Mordechai: A Cautionary Tale

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Mordechai is universally recognized as a hero, but it wasn't always that way. Like many heroes, his acts of greatness were extremely controversial at the time. Were it not for the benefit of hindsight, many of those who admire Mordechai today would have opposed him.

Mordechai was an eccentric figure long before he encountered Haman. Megillat Esther 2:6 introduces Mordechai as follows: "He was exiled from Jerusalem with the group of exiles that were exiled with Yechonya, king of Judah, whom Nevuchadnezzar, king of Babel, exiled." The Vilna Gaon makes an astonishing comment based on the repetitive mentions of Mordechai's exile in this single verse: "[This is] to inform us of his love for the Land of Israel, for each time [he was exiled], he returned to Jerusalem, and he was exiled three times."

How many Jews today would make *aliya*, be forced to return to the Diaspora, then try again two more times in short succession? How many rabbis would even encourage such behavior? This is despite knowing that there is a real future in Israel as the final prophecies unfold.

Mordechai faced the exact opposite scenario. The ten tribes were exiled, much of Israel was in ruins, and the little that remained was a vassal state. Everyone was aware of the prophecies that the Temple was going to be destroyed, the inhabitants of Israel would be slaughtered, and the survivors would be exiled. What was Mordechai going back for? His contemporaries probably thought he was insane.

Then again, others would have viewed Mordechai as an idealist with a can-do attitude that put his detractors to shame.

It's no surprise that someone who refused to abandon the sinking ship that was Israel at the time, no doubt suffering great personal hardship as a result, would be the hero of the Purim story. Mordechai was the one who urged the Jews not to attend Achashverosh's party, with its debauchery and implicit acceptance of an exile mentality, and Mordechai was the one who refused to submit to Haman.

These were not popular decisions at the time. If today's media and (God help us) social media existed back then, we can imagine how Mordechai's fellow Jews would have mercilessly attacked him, without regard for his status as a "leading rabbi." They would have accused Mordechai of endangering them with his reckless behavior, his unwillingness to be practical and accept reality. The Jews were in the Diaspora now and were fortunate to live in a "tolerant" society. Quiet diplomacy was the call of the hour, if not ingratiation and even assimilation. The last thing most Jews wanted was a religious extremist like Mordechai rocking the boat.

Contemplate this for a moment and be brutally honest. If you were there, would you have reacted any differently?

And there's the rub when it comes to heroes. Everyone points to them as role models long after they are gone, but the very qualities we admire in dead people we loathe among the living. Mordechai would be hard-pressed to land a pulpit today, or even a *shidduch*. Even those who admired his integrity and idealism would be leery of throwing their hat in with him. Practical considerations, after all.

We teach our children to admire people like Mordechai, but in a purely theoretical sense. Do we encourage them to emulate his behavior in real life? Does our society? No. We reward contemporary Mordechais with swift backlash and cold-blooded cancellation if they persist.

Children learn very quickly not to take stories of biblical heroes as an actual path to follow. The first time they point out an egregious hypocrisy in the community, an outrage that needs to be addressed, they might be met with amusement. Little Moshe wants people to stop talking during synagogue services! How cute!

If they don't get the message, though, they will get their first taste of retribution. If they are smart, they will learn to just be quiet and go along with it like everyone else. If they are clever, they too will reap the rewards of degeneracy, instead of being a pious fool. If they are geniuses, their idealism will be destroyed, their souls will be crushed, and they will go "off the *derech*." In the unlikely event that they return, their rebellious past will be a permanent stain.

If they remain religiously committed and somehow maintain their idealism, they will be social outcasts (unless they become extremely rich, in which case even worse crimes than idealism can be overlooked). Even those who agree with them and admire them will be afraid to publicly support them. If you want to take on problems in the Jewish world—really take them on—be prepared to do it alone, and be prepared to suffer mightily for it.

Mordechai's story is not so much a celebration as a cautionary tale.

Then again, it's understandable that heroes are doomed to be unpopular, at least until they are victorious. The reasons are not entirely without merit. Consider the following:

- Heroes rock the boat. Their behavior is by definition threatening to people's sensibilities, and often carries real dangers to the people they are trying to help. Mordechai took it upon himself to stand up to Haman, but that very plausibly could have backfired. He might have been "right" (well, he was definitely right), but is it always right to spit in the eye of powerful, impulsive rulers who don't especially like the Jews to begin with? Granted, not standing up to Haman carried its own dangers, but apathy is always the convenient choice. Heroes make inconvenient choices and demand the same of others.

- Idealists are never satisfied, and they make those around them uncomfortable. We need idealists to push us to greater heights, but they don't always make the best dinner guests.

- Not every underdog with a cause is a hero. It is natural to be suspicious of people who not only go against the consensus, but try to change the direction of the community. We've had more than enough agitators, moles, opportunists, reformers, false Messiahs, and downright traitors to be leery of those who promote changes of any kind. Just because Mordechai decided that he should stand up to Haman, why were Jews wrong to doubt him?

So how do we know? How do we know who is a hero worth supporting—in the moment—and who is just a troublemaker?

There might not be an exact formula, but we have plenty of examples of both in the Torah from which to derive pointers.

Consider the various Jews in the desert who were "left out." There was the unnamed son of Shlomit the daughter of Divri and an Egyptian man (see Leviticus chapter 24). He had no tribe and no share in the Land of Israel, through no fault of his own. Wherever he tried to pitch his tent he was told he didn't belong. He was a true underdog.

What did he do? He blasphemed God.

Then we have the daughters of Tzelafchad (see Numbers chapter 27). They too were excluded from a share in the Land of Israel, through no fault of their own. It didn't seem fair. What did they do? They approached Moses and the other leaders and explained their predicament. They respectfully asked to receive a portion of the land in place of their deceased father. Most of all: they were willing to accept no for an answer if that were God's will.

Hazal refer to these women as righteous and wise. God accommodated these underdogs, whereas the blasphemer, tragic figure though he was, was executed.

We can derive from here that an idealist worth supporting is one who is fundamentally loyal to the community, not an adversary.

Today there are many, many people who are dissatisfied with the Orthodox world. There is not enough ink to list all their complaints and debate their validity. But we must clarify the following before deciding how to address those bringing the complaints:

Are they friends or foes? Do they seek to build, or to tear down? Are they respectful, or do they blaspheme? Do they keep their criticisms in house, or do they malign the Orthodox world to our worst enemies and even partner with them? Are they willing to take no for an answer if that's how it must

be? Do they truly love their fellow Jews, imperfect and downright maddening as they often are, or is their "constructive criticism" a fig leaf for seething hatred?

Another point to consider is the agenda of the hero-in-question. A genuine idealist is one who has no personal agenda in mind. Mordechai never took the convenient path. Whether it was chastising the Jews or publicly defying Amalek, he risked his life for what was right. If he had to pay a price, even the ultimate price, so be it. Although God miraculously saved Mordechai and elevated him, he had no reason to expect that to happen.

Compare to faux idealists, such as Korah and Absalom. These rebels curried favor with the people with grandiose speeches about equality and justice, but it was just a ruse to achieve power for themselves. That's the default playbook in our times as well. Once again, we need to consider whether we really want leaders like Mordechai, who stand for truth and make us uncomfortable, or if we prefer to play the game with corrupt leaders. Societies tend to get the leaders they deserve.

Finally, what separates true heroes from impostors is genuine fear of God. A true hero lives to serve God and bring others closer to the Torah. True heroes are humble even in greatness. Most of all, heroes refuse to negotiate away their principles, for those principles are real. Mordechai understood that the political conveniences of attending Achashverosh's party or bowing to Haman were not a fair exchange for his identity as a God-fearing Jew.

This is the ultimate clue that we are dealing with a real hero, not a phony. A real hero places God's will above all else and makes no attempt to rationalize going against the Torah.

It was clear that Mordechai had all the above qualities, and so many more. It is tragic that he was not fully appreciated by the people during his lifetime, even after being vindicated. But the fact that he was vindicated should not be necessary; after all, not every hero will be fortunate to achieve victory. We should not view Mordechai as a hero because he won, but because he was the real thing.

When we teach about heroes, we should emphasize this point. It is not about the glory of victory, but the sacrifice for the sake of heaven, regardless of the immediate result.

Most of all, we should help create a society in which heroic behavior is appreciated and supported. After all, the Torah requires all of us to be heroes, each in our own way.

Megillat Esther concludes with the tragic statement that Mordechai was pleasing to "*most* of his brethren." Today Mordechai is universally loved, mainly because he is no longer here to admonish us. When we learn to appreciate and support those who follow in his ways, we will surely merit such people to be our leaders.

May it be soon in our days.