

BEING A HERO

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

The story of Pinchas is another example of a misjudged and unappreciated Jewish hero. Pinchas went ahead and risked everything, his portion in this world and his portion in the World-to-Come to right the wrong that had already resulted in the deaths of 200,000 Jews, and all the Jewish people wanted to do was string him up. What would have happened had God not stood up on his behalf and cleared his name?

It is hard to be a hero, at least when doing so goes against the grain of others. Sports heroes have a good time of it, because they are entertaining, at least for the people who like their team. They even get paid obscene salaries to do their thing just so people can be entertained.

Others are not so fortunate. While in Toronto recently, I happened to read an article about the riot in Vancouver last year after the local hockey team struck out, so-to-speak, by losing the Stanley Cup in their own home town. Though, based upon previous experience, the police had anticipated and prepared for such a violent reaction, still, the riot happened so quickly that it caught the authorities off guard, and resulted in a lot of injuries and tremendous damage.

The article said that, in the beginning, some people tried to contain what they could, but they got beaten up. Brave people that they were, they could not stand up to a crowd with a mob mentality, people for whom losing a sports game was moral justification to injure innocent people and destroy millions of dollars worth of property.

Just imagine what would have happened to Pinchas had God not stood up for him at the last moment, probably exactly what happened to Chur when he tried to stop the Erev Rav from making the golden calf: brutal death. When people feel self-righteous about their complaints, they also feel justified to take the law into their own hands, even if that means staining them with the blood of others.

Is it really worth it in the end? Many people have said 'no' over the generations, and have stood back and looked the other way, or have looked on in horror while doing nothing at all to help the victims. Who says I have to sacrifice my life for another? Who says I even want to?

Then, of course, there are the Rebi Akivas of history, who know how to go out in a blaze of glory:

When Rebi Akiva was taken out for execution it was the hour for reciting the Shema, and while they combed his flesh with iron combs, he accepted upon himself the Kingdom of Heaven. His students

said to him, "Our teacher, even to this point?"

He answered them, *"All my days I have been troubled by the verse, 'with all your soul,' that is, even if He takes your soul. I said, 'When will I have the opportunity of fulfilling this?' Now that I have the opportunity should I not fulfill it?"*

He prolonged the word Echad [of the Shema] until he died while saying it. (Brochos 61b)

As the Talmud says, a person can live his entire life as a righteous individual, only to become evil at the end. Some have done just the opposite, going from evil to good at the last moment. And, though there are those who acquire their portion in the World-to-Come after a lifetime of righteousness, there are some who do it in a single moment, usually their last, which can be the defining moment of a person's life:

It was said of Elazar ben Durdaya that there was not one prostitute [that he had not visited]. He was once informed that there was a prostitute in one of the sea countries who received a pocketful of 'dinars' for her services. He took the sum and crossed seven rivers until he reached her. While visiting her, [she caused him to repent] by saying, "Just as the wind cannot return to its point of origin so Elazar ben Durdaya can no longer repent."

He then [went and] placed himself between two mountains, pleading, "Mountains pray for me!"

They answered him, "We can't pray for you, for we must pray for ourselves," as the verse says, "For the mountain may depart and the hills may be removed." (Yeshayahu 54:10)

He then asked the heaven and earth to pray for him. They answered, "We have to pray for ourselves," as the verse says, "For the heavens shall vanish." (Yeshayahu 51:6)

He asked the sun and the moon to pray for him. "We must pray for ourselves," they replied, as it says, "Then the moon shall be confounded and the sun ashamed." (Yeshayahu 24:23)

He asked the stars and planets to pray for him. They replied, "Before we pray for you we must pray for ourselves, as it says, 'And all the host of heaven shall be dissolved.'" (Yeshayahu 34:4)

He then exclaimed, "I see that I can rely on no one but myself!" He then placed his head between his knees and he wept until his soul departed. A heavenly voice called out, "Rebi Elazar ben Durdaya is prepared for Eternal Life."

When Rebi Yehudah HaNasi heard of this incident, he wept saying, "There are those who acquire the World-to-Come in a single moment, while others acquire the World-to-Come after an entire life. And, it isn't enough for those who sincerely repent that they receive a share in the World-to-Come, but they are given the title of 'Rebi.'" (Avodah Zarah 16b)

Granted that there are those who have died peacefully, by what the Talmud calls Neshikah, or Divine Kiss (Brochos 8a). But that is for people whose lives were a blaze of glory, a blaze of Divine

Glory, because everything they did sanctified the Name of God. It is a death that only a few have enjoyed over history, people like the Avos and Imahos, and Moshe, Aharon, and Miriam.

Short of that, there is no better way to leave this world than as a hero making the supreme sacrifice on behalf of God and His Code of Morality. It is the only way to bypass Gihenom along the way to the World-to-Come, as did Rebi Akiva and the rest of the Ten Martyrs:

A Heavenly Voice proclaimed, "Happy are you, Rebi Akiva, that you are destined for life in the World-to-Come!" (Brochos 61b)

So, even though sports figures are thought to be some of the biggest heroes today, they are not from God's point of view, and it takes a lot more than a 'sacrifice fly' to bypass Gihenom, or to leave it all. Given the salaries and stardom they enjoy, including movie stars as well, the only people who make any real sacrifice are those who have to pay these people, and put up with their personalities, especially when they assume themselves to be spokespeople on behalf of mankind.

So, yes, it is tough being a hero, a true hero, which often earns you the wrath of not only your enemies, but sometimes even of your allies as well. Yosef HaTzaddik had to suffer through the latter even more than the former. Many heroes have been put through the ringer just because they were brave enough to identify problems in the society of which they were a part, and for trying to make improvements while others clung to the status quo.

But, at least the only One we have to impress will indeed be impressed. And, though He won't always help us out in this world, you can be sure that He will help us out in the next world, where it counts the most. Heaven has a special place for heroes, and its worth everything just to get there.

Text

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