

**Temple Israel**  
**Rabbi Adam Grossman**  
**July 2, 2010**  
**What Does It Mean To Be Free?**

Last year around this time, we witnessed Mahmud Ahmandinejad be reelected to the Iranian presidency amid what many believed, including world leaders and demonstrators, to be manipulated results. Instead of permitting the world to see these demonstrations, the Iranian government quickly prevented world journalists from covering the mayhem following and dictated the portrait that local journalists could paint for the local and worldwide audience. This choice by the Iranian government, to block the world and their people from seeing the rallies and to then formulate their own opinions of the protests, is similar to the decisions made by China in their attempt to control Google or religious zealots whose strict adherence to fundamental principles creates a system where no other views are tolerated. In each of these cases, the individual's right to choose – what to believe, where to live, and how to feel – are oppressed, which is in direct conflict with a moral imperative for personal autonomy.

Found within our Torah portion this week is the tragic conclusion of the biblical story of Pinchas. Last week, we read the extreme measures Pinchas took in stabbing to death an Israelite man and a Midianite woman for their inter-tribe relationship. The scene is mortifying, yet even more disturbing is the opening words of this week's reading where we learn not of Pinchas' punishment, but rather his reward. The biblical idea that God would award this act of fundamentalism is difficult for us to reconcile. Even our rabbis over 2000 years ago, were baffled and appalled by Pinchas' intolerant actions. The Torah commentary, the Torah Temimah, explains, "...the sages are uncomfortable with the acts of zealotry because in order for something to be a true act of zealotry, it must be done within the spirit of true zealotry in honor of God, and, therefore, we cannot give permission and license to anybody to act in this fashion, because we cannot really know if the person is acting truly on behalf of God, or for some other ulterior motive. The only way we may know that a person is truly a zealot is if God Himself comes down and validates the act, as was done with Pinchas. Since we may not issue rulings of Jewish law hoping that God will come and validate the outcome of the ruling. Then we may not issue rulings in regards to acts of zealotry. In the case of Pinchas, he acted against the will of the sages, and only God was able to salvage him."<sup>1</sup> If our sages could not resolve this challenging textual inclusion, how then can we be expected to reconcile this event?

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<sup>1</sup> "Learn Torah With..." Edited by Joel Lurie Grishaver and Rabbi Stuart Kelman. D'var by Daniel Bouskila, p. 313.

This weekend, we honor America and with it our founding fathers, who shaped this nation as a place where the right to choose was self-evident. Their words are forever etched into our mind in the Declaration of Independence, which asserts, “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” Yet, the embodiment of this principle is more than making a casual reference or stating it by rote memory. It challenges us to stand up to political and religious fundamentalism in order that freedom of individual thought is not suppressed. In the case of Pinchas, we meet fundamentalism head on and can be confused by God’s reward for this totalitarian act. Yet, strict adherence to our biblical text or to “God’s” word is not how our tradition operates.

In an ancient rabbinic dispute between R. Eliezer b. Hyrcanus and R. Joshua b. Hananiah, although a *bat kol*, heavenly voice, came forth to confirm the correctness of the Eliezer’s minority opinion, R. Joshua refused to concede, countering with the argument that the Torah “is not in Heaven” for according to our Bible, “the Torah has already been given... embracing the rule that the majority must be followed” (Ex. 23:2). The story concludes that even God accepted the majority view, and “rejoiced that His children had vanquished Him.”<sup>2</sup>

Thomas Jefferson from a letter he wrote to Roger Weightman, dated June 24, 1826. Expressing his regrets, due to poor health, for his absence at the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of American independence, penned, as author Daniel Gordis comments, “What might be characterized as a deathbed blessing for the United States.” Jefferson wrote, “May it be to the world what I believe will be the signal of arousing men to burst the chains, under which monkish ignorance and superstition had persuaded them to bind themselves...”<sup>3</sup>

As we prepare for our Fourth of July celebrations this weekend, may we personify the gifts of liberty that America affords us, and continue to resist against governments and religious entities that try to repress individual thought and free will.

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<sup>2</sup> Babylonian Talmud, BM 59b.

<sup>3</sup> Gordis, Daniel. “Saving Israel: How the Jewish People Can Win a War That May Never End. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2009, p 130.