Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5776/2015

Rabbi Edward Elkin, First Narayever Congregation

Courage

Fifty years ago, in the year 1965, two events took place which have had an enormous impact on our understanding of what it means to be Jewish to this day. Although I was too young to remember either event at the time it happened, I heard about them so much as a child and young adult that I sometimes felt as if I did remember them personally. They are both events that took place south of the border -- you'll forgive me I think, because I believe the issues they raise apply to us here in Canada just as much as they do there.

In one of these events, a famous Jewish pitcher refused to take the mound on the first day of the World Series because it fell on Yom Kippur. In the other, a well-known rabbi locked arms with Rev. Martin Luther King in the civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery. As I was growing up in the 60's and 70's, these two moments in Jewish history were often recalled as examples of extraordinary courage. Jewish courage. On this Rosh Hashanah, I'd like to reflect on the meaning of these two seminal events, and what they teach us about the meaning of Jewish courage fifty years later.

Sandy Koufax was at the time arguably the best pitcher in baseball. He wasn't a particularly religious man and later reflected that he had no idea that his decision to skip his turn on the pitching rotation because it fell on Yom Kippur would turn him into a cultural touchstone for the Jewish people in America. Yet at a White House dinner in honour of Jewish Heritage Month in 2010, at which were present prominent rabbis, two justices of the Supreme Court, major Jewish entrepreneurs, and Jewish members of the House and Senate – the biggest cheer was reserved for Sandy Koufax. What was there about the Sandy Koufax moment that touched so many Jews? In the context of 1965, something about his decision reflected a determination that while Jews are prepared to happily assimilate into the wider culture in many ways, baseball being the symbolic epitome of that wider culture, there is a line beyond which we cannot step, a place where – even though we have the option to become an invisible part of the wider society, our commitment to our family and our heritage means that we will choose not to do so. And we will publicly, visibly, draw that line – even at a cost to our career, even at the cost of disapproval or incomprehension on the part of our neighbours, even at the cost of feeling anxiety that we will be perceived as somehow less than fully patriotic.

Of course, the upshot was that it didn’t turn out to be such a sacrifice after all. Koufax ended up pitching in three other games in the series for the Los Angeles Dodgers, winning two of them including the series clincher seventh game, and there was no significant negative fallout on his career or public image. Most of us are similarly blessed – the fact that we’re here on a Monday morning may have entailed some rearranging of other parts of our lives, but for most of us I imagine nothing too serious. We are grateful to live in a society where the sacrifice required to maintain our Jewish identity is not the sacrifice of our lives, and it’s not the sacrifice of exile – both sacrifices previous generations of committed Jews had to endure. Nevertheless, Koufax’s decision became famous as an example of Jewish courage. Not that Koufax himself would have used this language, but it was, in a certain sense, an act of *kiddush hashem* – because of who he was, his decision glorified God’s name and the covenant between God and the Jewish people both among the Jews themselves and in the wider world. It exemplified the notion that Jewish observance was actually something important, something significant enough to merit inconveniencing oneself or others for, something worth taking risks for. He could have pitched that day and in so doing remained invisible as a Jew and incidentally probably remembered by very few outside the circle of hard-core baseball aficionados; instead, he declared who he was, and became a Jewish hero.

(It seemed auspicious to use a baseball example this year because of the Blue Jays amazing end-of-season run. If I can depart from any kind of normative Jewish theology for a minute, I hope it sends them good luck!)

My second example from 1965 is very different. The other moment of courage that made a huge impact on Jewish self-understanding both then, and in the decades since, is represented by an iconic photo. Perhaps you’ve seen it, and can picture it in your mind’s eye. It was on the civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery, and there, in the front row with Martin Luther King was a man with unruly white hair, a white beard, wearing a kippah. Who was that man, and how did he come to be in Selma that day? In many ways, the cause of African Americans suffering under Jim Crow could not have been farther from his experience. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was born in 1907 into a rabbinical family in Warsaw, received a traditional yeshiva education, and ultimately earned his doctorate from the University of Berlin and ordination from the liberal rabbinical seminary there. In 1938, he was arrested by the Gestapo and deported back to Poland, where he taught Torah and Jewish philosophy. Six weeks before the Germans invaded Poland, he left for London and ultimately came to the US with a visa arranged by the president of the Hebrew Union College. His mother and sisters were all murdered by the Nazis. After all the upheaval and loss he experienced, we would have excused him if he had settled into a life of quiet scholarship in the academy, publishing books on philosophy and giving lectures. Instead, there he was on the front lines of the most important struggle his newly adopted homeland faced.

Although 50 years later, the rightness of the civil rights cause seems obvious to us, in 1965 marching with Martin Luther King was anything but obvious. Many of the rabbis and other Jews who joined the civil rights movement were arrested, jailed and sometimes beaten, usually protected by the color of their skin from the worst physical dangers, but nonetheless threatened on a daily basis. Jews who took part in these efforts to assure blacks the right to vote also took considerable push-back from fellow Jews who felt that Jewish activism was better directed at issues of specifically Jewish, not general, concern. Some Shul members were themselves involved in racist real-estate practices through redlining and blockbusting. Some congregations threatened to fire their rabbis who got involved in the cause. Local shuls pleaded with national organizations to leave issues of integration and civil rights to local communities. And most Jews, segregationist or integrationist, simply did nothing. So in that context, for Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel to march in the front row, visibly Jewish, right there with MLK, was an extraordinarily courageous act. Having come from a family that was very liberal politically (that's small "l" in the US context), when I saw that photo years later, it came to represent to me and so many others what the true essence of Judaism was, or at least could be. Standing up for what is right no matter what the cost. Advocating for justice for the oppressed in the face of determined opposition both from within and from outside the Jewish community. Plenty of Jews were involved in these protests around civil rights and also Vietnam – what made Heschel's activism so extraordinary was that it was not just political, it was religious: Heschel was visibly Jewish, and publicly linked his activism with his Jewish identity and values -- when asked later about what it felt like to be on the Selma march, Heschel famously replied, "I felt like my legs were praying." He taught and modeled that Judaism was about more than just reciting words from a book and eating ethnic foods. His was another extraordinary act of kiddush hashem in that turbulent era.

Sandy Koufax and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. Two Jewish heros from 1965 who couldn't have been more different from each other, and yet who – looked at together from the vantage point of 50 years later, inspire us with their *gevurah*, with the strength and courage they displayed at key turning point moments for Jewish self-understanding in this corner of the Diaspora.

Here's my question for us this Rosh Hashanah: what does Jewish courage consist of in 2015? Our issues are related to the ones exemplified by Koufax and Heschel, but our context is so very different five decades later. If the

Koufax moment exemplified the conflict between the claims of our Jewish heritage on the one hand, and the claims of the wider society on the other, we certainly still face that conflict. We are still a tiny minority living in a society that often doesn't "get" us, and we ourselves often don't really understand what being Jewish means, or why we make the decisions and compromises and sacrifices that we do, for ourselves and our kids, in order to maintain and perpetuate our identity. That's all the same. But Sandy Koufax was raised in Brooklyn in an immigrant culture; 50 years on, most of us are 2,3,4 generations further removed from the old country and its traditional ways – and as the recent Pew Study confirms, we're less observant of ritual and even more embedded than ever in the wider society around us. While a growing acceptance of multiculturalism may have made it easier for minority groups to assert their difference in society, paradoxically perhaps, fewer of us than ever are motivated to do so.

The Heschel moment exemplified the willingness of Jews to engage, as Jews, with the most serious issues facing the wider society, and not just engage but take a very clear and strong and visible position on one side of a very controversial and polarized societal problem. One of Heschel's most famous books is entitled The Prophets, and the ancient prophets of Israel were clearly his heroes. They were so sure they knew what was right, and so did he, and history has borne out his position and his activism on civil rights, on Vietnam, and also on Soviet Jewry. But the answers to today's issues feel so much more complex. There are so many: climate change and the whole host of environmental issues; migration and refugees, which have been so much on our minds over the last couple of weeks; terrorism, security and civil liberties; nuclear arms proliferation in Iran and elsewhere; the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; ever-widening income inequality, women's rights; LGBT rights, physician-assisted dying – and so many more. Even race relations was not solved by the protests of 1965 and the ensuing civil rights legislation – as we saw this past year in Ferguson, in Baltimore, and in the controversy over carding right here in our own city.

What would the prophets say about these issues? To what issues would they apply their thundering rhetorical skills today? In 2015, what march would Heschel be on? I'm picturing him on a march against climate change, but am finding it harder to discern what specific remedies he'd be advocating for. Would he be marching for cap-and-trade? Closing down the oil sands? I don't know. I'm certain he would be advocating for more generous refugee policies, especially since he himself had been a refugee. But could he help us figure out, in a world with more than 20 million refugees in 2015, how many would be our reasonable share, how best to integrate them into our society, and how we can best address the causes that are leading so many people around the world to flee their homes and seek asylum elsewhere? And what measures exactly would he recommend to advance the cause of disadvantaged people who are already here, especially the First Nations people in this country, who lag other population groups by virtually every social indicator? In the area of civil liberties, would he be marching against the C-51 anti-terrorism bill and if so, where would he draw the line to keep us both safe, and free? Would he be for the Iran nuclear deal? Against the Iran deal? For a Palestinian state, and if so along what borders, and what would he say about arrangements in Jerusalem and about the thorny problem of Palestinian refugees? Both the biblical prophets and more recent ones like Heschel tend to be better at laying out broad principles than delving into specific policies, and on all these issues the specifics really matter. Speaking truth to power is a great slogan, but in order to apply it, first we have to decide, what exactly is our truth? Courage is a great attribute to aspire toward, but as we welcome 5776, we need to ask ourselves what courage consists of in our time.

I'd like to suggest two characteristics of courage that I think we can learn both from Koufax and Heschel that are still applicable in our time, characteristics that we can learn from, characteristics that we can judge ourselves against, as we enter this period of *heshbon hanefesh* on our Jewish calendar.[1]

The first is optimism. It is so easy in our day and age to be negative, to be pessimistic, to be cynical. Of course hopeless resignation wasn't invented in our time. Even in the days of the Bible, Kohelet said repeatedly אין חדש תחת השמש, there is nothing new under the sun. Nothing ever changes. If you think you're making a difference, you're deluding yourself. But that was a provocative minority point of view in the context of the Bible. Most of the Bible, and certainly rabbinic tradition, is predicated on the possibility of change. The primary biblical story on which optimism is based is the Exodus from Egypt. Slaves don't always have to be slaves. There is no inevitability in our lives. God can redeem us, or in the evolving Jewish consciousness as reflected in rabbinic texts, we ourselves can act to bring about our own redemption. The whole system of teshuvah which occupies us so much at this time of the Jewish year is predicated on the possibility that we can change, and that our lives can change, for the better.

There are always ample grounds for pessimism both in regard to the possibility of change in the world, and in regard to the possibility of change in ourselves. Our people may have gone free from Egypt 3,000 years ago, but still so many others yet await their moment of redemption, and so many lives are broken. Which is why it is far more courageous to optimistically assert that society can be better than it is, that we can be better than we've been, that there is hope. Such an assertion may make one vulnerable to accusations of naiveté, and that's why optimism is both a sign of, and a necessary ingredient for, moral courage. Reality as we see it has to be taken into account, but it does not have to define us or defeat us. Koufax's stance was optimistic in that it reflected a belief that a mere 20 years after the Shoah our society would allow a person to be both a part of it, and also be fully Jewish, and that the world outside is not all a bunch of anti-Semites waiting to pounce. Heschel's stance was optimistic, in that it reflected a belief that though racism had been entrenched in society for centuries, non-violent action could make a difference for the better. Fifty years later, in an election year here in Canada, around what issues can we overcome the tendency to negativity and nihilism, and courageously take an optimistic stand, a stand of faith, that society can be better? Around what issues in our own personal lives can we find the courage to do the work of teshuvah, even if we feel it hasn't "worked" before, at least not in the sense of leading to the change we think we want to see in ourselves?

---

[1] Prof. Yehuda Kurtzer, RLI Summer 2015, Lecture on *Moral Courage*.

The second attribute of courage that I'd like to put forward this morning is the willingness to take risks. In Israel, young people are asked to join the Jewish army and the risks involved in defending the country are apparent to all. In the North American Diaspora, the risks we are asked to take for the sake of our Jewish identity are perhaps less obvious, but they are also critically important – and are reflected once again in the stories of Koufax and Heschel. Each in his own way risked his career and his reputation by doing what he did. So one question we can ask about risk is, what are we willing to risk for our own Jewish affiliation and faith? How visible and public are we prepared to be in the name of who we are and what we believe? But the issue of risk goes even bigger than that, and can be very complex. Those three guys on the train in France who took down the terrorist last month showed great courage and became heroes. But we know that it could just as easily gone another way and they'd be dead now. Sometimes when we take risks it doesn't work out – otherwise it wouldn't be a risk. Yet we can't live a risk-free life. Last week I saw a documentary called *Meru* about three mountain climbers who were the first to reach the summit of a particular peak in the Himalayas that's considerably harder to climb than Everest. What I found fascinating in watching the story of these guys is that even within a sport that the rest of us would consider fantastically stupidly dangerous, in which you ascend hundreds of meters of sheer vertical cliffs in freezing temperatures and snowstorms with a constant risk of avalanche and oxygen deprivation, even within that world, there is a constant calibration of risk – and some things are considered just too dangerous. Most of us wouldn't take on the risks that these mountain climbers did, but we also know from experience that risk can't be avoided or eliminated altogether, as much as some of us might fantasize that it can be. Whether it's in sport or in social activism, or in our professional lives or in our studies or in our relationships or in our own personal struggles and growth, we need to constantly measure how much risk is appropriate – where we're being too cautious and that excessive caution is getting in the way of achieving our goals, and where we're being foolhardy, and taking chances that aren't helping us, but rather hurting ourselves and others. That process of discernment takes a great deal of experience and wisdom, but is unavoidable, especially if we want to live lives of courage.

I have focused in this sermon on the examples of two famous men to illustrate the attribute of courage, and there is a great deal that we can learn from the courageous acts of very public people. But courage is of course not just for famous people. Courage is found all around us. Courage is found everywhere a person suffering from a debilitating physical or mental handicap or illness finds a way to meet the challenges of the new day with hope. Courage is also found in places where people reach a point of acceptance, and let go of the struggle. Courage is found among the caregivers who sacrifice so much for those they love. Courage is also found among those caregivers who establish boundaries, who sometimes say "no" for the sake of preserving their own health and sanity. Courage is found everywhere people in a difficult marriage persevere and keep trying to address their problems despite all the pain they suffer, and inflict. Courage is also found where people with hearts that are broken realize that the rut they're in is no longer sustainable, and that they have to take action to pull themselves out of it. Courage is found everywhere individuals, and communities, make hard decisions that they think, but don't know for sure, help them better live up to the highest ideals and goals they have for themselves. Courage is found everywhere people at all income levels, or resources of time and skill, give of themselves to others in need, to a cause they believe in, or to the community. Courage is found everywhere people overcome the prevailing tone of mocking negativity and cynicism, and try to make themselves and the world better, in ways both large and small.

We can find examples of courage on protest marches, at the ballpark, on the field of battle, or in the Himalayas. But we don't need to go to those places to find it. There is so much gevurah in this room right now – in the people all around you, and in yourself. These holidays are a time for us to consider where in the last year we've been courageous, where we've managed to combine the qualities of optimism and a willingness to take risks to attain a goal we consider important. These days are also a time to reflect on where we've failed and been less courageous than we could have been -- too pessimistic, too self-centered, too cautious, too fearful to take on the challenges that life has presented to us. We can't always be courageous, I know that. Fear has its place in the human experience too. But my goal with these remarks is to ask you to consider what courage is in our time, and perhaps find a more expansive definition than is conventionally offered, so that you can find it, and nurture it, in yourself.

I want to conclude with a final story about courage, involving one of my own heroes, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev. He was born in Galicia in 1740, and he was renowned for his fierce love for the people of Israel and for his willingness to rise up in their defense, against no less a Judge than God Himself. Once on Kol Nidre night, he noticed a man whose eyes were full of tears. "Why are you crying," Levi Yitzhak asked him. "I was a pious man and well-to-do," the man replied. My wife was hospitable and devout. And suddenly God intervened and turned me into a heap of rubble. I lost my wife, my home. And here I am, desperate and destitute, with six children on my arms. I don't know how to pray anymore. All I can do is weep." The Rebbe asked if the man was ready to forgive God for everything that had happened to him. "Today is Yom Kippur, I must forgive" the man replied. At which point Levi Yitzhak turned to Heaven and roared, "You too, Master of the Universe, must forgive this man, and indeed all of Am Yisrael. We will give You our sins and in return, You will grant us Your pardon. And by the way, You come out ahead. Without our sins, what would You do with Your pardon?"

For a man of deep faith, nothing could be more courageous than this brazen challenge to God, this extraordinary chutzpah. Building on the legacy of Abraham at Sodom and Gomorrah, and Job, who refused to accept pious platitudes as the explanation for his suffering, Levi Yitzhak's example demonstrates that Judaism not only exhorts us to be courageous, it also helps us to achieve that elusive quality by showing us that we can safely challenge no less than God Himself when we feel we must.

May we be inspired in the year ahead by the spiritual courage of Levi Yitzhak, by the cultural and political courage of Koufax and Heschel, and by the simple yet profound acts of courage we see and experience all around us every day. As you look ahead to your Rosh Hashanah lunch that awaits you, consider discussing with others, or asking yourself, what is the meaning of Jewish courage in the year 5776? Who is someone who is a Jewish model of courage for you, and what is it that makes them so? In what parts of your life do you think you've been courageous in the last year, and in what aspects of your life do you aspire to more courage in the new year?

Kaveh el Hashem. Hazak va-ya-ametz libekha. *Ve-kaveh el Hashem.* Psalm 27 that is read every day for this whole period of the Jewish year beginning with the first of Elul, concludes: “Hope in the Lord, be strong and of good courage, and hope in the Lord.” Amen.