



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

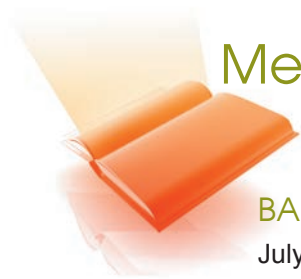
BAMIDBAR > Mattot

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

July 22, 2011

Mattot

Heroes and Anti-Heroes



Meaningful Sermons *"Words from the Heart Enter the Heart"*

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ABSTRACT

When faced with the cruel injustice of life, two men in history responded in very different ways: Moses and Acher. With the recent gruesome murder of Leiby Kletzky at the hands of one of our own, these two voices emerge yet again: One of doubt and despair. The other of hope and confidence. The voice of the hero and the voice of the anti-hero.

Some people like their heroes to be good. They want them to fight for a cause, overcome the obstacles in their path and triumph over evil. Other people prefer their heroes to stumble and fall, get bruised up, make mistakes and emerge better than at the start, but still as a work in progress.

It's been said that this is part of the appeal of the Bible – so many of its heroes are so very human. It's also been said that if the Bible were not written by God, it would have been written by an anti-Semite, because unlike the scriptures of other religions, it paints the Jews as decidedly imperfect.

And perhaps this fascination we have with imperfection is what has given rise to the popularity of the anti-hero. In novels and movies, the anti-hero is the chief character, the protagonist, whose traits and behavior are conspicuously contrary to those of the archetypal hero.

This sermon analyzes two figures from Jewish history: one an anti-hero, Acher, and one a hero, Moses. It contrasts their attitude to divine justice and their contradictory legacy – one a legacy of doubt, the other a legacy of hope. It also speaks of Moses' 120-day sojourn on Mount Sinai which corresponds to this time in the Jewish calendar.

HEROES AND ANTI-HEROES

1. Heroic or Flawed?

How do you like your heroes? Heroic or flawed? [Sunny side up or scrambled?]

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And perhaps this fascination we have with imperfection is what has given rise to the popularity of the anti-hero. In novels and movies, the anti-hero is the chief character, the protagonist, whose traits and behavior are conspicuously contrary to those of the archetypal hero.

The earliest known anti-hero in literature was Faust, the scholar of German legend who made a deal with Satan, exchanging his soul for unlimited knowledge and worldly pleasures.

In movies, arguably the earliest anti-hero was the boxer Midge Kelley, played by the Jewish actor, Kirk Douglas, in the classic *Champion*.¹ On screen the boxer is portrayed as brutal and callous to friend and foe, but also a vulnerable man who scrambled to escape poverty and achieve fame, because “I wanted to hear somebody call me Mister.”

So this gives us some food for thought – what kind of heroes do you prefer and why?

And if could meet your hero from the pages of history, who would it be?

¹ *Ragman's Son* by Kirk Douglas, Simon & Schuster 1988, p. 146.

2. Who Would You Most Want to Meet?

I once asked this question of a friend of mine and interestingly he chose not a hero but an anti-hero. He said, “You know a part of me would be very curious to meet Acher.”

If you don’t remember the story of Acher, it goes like this:

His original name was Elisha ben Avuya and he was one of the greatest sages of the 1st century CE. Together with three of his rabbi colleagues – Ben Azai, Ben Zuma and Akiva – Elisha entered “the garden,” that is, the mystical realms. The realms of reality Elisha and his colleagues accessed were so profound that Ben Azai died in the process, Ben Zuma went insane, and Elisha became an apostate. Only Rabbi Akiva came out intact.²

After he became a heretic, his crime was considered so terrible that his colleagues no longer referred to him by his given name, Elisha. Instead, they called him *Acher*, the unmentionable “Other.”

A related incident that contributed to Elisha’s rebellion is described in the Talmud.³ He saw a father tell his son⁴ to perform the mitzvah of *shiluach ha’kan* (“sending away a mother bird before taking her eggs”). The son did so, in effect fulfilling two mitzvahs (that of *shiluach ha’kan* and that of honoring his parent) both of which carry a promise of a good, long life as reward.⁵ But, instead, while climbing the ladder to fulfill his father’s wish, the son fell to his death. When Elisha saw this he was deeply disturbed wondering “where is this person’s reward of a good life? Where is this person’s reward for long life?”

Acher’s story is both fascinating and mysterious. One is strongly tempted to meet and ask him what he saw there in the mystical “garden” that so disturbed him. It would be amazing to hear his experience. Also to hear how he felt when the Sages began calling him

² *Chagigah* 14b.

³ Jerusalem Talmud *Chagigah* 2:1.

⁴ This detail (about the father telling his son) is in the end of *Chulin* (not in the Jerusalem Talmud).

⁵ Exodus 20:12. Deuteronomy 5:16. 22:7.

Acher. And when his great student Rabbi Meir defied the others to study with him, saying, "I eat the fruit and discard the peel. I suck out the juice of the fruit and discard the pits."⁶

What did Acher think about that? Did he agree? And what did he feel when he finally passed to the next world – how have his ideas about justice changed with the benefit of hindsight?

3. Question of Justice

I can understand my colleague's fascination with Acher, because who among us has not been plagued by the question of justice in this world? When we see tragedy strike good people ... when we see good people suffer, we all wonder where is the Judge and where is the justice?

Just last week, we were all faced with the brutal reality of Leiby Kletsky's gruesome murder. A young, innocent child who simply lost his way, making the wrong turn, and meeting of all people in the world, a butcher who would kill him in the worst possible way. Who of us is not crying out – like Acher did: Where is the Judge and where is the justice?!

Yes, it would be interesting to get Acher's answer now, from the world of truth.

But I myself, if given that one chance, would choose not to meet the anti-hero, but the hero himself. I would like to meet Moses – a far more complicated individual, I posit. And one who assumed a completely opposite attitude than Acher's to life's injustices.

This was a man who spoke to God "face to face as one speaks with a friend,"⁷ and he not only *maintained* his faith, but he became the ultimate symbol of faith and dedication, the quintessential man of God.

⁶ *Chagigah* 15b.

⁷ Exodus 33:11

And Moses also wandered in the mystical “garden,” and he too witnessed the suffering of the innocent, and confronted God on the topic of justice, after the Pharaoh increased their work burden, asking: “Why do You mistreat Your people?”⁸ Yet he maintained his deep faith.

4. Moses on Mt. Sinai (Joke)

One cannot help but be absolutely infatuated by Moses’ sojourn on Mount Sinai:

When Moses climbed the Mount Sinai to get the instruction from God, he did not know what God wanted to give him. He prostrated himself before God to show his respect and he listened carefully.

God said, “Moses, I want to give to you something.”

Moses hurriedly replied, “Wait a second. Before you tell or give me anything, I would like to know how much it will cost me?”

God replied, “It will cost you nothing.”

“Ahh,” said Moses, “In that case, give me ten.”

5. Moses on Mt. Sinai

[As I said] One cannot help but be absolutely infatuated by Moses’ sojourn on Mount Sinai:

- 1) First he spent 40 days receiving the Torah (from 6th of *Sivan* to 17th of *Tammuz*).
- 2) Then he came down, shattered the tablets of the Ten Commandments, and returned for another 40 days to pray that God pardon the people for this sin (from 18th of *Tammuz* to the 29th of *Av*).

⁸Exodus 5:22.

3) Unsuccessful, he returned for yet another 40 days (from the 1st of *Elul* to Yom Kippur), when he finally secured complete forgiveness on the holiest day of the year.

We are actually now in the second segment of Moses' climb – as today is the 21st of *Tammuz*.

What was Moses doing up there all this time? What did he see, and what did he learn? What did he say and what was said to him?

From the account in the Torah, we know that his hands were full. We know that he did not waste any time and immediately confronted God. We also know (from a series of cryptic verses in the Book of Exodus⁹) that Moses got straight to the heart of the matter by asking God to show him His face – that is, His divine ways and personality.

And God complied, although He said that instead of His face, He would show Moses His back. God would also reveal to Moses His mysterious and powerful Thirteen Divine Attributes of Compassion.

God then placed Moses in a crevice in the mountain, saying, "I will place My hand over you until I pass by. I will then remove My hand and you will see my back, but My face you will not see."¹⁰

6. What Did Moses See?

What did Moses see?

Perhaps we may never fully know. Perhaps we'd have to be Moses to know.

But of one thing we can be sure. No matter what happened up there, Moses did not give up – he went up for 40 days, for another 40 days, for another 40 days, until he prevailed!

⁹ Exodus 33:12.

¹⁰ Exodus 33:22-23.

During those 120 days, he must have heard every possible reason from God why the Jews deserved what was coming to them. He must have learned all the complexities of divine justice, and the balance of things above and below. Yet, single-mindedly, with no support system, he hammered away again, again and again...

7. A Message of Hope

No matter what happened up there, what we do know is that Moses – as opposed to Acher – was not only undisturbed by what he learned, but he came back with the biggest gift of all: the message that there is always hope.

Even when things break – and how they did break! – the human spirit is endowed with the power of persistence, and sheer and absolute persistence can break down any door.

Acher may help legitimize and lend credence to our doubts and questions, but then what are we left with? The same questions and confusions that have disturbed countless generations before us. As if we didn't have enough doubts and fears...

But Moses leaves us with confidence in ourselves, belief in the future, hope in our children and grandchildren. Yes, to believe ... and to believe even when there seems no reason to – now that takes guts, that takes courage, that takes real power.

8. Eternal Legacy

So, though we don't really know much about what Moses was doing up there, day after day after day for 120 days, what we do know is that he left us an eternal legacy – the ability to face our deepest questions about justice and injustice, about the innocent and their suffering, about God and His mysterious ways – and come away stronger, more confident than ever.

Perhaps what he ultimately learned is that our questions, doubts and fears don't weaken reality, just as our answers and courage don't strengthen it. The sheer power of faith is not intensified by answers, as it is not diminished by questions.

So why spend the rest of your life agonizing, justifying, excusing, inwardly cowering? Spend it better on growing, building, perpetuating. Even when the going gets tough, hold on to the future, rather than be victimized by the past.

Even as we reel in the face of the senseless death of a pure child and the devastation of his beautiful family, we ought not – we cannot – give up hope in all things good. That would be an injustice to the soul of little Leiby. We must – as difficult as it may be – find the strength to build, to create new ways to cherish and protect our children, to do everything on our power to fight for what is right and just.

9. My Hero

That is what Moses taught us, and that is why he is my hero.

While the people were suffering below Moses was experiencing a parallel reality above. He did not succumb to the resignation and the quiet (or loud) desperation from below. He wasn't interested in the millions of arguments making a case for despair and hopelessness. He had no time for that; he knew that anyone can come up with such arguments. With half a brain (or less), every conceivable argument can be made. It can be said that we are going nowhere, and the more things change the more they stay the same. A strong case can be made for a life of complacency and mediocrity.

Moses wasn't interested in repeating all the arguments for negativity that came before him and that would inevitably come after him. He wanted something unique, something legendary, something unprecedented – something that would instill hope in humanity, hope in our future, hope in our destiny.

Ahh, Moses. What a hero! He gave us a gift we can hold onto forever. And for this he deserves our eternal gratitude. Amen.