

On Heroes and Hope

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When Miriam died in the wilderness, the people were without water. Lost in the desert, without one of their righteous leaders to guide them. They had to find a way to exist without her enthusiastic singing, her exuberant dancing, and most importantly, the miraculous well that followed her throughout the journey and was a life source to the Israelites. Miriam's people could not see a way to move forward without her. They gathered against Moses and Aaron, clamoring for their thirst to be quenched. Their heroine was dead, their future in doubt, and the well had disappeared into the dry sand.

And we, their heirs, how do we move forward when our heroes die?

In the last year, we have lost so many heroes. Civil Rights icons Congressman Elijah Cummings, Reverend C. T. Vivian, and the conscience of Congress, Congressman John Lewis. LGBTQ+ activist Larry Kramer, who shed light on the AIDS crisis when few others would. And of course, the wound that is freshest and provides a sharp, cutting pain, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. How do we continue the fight

when these leaders, these luminaries, are no more? How do we move forward when the well seems to have dried up and we are left parched in the wilderness?

In myself, I sense fear and weariness. I feel lost in the desert. I was comforted knowing that these *gedolei ha-dor* - these giants of their generation were holding this country together as it strained at its seams, and now I question who will be able to do so. The path forward is unknown, it is frightening. And yet, I know that American democracy, that the values I hold dear, did not die with them. I know that there will be others who rise to fight their fights, and that not all hope is lost. Right now, though, it is so difficult to see that possibility when our heroes have died.

But let us examine how these modern-day heroes rose to this lofty state in our minds. These individuals became heroes, champions, and icons not by one swift and bold act, but through tireless work. They were tenacious, forging a long and difficult path through briars and brambles. It was not enough for them to find a cause that they cared about deeply, they then made the choice - again and again - to work their entire lives for justice. For each one of these heroes, it took time for them to bring their dreams to fruition, and all of them still left this world with much of that work unfinished.

John Lewis recounted the slow nature of change that came about by his own work, stating, “We used to say struggling is not a struggle that lasts for a few days, a few weeks, a few years. It is a struggle of a lifetime.”¹

Similarly, in her eloquent eulogy for Justice Ginsburg, Rabbi Lauren Holtzblatt remarked: “Justice did not arrive like a lightning bolt, but rather through dogged persistence all the days of her life. “Real change,” [Justice Ginsburg] said, “enduring change happens one step at a time.”...Pursuing justice took resilience, persistence, a commitment to never stop.”²

These great humans became great because they had the strength and drive to work day after day in the pursuit of justice. Even in those moments of failure, they forged ahead through the thickets, step by strenuous step.

They held fast to their hope, especially when faced with nay-sayers and tremendous obstacles. When I say hope, I don’t mean an oblivious and baseless belief that it will all work out in the end. When I say hope, I mean the hope that Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks wrote about. He argued, “Optimism is the belief that things will get better.

¹ <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/article/john-lewis-good-trouble-interview.html>

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7RuByeYePNk>

Hope is the belief that, if we work hard enough, we can make things better. Between them lies all the difference in the world. Optimism is a passive virtue, hope an active one. It needs no courage, only a certain naiveté, to be an optimist. It needs a great deal of courage to have hope. The prophets of Israel were not optimists. When everyone else felt secure, they saw the coming catastrophe. But every one of them was an agent of hope.”³

This is the prophetic courage that kept our heroes going and defined their lives. It is the very same courage that we must have in the wake of their deaths. When we look ahead, we do not know for a fact that we will make it to the Promised Land. However, we must have faith in the possibility. We must have the type of hope that will encourage us to keep moving toward that goal, even though it now feels distant.

Rebecca Solnit, the author of *Hope in the Dark* wrote, “Hope locates itself in the premises that we don’t know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty is room to act... Optimists think it will all be fine without our involvement; pessimists adopt the opposite position; both excuse themselves from acting.”⁴ Our current uncertainty can be paralyzing and it would be logical for

³ <https://rabbisacks.org/credo-optimism-is-all-very-well-but-it-takes-courage-to-hope/>

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jul/15/rebecca-solnit-hope-in-the-dark-new-essay-embrace-unknown>

pessimism to set up shop in our hearts when we think only about what we have lost with these deaths. However, with these heroic legacies as our guide, we can - we must - find the hope that is necessary in order to take the active role of fixing this reality. We must not allow despair to take over, we will not allow it to prevail and darken our souls.

How do we move forward when our heroes die? When the champions of our causes, the ones who hoped and acted and built on our behalf can build no more, what do we do? We double down on hope. When the pandemic seems unending and the isolation draining, we hope. When those who seek to undo our way of life and the progress we have made hold the cards, we do not despair. We find the space in which to act with hope. When the unjust systems in place seem set in stone and immovable, we find the weak spot upon which to push and nudge our world toward repair. The work may be slow, at times imperceptible, but eternally, the Jew hopes. We protect the *tikva*, that hope, and we let it inspire us, as our people has done ever since their 40 year journey in the wilderness.

Miriam, Aaron, and Moses died, and yet, the Israelites reached the Promised Land. Our heroes have died, and we, too, will arrive one day. Not tomorrow, and not without heartache and sweat, but we will get there.

In his poem, *Ein Yahav*, Yehuda Amichai, Israel's former poet laureate, reflects on seeing a moshav that grew date palms in the Arava desert on the Israeli-Jordanian border. In this arid land, a place where things grow only with difficulty and hard work, he remarks,

“there, I saw hope barbed as barbed wire.

And I said to myself: That's true, hope needs to be

like barbed wire to keep out our despair

hope must be a minefield.⁵”

⁵ <https://allpoetry.com/Ein-Yahav>