

VAYISHLACH 5786

Rav Soloveitchik's essay "Catharsis" (Tradition 17:2, pp. 38-54) is perhaps one of his most important seminal explorations of the human condition in general, and of Judaism's unique theological perspective in particular. Concepts such as Jewish heroism, inviting defeat, perennial struggle, and purgation as an indispensable condition of redemption are unpacked in the Rav's captivating signature style, and then illustrated with Biblical and Rabbinic examples. The contemporary relevance of the Rav's discussion of these ideas will hopefully be evident in this chizuk.

In his analysis, the Rav's point of departure is the famous wrestling confrontation between Yaakov and his mysterious foe in this week's Parsha. In this memorable encounter, Yaakov emerges victorious, but is injured. He earns a new name, Yisrael, but still must contend with his mercurial brother Eisav whom he fears. (32:25-30, 33:1-4). Indeed, a paradoxical event. For the Rav, however, it is precisely the enigmatic nature of this battle that furnishes a striking portrayal of the Biblical hero in all its moral grandeur and significance.

As the Rav puts it: "In contrast to classical aesthetic heroism [the Greek Homeric hero], Biblical heroism is not nurtured by an ephemeral mood or a passing state of mind... The heroic person, according to our view, does not succumb to frenzy and excitement... it is not loud but hushed; not dramatic or spectacular but mute. The individual, instead of undertaking heroic action sporadically, lives constantly as a hero. Yaakov did not just act heroically upon the spur of the moment. His action was indicative of a resolute way of life; he was not out to impress anybody." [Who, indeed, was around during Yaakov's clash with the angel].

In other words, for the classical hero model, only a few individuals would qualify: a great warrior, political pioneer, brilliant scientist, etc. In the Biblical model, however, everyone - from the simple anonymous individual to the person of renown - may earn the title "hero".

The Rav then shifts to describe the heroic persona. "What is heroism in the Halacha? What does the Halacha recommend to us that we may attain heroic stature? ... The Halachic catharsis expresses itself in a paradoxical movement in two opposite directions – in surging forward boldly, and in retreating humbly... The Torah

wants man, who is bold and adventurous in his quest for opportunities, to act heroically, and at the final moment, when it appears to him that victory is within reach, to stop short, turn around, and retreat. At the most exalted moment of triumph and fulfillment, man must forego the ecstasy of victory and take defeat at his own hands (my italics). Yaakov acted in this manner... he did not consummate his victory; instead, he set free the antagonist whom he had defeated and whom he could have destroyed. By freeing the defeated enemy, Yaakov defeated himself. He withdrew from a position he had won through courage and fortitude. He engaged in a movement of recoil."

Let us attempt to explain the Rav's unique understanding of what it means to be a Jewish hero. First, the heroic gesture finds expression in an action which, although right and good, appears absurd and illogical. To illustrate, to formally protest against antisemitism in the company of a pro-Palestinian audience would be foolhardy and perhaps even reckless. Not only would the demonstration not accomplish much, but the participants would likely be ridiculed, spat upon or even worse. Yet, to so do, would be a great heroic deed.

And then, we have a second - and very unconventional - component to the heroic gesture. And that is to recognize that "precisely in those areas that man fervently desires success, there are times when he must be willing to withdraw, to suffer defeat at his own hands." This second point is one of the Rav most original and powerful understandings of the human condition, and requires some explanation. For the question is: why should it be so? Why is it so important for man to take defeat at his own hands, and exactly how does he do it?

Let us suggest the following: All life inevitably must deal with "defeats". From unexpected hardships to sudden illnesses, from personal setbacks to stressful frustrations – in the Rav's terminology - are all defeats in a manner of speaking. Any time we do not get what we feel we deserve, we experience defeat. The disappointment is unpleasant to put it mildly, even depressing, and left unchecked, can tailspin and lead to despair and utter resignation. If "defeat" then is a quotidian feature of our human existential reality, how are we to cope with it? More, how can we even transcend its negativity and emerge better and more noble. The short answer: We practice; we practice "defeat at our own hands", or to use another one of the Rav's evocative phrases, we actually "invite defeat". How? We must be "willing to be defeated by a Higher Authority".

Perhaps we can reframe this concept of "defeat" in terms of something more familiar to us: our obligation to

observe the many "do not" mitzvot (LO TAASEI) in the Torah. Many Jews – even religiously committed Jews - look upon the 365 negative commandments as an onerous burden which they accept as HaShem's decree regardless of the difficulties or incomprehensibility of these mitzvot. However, what the Rav is presenting here is a much deeper appreciation of these "do nots". For the Rav, these restrictions are opportunities to actually "invite defeat".

To explain: When the Torah – that Higher Authority - obligates us to say "no" to a host of pleasures, emotions, cultural fads, etc. that it deems forbidden, we learn something very valuable. When the Jew is confronted with prohibitions that restrict his behavior, that force him to curb his appetites and passions, be it in the areas of Shabbat restrictions, kashrut proscriptions, and sexual restraints, to mention the most common examples, he is challenged to cultivate habits of self-control that expand to all other areas of conduct that in the absence of such disciplined behavior can lead to serious ethical and moral pitfalls.

But there is more: Through "accepting defeat by our own hands" by complying with Gd's commands, there is an additional and enormously vital benefit that is absolutely crucial in ensuring our existential welfare. As we said above, life is full of "defeats" that we did not invite at all. They intrude into our lives, disrupt our healthy routines, and wreak havoc with our need for happiness and security. However, for the Jew, who has learned - via the "do nots" obedience and habituation - that not every desire and expectation can be satisfied, he can tolerate these inevitable downers and adversities, the painful struggles and desolate moods that threaten to ruin his life. He knows and believes that each misfortune carries the seeds of creative growth. And so, he courageously pushes on and thankfully discovers that he can now achieve what prior he thought was practically impossible.

Thus, the Rav can state: "The dialectic of advance and recoil, of victory and defeat, is built into the structure of human existence and constitutes the essence of halachic living." To behave with uncommon courage and act boldly to do the right thing when others mock the effort, and then, to be able to endure the inevitable disappointments and not despair – to do both is to live life in its fullest.

And when the Jew can accept this reality, live by its paradoxical pattern and believe in its ultimate purpose, he then can earn the great meritorious accolade of hero!

In a posting from the Rabbinical Council of America, there is an excellent short essay which conveys a very similar insight as expressed by the Rav. Here it is in full:

"If someone ambushed you in the dark and hurt you, the last thing you would do is ask them for a favor before they ran off. But this is exactly what Yaakov does! After a brutal night that leaves him permanently limping, he holds tight to his assailant and says, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." Why does he seek a bracha from the source of his pain? Why would a victim demand a gift from his attacker? Rav Yaakov Nagen explains that Yaakov is actually teaching us a radical approach to trauma. We typically view pain – be it illness, loss, or conflict – as a deviation from life, an error to be fixed so "real life" can resume. However, the Midrash (B'reishit Rabba 10:10) tells us that every blade of grass has an angel striking it, commanding it to "Grow". The strike is not a punishment; it is the necessary stimulus for expansion.

Yaakov understood that his struggle (and even the resulting wound) was not an obstacle to his destiny, but the catalyst for it. (I once heard Rabbi Aryeh Lebowitz suggest that it's insane to think Yaakov could ever survive an actual showdown with an angel. The truth is that the Yetzer Hara's goal is never to destroy us, but rather to allow us to grow through challenges and adversity.) Yaakov realized that the "angel" striking him was actually an agent of growth. He refused to release the crisis until he had extracted the specific strength and insight that only this struggle could generate.

When we face a crisis, our instinct is to ask, "How do I get out of this?" Yaakov teaches us to ask, "What bracha is hidden inside this?" We can't let the struggle end until we have forced it to yield its blessing.