

## JEWISH HEROES

by Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel July 15, 2018

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The crisis of leadership in both the Jewish and non-Jewish world is at an all-time high. Many people in leadership roles, including presidents, prime ministers, mayors, CEOs, rabbis and teachers have been found to engage in immoral or illegal activities. Some individuals who many people thought were their heroes often turn out to be anything but as they engage in self-centered behaviors. In the Jewish community, some of those leaders whom Jews previously respected have been accused or convicted of crimes or improper behavior. In addition, search committees in the Jewish community who try to replace retiring leaders take longer and longer to find candidates worthy of that leadership. There are fewer and fewer rabbis today whom everyone looks up to and acknowledges as true leaders. Why is this occurring specifically now? What is the definition of a true hero and a true leader in Judaism? Perhaps after defining through the sources what authentic Jewish heroism and leadership are, we might begin to choose different kinds of leaders for today.

### **DEFINING A JEWISH HERO**

A hero in Western society is generally defined as “a man of distinguished courage or ability, admired for his brave deeds and noble qualities.” We know of many heroes who have performed various heroic actions. Yet if we were to ask today’s youth who their heroes are, who they want to be like, the overwhelming majority (in survey after survey) answers athletes, actors and pop singers. The values of most of these individuals (while there certainly are exceptions in every field) do not usually represent the best of Western society’s values and certainly not Jewish values. What, then, is the Jewish definition of a hero, and how is this definition the same as or different from that in society at large? What makes a hero become a uniquely Jewish hero?

The closest words for the terms “hero” and “heroism” in Hebrew and in the Bible are “*Gibor*” and “*Gevura*.” However, if we examine the use of this word in the Bible, we will see that it is rarely used in the sense of heroism, and it sometimes has a negative reference. For example, the very first time the word *Gibor* appears in Scripture is in describing Nimrod<sup>1</sup>, who is regarded as evil in Jewish thought. The Torah twice says that he was the first *Gibor*, referring to his hunting skill. One commentary<sup>2</sup> describes Nimrod in a positive light, as the person who showed courage in hunting and then taught humanity how to hunt animals. Rashi<sup>3</sup>, on the other hand, says that Nimrod “hunted” people and used his cunning to rebel against G-d.

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 10:8-9

<sup>2</sup> Ibn Ezra commentary on Genesis 10:8

<sup>3</sup> Rashi commentary on Genesis 10:8-9

Other personalities described as *Gibor* in the Bible are depicted in a more positive light, but once again, only to describe physical prowess. Gidon, one of the exemplary Judges, is called a *Gibor*<sup>4</sup>. On the other hand, Yiftach, whose character was somewhat questionable, is described as both a son of a prostitute and a *Gibor*<sup>5</sup>. This indicates that they were physically strong men, but says nothing about their character. In addition to his other traits, Saul, the first king of Israel, is also called a *Gibor*.<sup>6</sup> Saul's successor, King David, is usually thought of as a non-imposing figure physically, especially when we think of his encounter with Goliath. He did not "look" like a king (see Samuel I, chapter 16), as he was the last person Samuel or his family believed would be selected by G-d as king. Yet David is called a *Gibor* as a warrior,<sup>7</sup> in the same verse that he is described as a musician and a man of war. Some commentaries explain that this verse may be using *Gibor* not to describe his physical prowess, but his mental abilities in devising strategy (David became a general after his conquest of mighty Goliath), and his great personal courage.<sup>8</sup> The evil Yeravam, who split the Kingdom of the Jewish people into two, is also described as a *Gibor* in war,<sup>9</sup> a clear reference to physical strength, and certainly not to heroism

Later, Jeremiah warns people not to feel self-important and haughty due to their attainments of wisdom, strength, courage and wealth, but rather to realize that these accomplishments all come from G-d.<sup>10</sup> Clearly, the quality of a *Gibor* which is referred to in verses is primarily that of physical strength, and not necessarily a characteristic to be admired or that is heroic. But then, after all these amoral references to human beings as *Gibor*, we find that G-d Himself is described a *Gibor*, first in the Torah itself,<sup>11</sup> and then repeatedly by Jeremiah<sup>12</sup> and King David in Psalms.<sup>13</sup> Obviously, this description cannot be referring to physical strength since G-d has no physicality. What, then, does this term signify and how does it relate to our original question about heroism in the Jewish sense?

#### **A CHANGE IN THE MEANING OF GIBOR AND GEVURA**

Until now, we have seen that all references in the Scripture to *Gibor* and *Gevurah* indicate physical prowess. Even when referring to G-d, it seems to describe G-d's acts of might and power in the world. But then something changed. The Talmud<sup>14</sup> informs us that because the Jewish people were suffering mightily at the hands of non-Jewish kings and countries, Daniel actually removed the term *Gibor*, referring to G-d, from the prayer service (Shemoneh Esreh) as G-d's power and might were no longer readily evident in the world. Later, the Men of the Great Assembly reinstated the word as they redefined the concept. In Judaism, the term *Gibor* no longer signifies physical strength and might. Rather, it indicates inner strength and the ability to hold back one's natural tendencies, and to behave courageously from within. By withholding His anger with the non-Jewish nations who were persecuting His people, the Jews, G-d demonstrated

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<sup>4</sup> Judges 6:11-12

<sup>5</sup> Judges 11:1

<sup>6</sup> I Samuel 14:52

<sup>7</sup> I Samuel 16:18

<sup>8</sup> Commentaries of Radak and Ralbag

<sup>9</sup> I Kings 11:28

<sup>10</sup> Jeremiah 9:22-23

<sup>11</sup> Deuteronomy 10:17

<sup>12</sup> Jeremiah 20:11, 32:18

<sup>13</sup> Psalms 24:8, 78:65

<sup>14</sup> Yoma 69b

*Gevurah*, inner strength and courage. This, then, is the definition of Jewish heroism. All references to *Gibor* in Judaism after the Men of the Great Assembly seem to use this definition of heroism.

Since Jews are commanded to imitate G-d's ways and values,<sup>15</sup> it becomes a positive Jewish value to be like G-d, to overcome one's natural tendencies and inclinations, and hold oneself back from doing the wrong thing. Jewish heroism, then, is defined as a quality of inner strength that is accomplished privately. It is distinguished from the usual concept of the "flashy" hero performing acts in public. Thus, when the Mishna asks what is true heroism and true courage, it answers, "He who overcomes his natural desires."<sup>16</sup> This is Jewish heroism.

In a related idea demonstrating the importance of the privacy of Jewish heroism, the Talmud tells the story of a Jewish hero, Mar Ukva,<sup>17</sup> who used to anonymously leave coins each day at a poor man's house in order not to embarrass him or reveal the identity of his supporter. One day the man was curious who his benefactor was, so he stayed near the door. As Mar Ukva was approaching the poor man's house from a distance, he noticed the poor man at the door and he knew he had to hide himself. However, the only available hiding place was a furnace. Mar Ukva jumped into the furnace and stayed there until the man left. He chose to burn himself rather than cause this man any embarrassment. This incident displays true Jewish heroism – an act of goodness done privately. In a similar manner, the Ten Martyrs who were tortured and killed by the Romans because they refused to refrain from teaching Torah when the Romans banned the learning of Torah are called in the prayers "*Giborai Ko-ach* – heroes of strength."<sup>18</sup> Their inner strength and values – their heroism – compelled them to teach Torah even if it meant risking their lives.

Therefore, the Western definition of a hero and a Jewish definition of hero, although somewhat related, in reality are quite different. Perhaps this difference can be highlighted by which group of Jews is viewed as true heroes in the Holocaust. In the non-Jewish world, people point to the individual Jews who physically rebelled against the Nazis in the Warsaw Ghetto, holding off the Nazi army for nearly six weeks, longer than the entire Polish army managed to do. The millions who were murdered in the gas chambers are sometimes looked upon negatively as "sheep going to the slaughter." But based upon our new definition of a Jewish hero, it is the Jews who died with the Shema prayer on their lips, who never abandoned their dignity and faith despite the apparent logic in doing so, who are considered the real Jewish heroes of the Holocaust.

Another example depicting the difference between the Western concept of hero and the Jewish concept of hero can be seen through two different incidents. On January 15, 2009, Captain Chelsey Sullinger was flying his U.S. Airways plane when it became damaged. Despite the personal peril involved, he safely landed the plane in the Hudson River, saving all 150 passengers aboard. While this certainly was a heroic act, even by Jewish standards (saving even a single life in Judaism is an act deserving of the highest merit), Jewish lore often describes heroism in a different form. Rabbi Israel Salanter (1810-1883), the rabbi of the community, did not show up at his synagogue one Yom Kippur night. All the people were worried, and after the services they searched for him. They found him in the small home of a single mother who wanted to pray in the synagogue so

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<sup>15</sup> Sotah 14a

<sup>16</sup> Mishna Avot 4:1

<sup>17</sup> Ketuvot 67b

<sup>18</sup> "*Arzei HaLevanon*-Cedars of Lebanon" Lamentation in the Tisha B'Av service

much that she foolishly left her sleeping baby alone. On the way to synagogue, Rabbi Yisrael had heard the crying baby, investigated and realized the situation. He chose to babysit and miss Yom Kippur services rather than leave the helpless child alone. Even though Rabbi Salanter certainly wanted to pray in the synagogue, especially on Yom Kippur, he overcame his desire to do so in order to do what he believed was more important. This is an example of Jewish heroism.

No matter what the definition of a hero is, one eternal question remains: are heroes (or leaders, for that matter) born that way, or does the situation make them act in a heroic manner? There are many ordinary people or even scoundrels who are not considered heroes or leaders, but when a unique situation presents itself, they step up and act heroically like a true leader. (Consider Oskar Schindler and similar stories during the Holocaust, for example). Were these people heroic to begin with and they only needed a situation to demonstrate what was already inside of them, or did they become heroes only when a specific situation arose? This question is debated in the in the Talmud,<sup>19</sup> and has never been resolved.

### **WHO WOULD BE CONSIDERED JEWISH HEROES TODAY?**

Despite the general definition of a Jewish hero described above (which makes anyone who retains this quality a hero of sorts) are there any specific kinds of people who Jews should aspire to imitate? Are there role models who Jews should look up to as heroes and try to be like them?

Although there is no specific list, perhaps two sources can help give us direction. In one blessing that traditional Jews recite three times daily,<sup>20</sup> a group of people is mentioned that we pray to G-d to be with them and like them (“Set our lot with them”). Who are these people that we aspire to be in their company and to emulate? They are the “the righteous, the pious, the elders..., the remnant of the Scribes, the righteous converts...” What exactly is special about each type of “hero” who is described in this blessing?

A righteous individual, a *Tzadik* in Judaism, is not someone who is a “great guy” or holy. *Tzadik* comes from the word *Tzedek*, which connotes doing the right or proper thing in each situation.<sup>21</sup> Knowing what the Torah and Jewish law demands of a Jew in each situation and not deviating from the proper action is what makes a person a *Tzadik*. A pious person (*Chasid*) is an individual who goes beyond the letter of the law and also demonstrates extra kindness. And an elder in Judaism is not someone who is old. Rather, it is a person who has acquired wisdom.<sup>22</sup> A young person with wisdom can be called a *Zaken*, an elder.

Who is a “remnant of the Scribes?” The scribes used to write down all practices and transmit the tradition. The remnant is the last person of a generation who remembers what it “used to be like” when Jews observed certain customs. This person is the link to the previous generations and the one who passes down the tradition correctly to keep the chain of Jewish traditions and customs preserved. Finally, the righteous convert is to be admired because he or she sought truth and rejected an entire lifestyle, community, values and family in order to convert to Judaism and embrace a Jewish way of life. Therefore, this person is also a hero to be admired.

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<sup>19</sup> Erchin 17a

<sup>20</sup> Al HaTzadkim blessing, 13<sup>th</sup> blessing of the Shmoneh Esreh

<sup>21</sup> Leviticus 19:36, Deuteronomy 16:20

<sup>22</sup> Kiddushin 32b

There is another source which further identifies the “best” people in the Jewish community, the heroes to seek out. In searching for the perfect spouse (in Talmudic times the man chose his wife, usually based on the qualities of the father or the family), the Talmud tells us<sup>23</sup> which values and qualities to look for. The first choice for a spouse is to be [the daughter of] a *Talmid Chacham*, someone imbued with the wisdom of Torah. If that person cannot be found, then one should marry [the daughter of] a great man of the generation, which refers to a leader of the community. If not available, then marry [the daughter of] a head (perhaps the president) of a synagogue. If this category is also unavailable, then marry [the daughter of] a *Gabbai*, someone who is responsible for distributing Tzedakah (charity) monies to the needy of the community. Finally, one may otherwise seek to marry [the daughter of] a teacher of Torah. Although these would certainly not be the heroes one would think of in classic Western culture (and some may say these categories do not adequately portray the Jewish perspective either), the Talmud seems to declare that these five role models may also be considered heroes in the Jewish community.

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<sup>23</sup> Pesachim 49b