

We are the David People

The soldier was ten feet tall. He wore one hundred fifty pounds of armor and carried a nineteen-pound spear, a javelin, and a sword. For forty straight days, the soldier mocked his rivals, challenging them to single combat. The soldier terrified the opposing army and their king. After all, who could defeat such a daunting opponent? Then, the most unimaginable person courageously accepted the duel. He was just a boy. He spent his days shepherding his flock and attending to his father and to his older brothers. He lacked military training and combat experience.¹ The king and his brothers pleaded with the boy to withdraw from the quarrel. Yet, the boy, driven by valor, was determined to defeat the mighty soldier.

This is the David and Goliath story. David, the Judean boy, kills the Goliath, the gargantuan Philistine warrior. David, the scrawny [and as tradition teaches us] redheaded boy, would become Israel's next great warrior king. Though this story is thousands of years old, first recorded in the prophetic First Book of Samuel, the story's message – the underdog can defeat the much bigger, stronger adversary, has lived on throughout our ages in numerous films, in novels, in military conflicts, and in sporting contests.²

As Americans, we like to cheer for the underdog. We enjoy contests where a smaller, weaker challenger defeats a much stronger, skilled opponent.³ These stories remind us that anything is possible. The amateur can defeat the professional.

As Jews, the David and Goliath story is personal for us. The story appears in our sacred literature. The story illustrates our great king and poet extraordinaire. David is our courageous hero. David is our underdog who defies against all odds. And, most importantly, his courageous legacy lives on through us, the Jewish people. We are the underdog who defeats the goliaths. We are the underdog who fights for all underdogs, taking on their goliaths. We are the David people.

However, as personal as the David and Goliath story is for us - the story - perhaps, is cruelly ironic. The reality is that many goliaths have defeated the underdog, us - the Jewish people. A simple scan of Jewish history unfortunately reminds us of these devastating hardships. Therefore, I ask my Temple Solel family on this Jewish New Year 5776 – How can David's courage inspire us to combat the goliaths whom we face today?

Our goliath today does not attack us with a nineteen-pound spear, a javelin, and a sword. Rather, this goliath appears in a different face, but a face we know all too well, anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism is alive. Anti-Semitism is strong. Anti-Semitism affects each of us here - in the heart of southern California, and in our beautiful beach communities.

Anti-Semitism besieges and harasses our Jewish students, here at UCSD, UC Irvine, UCLA, Berkeley, and most universities in America. When I went to college, I experienced the joys of finding my academic and personal passions. Many of our Temple Solel college students will thrive in the ivory tower. However, many of our students will have anti-Semitic students attack their Judaism by vandalizing sukkahs, Hillel houses, and Jewish fraternities

¹ Cf. Malcolm Gladwell, *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2013).

² Cf. Keith Bodner, "David and Goliath (1 Sam 17)" *Society of Biblical Literature* (18 Feb 2015)

³ "David and Goliath," *Oxford Advanced American Dictionary*. For more on the notion of courage in Judaism, see Rabbi Yitzchak Blau, "Is Courage a Jewish Value," *Tradition* 42:4, (2010): 33ff. According to Blau, Our sacred literature mostly addresses *bitabon* and *emunah*, faith and belief, *besed* and *mishpat*, compassion and justice, and *shemirat ha-mitzvot*, commitment to *Halakha*.

and sororities painted with swastikas. Intolerant professors will assail Israel. Our students will annually witness Israel Apartheid Week on their campuses.

Anti-Semitism is highly visible in world universities. The student council at Durban University of Technology in South Africa demanded school officials to expel Jewish students who do not support Palestinians. In Australia, a mob of students ambushed a professor's lecture in order to bash the Jewish State.

Anti-Semitism is a movement that pressures governments, businesses, and organizations to delegitimize Israel's right to exist – The Boycott, Disinvest, and Sanctions Movement (also known as BDS). The BDS movement wanted rapper Matisyahu disinvited from a Spanish musical festival because he refused to sign a statement endorsing a Palestinian state. Matisyahu is not an Israeli citizen. He is Jewish. BDS successfully lobbied a Norwegian Film Festival to ban the films by Israeli director, Roy Zafrani. BDS informed Zafrani that he could only show films that “Discuss the discrimination of Palestinians.”⁴

Many of us shop at Trader Joes here in Encinitas. BDS wants supermarket chains, such as Trader Joes, to stop carrying Israeli products. Supermarkets in Europe have started to remove Israeli products from their shelves.

Anti-Semitism appears in mainstream religious movements. The Presbyterian Church and the United Church of Christ voted in favor to boycott, disinvest, and sanction Israel. The United Church of Christ almost approved a resolution calling Israel an apartheid state; the resolution failed by only ten votes.

Anti-Semitism assails us through an intergovernmental organization – the United Nations. Since the creation of the United Nations Human Rights Council in 2006, the Council passed forty-five resolutions condemning Israel more than any other country combined. United Nations Fifty-Four Economic and Social Council just adopted a resolution that found Israel as the world's only violator of economic and social rights abuse.

During Israel's defensive war against the terrorist group Hamas last July, trusted American news agencies did not report the facts. Rather, these agencies became biased spokespersons for Hamas and Gaza residents.

The list of anti-Semitic incidents continues to grow daily. We are angry. We are frustrated. We are tired of the double standard. We want to protect our college students from the anti-Semitic onslaught. We have lobbied Janet Napolitano, President of the University of California System, to adopt the State Department's definition of anti-Semitism in the UC system. The UC Board of Regents declined to take on the issue at the last regents meeting.

Organizations such as the anti-Defamation League and Stand With Us help combat anti-Semitism on the campus and throughout the United States. We have contacted our local, state, and national representatives to speak to the issue of anti-Semitism. We rightfully deserve results. However, this goliath continues to build speed and support.

Then, what is our response? In France, the ninety-year-old Zionist Youth Movement, Betar, trains French teenagers in marital arts in order to defend themselves against anti-Semitism. Fifty-one percent of racist acts in France are against Jews. Is this the necessary response for us to battle our goliaths? Does our response rely solely on our physical valor?

Our sacred literature charges Jews to “Be strong and of good courage” – *hazak vehebatz*. “Then Moses summoned Joshua and said to him in the sight of all Israel: *hazak vehebatz* –

⁴ Cf. Steve Schnur and David Renzer, “Recent Actions of BDS Groups Expose Discriminatory, anti-Semitic Underpinnings” *The Jewish Journal* (25 August 2015)

Be strong and of good courage, for you are the one who will go with this people into the land that Adonai has sworn to their ancestors to give them...Do not fear or be dismayed.”⁵

The Midrash about Nachshon ben Aminadav also discusses the importance of courage – *hazak veb'nithazak* - “Be of good courage.”⁶ Nachshon stood on the shores of the Reed Sea, fleeing from the Egyptians. Nachshon courageously jumped into the rough waters first, putting his life at risk. Only at the last second did God split the Reed Sea. No other Hebrew standing at the waters had the courage to take this unprecedented jump.⁷ The Hebrews waited until God split the rough waters before entering.⁸

Rabbi Kaufmann Kohler, the great leader for American Reform Judaism, wrote, “Physical courage, the result of man’s struggle against conditions that threaten his very existence, and which often develops boldness, fearlessness, and an utter disregard of physical pain, is extolled by the ancient Hebrews as a valued possession.”⁹

Our great biblical heroes such as David, Saul, Deborah, Gideon, Joshua, and Sampson fit this category of physical courage. The Maccabees who fought the Greek Seleucids and Marek Edelman, the last surviving leader of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, embody physical valor and fearlessness.

Judaism calls for courageous individuals to pick up arms, to stand a post, and to risk their lives for the Jewish people, as King David and the aforementioned did for us so many years ago. *Hazak veb'nithazak* - “Be of good courage.” And, of course, our courageous men and women in the American and the Israeli uniform live by these words daily, *Hazak veb'nithazak*.

We often measure courage according to how one uses physical strength in conflict. And, even more so, do we ascribe courage to the one who fights a much bigger, stronger adversary. David was courageous because he defeated the warrior Goliath. Then, General Washington was courageous because he defeated the military genius, General Cornwallis. But, how does David’s act of valor embolden us as Southern Californian Jews today as we face our goliath, anti-Semitism?

Before David killed the Goliath with his pure strength, David defeated the Goliath with the courage that came from his heart. This courage - moral courage, taught David that the Goliath could never defeat him, because the mission of the Israelites triumphs over the Philistines. Like David, for us, it is the mission of the Jewish people that transcends any goliath who stands in our way. How can David’s courage inspire us to combat the goliaths whom we face today? The answer for us is through moral courage.

Judaism sets a high value upon moral courage – courage that comes from our hearts, rather than from our hands. Moral courage is the secret of our resistance at all times against those who sought to destroy us.¹⁰ And, it is our Judaism – our way of life - that ignites our moral courage. The Book of Psalms beautifully reminds us, “*Hazak vay'yaahmaitz lib'beh'cha*, Be strong, and let your heart take courage.”¹¹

Throughout Jewish history, moral courage arms Jews to resist their goliaths. When the goliaths attacked our way of life in any epoch, we have always resisted courageously by staying true to our Jewish mission to this world: feeding the poor, healing the sick, and

⁵ Deuteronomy 31:7-8

⁶ Cf. 2 Samuel 10:12

⁷ Cf. Rabbi Nathan Lopes Cardozo, “The Great Challenge: Courage in Judaism” (12 March 2012)

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Kaufmann Kohler and Adolf Guttmacher, “Courage” *Jewish Encyclopedia* (1906)

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Psalms 27:14

comforting the suffering, regardless of race, ethnicity, and religious affiliation. Our Jewish character is how we resisted our goliaths.

Our Jewish character is what makes us march onward. This is also the David way. “*Haʒak vay’yaahmaitz lib’beb’cha*, Be strong, and let your heart take courage.” And, now, when we look at Jewish history, we can see how our moral courage resisted, triumphed over, and transcended any goliath who stood in our way. Here are a few examples of this:

When the Romans destroyed the Second Temple 2000 years ago, our great rabbis instituted a new legal system that would speak to issues concerning the poor and the most vulnerable in society, regardless of one’s religion and one’s country of origin. Even when the Romans sacked our sacred Temple, Judaism became a religion that sought to repair this world.

When Jews experienced the worst goliath of all – the Nazis, Jews resisted this heinous goliath with moral courage. In Treblinka, Jewish prisoners courageously sustained a vibrant Jewish life through prayer, education, and community. Pelagia Lewinka, a Holocaust survivor, experienced moral courage in the compassionate maternal love that women had for each other.¹²

When quotas prevented Jews from gaining admission to the top universities, Jews did not stop learning. Jewish scientists Jonas Salk and Albert Sabin courageously found the vaccine for Polio, giving the patent to all of humanity freely.

During the 1960s, when the Jim Crow Laws and Ku Klux Klan represented the goliaths to Black Americans and other minorities, Jews courageously ventured to the South, marching hand-in-hand with Dr. Martin Luther King and Civil Rights leaders to fight for equality for all Americans.

When Hamas launches thousands of rockets into Israel, we protect our people at all costs. And, we, the David people are driven by moral courage to build mobile hospitals to treat the wounded Hamas terrorists.

When the United Nations passes another unwarranted resolution, we mobilize and lobby our elected officials to seek the necessary changes. And, when humanitarian crises occur, we the David people, support the UN, as Israel did as first responders during the Haitian earthquake.

Temple Solel, anti-Semitism will not defeat us. We will not give anti-Semitism a moral victory over us, over our children here, over our brothers and sisters in Europe and in Israel, and over all Jews from any movement in the world. Anti-Semitism will not dissuade us from pursuing our historic mission to heal and redeem the brokenness of our world, from being *l’or goyim* – a light to the nations. Anti-Semitism will not dissuade us from celebrating the joys of our Judaism, our synagogue, our Jewish community centers, our Jewish camps, our Jewish learning and spirituality, and especially the love of our Jewish State.

When we leave this sacred space, I urge us to gather up our moral courage, our Judaism, for ourselves, and for our children. When the BDS movement attempts to assail us, their anti-Semitic agenda will never dissuade us from our mission to the world. We will teach our college students to challenge BDS on campus through proper debate and action. We will support our college students, speaking to university officials directly. We will lobby elected officials. We will not allow the UC Board of Regents to remain silent. And, we will continue to feed the poor, heal the sick, and comfort the mourner. We show up for humanity. We

¹² Melissa Raphael, “Signals of Redemption,” *The Female Face of God in Auschwitz: A Jewish Feminist Theology of the Holocaust* (Routledge: London and New York, 2003), 142.

have always done this. We have always used our Judaism as the heart of our moral courage for us and for the world.

As we welcome 5776, we know that we will face our goliaths who challenge us to combat - in particular, the anti-Semitic goliath. But, we are the underdog who continually takes on a much stronger adversary. And, sometimes, it even feels that we cannot defeat these goliaths.

Yet, we never capitulate. For, we are the heirs to a young boy who held fast against the odds. David's courage inspires us to muster not only our physical courage when it is called for, but, most importantly, our moral courage. For it is our moral courage that reminds us of who we are and our potential as Jews. It is our moral courage that strengthens us, no matter what adversity we face, to pursue our mission to repair this world. Our Temple Solel family and the Jewish people can endure and rise above any goliath who stands in our way.

Together, with our teamwork, together with our Judaism, and together, with our moral courage, we will defy these odds. We always have. This is our resistance. This is our response. We are ready to go. As the Prophetic Book of Joshua charges us on this Jewish New Year, "Adonai hereby commands you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for Adonai your God is with you wherever you go." No goliath stands in our way. We are the David people.