

**The Courage to Be**  
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Many students, and perhaps even more so their parents, are looking forward with some desperation to the end of finals season and the real beginning of summer. The thought of finals often reminds me of the story about a particularly difficult exam in which the candidates had three hours to answer the question ‘What is courage?’ Most students spent three hours writing erudite essays full of references to literature, philosophy and the arts. But the highest grade for the exam went to a student who wrote only two words: ‘This is.’

How would you answer the question, ‘What is courage?’ It seems to me that this week’s entire Torah reading can be understood as meditation on precisely that theme.

The Israelites are on the verge of entry into the Promised Land. They decide send to spies to scout out the land, its resources and the military capacity of its inhabitants, and then to return to help guide the people in the battles to come. Twelve spies were chosen; one from each tribe. The verse describes them as **אֲנָשִׁים כֻּלָּם**-literally, ‘they were all men.’ Now it so happens that they were male, but the word **אֲנָשִׁים** connotes further that these were people of special virtue and, particularly, that they were chosen for their courage. According to Rashbam, the spies were meant to be **גיבורים שאינם יראים**, courageous people who were not fearful. This mission was clearly dangerous; only people of marked courage, were able to carry out the task. And yet, the report they brought back was defeatist and despairing. The courage for which they had been chosen failed them.

But even as it illustrates this lack of courage, the parsha holds important lessons about where courage can be found, why it is important, and how it can be enhanced. In fact, the parsha indicates that there are three kinds of courage, each of which deserves investigation: The courage to act, the courage to speak out, and the courage to be.

The courage to act is the strength to carry out a noble goal even at great personal risk. Many of us know the story of Major Roi Klein of the Golani brigade. In an act that epitomizes the highest level of the courage to act, during the Lebanon War in 2006, he threw himself on a grenade to save the lives of the men in his unit. Similarly, servicemen and women, firefighters and police officers who daily risk their lives for the protection of others, are all in possession of courage to act. This courage is needed because in moments of danger, people feel fear. To have courage is to feel this fear, and to act in spite of it.

It was in a call for this kind of courage that Moshe told the spies - **וְהִתְחַזְקוּתָם** - strengthen yourselves; be courageous in this difficult task of spying on a strong enemy, and inspiring the rest of the people in advance of the battles to come. But Moshe’s admonition did not help. Although they completed their mission, the spies displayed the opposite of courage to the people. ‘We were like grasshoppers in their eyes’, they tell the people. ‘We will not

be able to go up into the land.' This is an archetypal lack of the courage to act, the failure to overcome personal risk even for the highest goals.

The second kind of courage, the courage to speak out, is slightly different. It, too, is the strength to endure personal risk for a noble cause. But it arises in circumstances where the nobility of the cause is not recognized by most people. The added distinction of this kind of courage lies in its aspect of protest, of going against the grain. A timely example is that of the two New York Jews Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, who, this month 46 years ago, put themselves at risk in service of the Civil Rights Movement and were murdered, together with James Chaney of Mississippi, by the Ku Klux Klan.

This courage to speak out characterized the most revered leaders of our people. When Moshe, as a son of Pharaoh's household, saw an Egyptian task-master beating an Israelite slave, he intervened in defense of the defenseless. The verse reads that וַיֵּרָא כִּי אֵין אִישׁ. He saw that there was no *ish*, no person. Here, as in our parsha, the word *ish* carries connotations of courage. For Moses was not simply checking that nobody would see his intervention, he was, rather, remarking that there was no person of virtue, of courage; nobody else who would stand up against the oppressor. Centuries later, this sentiment was canonized by Hillel - ובמקום שאין אנשים, השתדל להיות איש - Where there are no אנשים, where nobody else is doing the right thing, have the courage to speak out.

This second kind of courage is also found in our parsha. When the spies had delivered their report the people wailed in despair. At that moment, Calev spoke up:

וַיִּהְיֶה כָּלֵב אֶת-הָעָם - Calev silenced the people. Picture the scene: The text tells us that the angry mob considered stoning Yehoshua and Calev, the dissenting spies, to death. The Midrash imagines that Yehoshua had already been shouted down. At great personal risk, Calev tried a new strategy to persuade the people to change their ways. וַיִּהְיֶה כָּלֵב אֶת-הָעָם: Calev silenced the people, according to the midrash, by pretending to join their revolt: 'Listen to what I have to say about Moses', he shouted. They sat in silence, expecting him to join their condemnation, but instead he praised Moses who had led them unflinchingly to that point and urged the people to continue to follow him into the land.

This courage to speak out is still required by all of us today: Defending Israel on university campuses and in the press, campaigning about famine and disease in the face of apathy, standing up to discrimination in the workplace or in our communities. We should all be animated by the spirit of Moshe and Calev.

There is also a third kind of courage, in the words of the great 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian Paul Tillich, 'the courage to be.' This is courage not in the face of a dangerous external enemy, but in the face of an internal obstacle that can be just as fearsome. It is the courage to hold onto meaning in the face of doubt.

After the spies delivered their report of the land, the people despaired. The whole reason for their rescue from Egypt, the culmination of God's 400 year-old promise to Abraham, was to enter the land of Israel. But now this goal, the motivation for their every step, seemed unattainable. As a result they despaired of their very existence:

בַּמִּדְבָּר הַזֶּה לוֹ-מָתְנוּ, they cried – ‘if only we had died in this desert’. And this despair had such devastating power that it became self-fulfilling. The very generation that declared ‘if only we had died in the desert’ did just that. Only the next generation would reach the Promised Land.

The courage to be is the alternative to such despair. It is the courage required by a recently bereaved spouse sitting alone in an empty apartment and wondering how it will be possible to go on with their sense of purpose taken away. It is the courage required by someone suffering from chronic illness, and the people who care about them. It is the courage required by someone suffering from depression, searching each morning for a reason to get out of bed.

And it is also the courage demanded of each of us, even in the most normal of circumstances. How many of us, in a quiet moment, have been struck by a sudden doubt about the meaning that underpins our lives, and a fear that, like the Israelites in the desert, the goals we had set for ourselves in our youth may not in the end be realized. It is at moments like these that the courage to be is required.

A great example of this came up in the recent Oscar-winning movie *The Hurt Locker*, in which we see the main protagonist, a soldier whose job is to defuse bombs in Iraq, undertakes one act after another of the most incredible heroism, and he does so with an uncanny calm. But when he returns to his wife and child in America, and goes about the banalities of grocery shopping; when he is robbed of the sense of urgency and necessity of his life in Iraq and is returned to a situation in which meaning is harder to find; where he has the quiet moments in which he can ask himself ‘is this all there is?’, he is unable to cope. This master of the courage to act is crippled by the anxiety of doubt; he struggles to find the courage to be.

What is the source the courage to be? The answer is also in our parsha. It is the lesson that the generation of the spies would spend 40 years learning. In the sections immediately following the story of the spies, God commands the people in mitzvot that would only apply inside the land. *כִּי תָבֹאוּ, אֶל-אֶרֶץ מוֹשְׁבֵי תִיְכֻם*. - When you reach the land, this is what you will do. Just after God has told the Israelites they will not enter the land, he gives them instructions on what to do when they arrive. And God does not say ‘When your children reach the land’, but ‘when you reach the land.’ This juxtaposition contains a profound lesson: It may not be you who reaches the land, but you can still orient your lives around it. Even when we come to doubt what we thought were our goals, even when we encounter a fissure in the foundation of meaning, all is not lost. There is still something greater than us; there are still values of ultimate concern to which we can, to which we must, dedicate ourselves. The Torah does not make light of the anxiety of doubt, but it calls upon us to persevere anyway. It exhorts us to have the courage to be; to commit ourselves to life, no matter what.

So three kinds of courage – the courage to act, the courage to speak out and the courage to be – are all illustrated in our parsha. Ultimately, all of these kinds of courage share a common foundation. That is, the recognition of something beyond ourselves, the

commitment to a meaning that transcends our instinct for personal safety, our craving for societal approval, and the challenge of our personal doubts. The real foundation of courage is the ability to replace לִי-מָתְנִי – ‘if only we had died’ - with כִּי תֵבֵאוּ - ‘when you arrive.’ For us, as Jews and as human beings, ‘What is courage’ is not a question on an exam paper. It is a question posed by life itself. And it is when we focus on the Promised Land, even if we might never see it ourselves, that we will not only know the answer; we will live it.