

Spiritual Heroes

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For many years, the organization that I led-PANIM- ran 4-day seminars on Jewish values and social activism for teens who came to Washington D.C. from around the country. When I would speak to the students, my lead-off question would be: Who are your spiritual heroes?

It was a question that gave pause. Most American teens would have fairly quick answers if I asked them to name their favorite lead singer in a band. Or their favorite movie star. Or their go-to sports legend. Each of those answers could have come back affixed with the label “hero”. But “spiritual hero” was not a word combination that they expected. I’d wait a minute or two and usually a few hands would go up in the air. Before I called on them I offered a definition so as to make it possible for more students to get a person in their mind’s eye.

My definition: “A spiritual hero is someone, either living or deceased who, by virtue of their words and/or deeds, led a life that inspired others and was worthy of emulation.”

Let me take a moment now and ask you to think of one person who has served for you as a spiritual hero. I hope most of you have thought of someone. If not, don’t worry. This sermon might give you some ideas. Tomorrow, during the afternoon break discussion, we will have a chance to share thoughts with one another.

One of the reasons I decided to speak about spiritual heroes this year is because we live in a time when we desperately need to restore our faith in the nobility of the human spirit. I assume most of you shared my dismay at the unexpected rise of Donald Trump as a candidate for the Presidency of the United States. I dare say that we could describe the man’s character by simply picking out 5-10 of the lines from the *al chet* prayer—a list of behaviors that we need to repent for. Let’s see: triviality of thought; shaming of one’s neighbor; arrogance, excessive pride; abusive speech, to name just a few. OK, maybe it is more than 10. Suffice it to say: Hardly a role model for a national leader.

Some would say that we should not look to the political realm for moral or spiritual leadership. They will say that what it takes to rise to the top requires too many compromises, too many concessions, too much deal making. I vehemently disagree.

Most of us have lived to see a handful of political leaders emerge as spiritual heroes: Vaclav Havel in Czechoslovakia. Lech Walesa in Poland. Nelson Mandela in South Africa. Aung San Su Ky (Chi) in Burma. Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres in Israel.

None of these leaders were saints. None lived unblemished lives. But each one was able to rise above the small-mindedness that is the currency of electoral politics to seize an historic moment for their respective countries. Each was able to act in a way that helped to bend the arc of history toward justice. By doing that, they made the world better; they were role models for their citizens; and they helped us understand what it takes to act with spiritual heroism.

Spiritual heroes represent more than simply “doing the right thing”. For that I could have used the term “moral hero”. Children can be taught to do the right thing. But spiritual heroism implies a much more mature understanding that our behavior has cosmic significance. Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, taught that the universe was structured to support human goodness. It was how he understood the concept of God. Spiritual heroism requires cultivating an inner sense of what is right and just. Morality requires our head to guide our behavior. Spiritual heroism requires head, heart and the totality of our selves—our souls (i.e. the meaning of the first line of the *V’ahavta* prayer).

Allow me to expand on the concept of spiritual heroism by offering a glimpse of two people who have been spiritual heroes for me. Both passed away this past year so it is fitting to invoke their legacies: Elie Wiesel and Rev. John Steinbruck.

Elie Wiesel died this summer at the age of 87. He first came to public attention as a chronicler of the Holocaust. After his mother and sister were killed at Auschwitz, Wiesel and his father were deported to Buchenwald. His father died within the year but Elie Wiesel survived. His book, *Night*, is his recounting of his experience in the concentration camp and it is the way that millions of Jews and non-Jews learned about the Holocaust.

But for me, the book that made a far greater impression was his book *The Jews of Silence*. It was published in 1966, six years after *Night*. I was 14 years old. The book was my wake up call to social conscience and it started me on a 20-year journey as an activist on behalf of some 3 million Jews in the Soviet Union. I was transformed by the poetic way that Wiesel flipped the meaning of the word "silence" in the book's title. Much of the book was about the how the Communist State silenced Soviet Jews and restricted their ability to practice Judaism or to emigrate. But the book's punch came from Wiesel's accusation that Western Jews were as responsible for that predicament as were Soviet officials. It was our silence, it was our apathy that allowed Soviet Jews to be imprisoned in a totalitarian state. This, he argued, was morally indefensible. As the British philosopher, Edmund Burke said in the 19th century, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men (good people) to do nothing."

I pledged to myself not to become a "Jew of silence", someone whose apathy made me complicit in the suffering of other people.

In the ensuing years I made two trips to Russia to meet with Soviet Jews and bring them Jewish "contraband". I attended dozens of rallies and spoke at dozens of synagogues, showing my slides of my visits with Soviet refuseniks. My first congregation adopted refusenik Lev Elbert, who lived in Kiev. While he was serving a prison sentence for trumped up drug charges in 1983, we helped to facilitate a Bar-Mitzvah for his son, Karmi, via telephone. I later met Lev and his son in Israel. This type of activism was widely practiced by thousands of Jews in the West during those years. These Jews emerged from their "silence" to mobilize on behalf of our oppressed sisters and brothers trapped in the Soviet state.

Ironically, my first face to face meeting with Elie Wiesel took place on December 6, 1987. I was then the executive director of the Jewish Community Council of Greater Washington D.C. and we helped to organize the Freedom Rally for Soviet Jewry the day before Premier Mikhail Gorbachev met President Ronald Reagan for a summit meeting in the White House.

Wiesel and I met on the podium of the rally. The rally would not have happened but for the efforts of Wiesel and recently released prisoner of conscience, Natan Sharansky. Few gave the rally much chance for success in the middle of the winter. But the rally captured the imagination of Jews across the country and it did not take long for Jewish organizations to sign on and support it. A quarter million Jews attended the rally and it changed the course of history. Within a year, the gates of emigration opened and close to a million Soviet Jews went to Israel and to Western countries. Two years later, the Soviet Union collapsed under the weight of its own tyranny. Textbooks and courses on human rights will now cite the Soviet Jewry movement as the first successful international grassroots effort in history to reverse a national policy of discrimination. The campaign started with Wiesel's book, *The Jews of Silence*.

Among the many things that I found so inspiring about Elie Wiesel is that he did not restrict his activism to Jewish causes. He won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986, not because he wrote the book *Night*, not because he was a voice for the victims of the Shoah and not because of his advocacy for Soviet Jewry. In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, he stated that, as a Jew, he was part of a traumatized generation that experienced the silence and abandonment of the world while Jews were systematically exterminated. Yet he went on to say that he could not restrict his own activism to Jewish victimization alone. Among the issues he invoked in his Nobel speech were: apartheid; the rights of Palestinians; hunger; racism; and the political persecution of writers, poets and intellectuals throughout the world.

Some 2000 years after Rabbi Hillel stated: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me; but if I am only for myself, what do I amount to?" Wiesel re-stated the same principle in a modern idiom. Indeed, in April of 1993, I was present at the dedication of the US Holocaust Museum. More than a dozen heads of state were present as was President Bill Clinton who offered the keynote remarks. Wiesel, who at the time was

chairman the US Holocaust Commission, followed President Clinton. In his trademark soft voice, he turned to the President and said: “Mr. President: If your words here today mean anything, then you cannot stand silent as Bosnians are being starved and slaughtered in the Balkans.” Within the year, the Clinton Administration became actively engaged in protecting Bosnia until the Dayton Accords were signed, bringing an end to that horrific war.

The words and actions of one spiritual hero named Elie Wiesel literally saved hundreds of thousands of lives.

Reverend John Steinbruck did not play on as large an international stage as did Elie Wiesel but his spiritual heroism was no less impactful. In fact, because John and I were friends, he may have had more impact on me than did Wiesel.

When I moved to Washington D.C. in 1984 to head up the Jewish Community (Relations) Council, John was already a legend in a city that can get easily jaded to celebrity. John came to Washington in 1970 to be the senior pastor of Luther Place Church. The church was at the corner of 14th and N Streets, off of Logan Circle, an area that a couple of years earlier had burned in the riots following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Luther Place had a beautiful, historic building but its membership had made the exodus from the decaying inner city and its future looked dim.

I first met John standing on 16th Street across from the Soviet Embassy. The Community Council that I headed was the sponsor of this demonstration of solidarity for Soviet Jews. Every day at 12:30pm, a different Jewish organization took responsibility for standing silently across from the Embassy for 15 minutes holding signs that said “Free Soviet Jews”. The vigil took place without interruption for 21 years, from 1970-1991. John was a great champion of human rights and that commitment led him to take a trip to the Soviet Union in 1976 to meet with Jews. He came back deeply committed to the cause and on many Jewish holidays John, along with a handful of his Christian congregants were the ones who stood vigil across from the Embassy while the Jewish community observed its holiday.

But Soviet Jewry was only one of John’s many crusades. Aware that within blocks of his church dozens of people slept on the streets of the Nation’s Capital, John challenged the churches and synagogues of the area to practice “Biblical Hospitality” by taking the homeless into their buildings overnight. The idea made for a great sermon but no clergyperson in town had the courage and the determination to walk the talk. How would a congregation support such an effort? What would it cost? How would security issues be handled? How could budgets accommodate the exorbitant insurance premiums that would result?

John taught by example. Because of the membership decline in his congregation, his Sunday School classrooms were not being used. “Let’s open the doors” he told his Board. “Invite the homeless in from the cold and let us make our church into a sanctuary of hospitality”. His Board raised all of the expected objections at which point John said: “This is a church and we don’t put God to a vote”. The sheer force of his moral argument carried the day and within weeks, homeless people were invited to come in off the street to get a hot meal and bed down in Luther Place’s classrooms.

Very few congregations followed John’s lead in bringing the homeless into their buildings but they were inspired to support his efforts through financial contributions and a legion of volunteers (including from Adat Shalom). John built a compassion-industrial complex, an array of institutions all growing out of his simple but profound commitment to help the most vulnerable among us.

At his urging, Luther Place bought the townhouses across the street from his church which became a continuum of care facility for homeless women. He then raised millions of dollars to build a state of the art residential complex for women called N Street Village. The homeless needed medical care so the Zacchaeus Free Clinic was founded where physicians volunteered their time to provide free care to the city’s homeless. To address the chronic food insecurity of the city’s poor, John inspired the founding of Bread for the City whose van, dubbed “the glean machine”, picked up leftover food from events all over the city and turned that food into meals for the poor.

It is breathtaking to realize the power of one person's ministry to change the life of so many—from homeless people who got a new lease on life because they were nurtured by the institutions created by John to middle class people of faith who came to realize that religion can and should be about much more than just worship and ritual. It would be hard to find a better example of a spiritual hero than Rev. John Steinbruck.

Let me then come back to the question I posed to you at the opening of this sermon. "Who would you identify as a spiritual hero?" someone, either living or deceased who, by virtue of their words and/or deeds, led a life that inspired others and was worthy of emulation.

At the root of spiritual heroism is the belief that every person, regardless of race, religion, nationality or political ideology, is made in the Divine Image and is deserving of respect. **The fact that we live in a world in which 65 million people are now refugees is a reminder of how few spiritual heroes are among us. The fact that we live in the wealthiest country in the world—the US-- in which close to a quarter of all children live in poverty is a reminder of how few spiritual heroes are among us. Read the book, *The New Jim Crow*, as you must, and you get a harsh reminder of how deeply racism is embedded in American society, condemning people of color to be a perpetual underclass in our society. All these are reminders of how few in number are the spiritual heroes among us.**

Identifying a spiritual hero for yourself is a valuable exercise. I encourage you to do it. **But I am even more interested in each of you seeing yourselves as spiritual heroes. The entire High Holyday liturgy is about making you into a spiritual hero.** You have a few flaws? Welcome to the club. You made a few mistakes? You've got company there too.

But each of you have engaged in acts of love. Each of you have offered words of kindness. Each of you have stood up for those who are vulnerable. Each of you have given time and/or money to causes that will make the world a better place. These are behaviors that are worthy of emulation. This is the stuff of spiritual heroism.

There is a Chinese proverb that says: "Don't curse the darkness; light a candle." It parallels a verse in the book of Job: *v'al drachecha naga or*, act in such a way that a divine light will shine on you. Or a better translation: act with integrity, act with compassion, act with moral courage and a light will shine from within you. **This is the essence of spiritual heroism. You can be source of divine light for others.** Many of you are among that army of spiritual heroes who either in your professional roles, in your volunteer roles or in your family systems, are finding ways not just to curse the darkness but to bring forth light.

Perhaps it is time for a modest reconstruction of the theme of the High Holydays. Much of the liturgy we recite cites all of the ways that we may have fallen short or sinned. But how about this amendment to the High Holyday practice? Think of it as High Holydays, 2.0.

Let us identify one quality, one action that we engaged in, even once this year, that gave off light in a dark place. Make that action the topic of conversation with your spouse, your children, your friends and let that action inspire others to do the same. This is not bragging; it is modeling. It is so necessary. And we must do it. The world we live in today is filled with quite enough darkness; it is time to generate a bit more light.

May the New Year help you see the spiritual hero in the mirror. And when you see that reflection, may you know that this is the light that you were destined to bring into the world.