

JEWISH PRIORITIES

Sixty-Five Proposals for the Future of Our People

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A NEW PANTHEON OF HEROES

Without Stories of Courage and Sacrifice,
We Can't Have Jewish Pride

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IN JANUARY 2022, an armed gunman walked into a synagogue in Colleyville, Texas. After an eleven-hour siege, in which he held the rabbi and three others hostage and demanded the release of a notorious al-Qaeda terrorist, the rabbi threw a chair at the gunman and told the other hostages to flee. The gunman chased them out of the building and was gunned down by FBI agents.

Every Jew should know that rabbi's story. His act of selfless sacrifice and courage deserves to be remembered and celebrated. Yet, how many of us even know his name? (His name, by the way, is Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker.)

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Our failure to commemorate this act of heroism is part of a larger and worrisome trend. We—I mean the Jews of the non-Orthodox Diaspora—are reluctant to venerate our heroes. True, we celebrate individual Jews, but they are usually either philanthropists or great scientific, cultural, political, or business figures, revered more for their success than their personal qualities.

This is a fairly recent development, an unconscious decision seemingly taken in the last generation. The consequences are difficult to fathom. Without individual Jewish *heroes*, our children will have few vibrant historical Jewish examples to draw upon in charting the course of their lives, or even a sense of how important being proudly and defiantly Jewish really is.

Fortunately, it is the kind of problem that, once we put our finger on it, presents a clear solution.

I propose an ambitious communal effort to create a “pantheon” of Jewish heroes, including the institutional, educational, and cultural apparatus necessary to tell our children about the many heroic Jews who have lived through the ages and who still live among us today. This effort can include museums, curricula, scholarly and literary books, and even films or TV series.

If this talk of “Jewish heroes” sounds old-fashioned or outdated, that is largely a symptom of the problem we need to address. Among Diaspora Jews, Jewish heroism has indeed fallen out of fashion. In reclaiming it, the “How” is much more obvious than the “Why.”

Anyone who has spent time in Israel will be struck by the number of museums and historical sites commemorating the heroes of early Zionism—from the Palmach and the Underground to the illegal immigrants who came on ships like the *Exodus*. Israeli children learn about how Theodor Herzl drove himself to an early death to build a Jewish state that might forestall the coming catastrophe in Europe; they know about the Zionist pioneers who braved disease and hunger to drain the swamps; they know the names of Jews like Abba Kovner who led the Vilna Ghetto uprising, or the poet Hannah Senesh who parachuted into Nazi Germany to help the partisans. Israeli parents and schools take kids to memorial sites and retell their stories.

Israelis grow up knowing a great deal about Jewish heroism. But the issue I raise is not about Zionism or the building of a successful Jewish state against all odds. It is about the need of non-Orthodox Jews in the Diaspora for a tradition of Jewish heroism that we can encourage our children to admire and emulate.

Ultimately it is about fostering a proper pride in the tremendous historical achievement of the American Jewish Diaspora, built by generations of immigrants who faced struggle, hardship, prejudice, and exclusion to create the largest, most powerful and influential Jewish community in history.

First, of course, we must define what is meant by “Jewish heroism.” Heroism is different from success or individual accomplishment. When I speak of a Jewish hero, I am referring to something very specific: Someone who, through *courage and a willingness to sacrifice*, dedicates himself or herself to the betterment and welfare of our people.

Jewish history is full of heroes, and for most of that history, we made sure our children knew about them. Indeed, until quite recently, we have *always* believed that being a great Jew required qualities of character that we consider heroic.

Of course, there are the biblical heroes—starting with Abraham and Moses, who braved the wilderness to lead their people to a new life in the Promised Land; to the prophets who challenged the power of kings, to Queen Esther and the Maccabees. Great rabbis of old, too, risked the might of the Roman empire to teach and practice Judaism—and many were put to death for it.

To the extent these ancient stories are familiar, we often fail to see the risk and drama they involved. We need to recapture this sense of original Jewish risk-taking so we can appreciate the qualities of faith and perseverance they required. We need to bring these individuals to life not as musty icons but as heroes who risked everything to found, uplift, and preserve the Jewish nation.

The modern era offered Jewish heroes as well, from Benedict Spinoza, who challenged the authority of rabbis and tradition, risking excommunication to pave the way for a non-Orthodox Jewish identity, to Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, the once-Orthodox rabbi who endured excommunication and public censure for his efforts to craft a Judaism that would appeal to the modern lives of less-traditional Jews. In living memory, we have seen Soviet refuseniks like

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Ida Nudel, Natan Sharansky, Roman Brackman, and Joseph Bigun stand up to the most powerful totalitarian empire in history.

What these heroes had in common were the risks they were willing to take to affirm their proud identity as Jews. And we made sure that our kids knew their names.

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But now, it seems, we do not. We don't have museums or curricula to commemorate them. We don't focus on the heroism of Moses or the prophets or the rabbis who stood up to the Romans and the Inquisition. We venerate successful Jews, famous Jews, award-winning Jews, but not necessarily heroic Jews.

Growing up in 1950s Brooklyn, I, too, had Jewish heroes. Their names were part of my childhood. Louis Brandeis, the Supreme Court justice who fought for civil rights, and also for Zionism, at a time when neither was particularly popular. Mickey Marcus, an American Army officer who volunteered for the Israel Defense Forces and became Israel's first general, tragically killed by friendly fire in the War of Independence. Even Sandy Koufax, who refused to play major league baseball on Yom Kippur, risking his career, added a whiff of the heroic to his Jewish success story. And, of course, Albert Einstein, who openly espoused his Jewish and Zionist beliefs in the face of the rise of Nazi Germany.

We in the U.S. don't have a Jewish museum dedicated to Einstein. The government of Israel, however, is building one in Jerusalem.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that heroic Jews don't exist. On the contrary—we know they do. We just haven't made an effort to identify and hold them up for praise and emulation.

The Orthodox world, of course, has its pantheon, made up of great, usually late, rabbis. Although many of them indeed showed heroism in their lives, they are revered far more for their wisdom, learning, and communal leadership than for their deeds.

As for non-Orthodox Jews, our heroes exist but they are missing from our lives. We have stopped *looking* for heroes, praising heroes, commemorating them, or teaching our children about their deeds. Worse, we have stopped associating heroism with Jewish identity altogether. The absence of a sense

of Jewish heroism is one of the most striking changes in Jewish life of the last generations—and it happened without our even noticing it.

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Why has Jewish heroism fallen out of fashion?

The most obvious reasons have to do with the decadence of our time: American Jews are supremely comfortable; we don't think we really need heroic sacrifice. The Civil Rights movement of the 1960s—in which heroic Jews like the murdered Freedom Riders Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, or Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel who marched with Martin Luther King, played an important part—brought equality not just to African Americans, but also to Jews themselves, who no longer could be legally excluded from hotels, higher education, or jobs. A level playing field allowed Jews in America to succeed beyond their wildest dreams in almost every field.

But living off the heroism of those who came before us, we apparently saw little need to cultivate it in ourselves or our children.

Perhaps this was a natural result of the relative security and success of American Jews. But what about now? We live in a time when antisemitism is rising. More and more young Jews are being forced to choose between hiding their identity and incurring the wrath of anti-Israel and antisemitic forces on campus and elsewhere. Do our children have the spiritual resources required to stand up for their Jewish identity? Or will they be intimidated into silence?

We have also embraced the Holocaust as a central pillar of our identity. We talk about it constantly, building curricula and museums to keep its memory alive. We habitually focus on our victimhood, the scale of the destruction, and its universal moral implications. We talk more about Anne Frank—who is relatable as a victim but not as a hero—than we do about the resistance fighters of the Warsaw Ghetto. The hero of Steven Spielberg's blockbuster Holocaust movie, *Schindler's List*, wasn't even Jewish.

Through our almost exclusive focus on the Holocaust without a comparable focus on Jewish heroism, we have crafted an identity that is antiheroic in its essence.

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We also live in a cynical time, one that is far more sensitive to the sins of past heroes than to the virtues that made them heroic. Perhaps we are afraid to put anyone on a pedestal for fear of drawing attention to their flaws. But this is a mistake.

True heroes, because they are great, are also greatly flawed. King David was not allowed to build the Temple in Jerusalem because, the Bible teaches, he had “spilled much blood.” King Solomon amassed wives and riches and lost sight of the divine cause, setting the stage for the rupture of the kingdom. If anything, it is their flaws that make them human, relatable, and therefore useful models for young people.

Many of us have come to believe that heroism itself is not a Jewish trait. They do not realize how crucial it has always been to Jewish identity. The rabbis teach that there are certain laws which Jews must be willing to die rather than violate, such as not committing murder or idolatry. But there is another principle we must uphold: One must be willing to die rather than do *anything* that non-Jews interpret as repudiating Judaism.

Elie Wiesel tells the story of a man whose father was murdered in a concentration camp by a Nazi officer. The officer offered repeatedly to spare the man’s life if he only repudiated the Jewish God. The man repeatedly refused, saying only “The Lord is God!” The officer shot him to death.

“You know,” the son added, “my father was not a believer.”

The life of Jews in America and other wealthy, free nations today does not demand the same sacrifices as the Holocaust, or the early decades of Zionism, or the time of the Soviet refuseniks. But when we deprive our children of the very concept of courage, sacrifice, and risk for the sake of our people, when we remove heroism from the curriculum and recognize only success, generosity, and Jewish victimhood, we rob them of something that affects every aspect of our lives. We, therefore, put our collective future at risk.

Why are heroes important? Simply put: It is only through demonstrated courage and a willingness to sacrifice that we discover the price a person is willing to pay for their Jewish commitment. In business terms, heroism is an

act of *valuation* of one's Jewishness. A Jewish hero is not merely a successful person who is Jewish; and not even a hero who happens to be Jewish. A Jewish hero has put his or her Jewishness on the table. And by focusing on such individuals, we are sending a message to the next generation: Heroism teaches our children how important being Jewish is; its absence similarly teaches us how unimportant it might be.

In a world where the valuation of Jewish identity is low—where Jewish commitment is something that may be hidden or abandoned under pressure—should we be surprised at the assimilation of young Jews? Should we be surprised that antisemites feel comfortable rearing their heads? Should we be surprised when non-Jews fail to come to our defense?

Ultimately, the absence of heroes has the effect of cheapening Jewish identity and providing oxygen to the incendiary hatred of Jews that still smolders and is never extinguished. For if being proudly Jewish does not require courage, risk, and sacrifice, then it must not be all that important to us. Why then should anyone else respect it?

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Today, we have many tools for fashioning and elevating heroes if we want to. Books and films and TV series can capture heroes in their complexity, exploring not just their greatness but also the flaws that make such men and women compelling and real. Hollywood, despite the prominence of Jews in the film industry, has mostly chosen to ignore the Jewish heroes of the ages, from Bar Kokhba and Spinoza to Herzl, David Ben-Gurion, and the refuseniks. But we do not have the luxury of waiting for market forces to supply Jewish heroes for our children.

Jews of the Diaspora have the resources to create our own heroic pantheon. We can choose, say, eighteen or thirty-six heroes from across our history to the present era, to symbolize the Jewish life they affirmed through their courage and sacrifice. We can imagine creating cultural projects that recognize their qualities of courage, sacrifice, responsibility, resistance, and above all, Jewish pride. We can imagine a museum and educational center dedicated to them, a fund to subsidize screenplays and books and educational curricula about them.

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Because we are Jews, we will, of course, disagree about who should be included. Some may argue that only great religious leaders should be commemorated. Others may feel that we should focus on figures who took risks and sacrificed on behalf of the whole world, not just the Jews. Some may wish to include Alfred Dreyfus, whose 1894 trial and imprisonment brought attention to the antisemitism rampant in French society, while others may object that he was not a hero but a victim. Such a process will naturally engender a good deal of healthy debate.

But the goal is not exclusion: If various Jewish communities in the U.S. and abroad choose to add their own heroes, this would further the goal of rediscovering Jewish heroism overall.

Just having such a debate would be immensely valuable in itself. It would force us to focus on heroism and to ask difficult questions: What are the kinds of courage and sacrifice we *want* our children to emulate? Is it enough to voice unpopular opinions, to speak out when others will not? Must it involve risk to life and limb, such as we saw with the rabbi in Texas, or is reputational risk sufficient to merit inclusion in our pantheon? Must their intentions be entirely selfless? Must they be limited to serving Jews or Judaism alone?

However we answer such questions, the bottom line is this: Our kids need heroic exemplars. Specific Jews who made sacrifices and took personal risks to preserve their identity and their people. If we want young Jews to place a high price on their Jewish identity, they need to be shown examples of such heroism.

They need to know it is possible, even desirable, to care about being Jewish so much that it is worth sacrificing for, taking risks for, fighting for—even dying for. Because as Dr. King famously put it, “If you’ve got nothing worth dying for, you’ve got nothing worth living for.”