

Corey Greenblatt

D'var Torah **KI THISA**

“Who ever is for God come around me.” Well not actually me but Moses. Moses said these words at the beginning of my torah portion called *Ki Thisa*. The Israelites are wandering through the Sinai Desert and on the night that the Hebrews created the Golden Calf, the idol that showed their loss of faith in Moses and God; Moses stands up in the camp, furious at the Hebrews for committing such a terrible crime. He asks for those Israelites, that are willing to uphold the commandments and prove their loyalty to God to stand up; and all of the Levites stepped forward. Moses' next order was that the Levites should kill anyone who was not for god even if it shall be your sister, mother, son, close friend or even your spouse. The Levites did as Moses ordered, and about 3000 Hebrews died on that night. The next day Moses went up to Mount Sinai again, this time to beg for forgiveness for the forging of the Golden Calf. Some people might say he went up to Mount Sini to beg for forgiveness for ordering the murder. I think he went up to ask for the forgiveness of both crimes.

This massacre showed great loyalty as well as great fanaticism on the part of the Levites. When reading this portion my thoughts naturally turned to the events of 9/11, when men went into planes and killed themselves along with 3,500 other innocent men, women and children, in the name of God. To prove their loyalty to their deity, to prove their faith, and piety, the Levites committed murder with the same justification as the 9/11 terrorists. Should people ever be this loyal? If you were an Israelite in the desert, would you have killed just to please god? Maybe the Levites felt they had to commit these killings to prove their devotion, and perhaps they thought that they would be killed if they did not follow God's orders. But isn't another one of god's laws “Thou shalt not murder.” In fact, it is one of the 10 commandments. I don't believe there is any way to justify killing in order to please or prove loyalty to another human being, or to God. Only God has the right to give and take life. Human beings do not have the right to act in place of God and take a life. What is a good reason to kill? You can't think of one right? That is because there is none! The Levites didn't ask any questions, they did not think twice, they did as God told them. This is a huge religious act of faith, by a zealous group of religious fanatics exhibiting extreme fundamentalism. Fundamentalists don't question their authority, just as the Levites did not think of questioning Moses or God. If you were told to kill this many people by your leader would you question authority? I would. Did these 3000 people need to die? Could they have gotten a less harsh punishment?

The Hebrew nation was just beginning as a religion. The Jewish people were in their infancy as a faith and as a community. The Israelites were like children being guided and raised by Moses and God. If a child broke a glass, you would not kill him, but you would scold the baby, to teach him a lesson. Did these people need to be killed to be taught a lesson? What lessons have we learned from this mass murder in the desert?

I can't imagine that Moses felt very good about himself and the situation in the Sinai after he ordered the killings by the Levites. It's no wonder that in *Ki Thisa* Moses exhibits loss of faith and hope. Perhaps this is also in response to the Israelites loss of faith in God. The Israelites wanted a god that they could see, not one they had to believe was real. Somewhere in the desert, their faith began to deteriorate. Why couldn't they just “believe”? Why did they suddenly need physical proof? They were upset at Moses for abandoning them while he was up on the mountain. Perhaps they felt hopeless or useless. While they were wandering aimlessly in the desert, they wanted something concrete, something they didn't have to blindly trust. They certainly were having trouble-trusting Moses, and they could see him. Even after all of the proof of god's existence that they were given, from the 10 plagues and escaping Egypt to walking through a parted sea, they still needed something more; they needed something that they knew was real. The situation in the desert must have been so desperate that they ignored all of the miracles that God provided for them; the amazing Godly acts that enabled them to be on this journey to the Promised Land.

How desperate would you have to become to lose faith in yourself, in God or your leader who saved your life? How desperate would you have to be to kill? If you were the Hebrews would you have done something that was against your religion? Would you do something that was against your belief? I wouldn't. Think back to Abraham, who almost sacrificed his son in the name of God. We were supposed to learn that we are not supposed to take a life in order to prove our faith. Why didn't the Levites learn this? Why didn't the 9/11 terrorists remember this?

There were so many sins committed by so many people during this episode in the desert – by the Israelites, Moses and by God. Perhaps the lesson we can take from this story is the importance of forgiveness. This is so because God eventually forgave the Hebrews for the crimes they committed. He also accepted the sacrifice of the people, the 3000 Israelites killed. This was the ultimate sacrifice. Killing an animal or offering God fruit is not even close to killing a human as a sacrifice. God, instead of punishing the Levites for the killing, accepted it as a sacrifice. But then again God was the one who ordered these killings, so how could he punish the Levites? But I still need to ask if such a great sacrifice was necessary. We are always able to learn from tragedy, but is it ever really worth the loss? God may have forgiven us, but did we forgive God and Moses for making us kill? There is no way to justify killing.

This was the end to a very tragic experience in the desert, and there would be more difficult times to come. The Israelites may have gotten out of Egypt, they might have gone through the parted Red Sea and they may have survived the Golden Calf ordeal, but their journey to the Promised Land was just beginning.

When I first received this Torah portion for my Bar Mitzvah, I thought that my speech would center around three topics: trust, honesty and loyalty, In fact at the beginning it did. And while these things are prevalent throughout my Torah Portion, my expectations moved in a totally different direction as I re-read the portion and wrote the speech. I discovered that a current debate on fundamentalism could also be seen in this story. But there was also the topic of questioning authority. I have had lots of experience questioning authority. I do it all the time; I question my teachers for giving us homework and tests. I question how fairly my parents treat me compared to my sister sometimes. Once I questioned my English teacher who said I got a 67 on my test and when I recalculated the score I really got a 90, (he did change the grade.) I would question my baseball coach if he told me to take steroids to make me a better player. There are times perhaps, when questioning authority is not needed and not the right thing to do. In the desert there were situations where if you did question your leaders, you would die (for example the parting of the Red Sea). But there are times, such as the time of the Golden Calf, that the Levites should have questioned but didn't. What if the Hijackers of 9-11 had questioned the ones who had authority over them?

Hopefully my studies and my experiences will help me choose the right and wrong times to challenge my leaders, my teachers and God, as I travel on my path to the Promised Land.

I would like to thank a few people before we end. I would like to thank my Mom and Dad for pushing me to be the best I can be. I can just hope that when I have children I can be as good of a parent that they have been to me. I would like to thank Melanie for helping me through everything and making this whole process so much easier than I thought it would be. I would also like to thank Rabbi Niles for leading me and this congregation. I would lastly like to thank all of you for coming and celebrating my Bar Mitzvah with me.