Today we read Moshe’s retelling of the golden calf incident. Moshe reminds us of God’s analysis of the Israelite people based on the incident:

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֵלַי לֵאמֹּר רָאִיתִי אֶת הָעָם הַזֶּה וְהִנֵה עַם קְשֵה עֹרֶף הוּא:

And the LORD spoke to me, saying, “I have observed this nation and behold it is a stiff-necked people.”

The episode begs the question: if the Israelites were so stubborn, in a way that led them to a serious violation of God’s Torah almost as soon as they received it, why were they chosen to receive the Torah in the first place? The Talmud offers an interesting perspective. Rabbi Meir taught:

Why was the Torah given to Israel? Because they are strong-willed.

An anonymous teaching strengthens this message by telling us that the enigmatic phrase in Deuteronomy 23:2, “וֹ מִימִינוֹ אֵשׁ דָּת לָּמ” which for these purposes we will translate as “on God’s right a law of fire for them,” means that the Israelite will is like fire such that if they were not given the Torah no nation could have stood up to the Israelite people.

In Shemot Rabbah, we have similar teaching in which Rabbi Meir is critical about the Israelites:

“וַיִּשָּׁא לֵאמֹּר אֲנִי אָמַר ר’ יהודה בן פולעי, אָמַר ר’ יהודה בן פולעי, רַבִּי מַעֲרִיב, וַיִּשָּׁא לֵאמֹר אֲנִי אָמַר ר’ יהודה בן פולעי, אָמַר ר’ יהודה בן פולעי, רַבִּי מַעֲרִיב, וַיִּשָּׁא לֵאמֹר אֲנִי אָמַר ר’ יהודה בן פולעי, אָמַר ר’ יהודה בן פולעי, רַבִּי מַעֲרִיב: עֲמַר לָא כַּעֲדֵיהוּ כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּי כְּעַדֵּй

Note: Translations are my own.

2 BT Betzah 25b.
3 Id. "דרים של אליא עין, שאולמה (לא) נתנה תורה לישראל אלא כל האומה besteht באומות של קשת עורף." 
Rabbi Yitzchak bar Redifah said in the name of Rabbi Ami: You think that the description of Israel as “stiff-necked” is critical, but in fact it their praise! [For they say] “Either a Jew or hanged!” Rabbi Avin said, “Until this day they call Israelites in the diaspora “the stiff-necked people.”

To Rabbi Meir, the Israelites’ resolute character made them a danger to society and almost worthy of execution. However, ultimately, God decided that the Israelite stubbornness was not a disease to be cured but a characteristic to be channeled toward good through the Torah. Rabbi Ami and Rabbi Avin tell us that generations later it was precisely the Israelite stubbornness of character that helped perpetuate Torah as the Israelites refused to capitulate to those who demanded they surrender their faith and those conditions that made abiding by their faith so challenging.

The truth is that a strong will can be a dangerous thing when it is held by one with mistaken beliefs or problematic impulses. At the same time, it is an essential characteristic for those who have proper values and a positive inclination. A key challenge we all face is when to passionately fight for what we believe and when we need to reconsider the rightness of our cause. It’s never easy to tell the difference. But I think that we can find some guidance in Rashi’s brief commentary explaining why Rabbi Meir believed that the Torah would temper the Israelites’ dangerous nature. Rashi explains:

ונתנה להם תורה שיעסכו בה, היא מתשת כחם ומכנעת לבם.

And so the Torah was given to them to study intensely, because it weakens their strength and humbles their heart.

Rashi tells us that it is not only the content of the Torah but the fact that Jews would have to study the Torah that would temper their strong-willed nature and teach them humility. The very fact that God asks us to be guided by divine decree guides us toward the realization that we can’t always discern on our own what is good and just and therefore that we need to look outside ourselves for guidance between right and wrong. This was a very different concept than what was presented by other legal treatises in the Ancient Near East, which until the Torah all showed the gods empowering the human ruler to create the laws. Second, the fact that we are taught the necessity of regular study and contemplation of Torah - meditate upon it day and night - forces us to constantly consider different perspectives, to recognize the possibility that our current understanding might be wrong, and to acknowledge our responsibility to constantly improve our understanding of what God asks of us. I might add that the rabbinic aphorism that the Torah has 70 faces teaches that even if we get something “right” there are still 69 other perspectives that have some elements of truth that we can incorporate into our beliefs.

5 Lit. “Do you think that this”.
6 Id.
7 Rashi on BT Betzah 25b s.v. שהן עזין.
8 Jeffrey Tigay, JPS Tanakh, introduction to Deuteronomy Chapter 5.
9 Joshua 1:8.
For better or worse, every human being is, in one way or another, a person of a stiff-necked nature. Our responsibility is to temper that stubbornness through studying external sources for understanding between right and wrong, considering other perspectives, and being open to change our views. At the same time, we need to be prepared to call our stubbornness to arms in defense of that which is good, just, and righteous.

I’ll close with a prayer fashioned on Reinhold Niebuhr’s Serenity Prayer:

God, grant us the strength act resolutely in furtherance of our inclinations and beliefs that are good, right, and just in Your eyes; Humility to reconsider our attitudes and prejudices when we stray from Your guidance; And wisdom to know the difference.