# The Jewish Imperative to Cultivate Courage

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Without courage we cannot practice any other virtue with consistency. We can't be kind, true, merciful, generous, or honest.
—Maya Angelou.[1]

Courage, at its heart, is the trait that underlies every other. Now, this may seem counterintuitive. If one was to look at the classical character traits (what we refer to in Hebrew as *middot*), courage is not listed among the most normative or noble attributes. Courage does not necessarily impart *anivut* (humility); it may be only tangentially related to *simha* (joy); and it may actually be counterproductive to inculcating *savlanut* (patience). But, without courage, would we be able to go out into the world and fulfill our soul's potential? Without the spark that illuminates the challenging path called experience, would we be able to satiate the desire to learn and grow?

It is important to make a disclaimer. Courage is not reserved for the likes of Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Rosa Parks, or David Ben-Gurion. Each of us has opportunities for courage every day. Further, courage does not require putting the entirety of one's life at risk. We do not need to have the temerity of someone like Nahshon ben Aminadav, who walks into the water hoping that God intervenes and creates a miracle. In fact, the rabbis teach that we may not solely rely on miracles if we are to be present in the world.[2] There is no virtue in taking senseless risks that put our lives or our family's financial or emotional well-being in jeopardy. There is great risk in staying too comfortable and not changing, but there is also great risk in making ourselves and others too uncomfortable and demanding too much change too quickly.[3]

In the following essay, we will explore eight variations on the types of courage that are necessary to excel at all other character traits. The following pages are by no means a comprehensive or definitive summation of Judaism's ethical view toward courage, nor is it a list of categorical bromides. Rather, the eight classifications are based on my personal experiences and anecdotal meditations on the subject. In truth, the inherent definition of courage on display here will play with many facets of the term in a loose, deconstructionist manner. These characterizations will work in concert with each other and clash against each other; such is the nature of the word. Thus, this piece acts a stepping stone to place courage in the broader context of Jewish ethics.

**Courage of Being**

The first category of courage is, at the most basic level, to understand that each of us is unique. Inherent in that uniqueness is the mandate to do extraordinary feats that will, in some way, change the world. While one of the great mysteries of existence is to unlock our innermost strengths, we never achieve these strengths if there's an inability to possess self-value.

Peer pressure and the desire to fit in and to be loved are powerful emotions. But they are also crippling. Somewhere in the world, someone will despise you. It could be for your skin color, your religious beliefs, your favorite sports team; this litany of petty excuse to hate a fellow person is staggering. In the end, this is only noise; static in the ether. In this case, courage here means to have the courage to strive to be our authentic self. But how do we achieve this seemingly straightforward imperative? First, we have to realize that it takes enormous courage to hold ourselves accountable to our potential. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel breaks down the essence of this potential in a beautiful biblical metaphor:

> We are all Pharaohs or slaves of Pharaohs. It is sad to be a slave of a Pharaoh. It is horrible to be a Pharaoh. Daily we should take account and ask: What have I done today to alleviate the anguish, to mitigate the evil, to prevent humiliation? Let there be a grain of prophet in every man![4]

While not everyone has the fortitude for criticism that a prophet must possess, staying true to one's forthright convictions is an apt contemporary embodiment of the prophet's purpose. Of course, the vision for our lives need not be steeped in the purely righteous. Courage means setting a goal for yourself—modest or grand—and have the perspicacity to see it made manifest. Even Steve Jobs, the late founder of Apple Inc., whose life was marked with as many failures as triumphs, remarked, pithily, that we should go out and pursue the dreams that will further our lives:

…[H]ave the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become. Everything else is secondary.[5]

Courage of being means asking hard questions; it's an introspective pursuit. This is quiet courage, a courage that radiates from deep within the recesses of our essence yearning to break free.

**Courage of Will**

Mark Twain is credited as saying: "It's not the size of the dog in the fight; it's the size of the fight in the dog."[6] In all we do, we must cultivate a sense of bravery, an intractable perseverance, and the capacity to have resilience. With the balanced mix of an indomitable persistence of grit and a reservoir of spiritual inspiration, we become better equipped to get through challenges.

This was the essence of courage for the rabbis. Certainly, in a moving talmudic passage, the rabbis posit the following inquiry: "Who is courageous?" There are manifold possible paths that the rabbis could have pursued here: The person with the most faith in God? One who adheres loyally to the letter of the law? One who can be victorious in battle? But instead, what do they say: "One who can control his or her own inner drive," that one is the most courageous.[7]

Indeed, before we approach any type of action, our vigorous inner life must align with our outer life. At the center of this quest for enthusiastic earnestness is *ratzon* (will). We must have the desire to be courageous, otherwise we can't be courageous. This is no mere tautology. We must desire to cultivate a burning passion and a lasting energy to overcome internal and external obstacles. We must desire to overcome our fear of pain, of failure, and of loss.

**Courage of Speech**

Humanity was endowed with the gift of speech. We must use it wisely. And when our minds and souls coalesce around an action, a passion, or a cause, it takes the human ingenuity of speech to convey the importance of said pursuits. A vital element of spiritual courage is being able to speak up when it is terrifying to do so. It is mitzvah to do so. As it says in the Tanakh:

You shall not hate your brother in your heart; you shall reprove your fellow and do not bear a sin because of him.[8]

The late social activist Maggie Kuhn (1905–1995), who spoke out passionately for protections for senior citizens in America, said powerfully: "Speak your mind, even if your voice shakes!" Indeed, we must give feedback otherwise we will "bear a sin" and be culpable of complicity as a bystander. In those moments, we will come to "hate your brother." We must never allow this type of moral timidity to invade our souls.

**Courage of Action**

**Always do what you are afraid to do.**
—Ralph Waldo Emerson[9]

To be sure, courage does not always require leadership but, at times, it requires a modicum of followership. Some either prefer to lead or be cynical. The middle space of participating but not being in control can require enormous courage too.
At momentous points during our life, we must be willing to take critical risks. Not life-threatening or impulsive risks, but measured considerations about how we intend to live our brief moment in this universe. For many, leadership is a constituent piece of their desire to see tangible change. Yet, inevitably, when one takes the difficult step to rise up and lead, the critiques not only begin, but may become incessant. These responses often stymie others who would love to lead but cannot take the negativity and constant second-guessing. To overcome this mindset, it takes a healthy amount of courage to maintain conviction and propel action. Nelson Mandela, whose life story is the stuff of courage, wrote:

I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear.

**Courage of Restraint**

For every notion about courage being an outward display of character, having the foresight to restrain oneself is an underexplored avenue of courageous behavior. Courage is not only about acting publicly or about speaking up, but about being silent when the times call for it. Not every situation requires our voice; not every pursuit needs our opinion. Knowing when to back off is as important, maybe even more so, than to stand up. And, to be sure, we learn in the Talmud that there is a mitzvah to give constructive feedback to our peers, to reprove or rebuke them as the times see fit. But there is also a mitzvah not to speak up when it will not be heard, or when our actions or speech make situations worse:

…Just as there is a mitzvah for a person to say words (of rebuke) that will be accepted, so to there is a mitzvah for a person not to say words (or rebuke) that will not be accepted. Rabi Abba said: … It's an obligation (not to give rebuke that won't be accepted). As it says: "Do not rebuke a scoffer, lest he hate you; rebuke a wise man, and he will love you" (Proverbs 9:8).[10]

Others suggest we should still speak up even when it won't be heard.

R. Zeira said to R. Simon: Master should reprove these (officials) of the House of the Exilarch. (R. Simon) said to him: They do not accept (reproof) from me. (R. Zeira) said to (R. Simon): Even though they do not accept it, master should nonetheless reprove them.[11]

Another form of restraint is taking the initiative to step back and create space for others to shine. Lao Tzu, the philosophical progenitor of Daoism, teaches: "From caring comes courage."[12] Indeed, when we start, not from the ego-filled position to be a hero, but with the compassionate conviction of love, then we step back when we need to. To do this, we often need to rebuild trust and connectedness. In his book, *The Courage to Teach*, educator and activist Parker Palmer writes about the necessity of harnessing the will to not act on our fear, even at a moment when it might feel most appropriate:

In response to the question "How can we move beyond the fear that destroys connectedness?" I am saying, "By reclaiming the connectedness that takes away fear."[13]

**Courage of Mind**

It is, without a doubt, an immense challenge to exist in a world suffused with ambiguity. Indeed, most people struggle deeply with living within a gray zone rather than the easy binary of black and white. Some need to run toward certainty and clarity rather than orient their inner struggle with uncertainty; this is understandable. Palmer continues:

There is a name for the endurance we must practice until a larger love arrives: It is called suffering. We will not be able to teach in the power of paradox until we are willing to suffer the tension of opposites, until we understand that such suffering is neither to be avoided nor merely to be survived but must be actively embraced for the way it expands our own hearts.[14]

Not everyone can live up to the pressure of living in an un-bifurcated world But, one type of courage is about continuing to live mentally within the discomfort of uncertainty, continuing to grapple with questions before jumping to answers, and continuing to seek truth beyond ideological comfort.

**Courage of Spirit**

To cultivate courage on the soul level is to learn how to transcend self-interest, to transcend one's own body, and perhaps even transcend one's own consciousness. The late teacher of Mussar, Rabbi Chaim Shmulevitz (1902–1979, Lithuania/Israel), explains how people are capable of much more than he or she imagines, even during a trying moment of existential crisis:

> Our strengths are greater than we realize. A person really has the ability to reach much more than his natural [physical] strengths [we think we are limited to one level, we can move this, lift that, only stay awake for so long, etc.]. It appears that this is the explanation that our Sages give on the sentence, "The daughter of Pharaoh stretched her arm, and she took the basket that Moses was in. Her arm actually extended many "*amot*." It's not intended to be understood that her arm physically got longer and then her arm shrunk back to its original state. Because through the gathering of all her energy and her will to save this child, in the merit of that it was in her ability to achieve even the strength of Adam prior to the sin even though the basket was far way. There is no measure to the strength of [people] when they arm themself with *ometz* [fortitude] and *gevurah* [strength]. If they do it's in their hand to reach much more than their

> natural strengths would dictate.[15]

To imbibe meaning from the constant renewal of our spiritual work should not only comfort us, but also challenge us in the best ways. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel encouraged the recitation of prayer to be a vehicle for the cultivation of courage in the soul. For Rabbi Heschel:

> Prayer is meaningless unless it is subversive, unless it seeks to overthrow and to ruin the pyramids of callousness, hatred, opportunism, falsehoods. The liturgical movement must become a revolutionary movement, seeking to overthrow the forces that continue to destroy the promise, the hope, the vision.[16]

**Courage of Heart**

Finally, and most importantly, courage is a product of the heart. To be sure, we must learn to be comfortable with honest vulnerability. Brené Brown, a professor at the University of Houston and an expert on the diverse dimensions of courage, writes affectingly on the inner nature of courage and its effect on her life:

> [A]s I look back on my life… I can honestly say that nothing is as uncomfortable, dangerous, and hurtful as believing that I'm standing on the outside of my life looking in and wondering what it would have been like if I had the courage to show up and let myself be seen.[17]

Such a prospect can be terrifying, and that is normal for anyone. We all feel vulnerable at some point in our lives. To not be is to not experience the full expression of our humanity. Yet, being vulnerable is not equivalent to being weak or cowardly. On the contrary, vulnerability is an element of greater courage. As C. S. Lewis (1898–1963, United Kingdom) wrote:
To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken…. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable.[18]

One might think that acting courageously is antithetical to humility. This is not the case. Consider how Rabbi Abraham Isaac haKohen Kook (1865–1935, the first Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of pre-State Israel), explains this point:

We need to make a careful distinction when investigating the emotion of pride/arrogance. [We need to distinguish between] the *regesh haPasul* that distances a person from consciousness and consciousness of one's Maker, and the delicate (*adin*) feeling that expands a person's consciousness and reminds one of one's full and splendid spiritual existence. Often a person's heart will feel full of strength (*'oz*). At first glance this feeling will seem similar to a feeling of arrogance. But after clarifying the matter, the reality is that one's heart is filled with courage from the Divine light that shines in one's soul.[19]

How does Rabbi Kook suggest we achieve such an end goal? He continues:

When it becomes difficult for [people] to emerge from this heaviness slowly, they must rise up at once and mobilize the *middah* of Holy Arrogance. They must look at themselves very favorably and find the good aspects of their shortcomings and weaknesses. For as one sets one's mind to seek out the good, immediately all of their weaknesses transform into strengths. It is possible for a person to find within him/herself much good and to be very happy with their goodness. Day by day such a person will

increase positive activities with a pure heart and full of compassionate hope.[20]

One final note: We must learn to listen so we know what opportunities and moments are crucial for us to cultivate courage for. The former chief rabbi of the United Kingdom Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks writes about the imperative of being *here*, of listening to the voices:

There is no life without a task; no person without a talent; no place without a fragment of God's light waiting to be discovered and redeemed; no situation without its possibility of sanctification; no moment without its call. It may take a lifetime to learn how to find these things, but once we learn, we realize in retrospect that all it ever took was the ability to listen. When God calls, He does not do so by way of universal imperatives. Instead, He whispers our name—and the greatest reply, the reply of Abraham, is simply *hineni*: "Here I am," ready to heed your call, to mend a fragment of Your all-too-broken world.[21]

Every day, we should wake up with "Here I am" inscribed on our hearts and animated within our souls. Only in this way do we ensure that the grand experiment of humanity continues fresh and anew with every obstacle that the universe presents before us. Fortunately for the human spirit, we aren't ill-equipped for such a challenge. We have courage. And as is true with all virtues, cultivating courage takes practice. We must come out of our comfort zone to grow. We must learn the art of when to listen and when to speak, when to act and when to hold back, when to paddle to ride a wave, and when to sit back to enjoy the calm waters.

Rabbi Yisrael Salanter (1809–1883, Lithuania) leaves us with a final message of hope. For Rabbi Salanter, every person must hold on to and keep precious three qualities in order to lead and live a life with courage: not to despair, not to get angry, and not to expect to finish the task. Courage does not mean one makes an appearance and then hurries out the door. No, courage must be cultivated daily. It must be cultivated for years before it's even given the chance to blossom. Courage comes from realizing that our role in the universe is unique but limited. Yet, it's this limitation that allows us to excel beyond our wildest dreams. It allows us to pursue our destiny. And whether we know it or not, courage is the engine that allows us to move forward perpetually, with intentionality, with compassion, and with the knowledge that meaning is found through navigating the tribulations of living a full, active life.

[1] See Lindsay Deutsch. "13 of Maya Angelou's Best Quotes." *USA Today*. May 28, 2014. Accessed April 30, 2018. https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2014/05/28/maya-angelou-quotes/9663257/.
[2] See BT *Kiddushin* 39b.
[3] Another disclaimer. Historically, courage was described about men through masculine frameworks. Women were described as passive supporters but not as agents of change per se. See Rabbi Patricia Karlin-Newmann's feminist critique of the Nahshon narrative in Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Rabbi Andrea L. Weiss, eds., *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (New York: CCAR Press, 402).
[4] Abraham Joshua Heschel, "The Religious Basis of Equality of Opportunity: The Segregation of God" in *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1967 ed.) 98.
[5] Stanford University Commencement, June 2005. A full transcript of the speech is archived at https://news.stanford.edu/2005/06/14/jobs-061505/
[6] While Twain was a great creator of homespun quips, the above quoted phrase is—more likely than not—apocryphal. The sentiment remains the same.
[7] *Pirkei Avot* 4:1.
[8] Leviticus 19:17.
[9] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays* (London: Robson, Levey, and Franklyn, 1841), 262.
[10] BT *Yevamot* 65b.
[11] BT *Shabbat* 55a.
[12] *Tao Te Ching*, Ch. 67.

[13] Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2017 ed.), 59.
[14] *Ibid*., 88.
[15] On "*yichud lev*, *Selections from Sihot Mussar*.
[16] Abraham Joshua Heschel (Susannah Heschel, ed.), "On Prayer" in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1996), 257–267.
[17] Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* (New York: Gotham Books, 2012), 249.
[18] C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1960), 121.
[19] *Middot HaRAYaH* 25, translated by Rabbi David Jaffe.
[20] *Ibid*. 26.
[21] Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility* (New York: Schocken, 2007,) 262.