



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

BAMIDBAR > Shelach

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Shelach

Are You A Hero?



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Why are we obsessed with heroes? Everywhere we turn – the news, books, and everyday conversations – we hear talk of heroes. We love our Hollywood stars, professional athletes, and comic book characters intensely.

Of course, celebrating heroism is celebrating the human capacity to do or achieve amazing things, but could it be that we have become too drunk on heroes? Is our obsession born of mere escapism? Are we avoiding life by escaping into a fictional world or living vicariously through others? Do we immortalize heroes to help us forget our own flaws, at least temporarily, so that we don't have to confront ugly truths?

Or perhaps there is something deeper. Perhaps heroes lend more to our own lives than just a tale of a knight in shining armor saving a damsel in distress.

This week's Torah reading – *Parshat Shelach* – suggests that there is much more to the hero than meets the eye. In reading the story of Caleb and Joshua, who took a stand of heroic proportions, we find out the true meaning of what it takes to be a hero.

This sermon analyzes the personality of the hero through three graphic and inspirational examples and then goes on to introduce the crucial element, which allows any one of us to be a hero – to do the extraordinary thing in ordinary circumstances – by following the example of Caleb and Joshua.

ARE YOU A HERO?

1. Hero Worship

Why are we obsessed with heroes? Everywhere we turn – the news, books, and everyday conversations – we hear talk of heroes. We love our Hollywood stars, professional athletes, and comic book characters intensely.

I checked right before Shabbos just to be sure, but it turned out my suspicions were correct. The hash tag “hero” had hundreds of hits on Twitter in just the previous few hours and my quick search on Google news revealed that within the previous 24 hours, thousands of articles were written about people hailed as heroes.

See, my little son/daughter asked me earlier this week, “Tatty, who is your hero? Can I be your hero?” And I don’t know why – I’ve probably declared my heroes a hundred times before – but this time the question struck me: Who are my heroes?

But even more importantly, why did my child want to be my hero? Why did he/she feel the need to be a hero in the first place?

And the question bothered me all week: Why are we, as a society and especially as individuals, so obsessed with heroes? Why do we need to have heroes or even be heroes?

Of course, celebrating heroism is celebrating the human capacity to do or achieve amazing things, but could it be that we have become too drunk on heroes? Is our obsession born of mere escapism? Are we avoiding life by escaping into a fictional world or living vicariously through others? Do we immortalize heroes to help us forget our own flaws, at least temporarily, so that we don’t have to confront ugly truths?

Or perhaps there is something deeper. Perhaps heroes lend more to our own lives than just a tale of a knight in shining armor saving a damsel in distress.

So when I studied this week's Torah reading – *Parshat Shelach* – I was gratified to read about two men, Caleb and Joshua, who took a stand of heroic proportions, and in reading their story, I felt I had the answer to my question.

But first, before I share it with you, let me talk a little bit about the hero personality.

2. The Hero with a Thousand Faces

Joseph Campbell, a famous American mythologist and author, tried to understand the nature of the hero phenomenon. In 1949, he published his first book called *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, in which he theorized that all the mythological and fictional heroes that we come across in comics, films and books, are all born of a similar design.

Demonstrating how all heroes are variants of one archetypal hero, Campbell presented an eleven-step cycle, which he called the “Heroes’ Journey.” The journey, according to the book, begins and ends in the ordinary world, but on the way, the hero passes through a special world.

So, for example, you have a regular guy living a regular life – he drops his kids at school and goes to work, and sometimes he helps his wife do the dishes. But then, one day, he receives a mysterious message, a call to adventure or a challenge. However, before he embarks on this journey, this regular guy-soon-turning-hero needs some help – probably from someone older and wiser.

The next step is when our friend crosses the threshold from his normal, safe home and enters the special world. But, as you might have guessed, being a hero is hard work. Our hero has to solve a riddle, slay a monster or escape from a trap. And then it's time to face his biggest ordeal – which is the sixth step – it is the hero's darkest hour, a time of pure crisis where our hero faces his worst fear or even death.

Of course, being a hero, he succeeds against all odds and then he claims a treasure, a reward for saving the day. And finally, in the last few steps, the hero returns back to his normal life and, enriched by the experience, is able to help others become heroes too.

This is the typical hero of Joseph Campbell, and if you give it some thought, most of the fictional and real heroes that you know of have experienced some variation of this cycle.

3. Raoul Wallenberg

The would-be hero must ask himself: If I don't act, who will?

This is what Raoul Wallenberg did. He was a young 31 year-old businessman, working for the Central European Trading Company, when, in 1944, he had a weighty decision to make - whether or not to risk his life to save Hungarian Jews from being deported to the Nazi death camps or to mind his own business and save his own skin.

The American War Refugee Board was looking for a man willing to walk into the jaws of the Nazi death machine, and because he would be alone in his mission, it had to be someone courageous and confident enough to act on his own initiative. Raoul Wallenberg became their man.

In Budapest, Wallenberg quickly established an office and "hired" 400 Jewish volunteers to run it. He then invented a special Swedish passport called the *Schutzpass*, which would grant the holder immunity from deportation. His "passport" alone saved an estimated 20,000 Jewish people, and his other efforts tens of thousands more.

A woman working in Wallenberg's office told a story of how Wallenberg and his staff braved the freezing waters of the Danube River to save Jews who had been shot and left to drown by Hungarian gendarmes.

But his efforts didn't go unnoticed, and his life was increasingly in danger. One day his car was blown up and he began sleeping in different places every night. Until the end of the war, Raoul Wallenberg continued to risk his life to save Jews – a mission he undertook, not to be a hero but to do the right thing. As Hillel the Sage once said: "In a place where there is no man, try to be a man."

When the opportunity to make a difference was proposed to him, Raoul Wallenberg stood up to the task.

4. Finding a Source of Strength

Like Raoul Wallenberg, heroes take great risks, and to take great risks they must have courage. The hero within Joseph Campbell's archetypal design looks for a source of strength to succeed in his mission.

Chesley Sullenberger, the pilot of US Airways flight 1549, reached within himself for that strength. Shortly after taking off from La Guardia Airport in New York, Sullenberger struck a flock of birds and lost both engines. Hastily discussing his options with air traffic control, Captain Sullenberger realized that returning to La Guardia was not possible, and that even the nearest airfield in New Jersey was still too far away. With all options exhausted, with both engines gone, Sullenberger was on his own, stranded over the Hudson River, with 155 passengers and crewmembers on board, and no safe avenue of escape. So he took a risk: he steered his aircraft towards the river, attempting what no other pilot had ever done – crash land safely on water.

In what he later described as the "worst sickening, pit-of-your-stomach, falling-through-the-floor feeling," Sullenberger calmly stared death in the face as he told passengers to "brace for impact."

But Captain Sullenberger had to search within himself for the courage and composure to perform this death-defying maneuver. And he later confirmed how he had found the strength to do it: "One way of looking at this might be that for 42 years, I've been making small, regular deposits in this bank of experience: education and training.

And on January 15, the balance was sufficient so that I could make a very large withdrawal.”

Heroes are able to take great risks because they tap into a source of strength. And this strength unlocks their inner hero, the hero within – a hero who can stand up against the world if need be.

5. Jackie Robinson

This is what Jackie Robinson did.

If any of you have ever been to Queens you may have driven on the Jackie Robinson Parkway. It is a 5-mile stretch of road which is infamous for its tortuous twisting and turning. New Yorkers joke that the parkway was named after Jackie Robinson because it closely resembles his difficult path to playing Major League baseball, a path he walked alone.

Jackie Robinson debuted for the Dodgers in 1947, becoming the first African American to play in the Major Leagues. His debut came a year before Harry Truman desegregated the military and seven years before the Supreme Court ruled desegregation in public schools was unconstitutional.

He became a target of racial slurs and hate letters and death threats. Some pitchers threw purposely at his head and legs, while some catchers spat on his shoes while he stood up to swing. For the most part, aside from the staunch support of the Dodgers’ manager, Branch Rickey, and a handful of players, Jackie Robinson was alone in the Major Leagues, with even some of his own teammates refusing to play with him.

In a conversation with Rickey, two years before he took the monumental step, Robinson was asked if he had the guts.

“Mr. Rickey,” Jackie Robinson responded, “Are you looking for an African American who isn’t afraid to fight back?” Branch Rickey said he was not: “I am looking for a ballplayer with enough guts not to fight back.”

And that's how it was. Jackie Robinson learned to answer the insults, violence and injustice with silence. With his integrity, he earned the respect of his teammates, and eventually the opposition, and although he didn't turn a nation color blind, he certainly made it more color friendly. His lone stand opened the door to black athletes in the big leagues. By standing up against the world, he made the world a better place.

6. The Kosher Bird (Optional)

Thus we see that a sign of a true hero is his ability to withstand adversity and find the strength to swim against the tide.

Strange as it may seem, this relates to a peculiar yet fascinating case in the laws of *Kashrus*, which deals with the stipulation that if any animal has an injury or disease that would cause it to die within the next twelve months, it is deemed not kosher.¹

In examining the extent of this law, Maimonides² brings a case of a bird that was snared and fell into a rushing river. Now, in addition to being concerned about the general welfare of the bird, we rabbis are also concerned if, with the impact of hitting the water, the bird sustained an injury to one of its vital organs, which would deem it not kosher. We determine this by looking at the bird's movements. If it floats downstream, we assert that it is being carried by the tide and is indeed mortally wounded. If, however, the bird swims a full body-length against the tide, we deem it to be a kosher bird.

The calculation we use to determine the birds status is quite simple, does it flow with the tide or swim against it, but its implications are replete with meaning – some heroes swim against the tide, maintaining their integrity even in the face of loneliness and alienation.

¹ *Chullin* 42a.

² *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Shechitah* 9:8, 16.

7. Caleb and Joshua

And that brings us to this week's Torah reading – Parshas Shelach³ – which talks about Joshua and Caleb, two of the twelve spies that Moses sent to scout out the Land of Canaan.

Joshua and Caleb introduce us to a new type of hero: one who finds strength in the source of all strength – God. In so doing, Joshua and Caleb teach us that any one of us can be a hero, any one of us can find strength against the odds without being an experienced pilot, an astute diplomat or a stellar athlete. All we need do is turn to God in a moment of trial.

The moment of trial for Joshua and Caleb came when they and the other spies returned from Canaan to where the Jews were encamped in the Wilderness of Paran. The other spies – their minds made-up that the nation should not enter the Promised Land – described undefeatable giants they had seen living in fortified cities. The spies were representatives from each of the twelve tribes and their testimony was readily accepted. Their words frightened the Jewish people and roused them to protest against God's directive to inhabit the Land.

The Torah then relates that Caleb stood up and silenced the crowd. He reminded the Jews of the string of miracles that Moses had performed as a messenger of God that had led them to this point. “Did Moses not split the sea?” He boomed at them. “Did he not get the manna for us?”⁴

But the other spies rebuffed his words, and throughout the night the voice of dissent grew louder and stronger. The Jewish people complained against Moses and God, some even proposing to return to Egypt!

The next morning, Caleb resumed his stand from the day before, trying to endear the Land to the people. Joshua joined him, and together they attempted to dispel the lies that had taken hold of the people.

³ Numbers 13:17-33, 14:1-10.

⁴ See Rashi's commentary to Ibid 13:30. See Sotah 35a.

8. Strength in Prayer

The Torah informs us that Caleb and Joshua looked for a source of strength to stand up against the other spies and found it in prayer.

When Caleb arrived in the Land of Canaan, the Torah⁵ tells us that he went to Hebron where he prayed at the graves of the patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – for the strength to not be persuaded by his companions or be party to their plans.

Similarly, before the spies left on their scouting mission, Moses personally prayed for Joshua that he be saved from the spies' cowardly plot.⁶

To be successful in their mission – to endear the Land to the people and not be succumb to the pressure from their peers – Caleb and Joshua needed to pray, to connect to something higher, to connect to God above.

9. Withstanding Adversity

But even so, the people didn't listen to them. Caleb and Joshua were disparaged. They were threatened, intimidated and assaulted. The ten other spies and the entire nation stood against them. The people doubted their beliefs, they questioned their authority, and then they attacked them with stones.

And yet, Caleb and Joshua stood firm in their beliefs and didn't lose hope. When the other spies shouted, "We cannot go up⁷," they encouraged the people: "Yes we can."⁸

⁵ Numbers 13:22.

⁶ See Rashi's commentary to Ibid 13:16

⁷ Ibid 13:31.

⁸ Ibid 13:30.

They performed no battlefield bravado, nor any great achievement or triumph – in fact, their efforts to convince the people failed. But in the deafening sea of protest they made their voices heard.

With their heroism came isolation and yet, they maintained their integrity, if only to stand by the truth.

A true hero isn't measured by the size of his strength but by the strength of his heart – Caleb and Joshua were such heroes.

10. Windows into Our Souls

Our heroes, real and fictional, are the windows into our souls – they remind us of what we are really capable of.

As a rabbi, I have been privileged to witness many heroic acts of people in our community, a number of them sitting with us here today. Some of our heroes rose to the occasion in very dramatic fashion. But most heroism is actually quite silent and understated – but no less heroic than the dramatic sort.

A mother tenderly caring for her special child. A worker going out of his way to help a stranger. An executive anonymously volunteering to visit the sick. A pedestrian courageously preventing a mugging. All simple acts done without fanfare – but in these small acts, with no one watching or taking pictures, we see the tremendous spirit of a true hero.

I can sincerely say that there is nothing more inspiring than seeing “ordinary” people doing extraordinary things. And the courage and strength we see in them as they try to overcome their challenges ought to inspire us all to conquer our own difficulties.

And so, when my son/daughter asked me who are my heroes. I told him/her that these seemingly ordinary people are my heroes. I told him/her that he/she could be my hero too.

11. The Hero Within

I have come to understand that the celebration of heroism within our society is more than escapism but rather reflects an inner yearning and desire on the part of each one of us to discover the hero within.

Yes, it may be easier to replace our inner hero with a superstar in a comic book, on stage or screen, or in a sports stadium, but the mere fact that we are drawn to these heroes testifies to our deep-rooted need to be a hero in our own right.

Joseph Campbell taught the world about the Hero's Journey, but Caleb and Joshua taught us about the hero within. Inside each of us is a hero, one that can slay dragons and save the princess, one that can stand tall and be brave enough to swim against the tide if need be, one that can take extraordinary actions in ordinary circumstances.

There comes a moment in everyone's life, usually when no one is watching, when you and only you are uniquely positioned to be a hero. You have the choice to ignore the opportunity or to rise to the occasion. You and only you will decide. Heroes are created in these unsung moments.

The next time your moment comes, will you be a hero?

Friends, heroism is a metaphor for the human journey, for we all face challenges that – if we dig deep enough – we know we can overcome. But, ultimately, as any hero will testify, it comes down to single moments, and the decisions we make in those moments when we ask ourselves: “Who am I now? Who do I want to be? And how do I get from here to there? What are the obstacles blocking my way? And how will I overcome them?”

The answers to these questions are the key to unlocking your inner hero. In this week's Torah reading, Caleb and Joshua find their inner hero with the help of God, and I hope that you find yours too. Amen.

Good Shabbos.

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