

“If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him!”

What do you want to bet that I am the only rabbi who’s ever began a Yom Kippur talk like that?

This phrase, besides being the title of a book, is a quote from a 9th century Zen master. It aims at teaching Zen students that Buddha-hood is not to be found on the outside, but to be uncovered on the inside, where it always already is; and to shift one’s consciousness to know oneself to be Buddha, to be Awareness, to be God. A true teacher, Zen or otherwise, is one who supports this kind of awakening, this kind of remembering, by pointing to this Truth (capital T) over and over again; and *never* by pointing to himself or making himself the conduit through which one can find that Truth. While we don’t make a habit of “killing the Buddha,” we do have a terrible track record for shooting the messengers, the teachers who have, time and again, taught us this Truth, and asked us to stand in our lives as the embodiment of this Truth by exemplifying God’s attributes of Mercy, Love, Compassion and Care. And we, Israelites, began liquidating them way before the Zen masters of the 9th century, we began some 3000 years ago with a guy named Korach.

Now Korach, son of... Levi, betook himself... to rise up against Moses with men of stature from the children of Israel... They assembled against Moses and against Aharon and said to them: “Too much is yours! Indeed, the entire community is holy, all of them, and the Eternal is within them! Why then do you exalt yourselves over the Eternal’s congregation?” Numbers [16:1-3]

Korach was one of these teachers. He taught that every being is holy; he reminded even Moses that God is within us all. Korach wasn’t just any other Israelite. He was one of the prominent leaders of the tribe of Levi. Korach took a stand for what he knew to be true. His clash with Moses and Aaron was motivated by a different vision of Israel’s relationship with God—but, given that the spiritual and political were inseparable, his motivation was unabashedly political too. He harbored a different vision of tribal organization. Moses had created a deeply stratified community dividing the Israelites into three different groups, based on degrees of holiness. First was the *Clal Israel*, the common Israelite, at the bottom of the pyramid; then the Levites and the Cohanim, who were the priests, at the top; and the *Cohen Gadol*, the High Priest, at the summit. Aaron served as the *Cohen Gadol* at the time, the holiest of them all, and he was to entreat God directly on behalf of all the Israelites. The Cohanim and the Levites were called to serve in the

Temple. They were seen as being closer to God than the “run of the mill” Israelites. As for the commoner, the woodchopper and the water drawer, the soldier and the political leader—they were not to worry about spiritual matters but to remain concerned only with insuring their community’s survival and material well-being. *They* were not considered holy. So for those of you whose last name is Cohn, Cohen, or Kahn or any variation thereof; you are probably descendent of the priestly class. You are holy. If your last name is Levi, Levinson, Levy, or Levine, you are probably descendant of the levitical class. You are holy too. As for the rest of us, *clal Israel*, well, we are out of luck.

But Korach saw it differently. He took a stand and revolted against this spiritual caste system: “*the entire community is holy, all of them, and the Eternal is within them!*” He rejected the idea that anyone could be higher or lower, closer or farther away from God. Korach wanted to become High Priest so he could change the system from within.

You can imagine that this didn’t sit well with the brothers in charge. The revolt was crushed violently. Korach and his family were swallowed by the earth and those who followed him were consumed by Divine fire. Korach was the first teacher in Biblical record to be killed for taking a stand pointing to the Truth. Perhaps the Hebrews, still of the generation who were slaves in Egypt—used to strict despotic hierarchical systems—were unable to fathom the new reality that Korach proposed. With Moses’ harsh rejection, this radical teaching was to die with Korach... or was it? Fast forward a few years later. We find Moses imparting his final discourse to a new generation of Israelites who never knew slavery. He intentionally addresses *all* of Israel, the elders and the political leaders, the young and the old, the men and women, people of all trades. And this is what he says:

Surely this mitzvah, this spiritual path which I enjoin you this day is not too mysterious or extraordinary for you, nor is it beyond your reach. It is not in the heavens, that you should say: Who will go up to the heavens and get it for us and have us hear it, that we may observe it? And it is not across the sea, that you should say: Who will cross for us, to the other side of the sea and get it for us and have us hear it, that we may observe it? No, the word is exceedingly close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it.

In our heart and in our mouth! Though we seem to be endlessly seeking God, He is exceedingly close to us, so close that we cannot see Him for He speaks through our mouths and lives within

our hearts. And no, this is *not* metaphor! Teachers who say such a thing are trying to convey the same Truth of the Essence of Being that all enlightened teachers point to. And though I wish I could truly get this teaching across, though I wish we all could hear it, I am also mindful that those who have tried to do that before me have been killed... So let's go back to our text.

What is striking about what Moses says here is that it is the same teaching that Korach shared, though they might have had different ideas about timing. Could the younger, free generation of Israelites hear Moses now? You know the answer—a resounding “**no!**” Moses, like Korach, was ahead of his time. As the Israelites settle the land after his death, they put in place a three-tiered social stratum with the First Temple at its center, and the few holy Levites and Cohanim lording over the impious mass of Israelites. But in the roughly 400 years that the First Temple stood in Jerusalem, until Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylonian armies came to destroy it in 586BCE, many prophets challenged this spiritual elitism. And no one more powerfully than Jeremiah. Inspired both by Korach and Moses, Jeremiah preached of a different future, of a time when we will know to hear the voice of the Divine whispering from within us. As with all prophets, God's voice spoke instantly through him, saying that:

Days are coming... when I will seal a new covenant with [you]. It will be different than that which I made with your ancestors... This is the covenant I will make with [you]: ...I will place My Torah within them, I will write it on their heart; then I will be your God and you will be My child. Then you will no longer need teachers and sages urging you to know Me, for you shall know Me naturally; from the smallest among you to the greatest, all will know Me. [Jeremiah 31:30-33]

Yet Jeremiah too, was ahead of his time; by at least 2500 years. Because even though the priesthood will collapse with the Romans burning down the Second Temple in 70CE, another spiritual elite will rise from its ashes: that none other than... the rabbis. The patriarchal rabbinic tradition will come to dominate Judaism—and has for the past 2000 years—culminating with the rebbe, the guru-like figure at the center of the Chasidic and other Jewish communities. But Rabbinic Judaism is not the only culprit. Many spiritual and religious traditions east and west will place the guru at the center of their institution. In the west, Jesus, who was a powerful Jewish teacher and prophet, shared in teachings that echoed those of Korach, Moses and Jeremiah. He was killed not because he was Messiah himself (that came later and many agree

that he would have opposed such a label,) but because he was a teacher in the line of the Hebrew prophetic tradition to which he belonged, who taught that God awakens within every being. I recently came across a sermon that the late Rev. Rod Romney gave in April of 2006. There he said that “*If [...] the Gospel of Thomas had been selected instead of the Gospel of John, we would today have a far different Christian theology. Thomas presented the view of an indwelling God who inhabits all persons, instead of the external God that John presented, who will only enter the lives of those who repent of their sins and follow the way of Jesus...*” The early Church by adopting John’s Gospel will create a strictly hierarchical, male dominated, institution, where the priests are seen as the holy ones among the commoners, and the intercessors between the sinful individual and God Himself.

In truth there are examples of this pattern outside of religious movements as well. The spiritual elitism that took place with the Temples, the Synagogue and the Church as well as with the guru-dominated orders in the east, has also been reproduced in the political elitism of kingships, empires and dictatorships of all kinds, and can be seen in our days still. Time and again, through history, we have surrendered our own power and given it over to people or forces outside of ourselves to which we assign greater authority, some sense of special-ness, or unique abilities.

We have yet to let the truth of Korach, the truth of Moses, the truth of Jeremiah penetrate our hearts, enlighten our souls. Why is that? What is it about us that resists hearing their message? We read *Nitzavim* and Moses’ words twice every year; on Yom Kippur and when the Torah portion comes around. Why are we not able to hear these words? Why do we ignore the Divine light within, the Torah written on our heart? Perhaps because this is quintessentially part of the human psyche. We seem to need Buddhas outside of ourselves, we want gurus to teach us the way, we implore Moses to intercede between us and God. Long before Rabbi Jesus, long before Jeremiah, long before Buddha, we all heard God Himself tell us *directly* at Sinai: “I AM.” We were to awaken to the I AM that we are, the I AM that is not different than, not separate from the I AM that God is. But that knowledge was too much for us. We couldn’t handle the Truth. To know that we are God overwhelms us. We don’t know what to do with that. So, time and again, we do what we did at Sinai. We send a Moses in our stead and tell him to bring down from the mountain something we can wrap our minds around, something tangible that we can do. We

can't receive the Truth directly all at once, we need steps to follow, practices to do that will help us slowly get to the Truth. And when our 21st century Moses brings down the Torah-of-the-day, the practice with x-number of steps instead of the usual 613 commandments, we say today what we said at Sinai: "*Na-aseh V'nishmah* – We will practice this path and then we will be able to hear the Truth." But there is a problem with that too. Our ego loves when it has things to do, and so we get caught in the doing, in the observing and we soon forget the "why" behind the practice. The form becomes all important and the essence is forgotten. The form, instead of remaining a pathway to an ultimate sacred Truth, becomes the ultimate sacred truth in and of itself.

But there is a middle path. It is, perhaps, true that, so far, we have not been able to directly hear that *we are God*. Our track record, from Korach on down, certainly attests to that fact. We know that we, as human beings, have a tendency to surrender our own power to Buddhas, Messiahs, gurus, prophets, teachers, leaders of all kinds outside of ourselves and abdicate our own sovereignty to them. We build hierarchical structures of power and we let ourselves be led at best, subjugated at worst. The middle path is a path that no longer places the spiritual guru at the center, nor hallows the practice itself. The middle path is a partnership; a path which recognizes that we need strong, visionary, capable leadership and that all of us need to humbly occupy our rightful place, all of us need to contribute our unique light. The Torah is within our heart. We can't shrink from our own power and hope someone more special than us will take care of things.

Without getting into the politics of it, four years ago we sent to the White House the president that was going to right all the wrongs of our society, fix the economy and get all the "bad guys" out of our democratic system. Perhaps he oversold himself, making promises he knew he couldn't keep, but we were all too eager to let him do that, make him a demi-Messiah and project onto him all our hopes and dreams. When he told us, over and over again "Yes We Can!" what we heard him say is "Yes I Can." We didn't want to hear the "We" part of the slogan. We loved every word of his speeches but ignored the parts when he placed the responsibility for change back on *our* shoulders, or when he said that nothing would happen if *we* didn't take a stand to make it happen. We didn't hear him when he said the election wasn't about him, but about us. He seemed to be proposing, then, a middle path, a partnership, but we did what Moses warned us

not to do. We said: "We've found the one Who will go up to the heavens and [fix things] for us... Who will cross for us, to the other side of the sea and get [things right] for us."

Though this matters in every aspect of our life, it is even more critical when it comes to spirituality. We owe it to ourselves to be spiritual adults; to choose good leadership but remain autonomous and take responsibility for our own growth. We are the ones who can recognize the authenticity of the teaching, the clarity of the teacher, the integrity of the path offered. On our spiritual journey we need to find a spiritual partner in our teachers, a coach and a mentor. We need a teacher that can, at the same time, remind us of the Divine within and gently guide us through transformative practices that can be autonomously practiced. And we, too, as the other side of this partnership, need to take a stand in our life to embody the Divine attributes of mercy, love, compassion and loving-kindness. We need to stop averting our eyes from the light of God shining brightly within our heart, to let go of the shyness that keeps us waiting for Messiah "out there," to let go of our ego's fear of remembering that he or she is the Eternal One manifesting as us, through us; the fear that Marianne Williamson captured so beautifully when she wrote:

Our greatest fear is not that we are inadequate, but that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, handsome, talented, and fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We were born to make manifest the glory of God within us. It is not just in some; it is in everyone. And, as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our fear, our presence automatically liberates others.

There is no mistake that this Torah portion, the one we read on Yom Kippur is called *Nitzavim* and begins: *Atem Nitzavim*/you are standing; for this is no ordinary standing the text is inviting us into. *Nitzavim* means firmly planted, unshakable, committed. How we stand for our self, individually, and for each other this year will define not only our own experience of life, but our experience as a community. You are the embodiment of the One, a unique and precious expression of the Divine. What you stand for impacts all of Creation whether you recognize it or not. We are called to take back our own inner power and to use it for good. We are asked to take a firm, unshakable, committed stand; for ourselves, for the people that matter most in our life, for

our community, and for our world. May we choose our leaders wisely, spiritual or otherwise, and step fully into a partnership with them. *Atem Nitzavim HaYom Kul'chem*, you are all standing here today, because your voice matters, your light matters, your presence is needed.