Could you imagine if you were playing a basketball game and your coach told you to destroy all of the rival team’s equipment? The coach orders us to do this because they are different from us. But does that make it okay?

In my Torah portion the Israelites have been in the desert for 40 years. Moses commands them to go into the Promised Land and destroy the altars of the people there before them. Deuteronomy 12:1:3 states: “You shall utterly destroy all the places where the nations that you are driving away worshipped their gods: on the high mountains and on the hills, and under every leafy tree.”  When I read this, I thought why would God want  them to do this?

I thought about what theme I wanted to focus on, and decided something to do with respecting all types of people. I thought in what way does my portion tie into respect? I determined Deuteronomy 12:1:3, is the opposite of honoring diversity. After brainstorming about this passage,  I concluded that God or Moses was concerned that the Jews would disband into different religions and Judaism might be eliminated. Moses wouldn’t be there to lead the Israelites, or prevent them from assimilating into the religions of the tribes of the land that they would soon enter. At the same time, the Jewish people were scared that they were going into a new, mysterious, and strange place that they had never been to.  They had heard there would be dangerous obstacles and hardship. I then started thinking about questions relating to this paragraph and developed my essential observation: In this case, the Jewish people were afraid of difference! How would the ancient Israelites keep their identity in the face of an entirely new way of life?

Fear of difference is very common in this world, just like in this Torah portion. Such as the first time you try something, you might be apprehensive about encountering a new situation. In society, some people are scared of different types of people. Some are afraid of people of color, and some are afraid of different types of faith. One way of dealing with difference is to destroy it, as God tells Moses to do, but another path would be not to destroy but to assimilate to the new culture. My suggestion to this problem is to consider a 3rd path that involves retaining and maintaining the essential truth of what it means to be jewish while also remaining open to other ways of life. This approach could work in other areas of life as well as the spiritual journey. In a way my own life is an example of this concept, as I come from mixed ancestry. It is with curiosity and interest in what’s come before me that I begin to learn more about my Jewish roots and my mother’s side of the family. I feel honored to be part of such an ancient tradition, and grateful to assimilate some of my ancestry into my life.

I began doing some research, and found three articles that pertained to my theme. The first was “Why you’re so afraid of change and what you can do about it” by Adam Dachis. This article discusses why exactly we are so fearful of change. As Dachis says “Anytime we are confronted with an event that is inconsistent with our core beliefs, we will likely feel some level of stress.” He continues to say “When we invest ourselves emotionally in anything, it becomes harder to change because we don’t want to lose all the effort we already expended.” This section relates to my torah portion because the Israelites had been in the desert for 40 years, and didn’t want to lose all the time and effort they had invested.  Therefore, they planned to destroy the different and threatening altars. Instead of trying a peaceful way, they were going to demolish everything.

In another article I read, “Factoring fear: What scares us and why” by Lou Dzierzak,  discusses what part of the brain reacts to fear. Dzierzak says that fear is the response to the threatening stimuli, or situation. He continues to talk about the fact that  “The amygdala is the first responder to threatening stimuli.” The amygdala is a small almond sized part of your brain that is basically the fear center of your body. I chose this article because I was studying a lot about fear of difference and the concept of fear itself interested me. This article proves that we all experience fear, and it is not our fault that we are scared of difference.

When I was 5 or 6, I was walking by Moody’s with my mom and dad. The putrid smell hit me as I noticed a homeless person for the first time. He smelled like he had been dumpster diving frequently. He wore tattered clothes, was dirty, and had a sign for money. I was frightened because I wasn’t used to seeing people like this. Something like this has probably happened in your life.

In the article “Overcoming fear: the only way out is through”written by Noam Shpancer from Psychology Today states “Exposure works better than avoidance on the physiological level by bringing about nervous system habituation, which is the physiological antidote to anxiety.” Maybe if I had sat down and talked with the homeless person I wouldn’t have been so scared. I might have gotten to know his story, and he wouldn’t have seemed so different from me. Some ways to overcome this type of fear I found, is to sit down and talk with the source of your fears, or talk to a friend or family member about your feelings toward that group or person. This process might make you less anxious when you are around them. Next time, if you come across being afraid of difference, don’t be so scared. Instead, try to work on becoming more relaxed around them. In today's world, if we try to become less frightened of difference, maybe we might have a more peaceful planet. I believe that overcoming this fear is a key component to human society.

I have many people to thank, but first of all I would like to thank all of you who have come here today from near and far to attend this ceremony. Whether you just drove down the street, or flew in from London or Boston, I am very grateful you are here. I want to thank Margaret for teaching me about Judaism and spirituality in an interesting and thought provoking way.  Mina, thank you for your dedication to teaching me Hebrew. Either coming to my house daily or calling from afar, you checked in with me everyday and kept me on track. Thank you Scott, Jennie, and Emily for helping me organize my thoughts. I would also like to thank my Hebrew group: Pele, Josephine, Nora, and Aria for supporting me all the way through the process, the Jewish community for letting me partake in services, my grandparents for being understanding, and a big thank you to Mr. Strupp for teaching me  about the history of Judaism. I most of all owe thanks to my parents, for their ongoing support and funding of my studies. Without all of you this would not be able to happen.