

LEADERSHIP AND POPULISM

A commentary on *Parashat Tzav*

By Hannah Weisfeld

Parashat Tzav spells out in detail the rituals and rules around sacrifice and the way in which different types of sacrifice must be dealt with. On first glance it makes for rather mundane and extremely gory reading! Yet, it offers us some interesting insights into the concept of leadership and what it means to represent the people.

Early on in the *Parasha* we are told of the 'aish tamid' - the perpetual fire that must be kept burning on the altar by the priests. All through the night the burnt offering is left on the altar and in the morning the priests take the ashes outside of the camp to remove them, and replace the wood on the altar to ensure it never goes out. The obligations on the priests are significant. Day-in-day out they must tend to the everlasting flame, the offerings that are upon the altar, with strict rules about exactly who can eat of the offering, how it can be eaten and how much can be eaten. The priests are expected to offer sacrifices on behalf of them. Taking on the guilt and sins of the people is no mean feat, it is quite a time consuming and serious labour. The responsibility of leadership dictates how the priests must live their lives. Constantly on display and at the service of the people.

In the context of biblical times, the priesthood wasn't something you chose, you were born into it, making in some respects that obligation much tougher. Yet if that is the level of obligation placed on the unelected leadership, it sets the bar extremely high for those that choose to enter into a leadership position and represent the people. The priests have little choice about whose offerings they can and cannot

offer: they perform a service on behalf of the people for the people and G-d. They are given strict instructions about what they are entitled to benefit from whilst performing their duties i.e. which parts of the sacrifices they are entitled to eat. Their personal ambitions and egos are largely irrelevant in the process of performing their priestly duties.

What if all elected leaders were to apply these same rules to their leadership: day in day out to be constantly reminded of their calling to serve the people for a higher purpose than their own personal ambitions? To represent the wide range of opinions and views that exist, regardless of their personal beliefs, and to do so without a display of ego and not for their own personal gain, but for the benefit of all?

Perhaps the tumultuous events of the past year would have panned out differently? The decision to enter into an EU referendum, partly driven by personality politics and the desire to protect or enhance personal positions of leadership may never have come into fruition. The attempts by the American president to prove his popularity above and beyond all other previous presidents, and the desire to belittle media outlets questioning his leadership capabilities, would simply not have featured on the radar. The approach of Western leaders to the common good – whether that be the treatment of minorities within our own societies, or the need to protect the most vulnerable beyond our borders would be valued much greater than the desire to play to popular politics.

Of course, the demands of priestly leadership of the biblical era in comparison to western elected politicians of the 21st century are significantly different, and yet the comparison gives us some insight into the type of leadership we should be striving for and seeking to support in our troubled world.

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