

“At Any Cost:”

The Other Side of Aaron & Bernie

Parshat Ki Tisa 5769

By Rabbi Mark B Greenspan

This morning I'm going to do something extremely unpopular: I'm going to condemn one of the greatest heroes in Jewish history -Aaron, the High Priest- and then I'm going to defend one of the greatest thieves of all time - Bernie Madoff. I'd like to suggest that these two men have more in common than we may have realized.

No, this sermon is not meant to be taken in the spirit of Purim. I'm completely serious. While you couldn't pick two people more different from one another than Bernie Madoff and Aaron, there's a common denominator which ties them together and which we need to think about. The common denominator is **you and me**, its society as a whole, and how we, the people, sometimes not only aid and abet but create our own worst nightmares.

So let me begin with Aaron, the older brother of Moses and a figure who has been beloved hero of the Jewish people throughout history. The sages love Aaron. In fact in our daily service we even refer to him as an *ohev shalom and rodef shalom*, a lover and pursuer of peace. The Rabbis waxed eloquent describing the good qualities of Aaron, how he was a man of the people who saw the good in others, and how he helped to mend conflicts and disagreements. While Moses was the tough guy who was constantly telling the people what and what not to do, Aaron met and accepted the people as they were. It was hard not to like Aaron.

And yet in today's Torah portion we learn that there was another side to Aaron. He was responsible for the most heinous crime committed during Israel's sojourn in the wilderness: the worship of the golden calf. When Moses did not return from Mount Sinai after forty days, the people of Israel became panicky. They came to Aaron and demanded, "**Make us a god**, who shall go before us for that man Moses who brought us out of Egypt, we don't know what happened to him!"

Rather than trying to calm the people, Aaron acquiesces. After gathering their gold, Aaron fashions a golden calf and presents it to the people. He says, "**This is your god**, O Israel, who brought you out of Egypt!" Worst of all, when Moses returns, furious with the people for having worshipped the golden calf, Aaron denies all responsibility. He says, in affect, 'Don't blame me!' "You know these people are bent on evil...I said to them, 'whoever has gold take it off.' They gave it to me and I threw it into the fire and out came the golden calf!"

Aaron deserves to be condemned. He failed as a brother, as a leader, and as a Jew. While the sages found ways to excuse Aaron's deeds, we're left with the devastating truth that he allowed the people to worship an idol and did nothing to stop them. And yet Aaron was the original 'Teflon Don,' who, like a certain modern day Mafioso, managed to dodge conviction. It just doesn't seem right....

But let's talk for a moment about Mr. Madoff. While there's no question that Bernard Madoff is guilty, that he broke the law big time, and that he deserves to go to prison, it seems to me that we are viewing this man's wrong doings with myopic vision. **The truth is we created Bernie Madoff.** A year or even six months ago, Mr. Madoff was a hero and people couldn't give him their money fast enough. Despite the fact that his returns were 'too good to be true,' people, charitable institutions, and even government officials chose to suspend judgment and take advantage of the cash cow that promised high interest rates and with little risk. All you needed was lots of money to invest.

And invest, we did: not just individuals but institutions. There was in America an unrealistic exuberance and inflationary expectation when it came to investments and the future. Our society was more about high interest rather than hard work. Of all the things that Bernie Madoff said when he pleaded guilty the other day, there is one thing that rang true; as much as his ponzi scheme was about greed, it was also about giving the people what they wanted. When asked why he did it, Madoff said: **"I felt compelled to satisfy my clients, at any cost."**

"At any cost" How often are we willing to overlook wrongdoing and impropriety in the name of getting what we want? How often do we figure that the ends justify the means? Aaron was willing to compromise a little in the interest of stalling the people until Moses returned. He didn't want to disappoint the people or even worse, he didn't want to make them angry. So he pleased them 'at any cost.' And in the end, I suspect that's why Aaron was not condemned more severely. He was no guiltier than the people he was serving.

Similarly, we need to ask ourselves how society created Bernie Madoff, has greed become the new golden calf, and what it is that we value in our society today. Who do we honor in our society? Do we honor people who are clever or people who are good? Do we look at people's income or do we judge them based on their character? We are enamored by fame and wealth and even infamy rather than the simple goodness of people who work hard and contribute in intangible ways to the world around them. We live in a society with a growing gap between the rich and the poor, the 'haves' and the 'have nots,' and it is in this context that people like Bernie Madoff become superstars. We love the Bernie Madoff's of society and we hate them. We secretly and not so secretly covet their rise to fame and then gloat over their fall into ill repute.

Of course I wouldn't let Bernie off the hook so easily. I'm reminded of a cartoon in which a man, standing before a judge, says, "Your honor, its not my fault if all those people hadn't hired me I never would have broken the law." In the end we are responsible for the choices we make – we cannot blame society, no matter how seductive or alluring it sometimes is. But as on lookers and investors we should ask ourselves if there are things that we are willing to do "at any cost."

We tell our children and children that the most important thing is their education. What are they willing to do to get into the best college? The other day a middle school student in Oceanside was caught cheating with her cell phone during a NY standardized test. Are we willing to get the highest score "at any cost?" More disturbing, however, was that my religious school students were upset because they thought that this might affect their standing – and it might affect their record. It seems that the issue for them was not morality but getting ahead...

We want to retire comfortably. But what are we willing to get there? How much are we prepared to cut corners and to make sacrifices at the expense of others to create a nest egg for ourselves?

Do you know the story of the tourist and the Mexican fisherman? The tourist was on the pier of a small coastal Mexican village when a small boat with just one fisherman docked. Inside the small boat were several large yellow fin tuna. The tourist complimented the Mexican on the quality of his fish and asked how long it took to catch them.

The Mexican replied, "Only a little while."

The tourist then asked, "Why didn't you stay out and catch more fish?"

The Mexican said, "With this I have more than enough to support my family's needs."

The tourist then asked, "But what do you do with the rest of your time?"

The Mexican fisherman said, "I sleep late, fish a little, play with my children, take siesta with my wife, Maria, stroll into the village each evening where I sip wine and play guitar with my amigos, I have a full and busy life."

The tourist scoffed, "I can help you. You should spend more time fishing; and with the proceeds, buy a bigger boat: With the proceeds from the bigger boat you could buy several boats. Now you would have a fleet of fishing boats. Instead of selling to a middleman you would sell directly to the processor, eventually opening your own cannery. You'd control the product, processing and distribution. You could leave this small coastal fishing village and move to Mexico City, then Los Angeles and eventually New York where you could run your ever-expanding enterprise."

The Mexican fisherman asked, "But, how long will this all take?" The tourist replied, "15 to 20 years."

"But what then?" asked the Mexican? The tourist laughed and said, "That's the best part. When the time is right you'd sell your company stock to the public and become very rich, you make millions."

"Millions... Then what would I do?"

The American said, "Then you would retire. Move to a small coastal fishing village where you would sleep late, fish a little, play with your kids, take siesta with your wife, stroll to the village in the evenings where you could sip wine and play your guitar with your amigos."

What are we willing to do "at any cost?" And what are we willing to sacrifice? It seems to me that both Aaron and Bernie started out with good intentions but ended up breaking the law by pursuing their goals 'at any cost.' There is nothing more dangerous in society than a life where the end justifies the means, in which we turn fame or wealth, or other materialistic goals into our new golden calves.

Aaron is not completely innocent nor is Bernie Madoff completely guilty. And in these challenge economic times I believe we must ask ourselves, what do we value? Who are we? And how do we want to be remembered? But most of all, we must ask ourselves, "To whom do we answer?" Bernie Madoff is a wake up call. We cannot pursue our goals "at any cost."

Shabbat Shalom