

Ki Tisa 2018

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick 3/3/18

Sometimes you read a passage in the Torah, and it just doesn't make sense. This week I came across one that really had me scratching my head... In this week's Torah portion, the Jewish People worship the Golden Calf while Moses is up on Mt. Sinai. After all that Gd has done for them - the plagues, the parting of the Red Sea, even the giving of the Ten Commandments, it's hard to understand why they fell back to idolatry! Needless to say, Gd is not happy about that, and He threatens to wipe out all the Jewish People and start over with just Moses. And Moses responds to Gd by saying, "Don't let your anger out on them. After all, you took them out of Egypt with mighty outstretched arm." Really?! What kind of reasoning is that? It's like me saying to you, "Don't get mad at your child, after all, you protected her, fed him and gave her shelter..." You'd say, "But that's exactly WHY I'm angry and disappointed; precisely because I DID do all that for her! How much more so should I be upset!" It seems like Moses is saying exactly the WRONG thing!

But I read this wonderful commentary, by Rabbi Yochanan Eibeshutz who lived in the 18th century, who said that Moses was trying to make an important point to Gd. Moses was saying, "Look, it took your mighty arm to get those People out. It was SO hard. You didn't just have to take them out physically, but spiritually too. You know where they came from! They were slaves. They had no vision of the future. They worshipped a Golden Calf because that was all they knew. So before you get too angry, remember where they came from."

And you know what? It works. Gd does not destroy that generation, and for most of them life goes on. It's as if Gd says, "I now understand that you have been so preconditioned, so cynical, so short-sighted, that I really can't expect anything more." And it buys them time. But only for a while. Later on that same generation will follow the negative advice of the 10 spies who say that they should all just go back to Egypt because the battle ahead is unwinnable. And at THAT point, Gd says, "OK, that's it. Enough. I really need a NEW generation with a FRESH perspective to move this whole project forward." And so that entire generation passes. It is their children, they who did not grow up with a slave mentality that get to see the dream fulfilled. THEY are the ones who make it happen.

I thought a lot about that section of the Torah this week as I watched the student protests about gun control sweep across many parts of the country. Part of me cynically said, "Kids, you don't know what you are up against. Yeah, you'll make some noise now, but real change isn't going to happen." But then I caught myself because, like most Americans, I think something has to be done. According to the Gallup poll just out, 55% of Americans want gun laws to be stricter, 10% say they should be less strict, and 34% want to keep them as they are now. It remains to be seen if those numbers will go up after another deadly mass shooting. But also, like many Americans, I am fairly cynical when it comes to actually doing something about it. I'm not proud of it. In fact, I'm more than a little ashamed. But that's why I admire the students, the teens, the kids, who are passionate about this and are getting organized. I think it will take a new generation who are not jaundiced like mine, and I am excited about their enthusiasm.

I am proud that the Conservative Movement's USY youth movement has taken up this cause. The senseless shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida has

impacted our USY community profoundly, especially as many current USY'ers and alumni were there that day, including one who grew up in our shul. As they say on their website, "We want to seize this singular social action-*tikun olam* moment of our generation. That is why we must act and demand change to assure our safety. We must declare with one voice that it is not acceptable to be worried about being shot at school. We must ensure an end to this epidemic of mass school shootings. And we must make this crystal clear to our government leaders. Join us March 24 in Washington D.C. to take to the streets and demand an end to the epidemic of mass school shootings at the March for Our Lives."

March 24 is a Shabbos, but they are marching anyway. They'll use pre-paid Metro cards, or they'll walk, but the USY'ers will be there, and I am proud of them.

I have not felt this teen energy in a long time. It reminds me of the Soviet Jewry rallies I went to as a teenager. We marched in Philly, and we marched in Washington. And you know what happened? Things changed. The gates opened, and Soviet Jews went free. As a teenager I was encouraged by my teachers in Hebrew School to march. I was encouraged by my parents to march. I felt that my voice was heard. I felt like I made a difference.

And that's why I am glad to see teachers and administration are backing away from threats of punishment for students who stand up and walk out for what they believe. I'm glad to see that 175 colleges and universities have said that they support the student protests and will not judge the applicants based on disciplinary actions taken against them for peaceful demonstrations even if the high schools put that on their record. This is an incredibly rich teachable moment; a chance to teach the vitality of democracy; a chance to teach the power of each of us to bring about change. They need to think like one on one educators. If you had only one student and your student said, "I feel passionately about stopping this violence," would you not find a way for them to feel heard and understood? Don't we want to encourage our kids to stick their necks out when it comes to something like this?

We don't need to teach our kids to be cynical; that'll happen soon enough. We need to allow our kids to lead, to move society forward, to encourage them to take a stand for what they believe in peaceful ways. As a generation rising towards the legal voting age, the power is falling into their hands. They show no signs of ceasing this mission, it's gaining more and more momentum every day.

I have spent 35 years working with teens and I can tell you categorically that teens are far more likely to listen to you when they feel like you are listening and understanding them. The hallmark of Jewish tradition is teaching kids to think for themselves. We cannot let this teachable moment be squandered.

This week I had an open discussion in my Hebrew High class about gun control. And while the kids have passionate opinions, they are equally concerned about what their parents and other adults think. They are looking over their shoulders, they care about our adult response. They want to take a stand, and they want to know where we stand. All I am asking is that we think like educators and have the courage of our Jewish convictions. Let's empower our kids to think for themselves. We are not weaker when they are stronger. We are stronger as Jews and Americans

when we are willing to learn and listen to the passionate voices of our kids, and maybe, just maybe, follow their example.