

WHO IS A HERO?  
Rabbi Dr. Herbert M. Baumgard  
Temple Beth Am, Miami, Florida, 2003

How does the nursery rhyme go? "Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,  
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall. All the Kings' horses and all the  
King's men couldn't put Humpty Dumpty together again."

We here in America in the 20<sup>th</sup> century have a way of making  
heroes of people who are really like Humpty Dumpty. Because we  
are trained to watch movies and TV much of the week, our heroes  
are the stars of movies or sports. We come to admire these stars  
and long to be like them, but when we learn what some of them are  
like in real life, we discover that they are pretty much like Humpty  
Dumpty. We place them on a pedestal, but they invariably fall off,  
and all the King's horses and all the King's men can't put them  
together again.

An obvious example is O.J. Simpson. He could run so fast. Try to  
tackle him, and you tackle air. Most ordinary players are  
considered good if they can gain 1,000 yards in a season. For O.J.,  
2,000 yards was nothing. He was truly, in his prime, a sensational  
athlete; but is athletic talent all it takes to be a hero? The fall of  
O.J. Simpson teaches us otherwise.

Take for example, Marilyn Monroe. Countless women yearned to be as sexy as Miss Monroe, and she was the dream goddess of millions of men. Yet the truth was that miss Monroe was terribly insecure. We are told that she always doubted her sexuality and that she would slide into bed with many a man who said a kind word to her. In her final days, she was so unhappy that she took an overdose of drugs. Humpty Dumpty fell off the wall.

Then, of course, there is Elvis Presley, movie star, swivel-hipped singer. Millions adored him and still do, but Elvis <sup>die</sup> dies from the complications of his drug habit. Still many of his admirers try to put Humpty Dumpty together again. Some time ago, 10,000 people showed up at his former home on the anniversary of his death to pray for his rising from the grave.

The story of America's shallow and brittle entertainment heroes goes on and on. Hypnotized by high power publicity, we make a hero of the likes of Michael Jackson and Madonna. Isn't it time for us to learn that the world of entertainment, whether it is sports or TV, is not a reliable source for the seeking of heroes. Surely we have to look for them elsewhere. We have to look to real life.

Certainly a true hero in modern times, is Martin Luther King, a Black Minister who galvanized the battle for Civil Rights in the 60's. In Atlanta there is a memorial to the Rev. King. In the middle of the memorial are these noble words, "Let justice roll down as the mighty waters and righteousness like an unfailing stream." Under this quotation is the name, Martin Luther King.

The <sup>R</sup>rev. King knew that he was not the author of these words, but the people who inscribed the stone did not know that the real author was the Hebrew Prophet Amos who lived in 800 BCE.

Amos was a true hero. Amos, a poor farmer, stood in the fancy court of the Ancient Temple in Northern Israel and pointed an accusing finger at both the Priests and the wealthy leaders of that

✓ Nation. "Shouldn't you be more concerned about the problems of the poor than you are about your elegant houses and chariots?"

✓ The Prophet declared, "Let justice toll down like the mighty waters and righteousness like an unfailing stream." Amos was just the first of many Hebrew Prophets who tried to awaken our people to the noble tasks to which God had originally called us. If you want to learn about an authentic hero who inspired the likes of Marin ✓  
Luther King, read the book of Amos in our Bible. The book is only twenty pages long.

The Rev. King was also fond of quoting another of our prophets. King was a pacifist, and he quoted the Prophet Isaiah who declared in God's name 2700 years ago, "The time comes", saith the Lord, "when nations shall beat their swords into plows and their spears into pruning-hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, nor learn the art of war anymore'." Some of you may recognize that these words are on the so-called Isaiah wall in the garden of the United Nations building in New York City. The nations of the world think the Hebrew Prophet Isaiah is a hero.

Prophets like Amos and Isaiah lived a long, long time ago, but 500 years before they were born, there was a man called Moses. The Bible tells us that Moses was raised as a Prince in the Royal House. He was the adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter. Riches and high honor could have been his throughout his life, but Moses could not stand for the way in which the Egyptians were treating their slaves. When Moses saw one of the Egyptian guards whipping a Hebrew slave, Moses attacked the guard. In the struggle that followed, the guard was killed.

Knowing that Pharaoh would not look kindly upon his rebellion, Moses fled to the desert. There he took up a life of hard labor and semi-poverty. After a number of years, Moses heeded the call of

God and returned to Egypt to help the slaves, even at the risk of his own life.

Moses is a hero not just because he was courageous. The great dream of Moses was to help in creating a law that would at once assure the rights of poor people and lend stability to society. When we think of Moses, we do not remember him as a great army general. We do not even think of him as a worker of such miracles as were described in the plagues against Pharaoh. No, Moses gave us a great deal more than miracles. He gave us the Moral Law. He gave us the Torah. When we think of Moses, we think of the Ten Commandments. We think of the teaching, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself," later quoted by Jesus. We think of the hundreds of laws laid out as the basis for an ethical society. Moses was the very essence of the Jewish idea of a hero. Small wonder then that he is studied and admired 3,000 years after his death-not only by Jews but by most civilized human beings.

Not all heroes are Jews, of course, but we Jews can be proud of the fact that we have had more than our share of heroes down through the centuries. For example, we have contributed disproportionately to the ranks of those scientists who have

committed themselves to seek cures for human illness or who have tried to further the extent of human knowledge.

In the United States, while Jews are but 3% of the population, we have contributed 27% of America's Nobel Prize winners. It is not by accident that Jewish mothers have long prayed that their sons be Doctors, but never have they prayed that their sons would be football players. For Jews, a hero is one who gets an education not one who excels in physical strength. When a Jew starts to worry more about his muscles than his morality, then we know he is in trouble.

Let us speak of one modern Jew as an example of many other modern Jews who have tried to make our world a better place in which to live. This man came to the United States as a refugee from Hitler. Before Hitler, many of the European Universities would not let him teach there because he was a Jew. Albert Einstein gave the world the formula for the relation between matter and energy. In doing so, he paved the way for the splitting of the atom. Today humankind has a new source for creating an enormous amount of energy, if we are able to use this discovery properly- for good and not for destructive purposes. This energy is called "atomic energy."

Einstein is probably considered the greatest scientist of our century, but what makes him a Jewish hero in my mind is that he taught (and here I quote), "A life which is not lived to help others is no life at all." Einstein was to his core a deeply moral man who had himself been inspired by Moses and the Prophets.

Now to switch gears abruptly. Not long ago, on Channel 2 TV, Bill Moyer interviewed a famous Professor by the name of Joseph Campbell. Campbell spoke, amongst other things, on the question, "Who is a hero?" Campbell said, "A hero is the person who has done something beyond the normal range of human activity."

I must say that I do not completely agree with Joseph Campbell, and I do not think that to be a hero you must necessarily do something beyond the normal range of human activity. I think that some of our greatest heroes are those who work patiently and courageously at what seem to be very normal or ordinary tasks.

Sometimes a hero is the person who lives next door who faces all the misery of human life and comes up smiling, ready to face whatever tomorrow may bring. In the many years in which I have visited hospitals, I have often thought that it takes a great deal of

heroism to endure a difficult illness, especially when that illness is continuing and progressively weakening.

I have thought that it is heroic of parents to seek children in the first place and to endure the struggles and concerns that come with raising children. (You can say amen if you want to). I have thought that it is heroic for a husband and wife to keep trying to make a go of things when sometimes the going is mighty tough. I think it is heroic to seek help from a Psychologist or Psychiatrist when you obviously need objective help in solving your problems. It takes inner strength to say, "I need help. I can't handle my problems by myself."

I think it is heroic of a child to endure an abusive or neglectful parent and still try to lead a meaningful life. It is heroic of a child born with a birth defect to accept the extra burden of his or her life, especially when he never gets to win the race or to win the prize.

I think of most policemen and housewives who face the worst of our society every day as heroes. Among my heroes are judges and honest lawyers who try to make the law work, dedicated doctors and nurses. On my list of heroes are caring teachers and honest politicians. I think of the menial laborer who goes to work day in



and day out trying to put bread on the family table, even when he or she knows that there is no prospect of advancement. I think of this honest labor as heroic. Sometimes the stuff of heroism is to just hang in there when there is no apparent end to the pain and the agony.

Let me tell you a story about a man who is an outstanding example of a hero. This man is a close friend of mine who happens to be a Baptist minister. He is a man who was born without legs. His whole life has been spent in a wheel chair.

Mel was born in the mid-western part of the United States. He was born to an un-wed mother who was ostracized by the small community where they lived. When he became old enough to go to school, Mel was told by the school authorities that because of his physical handicap, they were not able to handle him, and so he was not admitted to the school.

How was Mel to receive an education if he couldn't go to school? His mother bought him a set of books for beginners and helped Mel learn the letters of the alphabet. Mel took it from there himself. Hour after hour, this little boy without legs learned how to form words and pronounce them. He developed a strong interest

in reading, because it led him into a wonderful imaginary world, a world very different from the one in which he actually lived.

This imaginary world was a world of action with all kinds of marvelous people. In Mel's real world, he was alone all day while the other children went to school. His mother went to work to support the two of them. Learning how to read meant Mel was not always alone. In this world of reading, Mel found a substitute for playmates and friends. Similarly, Mel learned how to do elementary arithmetic. When his mother <sup>✓e</sup>came home from work, she would quiz him on his numbers and ask him about the stories he had read. Mel also read geography books and history books, which were fascinating to him.

When the other children were ready for middle school, Mel's mother took him to the head of the school and said her son was ready for such a school and able to get to classes in his wheel chair. The principal gave Mel a test and found that Mel was a brilliant child who was advanced in most of his subjects.

<sup>✓ed</sup>Amazingly, the principal made arrangements for Mel to be admitted and to be helped in his maneuvers around the school.

So began the story of this hero who conquered his unusual handicap and went on from there to study to be a minister and an outstanding fighter for the underdog and for social justice for the poor.

Mel came to Miami and founded a liberal Protestant Seminary or school for ministers. Every one who knows him admires him and loves him, and he has love for everyone. He is one of my great heroes and should be a model to all who start life with a severe handicap.

Mel has just written a book called A Life Worth Living, and I recommend it highly.

While Mel's story is somewhat extreme, it is not completely unlike the story of some children and people around us. The children we know, perhaps, have other handicaps of somewhat lesser degree in severity but enough to make their lives more difficult. There may be a hero in your house, perhaps a child, perhaps a mother handling many difficult situations, perhaps a father who not only earns a living for his family but who also works alongside his wife in helping to handle the awesome, if rewarding, task of raising a family.

The real heroes are not on the movie screen or on the ball field; they are near at hand – in your house or amongst your friends. Do more than applaud them – help them, help them and become something of a hero yourself.