

How to Become a Heroⁱ

A Sermon for Second Day Rosh Hashanah 2017/5778

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L'Shanah Tovah

How do we navigate our challenging times?

Rosh Hashanah night I spoke about how we can build a happy life. Yesterday, I spoke about how listening better to each other can help. This morning, I will continue our “how to cope” series by asking you two questions. No need to raise your hands. Just think about the answer. Who here ever wished for a hero to come save the day or simply go to bat for you? Who here ever had the opportunity to be a hero for someone else?

At some point in our lives, all of us can use a hero in our corner, can't we? And at some point, deep down, don't we all want to be a hero in someone else's eyes, if not also in our own?

I think these desires partially explain the continuing popularity of superhero movies. In complicated and stressful times, it is natural to feel helpless and thus yearn for, search for, a hero to save the day. But I also think it is natural to feel that somewhere deep inside each of us, there is an inner hero waiting to be discovered. This morning I will tell you about three heroes (one fictional, one contemporary, and one ancient) whose stories can help *us* become the heroes we know we can be, the heroes God created us to be.

Our first hero comes from this summer's blockbuster *Wonder Woman*. Wonder Woman does not start out as a hero, super or otherwise. She starts out as an overprotected, pampered little girl named Diana. Her aunt, Antiope, wanting to prepare her for the inevitable challenges ahead, offers Diana her first and most important lesson: “You are stronger than you believe. You have greater powers than you know.”

My friends, this is the first step in becoming a hero: recognizing that we, too, are stronger than we believe and have greater powers than we know.

Strength comes in many forms. You don't have to be able to lift heavy trucks or leap tall buildings. There is the strength that helps us survive a horrific loss, trauma or tragedy and rebuild our lives. There is the strength that helps us confront a debilitating illness and make every day count. There is the strength that inspires us to take a stand, sustains us when we step up to help and motivates us to intervene when others won't.

You don't have to be a comic book superhero to have these kinds of strength. Regardless of what we face in our personal or communal lives, what is true for Diana is also true for us. We, too, are stronger than we believe. We have greater power than we know. Recognizing that, appreciating that, embracing that is the first step to becoming a hero.

But it is only the first step. It is not enough to recognize one's strength and power if we do not know what to do with that strength and power.

One option is to do nothing.

At one point in the *Wonder Woman* movie, Diana's friend, pilot and spy Steve Trevor, explains why he is taking on what appears to be an impossible mission: "I gotta try," he says. "My father told me once: when you see something, you can do nothing or you can do something. I already tried nothing..." Doing nothing may be easier. It may seem safer. It certainly is more convenient. But our conscience, our inner hero, knows better. The hero within us knows we gotta try.

If you think there are things we have no choice over, think again. God created each and every one of us with freewill and planted within us incredible inner strength and power. We *always* have a choice, even if our choices are limited, even if our only choice is our attitude.

This is the lesson we can learn from our second hero this morning, a real-life hero depicted in a very different movie, *Schindler's List*. I am not referring to Oscar Schindler, who saved over 1,000 Jews during the Holocaust, though he *is* a superhero in my book. No, I am referring to a young man named Joseph Bau.

Joseph Bau was an artist who used his talent to forge identity papers, helping many Jews escape the Nazis. When asked why he did not forge papers for himself, he said, "If I make documents for myself, who would help the others?"

It is Joseph Bau's wedding to Rebecca Tennenbaum in the Plaszow Concentration Camp that is depicted in the film *Schindler's List*. The wedding really took place, in secret, of course. Everyone involved would have been killed if discovered. Why did they take the risk? Joseph and Rebecca decided to marry not only because they were in love but because they were determined to wield the human capacity for love even under the most terrible and inhumane conditions.

They were separated when Rebecca was sent to Auschwitz. After the war, they miraculously found each other and made *aliyah* to Israel, where Joseph became one of the fathers of Israeli animation while secretly creating fake documentation for Israeli spies, including those who captured the Nazi war criminal Adolph Eichmann. Doron Pollack, who curated a retrospective of Joseph's work, summed up his life this way: "[Joseph Bau] was a man who helped where needed."ⁱⁱ

That, my friends, is the second step to becoming a hero. We don't have to face the terrible life-threatening choices confronted by *Schindler List's* real Joseph Bau or *Wonder Woman's* imaginary Steve Trevor. We just have to be willing to try to help whenever and wherever help is needed. We gotta try.

The third step towards becoming a hero is figuring out how to wield our strength and power for good and not evil. That is the step our third hero learns this morning in our Torah reading.

Did you ever wonder why our ancient Sages chose for this holy day a story about a father who almost kills his son? And not just any father, but the founding father of our People, Abraham?

Maybe it is because, like Diana, Abraham does not start out as a hero. Abraham pawns his wife off as his sister, stays on the sidelines as Hagar belittles Sarah and her son bullies Isaac. Don't get me wrong. Abraham has heroic moments. He rescues his nephew Lot. He argues with God to save Sodom and Gemorrah. But Abraham has not yet become a hero. Not until the story we read today.

The key to understanding Abraham's evolution as a hero is the phrase, *Henini*, "Here I am." It is not an accident that it appears three times in this story.

The first time, Abraham says *Henini*, "Here I am," is in response to God's request that he slaughter his son Isaac. Right or wrong, Abraham must have needed tremendous inner resources to proceed with what he thinks God is asking of him; greater strength and power than he knew or believed he had up until this point. We are stronger than we believe. We have greater power than we know. But such belief, such knowledge, is not enough.

This leads us to the second time Abraham says *Henini*, "Here I am." Abraham has loaded the wood for the sacrifice upon Isaac and takes the knife and firestone himself as Isaac asks, "Father?" Abraham answers, "*Henini, b'ni; here I am, my son.*" Isaac asks where is the sacrificial sheep? Abraham answers *God will provide the sheep*, as they climb the mountain together. Is Abraham being disingenuous, hiding his real intent, or do his words describe his hope, perhaps his trust, that God will indeed provide an alternative sacrifice in place of his son? Perhaps the budding hero within Abraham only knows that he has to try to make it all work out, to both follow God and protect his son, even if he doesn't exactly know how. This is the second step to becoming a hero. Knowing you gotta try even when the odds are against you, even when you don't know how it will work out or if it will at all work out. But knowing we gotta try is also not enough.

This leads us to the third time Abraham says *Henini*, "Here I am." No alternative sheep has appeared. Abraham binds his son, raises his knife. I imagine him closing his eyes, closing his heart. Perhaps it is this disassociation that forces the angel to call him *twice* before he answers *Henini*, "Here I am," lowers his knife and learns that God rejects violence perpetrated in God's name. This horrific lesson is not like the others. It sears him. But it also transforms him into the hero he was meant to be, who now knows in his gut how to wield strength and power for good and not evil, how to reject violence for violence's sake, violence in the name of religion, because the world as it can be, the world as God intends it to be, is a world of love.

Power and strength are not enough, trying is not enough, if we do not use them for good, for love.

None of us is perfect or omniscient, all knowing. Not Wonder Woman, not Joseph Bau, not Father Abraham, and certainly not us. All of us have a dark side, what our ancient Rabbis called the *yetzer hara*, the evil inclination, the temptation to do things that harm ourselves and others, that battles the *yetzer hatov*, the good inclination within us. Sometimes, even the best of us find our *yetzer hara*, our dark side, overcoming our *yetzer hatov*, the light of good within us. That is why we are here today, to wrestle with our *yetzer hara* and overpower it with our inner hero.

Wonder Woman's arch nemesis, Ares, is also strong and powerful. He certainly knows how to try. A big part of his power lies in his efforts to manipulate others for his own ends by channeling their fear and anguish into anger and then into hate and violence. His plan is as old as human history and as modern as today's headlines.

Ares tries to recruit Diana by stoking her rage over the human propensity for violence. She is angry. But she catches herself, reliving an earlier interaction with Steve when Diana told him people didn't deserve their help. He replied, "People are not perfect. We have darkness within each of us...It's not about what *they* deserve. It is about what *we* believe." Calmed, she

answers Ares: “It’s about what you believe, and I believe in love... I’ve... Seen the terrible things men do to each other in the name of hatred and the lengths they’ll go to for love. Now I know. Only love can save this world. So I stay. I fight, and I give... for the world I know *can be*. This is my mission, now. Forever.”

My friends, this is also *our* mission as Jews, now and forever to stay, fight and give for the world we know can be, a world filled with love. The most important verse in our Torah, upon which all the others are based according to our great sage Hillel is one of love, “*Love your neighbor as yourself.*”ⁱⁱⁱ Of all the nations on earth the Jewish People know viscerally the terrible things people can do to each other when our *yetzer hara* overcomes our *yetzer tov*. We also know the lengths they can go for love. That is why we are called upon to fight and give for the world we know can be, a world filled with love.

That is why Abraham, and Isaac, had to learn the painfully hard way that God does not desire human sacrifice. That is why Joseph and Rebecca Bau, who had every reason to hate, responded with love by marrying in the Plaszow Concentration Camp. And that is why God is relying on our inner hero to rise to the occasion in response to all the pain, viciousness and callousness we see around us.

It is not about what *they* deserve. It is about what *we* believe.

As Jews, we believe that every human being is created equal in God’s image.^{iv} We believe in self- defense *and* the defense of innocent others, that we are to pursue justice, not stand idly by the blood of our fellow^v or withhold good from those who deserve it when it is in our power to act.^{vi} These are the things we have believed since the days of Father Abraham and still believe. Particularly when confronted by confusion, anguish or anger, remembering what *we* believe helps us find our inner hero and harness our strength and power for good, rather than ill.

I think that is why our Sages chose Abraham’s difficult story for this holy day. But there is another reason as well.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who we honor every winter at our Interfaith Service, used to tell the story of the first time he heard about the near sacrifice of Isaac. He was seven years old and by the time the angel stopped Abraham’s hand, he was sobbing uncontrollably. His teacher asked him what was wrong. He knew the end of the story, that Isaac is saved. “But,” the young Heschel responded, “what if that angel had been a second too late?” His teacher answered, “An angel cannot be late.” Decades later, Rabbi Heschel would tell this story and add, “An angel cannot be late, but we, made of flesh and blood, we may come too late.”^{vii}

My friends, it is not enough that we believe we are stronger and more powerful than we know. It is not enough to know we gotta try. It even is not enough to fight for the world we know can be, a world of love. None of it is enough if we come too late. An angel cannot be late but we can. Humanity has too often come too late to stay the hand of the slayer or reach out a helping hand to those in need. And that is something to weep over.

There is a lot going on in our world, our nation, our community. Charlottesville; Hurricanes Harvey, Irma and climate change that contributed to their destructive force; attacks on women’s access to health care, everyone’s access to health care; the frightening rise of hate in our world. So much else. It’s easy to feel overwhelmed, to want to disconnect, to despair of making a difference. None of us can do everything. But all of us can do something.

We may not be able to leap buildings like Wonder Woman, create false identity papers like Joseph Bau, or get a direct message from God and angels like Abraham. But each of us can become the heroes we know we can be. All we have to do is do what we can, maybe more than we think we can. We can write, call, lobby, march, show up, donate, reach out, speak up, and speak with empathy to someone who has a different opinion. We are stronger than we believe and have greater powers than we know. Our strength and power, and our beliefs, were given to us by a God who loves us and asks us to love the world so that we can fulfill our eternal mission as Jews to fight for the world we know can be, the world of love.

In the coming year, may we find something to give to, some way to help where needed, something to fight for, for the world we know can be, the world of love. May we try to do our part and not be late. And let us say, Amen. Shanah Tovah.

ⁱ © Copyright. Rabbi Susan Grossman, 2017.

ⁱⁱ Maxine Dove, "Love rules on 70th anniversary of Bau couple's concentration camp wedding" *Jewish News Service* (March 19, 2014) <http://www.jns.org/latest-articles/2014/3/24/love-rules-on-70th-anniversary-of-bau-couples-concentration-camp-wedding#.WaytyMiGPcs>. (Accessed on September 3, 2017.) My appreciation to Rabbi Perry Rank for making me aware of Joseph and Rebecca Bau's story.

ⁱⁱⁱ Leviticus 19:18.

^{iv} Itamar Sharon, "For southern residents, a tense night on Gaza frontier," *Times of Israel* (March 13, 2014) <http://www.timesofisrael.com/for-southern-residents-a-tense-night-near-gaza-border/>. (Accessed Sept. 3, 2017).

^v Genesis 1:27

^{vi} Leviticus 19:16.

^{vii} Proverbs 3:27

^{viii} My appreciation to Rabbi Amy Katz for making me aware of this story.