

בס"ד  
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**Lessons from the Life of John McCain:**  
*A Life of Striving and Service*

Today, as we speak, Senator John S. McCain III is being memorialized in the American version of a state funeral, and tomorrow, in a private ceremony, he will be laid to rest in the burial grounds in the Naval Academy, as he said, 'next to his best friend, Chuck Larson, overlooking the Severn River, back where where it all began'.

Much has been said since his passing one week ago, but I thought it was entirely fitting that we might take a few brief moments together this morning to reflect on the lessons which this man's life holds for us. As our Sages taught us, the wise man is the one who learns from every man, and, surely, there is no man who does not have his hour, but, it would appear that Senator McCain's life can teach us more than most.

Shabbat is no time for eulogies, of course, but, especially in this season of introspection and reflection, as we will begin the Selichot this very evening, some consideration of this American hero's life seems appropriate.

I do not use the word hero lightly, though, of course, in our society, the title is bestowed rather lightly. Yet, there is great heroism, contrary to a grotesque comment made a few years ago, in merely surviving years of mental, emotional, and physical torture. Our moral code begins with the very notion of the sanctity of life, **ובחרת בחיים**, and, when so many would prefer to simply die, and this is something with which Captain McCain himself struggled, twice attempting to take his own life, his ultimate choice to carry on, **ובחרת בחיים**, his ability to persevere through unspeakable acts of cruelty is, in every sense, heroic.

Yet, as the Torah teaches, us, and we read it again this morning, ארור מטה משפט גר יתום ואלמנה, that we must show compassion to those who are most vulnerable, based on our own experience of historical suffering, כי גרים הייתם בארץ מצרים, when Captain McCain became Senator McCain, he became the most authoritative voice which spoke out against forms of torture which were being employed in the detention center in Guantanamo Bay. While others, who did not have his personal experience, would often speak in cavalier terms about what transpired, the Senator knew about that which he felt so strongly. It was not a matter of leniency in national security, few in our generation took these issues as seriously as Senator McCain, but a matter of stringency concerning certain inviolable moral standards that a nation which is founded upon the ideal of human beings being endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights simply could not disregard.

Without a doubt, however, the greatest demonstration of heroism which then Captain McCain demonstrated was refusing an offer for early release once his captors discovered his family connections, as a son and grandson of US Admirals. It was not merely that McCain would not accept better treatment than other prisoners on account of his family connections, but that he received, after refusing release, far worse treatment, in terms of torture and abuse. Yet, he knew how fragile other pilots held in captivity were, and what early release for him might mean for them. In these situations, hope is often the dividing line between life and death, and he could not demoralize these men. Who could have judged him had he come home early? We dare not. But, who could be unmoved by his decision to remain.

Natan Sharansky wrote very movingly this past week about precisely this point, and his own decision not to accept early release for “medical reasons” from the Gulag, so as not to demoralize other refuseniks with far lower international profiles. This was a bond which he and McCain shared.

For us, who have been blessed not to spend five years in the Hanoi Hilton, or who are not members of the United States Senate, there is still much to be gained. McCain, and he was the first to say it, was far from a perfect man. And, during this season of reflection, we should be inspired by the notion of imperfect heroism. Try as we might, it is likely, if not inevitable, that we will not achieve spiritual and moral perfection by the end of this High Holiday season, which begins tonight. Yet, I think we can all aspire to imperfect heroism, of overcoming some of our greatest challenges and limitations, much as McCain did.

When his first marriage failed, he took full responsibility, and became a better man. When he acted with less than perfect integrity in the Keating Five scandal, he devoted himself to ethics, to campaign finance reform, and became a better public servant. When he failed to condemn the flying of the Confederate flag in the South Carolina Capitol for political reasons, he famously apologized, and, in 2008, in the heat of a Presidential election, corrected a bigoted woman who called then Senator

Obama an Arab, noting that his opponent was a fine American and family man with whom he simply had his disagreements. He made mistakes, but he corrected them. He became a better person.

For a person who lived a public life, he had a profound sense of the sanctity of that which was private. He and his wife adopted an orphaned child from Bangladesh, but did not speak of it, even when his very adoption of that child became the subject of vicious racist smears in the 2000 Republican Presidential primary. I remember reading an article dating back to that campaign, which noted that John McCain would not allow reporters to enter a room where he was meeting families of soldiers who had fallen in combat. Though surely the press would have been positive, some things, for John McCain, were too sacred to be exposed.

Finally, he leaves a legacy of service. This, too, must call to us. In this week's parshah we read, אָרוּר אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִקְיָם אֶת דְּבַר יְהוָה לַעֲשׂוֹת אוֹתָם, 'cursed is the one who does not uphold the words of the Torah, to fulfill them'. Ramban understood the term יִקְיָם, to uphold, to refer to an individual in a position to make a difference for the community, to strengthen Torah in the community, who does not do his or her share of service.

Now is a wonderful time to consider how in the coming year we might all dedicate ourselves, to a greater degree, towards community service. Our synagogue functions on the day to day level thanks to the volunteerism of our welcoming committee, security committee, ritual committee, youth committee, and the unsurpassed devotion of our officers, But, we need help. We need you, and your talents. We need your sense of service. Family must always come first, but that does mean that there is no second.

And, as Senator McCain said in his parting words to the American people, it is precisely our service, our giving to others, from which we grow the most. "Our identities and sense of worth are not circumscribed but enlarged by serving good causes bigger than ourselves." As our Sages taught us, for all those who engage in the community's work, the merits of their ancestors should assist them, and their righteousness is eternal.

Senator McCain loved Hemingway. So now, like the Old Man and Sea, he drifts off now, disappearing over the horizon. Not on an Aircraft Carrier or a Battleship, like those commanded by his father and his grandfather, but, as I imagine it, in a small, silent boat, which gently leaves in its wake slow moving circles of water, ripples which bring us the message of our shared humanity, of failing but striving to be better, of serving others, of knowing the face of the evil which does exist in this small planet of ours, but always appreciating the beautiful people and things which are all around us, of never despairing of suffering, and looking forward, always looking forward, to better days ahead.

