

# Weekly Teaching

August 24, 2018

*This week's teaching is provided by Kevin Peters, Temple Sholom's new Rabbinic Intern. Kevin is entering his third year of rabbinical school at JTS and will be graduating from the Davidson School with a MA in Jewish Education this May. He completed his first unit of CPE (clinical pastoral education) this summer. Kevin was placed at an elder care agency where he did home visits and ran programs for Holocaust survivors. He graduated with honors from CUNY, College of Staten Island with a BA in psychology. Kevin came to JTS after working over seven years in the field of developmental disabilities. As someone with dyslexia and ADD, Kevin is interested in working to make Jewish communal and educational environments more inclusive and sensitive to the needs of individuals with learning disabilities. He has also taken an active role in coordinating JTS's participation in NYC's Pride March and is a leading member of Keshet JTS, the LGBTQI student organization at JTS.*

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Mitch

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As Jews, we are called to be in relationship with God. It is not a relationship of equal partnership, but neither is it one of master and servant. We have agency and a voice.

In keeping with Rabbi Mitch's message from last week's Rabbi's Weekly Teaching, I would say that we have an ethical obligation to use that voice. The Torah gives us two great examples of human beings that used their voices to challenge and ultimately change God's mind. Abraham convinced God to spare the people of Sodom if at least ten righteous people could be found within the city (Genesis 18:16-32). When the Israelites built the Golden Calf, God wanted to destroy them and establish a new nation through Moses. Moses successfully pleaded with God to spare the people by remembering God's covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Exodus 32:9-14).

We are a people with a tradition of arguing with God. Perhaps that's why there are so many Jewish lawyers. We do not accept the status quo, nor do we simply follow laws without question. We speak out even when God's own words feel unjust. Once the Torah was given and the age of prophetic communion with God was over, arguing with God took on a different form. The Rabbis of the Talmud, who could not argue with God directly, had to argue with one another about how to properly understand Torah (i.e. God's will). In *Parshat Ki Tetzei*, we find one of the laws with which the Rabbis had great difficulty.

*"If a man has a wayward and defiant son, who does not heed his father or mother and does not obey them after they discipline him, his father and mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his town at the public place of his community. They shall say to the elders of his town, 'This son of ours is disloyal and defiant; he does not heed us. He is a glutton and a drunkard.' Thereupon the men of his town shall stone him to death." (Deuteronomy 21:18-21)*

It was God's will that a parent should bring their disobedient child to public court to be condemned to death?! How does this sit with you? I imagine that you are as appalled as I am at the prospect of executing a child. In the Talmud (Sanhedrin 68b), we see that the Rabbis were also challenged by that idea. After several pages of lengthy discussion, they were able to completely limit the circumstances in which that biblical law could be enacted. In effect, they wrote the 'wayward and disobedient son' out of existence by making it impossible to actually prosecute him. That is not exactly the same as arguing with God to change God's mind, but the Rabbis used the tools at their disposal to uphold what they knew to be morally correct.

Now it's our turn. We are in the month of Elul, a time for introspection. We all should be working on our *heshbon ha-nefesh* or personal inventory. Have I done the best that I could do to right injustice? Were there

times when the world needed to hear my voice and I was silent? I invite you to take time this week to do that important work of self-reflection. Be honest and courageous with yourself so that you might discover how to best lend your voice to the cause of bringing more justice and mercy into the world.

Shabbat Shalom,  
Kevin Peters  
Rabbinic Intern