

'THE MEANING AND LIMITATIONS OF COURAGE'

A.D.L.--"Courageous Jewish Leadership Award" Ceremony

Abe Foxman's gracious and hyperbolic introduction of me suggests a rather interesting zoological oddity: *Foxman* trying to paint a mere *Lamm* as a *lion*... I shall follow the honorable tradition of responding to the flattering encomia we've heard this afternoon with the appropriate and sincere demurrals. But in one sense I accept your award, graciously but fully and without false modesty: If you judge courage by the number and frequency of attacks and the variety of directions from which these blows come--left, right, and center--then I am courageous! Indeed, too much so...

I am grateful to my good and learned friend Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks for his eloquent exaggeration of any claims I may have to this tribute, and I offer my warmest thanks to ADL--to Mel Salberg and to Abe Foxman and his associates, and to Burt Resnick and Sheldon Rudoff and to all gathered here, for the honor you have bestowed upon me. If there is anyone who is qualified to be an expert on courage, it is the ADL, and the entire community is indebted to ADL for its valiant and courageous activity.

The times we live in--and I am speaking of months, not centuries or even decades-- are so tense, so combative and confrontational, that civility has become suspect. It is everybody against everybody.

The situation reminds me of the young man, proud but in tattered outfit, who seated himself opposite a distinguished looking gentleman on the train from Lublin to Warsaw. He bent over to the older man and said, "Excuse me, *Reb Yid*, can you please tell me the time?" The older man thought for a moment, then stretched out his hand and slapped the young fellow across the face. "I know what you're up to! You will engage me in conversation, find out I have a daughter, worm your way into my home, and ask for her hand in marriage. And you're so poverty stricken you don't even own a watch!"

We seem to be looking for opportunities to slap each other down. Dogmatism dominates, modesty of expression is as rare as it is commendable, and confrontation is taken as a sign of true conviction. We appear to have become a *Loud Society*, in which soft speech is considered a compromise of principles, and the failure to shout is tantamount to a confession of cowardice. The N.Y. Times has noted this phenomenon several times in the past few weeks, as columnists have reported on the escalating tensions amongst Jews in Israel and America, and editorials have commented on intemperate remarks by Jewish leaders. This is not a time when we can be proud of ourselves.

The irony of it all is that the yellers and the screamers, those of unrestrained rhetoric and purple prose, really and truly believe themselves to be courageous. At a time of this sort, one must begin to question what "courage" really means and what are its limitations. Please indulge me, therefore, if I think aloud with you some thoughts about this fascinating subject.

That courage is a virtue is self-evident. Our people owes its existence to acts of historic courage. If Abraham were not an iconoclast; if Moses were not a bold but vastly unpopular leader; if Maimonides were not a fearless thinker; if the Besht were not an intrepid spiritual pioneer--we would not have become what we are today.

But courage is not that simple a matter. We must answer such questions as: is it always commendable? How much courage is good and when, if at all, does it turn sour?

The immortal Maimonides taught us the principle of the Mean. Every personality trait can be traced along a spectrum, one with two extremes and a broad space in between, divided by a central point or line. Normally, one's native disposition leads to a point on the spectrum of character which inclines to one of the extremes. Character means *not* "doing the what comes naturally," but exercising wise judgment and directing your character to avoid the extremes and aim for the middle point, the center, which he praises as the "way of the Lord." In doing this, one becomes responsible for the development of his/her own character and moral personae. This is the attribute of the *hakham* or wise person. Thus, using the attitude to money as an example, a wise person is neither a miser nor a spendthrift, but a sensible spender. Now, one of the more interesting examples he cites is that of courage. Here again, the "way of the Lord" adopted by the *hakham* is courage: the mean between faintheartedness or cowardice on the one hand, and foolhardiness or contempt for one's own life and limb on the other. *Thus, courage too can taken to an extreme--and it is no less objectionable than cowardice.*

Thus, the kind of "courage" that impels a person to blurt out his opinions unthinkingly, because he believes them based upon moral "impulse," is not courage at all. The *hakham* has to "measure" (i.e., analytically assess) the consequences of his actions; this is not impulse, moral or otherwise, but the *intelligent* use of moral or spiritual energy. Courage requires *sekhel*, judgment and intelligence; without it, one blunders aimlessly and mindlessly into mortal danger. As the estimable American philosopher, Yogi Berra, is reputed to have counseled, "When you come to a fork in the road, take it..."

In order to locate and stick to that “way of the Lord,” a wise person must know that there are two kinds of courage: the active and the passive. The active kind is the one we normally refer to when we praise someone for showing courage--it is a positive expression, visible and often audible. There is, however, a negative and more passive, subtle form of courage. That is, paradoxically, the courage that calls upon us to refrain from a show of bravado, from unnecessary risk and harmful consequences to other, more valuable interests or principles. Such self-discipline may be a greater expression of courage and character than the bluster that disguises a show of contempt for other worthy interests and cherished values.

Moses was a man of indomitable courage. Early in his career, he defended a persecuted fellow Jew by smiting his Egyptian tormentor. He defied the power of the mightiest kingdom of that era--Pharaoh and Egypt. He courageously stood up to a rightist rebellion when worshippers of the Golden Calf wanted to return to Egypt, and a leftist rebellion when Korah tried to rally the malcontents under his phony populist banner. Yet all this courage goes relatively unnoticed when compared with Moses' other virtues. Only once, however, do we hear an explicit divine compliment to Moses, and that occurs when his own brother and sister--his partners in the leadership of the people--talk about him disparagingly and vent their complaints against him. Here, *Moses simply refrains from saying anything in his own defense*. The Torah says, “The man Moses was very meek, above all the men that were on the face of the earth” (Nu. 12:3). God, in reproaching his siblings, refers to Moses as “the most trusted in My house” (v. 7). And the Midrash (Tanhuma, *Tzav* 13) add that the word *anav* (meek) is related to the root *anoh*, *answer*. Thus: Moses could certainly have *answered* all their arguments against him. He could have answered--but he didn't. *And that took courage!*

From this we learn that courage is not only the ability to brave danger by walking in the line of fire; it is not only an active, positive element. Equally admirable is the courage that is negative: the strength of character to refrain from answering in kind, to practice self-restraint instead of self-assertion, to keep silent when the crowds call for a show of defiance, to speak softly when others demand shouting, to whisper in the “Loud Society.”

The Talmud (*Gittin* 36b) put it this way:

Our Rabbis taught: They who suffer insults but do not inflict them in return, who hear themselves reviled and do not answer back, who do what is right from love and gladly accept chastisement, of them does the Torah say, “And they that love him are like the sun when it goes forth in its might” (Judges 5:31).

True “might” comes from *not* responding in kind to unkind remarks, in suffering insult and *not* retorting, in tolerating embarrassment and *not* acting hatefully in return.

In our tempest-tossed times, when we are tearing ourselves apart and trading terrible insults without reason or sense, we need the courage of “the way of the Lord” that expresses itself in not expressing ourselves, the courage not only to speak and act but also not to respond to every attack and not to shout back at the loud mouths of the community. “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a grievous word stirs up anger” (Proverbs 15:1).

So, I accept your kind words and your award in the presence of my dear family and friends and associates, not as a sign of approval for what I may have done in the past, but as an incentive for what I should and should not say or do in the future--the courage to stick my neck out; but also the courage to bite my lip, keep a civil tongue, and remain maddeningly silent even when provoked to do otherwise.

And the *sekhel* to know which course to choose when.