

# INNER HERO

*by Rabbi Pinchas Winston*

**Pinchas the son of Elazar the son of Aharon the kohen has turned My anger away from the children of Israel by his zealously avenging Me among them . . . (Bamidbar 25:11)**

Pinchas was a hero. Previously he had been a virtual nobody, but when the situation warranted it he became a somebody. The rewards for doing so were tremendous, including becoming Eliyahu HaNavi, the prophet who will eventually herald the Final Redemption, may it happen soon, God willing.

This week's *parshah* provides an opportunity to discuss what it means to become a hero, and in the process, personally redeemed. Redemption is not only a national event. It is also a personal one, which is really the basis of the national one. The *gematria* of the words "Adam" and "*geulah*," or "redemption," are the same, teaching that a complete person is a redeemed person, something that also occurs in two steps.

From an early age, we have heroes. At first it is one's mother or father, because that is all we know. As the world of the child expands, the hero might become a sibling, friend, or even teacher. If media is allowed to infiltrate the child's life, his hero may end up becoming a fictional character capable of fighting evil and performing superhuman feats.

As the child moves more into the bigger and more real world, his hero also becomes more real, perhaps some kind of leader, living or dead. The person's values, which have evolved over the years, will determine what kind of leader he will choose to idolize and perhaps, even emulate.

There is a reason why children don capes and pretend to accomplish superhuman feats. Their hero talks to them, perhaps on a level they do not yet recognize, and he or she inspires them to act in a similar manner. The actualized hero on the outside talks to the potential hero on the inside.

Sometimes the potential is actualized and becomes real as well, and the person himself grows up to become a true leader and savior. Most of the time people just fall back into mediocrity and let others be heroes for them. Over time, they just forget about their inner hero and assume there is no price to pay for doing so.

Before dealing with the consequence of this, the question is, what interfered in the process of hero development? It's simple: materialism.

While a person's inner hero emerges and begins to develop, something else does as well. One of

the first noises to emerge from a new baby is a scream. Though medically this represents part of the transition from a world of water to one of air, it is also the product of a new need for comfort, one that will only increase as the child does as well.

Kabbalistically, a child does not even have a *yetzer tov*—good inclination—until the age of Bar Mitzvah. Long before his good side shows up on the scene the *yetzer hara*—evil inclination—has taken advantage of its incredible head start to groom its host in its ways. Existential temper tantrums for the silliest of material acquisitions is a relatively common event during childhood.

The West is not called a "Consumer Society" without good reason.

You don't need a *yetzer tov* to create a core hero. It's really quite automatic and as natural as life itself. However, you certainly need one to protect it from the relentless demands of the *yetzer hara* for an increasingly more comfortable life.

For a while, parents, teachers, and other supposed "good" influences are supposed to act as surrogate *yetzer tovs* for the children whom they are raising or influencing. If they themselves failed to protect their own core heroes, they will more than likely have a difficult time protecting their child's core hero as well.

With the pursuit of materialism usually comes spiritual compromise. In extreme cases people have even "sold" their souls to satisfy their material lusts. In lesser situations they tend to only sell parts of it, especially when they live beyond their spiritual means.

Compromise of the values of one's core hero reduces the stature of the person in his own eyes. It deals a devastating blow to self-perception and self-confidence. Though this may not be evident on the outside at first it will be over time, especially as the person becomes more self-centered and apathetic to societal crises. The person may not have become physically obese, but he will have become spiritually obese.

Ever notice how when watching someone we identify as a hero we tend to resuscitate our own inner hero? Ever see how when that happens that material sacrifices we previously had difficulty making become the most obvious things to do? Ever witness someone make a large donation at an inspiring event that they later regretted once the inspiration passed? Why did it happen, and why didn't it last?

Before answering this question, there is another for which there is a similar answer. There is something else that is interesting about people, a certainly duality people possess which can also be explained in a similar manner.

It is not uncommon for a person to want to participate in something that another part of them wants to avoid. On one hand, they are prepared to take the risk to do something that, on the other hand, they are screaming on the inside to avoid. It results in uncertainty, hesitancy, and often missed opportunities, or opportunities that should have been missed but weren't. It all depends on which

"voice" carries the day.

If a person's drive for comfort is strongest then the most comfortable route in life will become the norm. A situation may talk to and even arouse the person's inner hero, but the material drive will overpower its voice, and the person will "choke." They will sacrifice the potential moment for glory on the altar of material security.

If the reverse is true and for some reason the inner hero is able to "speak" loudest, the person will boldly attempt the act of greatness, small or large, perhaps feeling uneasy the entire time. They will break the bonds of mediocrity, if only for the moment, and truly become, at least in part, that which they have always dreamed of becoming. They feel great about it.

Moments of inspiration do exactly this: they boost the voice of the inner hero, what we can call the "Moshiach Ben Yosef Effect." It is the impact that a person or event has on us, the result of which is an arousal of our inner hero until we have no choice but to become cognizant of it once again. We have to become aware of it because of the incredible feeling of wholeness it gives a person.

For many the moment is fleeting. They taste it, enjoy it, then lose it. Not recognizing exactly what it is, and not knowing how to continuously access their inner hero, it slips away as the person once again descends into the clutches of being only average.

Sometimes *Hashgochah Pratis* does not allow this to happen. Sometimes Divine Providence not only kick starts the inner hero engine, it does not stop until it is running on its own. Sustaining their inner hero they become accustomed to it and, gradually, materialism becomes less of an issue for them.

This can result in something as mundane as being able to maintain a strict diet to something grander like sacrificing personal comfort for a greater cause. It depends on the person, their inner hero, and the inspiration it receives. Whatever the result, the person will grow into his or her inner hero. The transformation is remarkable.

This creates both a solution and a problem. A great thing has happened: a person has reached his potential, or a good part of it. A danger has also been created: the hero can become consumed with himself and undo so much of the good he or she has achieved. History is replete with examples of pride-ignited implosions.

Greatness is a double edged sword that not everyone can manage on their own. In fact, few if any can. It is something to be celebrated and to be feared. Too many people have done the former and not enough have done the latter, and mankind has paid a deadly price as a result.

There is only one way to harness the power of personal greatness while not becoming overtaken by it: the "Moshiach Ben Dovid Effect."

We can start with examples of this: the Avos, Moshe Rabbeinu, Dovid HaMelech, Yehonason Ben Shaul, to mention but a few. They were people who became their inner heroes without losing

control of it. They not only overcame their need for materialism along their paths to personal greatness, but when they finally reached it they channeled it in ways that only made them greater. They became powerful people in a powerful way.

Ultimately, it all comes down to one's understanding of the concept of redemption. This is something that the word "Adam" itself indicates.

The name "Adam" is comprised of two parts, the letter *Aleph*, and the two letters *Dalet-Mem*. The *Aleph* represents the number one and therefore alludes to God's Oneness, and man's Godly component, his soul. The letters *Dalet-Mem* spell "*dumm*," the Hebrew word for "blood," alluding to man's physical component.

To ignore either element is to self-destruct. Even just to over-emphasize one over the other is dangerous to either the spiritual or physical well-being of a person, depending upon which component is being downplayed. The perfect individual, and therefore the redeemed person, is the one who strikes the correct balance between the two at any given moment in time.

The Torah was given to make this consistently possible. A *mitzvah* helps us to distinguish between right and wrong. The narration fills in gaps and gives us a more experiential understanding how to apply what we have learned in various different situations. The more one learns Torah the more he learns how to strike the perfect balance between body and soul throughout life and its many challenges.

Ultimately what the Torah does for man is teach him about the material world. It explains to him the most meaningful way to take full advantage of the physical world to his own, and the world's ultimate benefit. The deeper one's understanding of Torah becomes the more this is the case. This is the meaning of the teaching:

*The tablets were made by God, and the writing was God's writing, engraved on the tablets. (Shemos 32:16)*

Do not read "*charus*"—engraved—but "*chairus*"—freedom, because no one is free but he who occupies himself with Torah learning. (*Pirkei Avos* 6:2)

The ultimate reality of redemption is the Messianic Era, and the Messianic Era is described in the following terms:

*And God will be King over all the land, and on that day, God will be One and His Name will be One. (Zechariah 14:9)*

This is the essence of redemption. When a person knows with complete clarity that God not only exists, but that He is responsible for every aspect of life, even the parts that we see ourselves achieve, he is free. Nothing is more restricting in life than falsehood. There are no greater shackles on a person's freedom than mistaken ideas about life and Who runs it.

This is why the greatest threat to the Jewish people is Amalek.

The *gematria* of "Amalek" is the same as for the Hebrew word "*suffek*," which means "doubt." Not just any doubt, but doubt in *Hashgochah Pratis*:

*Then came Amalek and attacked the Jewish people in Refidim. (Shemos 17:8)*

The Torah places this section immediately after this verse [when they asked, "*Is God among us or not?*"] to imply: "I am always among you and ready at hand for everything you need, and yet you ask, 'Is God among us or not?' By your lives, that dog shall come and bite you, and you will cry for Me and then you will know where I am!" It is like a man who carried his son on his shoulders and went on a journey. The son saw an article and said, "Father, pick up that thing and give it to me." He gave it to him, and so a second time and also a third time. Yet when they met a certain man along the journey, the son asked him, "Have you seen my father anywhere?" Therefore, the father said to him, "You do not know where I am?" at which point he put him down and a dog came and bit him. (*Rashi, Shemos 17:8*)

Amalek is that person who sits at the fork in the road seemingly to help people find the right path while maliciously sending them down the wrong path. As a person defeats his *yetzer hara* for materialism and begins to feel and enjoy his newfound personal power, he has a choice of two possible paths to walk. He can take the credit for himself, or he can give it to God.

The practical difference between the two approaches is obvious. The first person becomes a narcissist, and losing touch with reality he self-destructs while thinking he is actually becoming greater. The second person truly becomes greater with each passing act of greatness and even more respected in the eyes of others.

Furthermore, the first person thinks that he is the freest man in the world when in fact he is enslaved to his self-generated image. What he doesn't have to do and compromise to maintain it! The second person is the freest man in the world because true heroes are guided by their conscience, and there is nothing more liberating than doing the right thing.

There is *nothing* more liberating than doing the *right* thing.

Imagine a child in class who gets caught up in the antics of two unruly classmates. On his own he wouldn't think of misbehaving but when influenced by others he can be pulled down somewhat to their level, and at the moment, he has been.

This time, however, the teacher has spotted him, and is now ominously approaching him. "I'm in big trouble," he thinks to himself, and he fears for the worst.

Sure enough the teacher takes the terrified youngster's head in his hands, and holding tightly looks straight into his student's eyes and angrily says, to the utter surprise of the boy,

*"You're too good to be dragged down into the mud with these boys!"*

Letting go of the child's head, the teacher returns to his desk to continue on with the rest of the lesson.

The child is no longer afraid. He's not even embarrassed or offended. He actually feels complimented, as he repeats the words of his teacher in his head over and over again, *"You're too good to be dragged down into the mud with these boys! You're too good to be dragged down into the mud with these boys!"*

"I'm too good," he says tenderly to himself "to be dragged down into the mud with these boys . . ."

Feeling completely different than he ever has, he commits himself never to be dragged down into the mud with anyone. The teacher spoke right to his inner hero and he liked what emerged, something worth holding onto and developing the rest of his life.

*"You're better than that!"* and *"You are capable of greater things!"* and similar statements talk right to our inner heroes. Whether someone else says them to us or we say them to ourselves, they have the power to slice through our barrier of materialistic attachment and wake up our inner hero.

After that, it is a question of associating all personal greatness with God, to see all the great things we do as gifts from God. As it says,

If someone comes to purify himself, they help him. (Yoma 38b)

This means that anyone who comes to do the right thing will get help from Heaven to succeed. All he has to do is take a step, even a small one, in the right direction and Heaven will assist with him the rest of the way. If someone comes to greatness, they help him become greater. They'll inspire his inner hero and nurture it until it becomes his outer hero.

Text

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