

Ki Tissa 2016

As you likely know, the passing of brilliant Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia has been in the news of late. Justice Scalia, an Italian American, had strong ties to the Jewish community. In fact, he was the first Supreme Court Justice to use the Yiddish word "Chutzpah" in a written decision. He employed the word, meaning of course "audacity or nerve," in a 1998 case, National Endowment for the Arts v. Finley. Interestingly, in his concurrence with the majority opinion, Scalia felt the need to define the words "decency" and "respect", using the American Heritage Dictionary but apparently felt that "chutzpah" was sufficiently well known to need no such definition.

I share this with you because this week's Torah portion has one of the most supreme statements of chutzpah in the entire Torah. Moshe is up on Mt. Sinai having received the Ten Commandments when Gd says to him: "Hurry down for YOUR people, whom YOU brought out of the land of Egypt...have made themselves a molten calf and are bowing low to it and sacrificing to it saying, "This is your Gd, O Israel." Gd is seething with anger and most surprisingly here is what Moshe says in response: LAMAH ADONAI YEH-CHA-REH AHP-CHAH? "Why should you be angry with Your People, Gd?" Really!!!!?? Are you kidding me!?! Why should Gd be angry?! Gd only took the People out of slavery, split the Red Sea, punished their oppressors etc. etc...and now they are dancing in front of an idol saying THIS is your Gd?! Why is Gd angry?! Come on! Moses asks, "Hey, Why are You so angry?" That's Chutzpah!

The People made a mistake - a really big mistake! What Moshe SHOULD have said was, "Forgive your People for they have sinned." Admit the mistake and beg for forgiveness - that's what Moses should have done! He should have done T'shuvah for the People. He should have apologized on their behalf then and there. But he doesn't. And so that leaves us wondering what's going on here? Why does Moshe get so chutzpadik and turn it back on Gd? Why not just apologize??

Well, for one thing, he can't apologize for the People while they are STILL DOING the sin! They are still dancing, so Moshe knows he can't really say they are truly "sorry." But that is only part of the picture. There is a lot more going on here....

I think that if we look carefully, deeper into the text, we see the one phrase in the text that pushed Moshe to turn it back on Gd. It's two short words, "HEE-NEE-CHAH LEE." Right before Moses asks, "Why are you so angry," Gd says "Leave me alone." Leave me alone and let me do what I want to do to the people at the base of the mountain. "Let my anger blaze."

Think about it. Gd says, "YOUR people have rebelled, Moses." "MY People?" Really, Moshe wonders...? All of a sudden they are "My People?" Clearly Gd has already distanced himself from the Jewish People at the base of the mountain, but when Gd then goes on to say, "Leave me alone," it seems like the separation is complete. Gd has withdrawn. The connection is lost. The chance to move on together seems about to be severed. There is no more chance for dialogue. "Leave me alone - I am done - there is no reasoning with these people." Moshe hears this, the words and their tone, and realizes that this calls for desperate measures. And so that's

why Moshe says, "Why are you getting angry AT YOUR PEOPLE?!" It's not MY People, they are YOUR People, Gd!"

Sure, it would have made sense to say "They are sorry." It would have made good sense to come up with a plan for moving forward. But in this interchange is a very powerful lesson: WE can't make plans to move forward, says Moses, until you realize THAT WE ARE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER. At the most stressful moment, Moses reminds Gd that unity must come first. The natural response to frustration is divisiveness, withdrawal from civil discourse; an "us vs. them" mentality. But Moshe won't let that happen. "These are YOUR People" Moshe responds to the Creator. Doesn't Gd know this? Of course! But Gd needs Moshe to step up and stand up for the unity of the Jewish People, even, and especially, when they err. Maybe Moshe, who is so often frustrated and overwhelmed by the fractious people he leads, needs to hear HIMSELF say this. And so Gd puts Moshe in a position where he must shout for unity and mutual responsibility above the din of rebellion and discord. It's something that Moshe will wrestle with for the rest of his career. And the truth is, so do we.

It is so easy in challenging times to have an "us vs. them" mentality. It's so easy to quarrel, to fight, to accuse and point fingers, and ultimately to withdraw from dialogue and civil discourse. But Moshe has the temerity to say to Gd, "You are better than that," which of course is what Moshe needs to hear about himself. In this politically charged season I cannot help but sense the frustration of many in our congregation who feel that civil discourse is in short supply. We live in challenging times. But the challenge for us, as individuals and as a community, is to look past the bickering to the greater good; to remind ourselves and those around us and that we are all in this together.

To this day we read these stories to remind us of our own highest ideals of Achdut- of Unity, of mutual responsibility and the goal of mutual understanding. We can't always attain that goal. Moses ended up smashing the first set of tablets. We too are only human. We too can get caught in the undertow. But as a spiritual People we Jews are reminded by our sacred story that we can stand tall. We can lift others when we ourselves set the bar high. May the strength of our Jewish spirit help us to see past divisive rhetoric and strive for the unity that will move us all forward.