

Moral Courage  
Rabbi Brett Krichiver  
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It has been the best of times and the worst of times. Charles Dickens may have been writing of the French Revolution in his spring of hope, winter of despair reference. But because of recent events in our country and our world, Jews around the globe approach these particular High Holy Days with a deeper perspective on what it means to share the Days of Awe, and the need for personal and communal reflection.

The past weeks have shown us the very best of human nature. Former President Jimmy Carter got it right when he said, "As the waters rise, so do our better angels." As hurricanes bore down on Texas and Florida, unleashing devastation and destruction upon cities and the islands of the Caribbean, our country rallied to support and respond to those communities. We have sent every kind of support. The need is massive and the response too will be massive.

We witnessed act after act of bravery as rescues took place and cleanup and care for survivors begins. As one example, we watched with pride as the Cajun Navy, a volunteer group of private boat owners from Louisiana activated after Hurricane Katrina, drove into Houston to ensure others would not suffer the way they had suffered 12 years ago in New Orleans. These displays of courage and compassion are truly God's presence in the face of adversity. Natural disasters bring us together. They bring us into contact with one another, and we weather the crisis.

But let us not forget the stories dominating the news cycle only a month ago. In August, after months of protest over the removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee, white supremacists and neo-Nazis marched in Charlottesville, Virginia and came prepared for battle. We allowed a crack to form in the very fabric of our moral society and radical extremist points of view are back in the public square in dangerous ways. The violence which followed the protest, including the death of Heather Heyer, can only be the responsibility of those who peddle violence and hatred.

But the rally in Virginia was only the latest indication of a cultural tide rising over the past year. Many of America's best traits have taken a real hit. We have doubled down on stubbornness and pride, watched with shock and horror as our national conversation has been derided and overwhelmed with personal attacks, scandals, and ratings wars. In the words of Ted Koppel to Sean Hannity, "ideology seems more important today than facts."

We Jews know a little something about ideology. We teach and preach the Ten Commandments, and the collective wisdom of Mitzvot, and we believe these ideas have the power to change the world. But we teach something else as well. It is a fundamental Jewish

belief that our ideology is never absent common sense – this is the very premise of Reform Judaism. We never simply accept ideology, but rather we obligate ourselves to challenge it. We are commanded to engage our rational minds, to pursue and to respect the truth, to hold up the banner of our ideology, but also to treat one another with dignity and respect. And that takes real courage.

Throughout history, our ability to see in moral terms has allowed Jews to speak truth to power. We have always held high the torch of liberty and justice. We are the people of the prophetic voice, and each generation has heeded the call. We have marched for civil rights, just as we have advocated, lobbied, and fought for equal rights for women, for immigrants, for gender equality, for environmental stewardship, and the list goes on. And when we read from our Torah, we read not only of our journey from slavery to freedom, but of the longing of every tribe and nation to liberate themselves, and be granted liberty.

We often use the word courage to talk only of doing the things which scare us. There are choices to be made every day of our lives, which take courage, and that should not be diminished. But living in a moral way - that is a more nuanced goal. Lao Tzu put it this way, “A person with courage dares to die, a person with moral courage dares to live.” (Tao Te Ching Chpt 73). Risking life and limb for an idea is noble and brave, but what made a difference during the crises of Hurricanes Harvey and Irma, what will become the legacy of Charlottesville, and what Jews have understood for millennia, is that we risk even more when we are willing to put ideas into actions - to see past our differences to care for our neighbors, to unite behind the threat of hate speech and extremist ideology, to shout our values from the rooftops, whether our own lives are on the line or not.

A few years ago there was a powerful TED talk on the subject of this particular kind of courage. Brene Brown has established herself as a powerful authority on the topic. Splashed across her website are quotes like: “courage is contagious,” “Every time we choose courage we make everyone around us a little better and the world a little braver,” and, “Truth and courage aren’t always comfortable, but they’re never weakness.”

Brown isn’t talking about the kind of courage it takes to speak in front of a crowd, or to learn to skydive or do anything else that scares you. Rather she is tapping in to something much more profound. We might define this type of moral courage as a willingness to risk one’s spiritual or emotional safety to bring morality and ethics to life. In other words, when doing or saying something right or true might be unpopular, cause you to lose friends, or experience other potentially negative consequences. It means speaking and living your truth, and believing the positive outcomes will eventually outweigh the negative. It means going out on a limb and standing up for what you believe in.

Brown explains in her talk that the very word courage, from the Latin word “cur” means heart. Courage is “heart-strength.” People with this type of moral courage speak their truth with their whole lives. And this kind of courage, she argues, has the unique power to transform us, and our communities.

Rosh Hashanah comes every year to begin the cycle of holy days anew, to renew our commitments to one another, and most significantly, to remind us of the important work of Cheshbon Hanefesh, taking stock of our souls, the work which our tradition prescribes to us for the next ten days. Today, may we be bold enough to ask ourselves, “What do we stand for? What have we done in the past year to live our values and to assert ourselves when called to action? When we last heard the shofar’s blasts, did we heed the call? Did we allow those notes to stir our souls? Standing today before the True Judge, do we feel prepared to account for our actions, and for the many examples of our inaction?”

Judaism encourages this examination of the self not only on the High Holy Days, but every day through the study of personal, positive character traits, known as Middot, in the field known as Mussar, the Jewish ethical teachings. Character, like any other part of our being, requires practice and a strengthening of the muscles that support the traits we hope to embody. If we hope to become people of character, and exhibit moral courage, then those are muscles need to be exercised, developed, matured.

Modern psychology may well have taken a note from ancient Jewish texts. Courage, in Mussar, is *Ometz Lev*, or literally heart-strength: the ability to show your heart to the world. And it is hard work. We are more comfortable behind the masks we wear and the roles we play. Especially when confronted with a situation in which we disagree with others, it is much easier to simply avoid the trouble and the work by saying nothing. And so we hide. We hide for fear of judgment and we hide for fear of not fitting in. And we feel cut off from our community, and we sit here alone.

Tonight, let us take comfort from the fact that this ancient day of Rosh Hashanah has gathered us together, to sit under the same tent and reflect instead on what unites us. When the prophets speak of “justice rolling down like water, righteousness like a mighty stream,” (Amos 5:24) let us imagine our contemplation of these values leading to more conversations, and to finding opportunities to act for justice and righteousness in the world. When the prophets write, “Torah will go out from Zion, God’s word from Jerusalem,” let us imagine that this is our Zion, our Temple is here, and it is up to us to make sure God’s word emanates from this building, and spreads to the world through our congregation. Let this be our Cheshbon Hanefesh tonight, a strengthening of our commitment to Jewish values, and a strengthening of our commitment to Judaism at a time when that is exactly what our world needs from us.

Unfortunately, moral courage is profoundly lacking in the world today. Too few are willing to really talk about racial inequalities, gender inequalities, socio-economic inequalities, bigotry and ignorance that fill the news cycles and the meeting agendas of our Social Justice committee, but rarely lead us to the streets to protest. If we are to dedicate ourselves to speak up and act out in the New Year, we will need to turn back the pages of history for stories of those who help us understand and strive for moral courage.

In July of 1997, Malala Yousafzai was born in Pakistan, in the Swat Valley. She attended a school her father founded, until the Taliban began attacking girls’ schools in the region. In an

extraordinary show of moral courage, Malala gave a speech entitled, “How dare the Taliban take away my basic right to education?” and began blogging for the BBC. When she won the Pakistan National Youth Peace Prize in 2011 and was nominated for an international award, she learned that the Taliban had issued a death threat against her. This did not stop Malala from continuing to speak out for education of girls. And then in 2012 she was shot in front of her friends on a bus heading home from school.

The most powerful part of Malala’s story, which includes becoming the youngest person ever to win the Nobel Peace, is that having survived and recovered from her serious injuries, she continued her activism. She gave a speech at the United Nations on her 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, and her autobiography was released shortly after that. She has leveraged her growing influence to do more and more good for her cause, and for every one of us. On her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, she asked supporters to post a photo of themselves holding their favorite book and to share why they believed in education – in a global initiative called “books not bullets” to increase worldwide spending on education relative to the military.

An Op-Ed piece from that year suggests that there is one simple explanation for Malala Yousafzai’s extraordinary story – and that is her moral courage. The New York Times published: “Researchers have found that people who display moral courage often perceive themselves to be ‘strongly linked to others through a shared humanity’ and feel a sense of responsibility that is not limited to [family].” What the reporter noted about Malala’s story was that “despite terrible suffering [she] had witnessed and the dangers in her work... she had clarity of purpose which is rare... She never let go of her idealism.” (NY Times, 12/18/14, Op-Ed Fixes: Where Does Moral Courage Come From?)

There are countless examples of this kind of moral courage in Jewish texts and Jewish history: Moses, who stood up to Pharaoh; Akiva, one of our great martyrs, who taught Torah even when his life was threatened; Chana Senesh, who risked her life to save Jewish children during the Shoa. And I think of our own Rabbi Maurice Davis marching with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. along with hundreds of other Jewish figures at the Selma march. Each of them, and so many others, understood that our morals mean nothing if we are not willing to be the ones to live them.

We cannot afford to forget how much was risked by each and every one of these heroes. We take for granted that Moses would be successful before Pharaoh, the greatest power of the known world at that time, just as we are certain it was right for Rabbi Davis to march with Dr. King. We imagine that Chana Senesh and the many other teenagers who fought for the fledgling Jewish state of Israel already knew that they could defeat the much larger Arab armies surrounding them, let alone rescue Jews from the trains taking them to Auschwitz. They knew their lives were at stake, but they also knew, with the full strength of their hearts, that the ideals they were living were the right ones.

Eva Kor was born in 1934 in Romania, where she lived with three sisters, one of whom, Miriam, was Eva’s twin. When she was only six years old, she and her family were transported

to the death camp at Auschwitz. She and her twin were subject to the infamous experiments of Dr. Joseph Mengele, and both of them survived and made it to Israel, and the city of Haifa. She eventually married and moved to the United States, and established the Holocaust Museum in Terre Haute called CANDLES.

We are fortunate to have many Holocaust survivors in our community, and we are especially fortunate to have some who are as passionate and articulate as Eva Kor. And none of this is why Eva gained national attention. In April of 2015, she traveled to Germany to testify in the trial of former Nazi Oskar Gröning. During the trial, and in a very intentional way, Eva Kor embraced Gröning and offered her forgiveness, and even gratitude for his willingness to admit the truth.

Clearly not all in the Jewish community and beyond are prepared to forgive, let alone embrace former Nazis. In my own conversations with Eva she has explained herself very simply. We each have a choice, she said, to carry around hate and hurt, or to forgive and move forward. The way in which she has chosen to move forward is to talk about healing and hope. And while Eva Kor may not speak for the entire Jewish people when she places the past behind her to forgive in her heart, her strength shines for me as a bright light, showing us all how to make courageous choices.

What Malala Yousefzai and Eva Kor share is a tremendous strength of conviction, and moral courage. Whether or not you agree with their positions, there are no better examples of individuals living in an authentic and courageous way.

You do not have to be an international figure to live with moral courage. Each one of us is capable of Ometz Lev, of living the strength of our convictions. The book of Proverbs teaches: "The refining pot is for silver, the furnace purifies gold. But God tests our hearts. (17:3). Our hearts are tested every day. I think about the dozens of IHC families who attended a session held a few years ago during Sunday school dealing with anti-Semitism in Indiana public schools. The family, whose frustration at mandatory religious instruction in their public school, led us to skype tutor their children from the library each week. I think of another family who met with their school administration to create programs teaching tolerance and understanding in their school.

I think of our teens who confront bullying in the classroom and online in ways we could not have imagined in our youth. There are many examples of these teens supporting each other by speaking out, standing together. I think of the work it takes, even within our friendships, partnerships and marriages, to offer a corrective, to find a way to say the difficult thing in a way that our spouse, our friend can hear. Ometz Lev offers us strength in every moment we need it, and in every relationship.

And I think of the way our congregation has found its voice in recent years, standing up with interfaith coalitions, and as the largest constituent congregation of the Jewish community to advocate for a comprehensive hate crimes law, health care reform, immigration reform, and

marriage equality, in a political climate which has historically minimized the concerns of the Jewish community, in a state which has often proven itself less than open to hearing about these issues. We hold elected officials accountable, and we advocate for Jewish values. And we show tremendous moral courage every day.

Chesbon Hanefesh asks each of us, tonight and for the next ten days, to rededicate our lives to our values. To find ways to live with courage, and to speak out every time our values are threatened in large or small ways. To engage with those with whom we disagree honestly, and with integrity, and in this way, fulfilling the ancient hope that we might be a light unto the nations. May this be the meaning of these Days of Awe, and may this be inscribed for us in the Book of Life. Kein Yihi Ratzon. May it be God's will.