In December of 2022 Benjamin Netanyahu started serving his third term in his role as Prime Minister of Israel.

After a series of elections (five in four years!), Netanyahu was finally able to form a coalition and win the election with over seventy percent of Israelis voting for him. My friend, a poll worker in Israel, told me that the elections were held in a strictly democratic way and there was no foul play.

The reason for this overwhelming majority vote for Netanyahu is based on the perception held by most Israelis that he is an incredible politician. He has been able to stay in power longer than any other prime minister in Israel because the people believe that he is a strong leader who can provide the country with much needed security. And when it comes to an election in Israel, security is always the number one issue. As such, the concern over safety influences the majority of votes.

Despite his reputation as a strong leader, Netanyahu, also has a reputation for misleading his staff members as well as political partners. As a result of his own actions, Netanyahu was charged with corruption. Yet, even with that blemish, he once again became prime minister. And each time he wins an election he becomes more and more emboldened by his power.

This is not a new situation in the history of mankind.

We see this abuse of power early on in the Tanakh when we read about the complex character of Israel’s first King - King Saul (Shaul). In the Book of Prophets in Samuel we learn that the Israelites demanded that God should appoint a King to rule and protect them. God tries to convince the Israelites against it, citing all the disadvantages: the taxes they pay would increase; they would be required to give up some of their land; and they would even have to send their sons and daughters to work for the King. But the plea was to no avail. The Israelites were convinced that, like other nations, they needed a King who would safeguard them.

The Prophet Samuel was able to identify a young man who was respected in his community and anointed him as the King of Israel.

In the beginning of his reign, Saul indeed proved to be a great leader and talented commander who won many battles for Israel. As the years passed though, Saul became paranoid that he might be overturned and another King would take his place. His actions and decisions from then on were not

based on his desire to continue to serve his people and bring Israel to its glory but rather he focused on his own needs and fears. This selfish and misguided behavior almost ruined all that he had been able to achieve in the earlier years and it cost him relationships with family members as well as his supporters.

Unfortunately, more often than not when a person comes to power, whether it is on the government level, or as the CEO of a company, or the manager of a small team, or an executive director of a nonprofit board, the feeling of being invincible grows as does the feeling of self-importance.

The perception that they are above the law leads many such leaders to corruption and ultimately their country, their office, their company, or their organization faces destruction.

Like King Saul, fearful, corrupt rulers can become dictators. This is not unusual and it seems that Netanyahu is not an exception. The evolution of Netanyahu into a harsh and unrelenting autocrat is extremely upsetting to Jews around the world who always supported Israel. Many are becoming disillusioned and are accusing Israel of a lack of democracy.

I would disagree with that opinion.

Since Netanyahu has proposed his judicial reforms, Israelis have began taking to the streets with mass protests have forming all across the country. This week, for the first time, almost the whole country went on strike to convince the government to change the decision. Netanyahu retaliated by tabling the vote, which most likely was done to buy more time to convince or over rule his opponents.

Friends, as much as the events of the past few months are upsetting to us, we should be very proud that Israelis have been exercising their right of free speech. Despite the fact that the majority of them voted for Netanyahu, they now recognize that he no longer is “the only choice” for the country. I know that many of my family members and friends are participating in the protests. Yes, Israelis are extremely upset with their government’s decisions, but they are not staying silent - and this should make us proud! Instead of seeing the negative side while focusing on the corrupt government, we should see the positive side and focus on the rise in activism. We can stand by the Israelis and support their fight for the country

they love. We should help amplify their voices as they try to bring back the ideals on which the State of Israel was built.

And so we American Jews should continue encouraging the State of Israel rather than turning away from it. Israelis need us now more than ever.

In this week’s Torah portion, Aaron and his sons are officially anointed as priests. This role, as they would soon learn, carries a tremendous amount of responsibility. Yet, in the Torah, the Cohanim - the priests - are not above the people. Instead they served as facilitators of sacrifices and worship. Their positions were more like advisors than rulers. That is why God was reluctant to give the power to one person – he feared the results that could occur if the well-being of the entire people is placed on one man – a King.

From these ancient writings we see that we Jews have always pursued freedom as a core value. Democracy is deeply embedded in our DNA. We will reinforce this message again on Wednesday when we gather around the table and read the story of Exodus and the fight for freedom for all.

For Israelis this will be a very strange Seder. While some are considering making an Exodus from Israel, many others are determined to remain and continue to fight for their right for freedom. Let us pray for freedo