

Sermon for VaYeshev–Hanukkah 2016

What Makes a Hero

The other day I heard a story on the radio about a little girl who believed monkeys painted her tissue box. It seems that her parents went through a rough patch when she was 6 years old and it was Christmas time. This little girl wanted a bicycle, but when they got to the tree that morning, there were just two painted tissue boxes, one for her and one for her big sister Susan. The little girl started to cry. She was disappointed, of course. She recalls that her mother looked like she was going to cry too. Then Susan said, “Wow, this is great. These tissue boxes were painted by monkeys.” The little girl thought that was great and stopped crying. She put the box in a special place in her room and she believed it was this rare monkey work of art until she was 20-years old. You know, because she was a kid and never had reason to doubt it.

When she turned 20 she came home from college and was snooping in her sister’s room and found a journal from when they were kids. She couldn’t resist reading it, and there she found the truth. Susan recognized the boxes as a charity project that a neighbor made and gave to folks who couldn’t afford presents. She saw her baby sister crying and saw her mom about to lose it and she blurted out the lie about the monkeys. Then she came up to her own room and cries while writing that journal entry. She cried because she too was disappointed about her gift, but more because she was forced to be a grown-up when she was just 10-years old herself.

I found that story so moving. I just can’t believe that little girl had the wisdom and sense to swallow her own disappointment to emotionally protect her sister and parents. When I heard the story, and maybe because Hanukkah begins tonight, I couldn’t help but think of that 10-year old in that moment as a hero. But a 10-year old girl lying to her sister hardly seems like what we would classically call heroic. It isn’t Judah Maccabee heroic, is it? It got me thinking about how we define a hero and as we celebrate Hanukkah, what that teaches us about how we approach the world.

On Tuesday I had another such experience. I read the obituary of Marion Pritchard. When she was Marion van Binsbergen, a Dutch social work student in 1942, she saw Jewish children being picked up off the street by Nazi soldiers and anyone who tried to intervene being thrown on the truck too. In that moment she decided she would fight what they were doing any way she could. She is credited with saving dozens of Jews during the Shoah. She and a few friends procured false documents for Jews, scrounged up extra food rations, though there was a food shortage and they were themselves hungry and hid a man and his three children in an empty country residence. When the owner, a Nazi collaborator, got suspicious and came snooping, she shot and killed him. Marian was a hero, but is this our classic definition of a hero? As she put it, “Most of us were brought up to tell [the] truth, to obey the secular law and the Ten Commandments. By 1945, I had stolen, cheated, deceived, and even killed.” Perhaps defining what a hero is and what a hero does isn’t as easy as we might think.

This week’s Torah portion begs the same question. The rabbis arranged it so that during Hanukkah the Torah reading is always the story of Joseph and his brothers and their trip to Egypt. The connection seems to be that Joseph is a hero, but he certainly doesn’t seem to be heroic in the same way as the Macabbees. He doesn’t stand up and fight for what is good. He is honest, but often tactless, as we see in the verses that introduce him (see booklet), and much of what he accomplishes seems to be because he is in the right place at the right time. He does have a superpower - his ability to interpret dreams. It wouldn’t have done him much good though if he hadn’t been in the prison when Pharaoh started having funny dreams.

But maybe that's exactly what Joseph and the Maccabees and Marion Prichard and the older sister in the story do have in common. Quite frankly, they were all flawed people. We all are. Being a hero does not necessarily mean being the most righteous or the most driven or the most anything. It's being in the right place at the right time to do good, recognizing what is called for and then doing it. That is the secret to Joseph's heroism – not what he sets out to do or his ability to interpret dreams, but that he recognizes his moment and does what he has to, whatever is within his power, to act. That's what the Maccabees did in the Hanukkah story as well. They weren't inherently extraordinary men or soldiers or leaders. Throughout the Book of Maccabees they get into mishap after mishap. They have setbacks and many of the Maccabee brothers die. But they recognize their moment.

That is what it means to be a hero. In the spirit of Elie Weisel a hero overcomes indifference and personal risk to act as Marion Blanchard did. In the spirit of Theodor Herzl they muster the will and vision even if they don't believe they can fulfill that vision in their lifetimes. In the spirit of Heschel they become a symbol of a cause or a belief as the Maccabees did. And in the spirit of Joseph, they recognize a moment when heroism is called for like that 10-year old girl on that sad Christmas morning.

This Hanukkah, as we light the candles and celebrate the miracle that happened so long ago, I challenge us all to recognize the places where our heroism is still required, to recognize the places in the world where we can make a difference and especially the places in the world where *only* we can make a difference – whether that is in our family, our community or the world. We are all challenged to overcome our indifference and self-interest and to envision a path forward. How do we know when we are the hero of our own story? How will we know when we are truly walking in the footsteps of our Maccabee ancestors? Perhaps the key is in Heschel's words – we will know when we stand for something, when our very lives become a symbol of that vision we are serving. When we achieve that, we are the hero in our story, our family's story, our people's story, our own story. May we all fulfill that vision on this Festival of Lights and in doing so, help fill this world with more sacred light.