

On Shabbat (Friday sundown to Saturday sundown), in the synagogue, when we Jews gather to meet and pray, we read a weekly portion from the *Torah* (the first five books of Moses). The portion (in Hebrew ‘parashah’), which will be read this Shabbat, is called ‘*Korach*’ after its first distinctive word, and refers to BeMidbar (“In the Wilderness”), or Numbers 16:1–18:32.

*BeMidbar* or Numbers is the fourth book of the Hebrew Bible. As its name suggests, it takes place after the liberation from Egypt as the Children of Israel are still wandering in the wilderness, before they enter Canaan, the Promised Land. Their leader is Moses but in *Korach* his leadership is challenged by the man after whom the *parashah* is named.

Korach’s challenge fails and he and his followers die as a result, but the parashah does ask some interesting questions about leadership and what makes a good leader. Moses was not born into leadership, but neither was he elected. He was, however, chosen and had to prove himself. Even after he liberated the Children of Israel, he had to prove himself to them. In *Korach*, they ask: “Is it not enough that you have brought us out of a land flowing with milk and honey to kill us in the desert, that you should also exercise authority over us?”

Our leaders and their leadership are very much in the news. Whether it is the so-called “strongmen” to quote a recent book like Vladimir Putin in Russia, Viktor Orban in Hungary or Modi in India, or the leaders of Ukraine or the UK who offer such contrasts. Does the Bible offer us any insight?

Despite being full of leaders, the Hebrew Bible is ambivalent about human leadership. In the era of the Judges, the military hero Gideon said “I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. The Lord will rule over you” (Judges 8:23). The Judges themselves were unelected but non-hereditary leaders temporarily appointed in times of military crisis to defend Israel against its enemies and to establish justice. In what was a patriarchal society, they even included women.

Those biblical judges sound like a promising model but they did not last. In a year when we celebrate the Queen’s Jubilee (a word which might derive from the Hebrew *yovel*, or trumpet, for marking such an event), what does the Bible have to say about other types of unelected leaders?

The prophet Samuel warned of the dangers of appointing a monarch.

“He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots ... He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves ... When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, but the Lord will not answer you in that day.” [1 Sam. 8:11-18]

And, in a sense, Samuel is right for once a monarchy is established in biblical Israel it leads to its ultimate downfall.

We might do well to remember such lessons especially with debates over what or who makes a good leader and what type of system of leadership is best. In today’s heated context, the words of the Bible continue to resonate loudly.