

Bar Mitzvah Speech

Throughout this year I have studied Torah and other Jewish texts with Rabbi Eli. Over this time I have improved my interpretation skills and gained many insights on Judaism. Over the year, the Torah has even changed my world views. In the past I thought of the world as black and white, but I now realize that that is simply not true. Everything is a shade of gray. My goal here is to explain that religion is an amazing thing, but when we abuse it for our own gain, it becomes corrupted.

My Torah parsha is "Balak." I focused on the last few lines of the parsha, but I will tell you the whole story so it makes more sense. It tells the story of Balak, the king of Moab, who wanted to conquer the Israelites. The Moabites were a neighboring people of the Israelites, and the two were constantly at war. Balak calls upon Balaam, a desert hermit who was independent from the Moabites and the Israelites and who had a connection to G-d. Balaam was known to have prophetic dreams and Balak decides to hire Balaam to curse the Israelites. Balak sends men to Balaam in hopes of getting Balaam to come to Moab for a meeting. Balaam tells the men to wait overnight so he can see what G-d tells him to do. That night Balaam hears from G-d, and G-d tells him not to go. So in the morning

Balaam tells the men that he can't go. The men go home, but Balak still wants Balaam's help so he sends more men. The same thing happens again, and the men go home. Balak sends even more men, and this time the king is successful. G-d gives Balaam permission to go with the men and he does.

Balaam goes on his way to Moab thinking it was G-d's will. But it turns out to make G-d angry. G-d sends down an angel to block Balaam's path. Balaam can't see the angel, but the donkey that Balaam is riding sees it. The donkey goes off the road into a field and waits. Since Balaam doesn't see the angel, he beats the donkey. The angel moves away and the donkey continues on. But soon the donkey sees the angel again in the gateway of Moab. The donkey goes up against a wall, which hurts Balaam's leg. So Balaam beats the donkey again. The angel moves away, and the donkey continues on until it reaches the angel once again. But this time there's nowhere for the donkey to go so it lies down in the road.

Balaam moves to strike the donkey, but the angel gives the donkey the power of speech, and the donkey says: I have been loyal and worked hard, so why do you beat me? The angel then makes itself visible to Balaam, and Balaam realizes that he has done wrong, so Balaam throws himself on the

ground and apologizes and begs for forgiveness. Balaam declares that he will go back home to earn G-d's favor. However, the angel tells him to continue on his journey.

Balaam continues on to Moab and arrives at the palace of King Balak. King Balak commands Balaam to curse the Israelites, and Balaam does all the preparation to carry out the order. But at the last minute, G-d tells Balaam to bless the Israelites instead of curse them. So Balaam blesses the Israelites, which angers Balak. Again, Balak tells Balaam to curse the Israelites, and again, Balaam prepares to follow the orders. But at the last minute, G-d again speaks to Balaam and tells him to bless the Israelites instead of curse them. So Balaam blesses the Israelites as commanded, and again Balak is angry. The whole process repeats a third time, with Balaam blessing the Israelites instead of cursing them, and Balak is very upset.

Balak asks Balaam what to do to defeat the Israelites if he can't curse them, and Balaam suggests that if Balak sends all the Moabite women to seduce the Israelites then the Israelites might lose G-d's favor. Balak decides to give it a try, and it works. The Israelites start sleeping with foreign women and worshipping foreign gods. G-d is understandably pissed

and sends a plague among the Israelites. 24,000 people die before we get to my parsha.

In my parsha, Prince Zimri of the tribe of Simeon and a Midianite prostitute named Cosbi have sex in the Holy Tent of Meeting.

The Holy Tent of Meeting was where G-d met with his people, so as you can imagine, sex in the Tent of Meeting was not allowed, let alone with a prostitute. It's made even worse by the fact that all of the Israelites are outside of the tent, weeping for all those who had died because of the people's sins, and and to witness what was happening. Pinchas, who is the son of Eleazar the high priest who is the son of Aaron, Moses brother, sees this happening and decides that it is up to him to do something about it. He believes that if he doesn't put a stop this terrible behavior, G-d will punish the Israelites even more severely. So Pinchas goes into the tent and stabs Prince Zimri and the prostitute through their genitals, killing them both. Side note, many translations of the Torah say that Pinchas stabbed Zimri and Cosbi through their bellies, but the scholar Rashi states that that is wrong. He says very clearly that, "Pinchas directed the spear through the male genitals of Zimri and the female genitals of the woman."

G-d rewards and praises Pinchas for his actions and ends the plague. As the medieval scholar Ramban said, "Pinchas was rewarded for his zealotry for his G-d and for his righteousness in atoning for Israel's wrongs so that all the Israelites were not killed by the plague."

The torah explains why Pinchas was rewarded in its own words.

G-d tells Moses, "Pinchas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, hath turned my wrath away from the children of Israel, in that he was very jealous for my sake among them, so that I consumed not the children of Israel in My jealousy. Wherefore say: Behold, I give unto him a covenant of peace; and it shall be unto him, and to his seed after him, the covenant of everlasting priesthood; because he was jealous for his G-d, and made atonement for the children of Israel." Pinchas felt completely justified in his violent actions, and G-d's praise proved that he was.

My haftarah portion is from the prophet Micah. In that story, Micah is wondering what G-d wants from us to earn his favor. Micah says: "O my people, remember now what Balak king of Moab devised and what Balaam son of Beor answered him; From Shittim unto Gilgal, that ye may know the righteous acts of the lord. 'Wherewith shall I come before the Lord, And bow myself before G-d on high? Shall I come before Him with

burnt-offerings, with calves of a year old? Will the lord be pleased with thousands of rams, With ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my first-born for my transgression, The fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?' (say clearly) It hath been told thee, Oh man, what is good, And what the Lord doth require of thee: Only to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with G-d."

In this passage, Micah challenges the idea that depraved acts and sacrifice are what G-d wants, and he argues that G-d just wants us to love our fellow human beings. Although, what Pinchas did could be considered all of those things. He enacts justice for G-d by killing Zimri and Cosbi. Pinchas's acts are in pursuit of mercy for the Hebrew people as a whole. Pinchas does what he does to spare the Hebrews from G-d's wrath. And it's not as if Pinchas was going around exclaiming that he was the only one who could get justice for everyone. He just took it upon himself to do it. But, it was still an act of violent zealotry, and I personally think that he could have dealt with the issue in a more peaceful manner. What we need is compassion, not hate and fear.

These two stories have something in common. They both deal with zealotry. Zealotry is an extreme act in the name of religious or political

beliefs. A zealot is a practitioner of zealotry. A more popular word for zealot is extremist or terrorist. They are a hot topic in the media right now, but not all zealots are the kind you hear about today.

Anybody can be a zealot. In the name of religious ideals, there are Muslim extremists such as ISIS and the Taliban. If you didn't know, they are the two groups in the Middle East who rule with fear. They do things like oppress women, behead "infidels", and torture people in public places. They do this in the name of of religiously based politics.

There are also Christian extremists who do things like oppress gay people, violently protest, and even blow up abortion clinics. Their inspiration is the same religiously based politics.

Or Hindu zealots in Asia. They do things such as massacres and oppressing women. They do it in the name of one of their gods.

Even Jews can be zealots. Their acts of extremism include oppressing gay people and women. And recently there was a Jew who went to a gay pride parade and stabbed 6 people. Even our holy text, the Tanakh is full of violent zealotry, in the tanakh the Hebrew people literally go through a huge area and kill everyone and everything in there.(Pause)
So far, all of my examples of zealotry involve violence and terror. However,

on reflection, it occurred to me that not all zealots are violent. Consider the civil rights movement in the 1960's. Many Jewish people stood in protest with M.L.K and the African-American population against oppression. They protested peacefully with marches, speeches, and boycotts. The people in the civil rights movement took some extreme measures to support their cause, but they did not use violence as a means to achieve justice.

Another example is the Dalai Lama. He is the leader of Tibet and a zealot in his belief that Tibet should be a free and independent nation. But I doubt that he has ever raised a fist against anyone. He is the perfect example of a peaceful zealot. He opposes Chinese rule of Tibet with peaceful protest and world presence. He does all of this in the name of his religion. Many people don't realize that he is as much a zealot as Pinchas.

A third example comes from Islam. In the original rules for Islam, Muslim warriors weren't allowed to harm so much as a tree. Muhammad says to hurt only the warrior who is currently attacking you.

Given that perspective, I conclude that not all zealotry is bad.

Now, in relation to my dvar Torah, this conclusion raises the question: is violent zealotry really how God(s) wants us to act? I don't think so. I think there are 2 good reasons that G-d does not want us to be violent zealots.

The first reason is that if there was no violent zealotry in the first place, then no one would need to be a violent zealot in retaliation. For example, if there had been no racism in the 1950's and 60's, then there would have been no need for the civil rights movement. I consider the racism of that era to be a perfect example of zealotry, because racist people banned non-white people from everything, and groups like the KKK violently attacked African-American people. If you think about it, many wars have started from a radical difference in beliefs. I'm not saying that people can't have different beliefs, I'm just saying that they shouldn't act violently on their on those beliefs.

The second reason that I believe G-d does not want us to be violent zealots is that I believe that, over the millennia, G-d has evolved along with civilization. In the Tanakh, G-d is honestly pretty vindictive and cruel, and so was humanity. But now, humanity has evolved into a more compassionate, less cruel, and less warlike species. I think that G-d has changed in the same way. In biblical times, G-d may have been ok with violence and may have even supported it, but in modern times, I think G-d is probably appalled at the atrocities that the human race has committed. The bible may say we can have relationships only with our own people, but

that command applied only to biblical times, and doesn't mean that we shouldn't mingle with other cultures now. The Torah is full of outdated rules that we don't follow, so there's no reason that we have to follow the zealous rules such as having to do a lot of ritual sacrifices. They're outdated too.

Everything's just better when people are just kind to everyone else. There are no surviving religions that support the idea that violence and cruelty is right and good. Do you know who says that we should be violent and cruel and terrible to each other? We do! The human race has chosen to support these traits. In our hubris, we think that we know exactly what the bible means when it says something like, "Man shalt not lie with man as man lies with women." This line is usually interpreted as anti-gay, but I would like to offer an alternate idea. In ancient times, women were considered to be lesser. Therefore, they were to be owned by men. Men were all to be respected. Since women weren't thought of as free people, men didn't need their consent to have sex. But, since men were due respect, no one was supposed to have intercourse with them without consent. Therefore, "man shalt not lie with man as, man lies with women" may mean that man can not have sex with other men without consent. My interpretation may not be correct, but I believe that no G-d who is kind,

compassionate, and loving would ordain that certain people are to be hated for the way they are. My point is that we do not get to say that the Torah or any other holy text means one thing and then use that interpretation to belittle others.

If zealotry means an extreme act justified by a certain interpretation of the Torah, then when is zealotry ok? I think the answer is rarely. As I said before, religion is a great thing, but if we use religion as an excuse to do whatever we want, it becomes corrupted and perverse. I think that over the time that Judaism has existed, it has evolved into a more peaceful and loving religion. So, is violent zealotry what god wants from us? I say no, and whether you agree or disagree with that, I think everyone agrees that we need to do our best to be good to one another and try to be the best people we can.

Before I conclude, I would now like to take a few minutes to thank all of the people who helped me reach this special day. Let's start with all the friends who have helped me develop as a person. First off, I would like to thank the Jew Crew as a whole. You guys are all great people and great

friends. You make synagogue fun. I would also like to thank my school friends. You are all fantastic, and I love being with you. It means a lot that you came to see me, that's what this is all about.

Next I'd like to recognize all the amazing teachers who have helped me develop as a Jewish person. First, there's Kathi Shuirman. Thank you for teaching me the basics of Judaism, I had a lot of fun. Then there is Francine Shetterly, I would like to thank you for setting the groundwork of Hebrew, it was an amazingly educational class. Then there's Joan Myles, you have taught me almost everything I know about Hebrew and The Torah, so thank you. Last but not least, there's Bob Hector. Bob, I have enjoyed our discussions immensely, and I'm so grateful for your investment in me.

There are a few other special people I would like to thank. I would like to thank Rabbi Eli, for helping me learn to interpret texts, and always keeping me on my toes. Those debates that we have are enjoyable every time.

Grandma Marilyn, you have always challenged what I say and I really appreciate that. Aunt Ellen, you and I have a lot in common, for example, I look like you when you were my age, and we both love to talk and ask questions about everything. Aunt Avra, throughout my life, I have spent a

lot of time with you, and I have enjoyed that immensely. You have made me a more relaxed and happy person. Gavri and Max, you two have both been like older brothers to me and have always influenced how I act. Momie, you and Papa have always been a source of kindness, good humor, and goodness throughout my life, thank you for always being there. I am so happy to have my Great Uncle Monte here today all the way from Michigan. He may be the most left wing person in the family which is saying something, and I look forward to some interesting political discussions. I haven't forgotten my little sister Julia. Julia is a great help to my learning process because I can always bounce ideas off her without fear of being judged. And last but not least, Mom and Dad. My parents have always been very supportive of everything I want to do, and encouraging of the things I don't want to do. You guys are loving, kind, and funny, so thank you.

I would also like to take a minute to talk about my grandfather, Bill Cohen. He is sadly no longer with us and we will miss him dearly. My grandpa Bill was an atheist scientist, but he always considered himself a Jew. His views on Judaism are really what made me how I am right now.

He always encouraged debate and made everyone rethink everything. I'll really miss him.

Finally, I'd like to thank all of you who are here today to help me mark this momentous occasion. It means so much to me to be surrounded by people that helped me reach this day. I'm truly touched, thank you all.