

"Flawed Heroes"

דבר תורה (sermon) for Rosh Hashanah Day 2 5778/2017

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Grey material omitted from spoken presentation.

The Jews, as a class violating every regulation of trade . . . are hereby expelled . . . within twenty-four hours from the receipt of this order. . . [A]ny one returning after such notification will be arrested and held in confinement until an opportunity occurs of sending them out as prisoners . . .

When the author of this order passed away, a prominent rabbi insisted on walking the seven-and-a-half-mile funeral parade route so that he could serve as an honorary pallbearer on Shabbat, while other rabbis, Orthodox and Reform alike, were dismayed not to have been invited to serve as pallbearers.²

The order of expulsion of Jews was issued by then General Ulysses S. Grant on December 17, 1862, expelling Jews from the military district he controlled, which included Tennessee, Mississippi, and Kentucky.³ The order was quickly quashed by President Lincoln on January 4, 1863.⁴

How did it happen that the man who expelled all Jews from his military district became beloved by so many Jews by the end of his life? The story is both a story of repentance and forgiveness as well as a reminder that even fine people can be deeply flawed and perpetrate evil. The story is told by Professor Jonathan Sarna, the dean of American Jewish history, in his book, *When General Grant Expelled the Jews*.

¹ Note that in case any of the articles referenced in this sermon are taken off the internet, I have maintained copies of them and can make them available on request.

² Jonathan Sarna, "Why The Rush To Tear Down Grant's Tomb Is Ignorant" <http://forward.com/opinion/380997/why-the-rush-to-tear-down-grants-tomb-is-ignorant> of Jonathan Sarna, *When General Grant Expelled the Jews*, Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2016. p. 142-143.

³ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/General_Order_No._11_\(1862\)#Text_of_Grant.27s_Order](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/General_Order_No._11_(1862)#Text_of_Grant.27s_Order) accessed 9/12/17. Full text of General Orders No. 11 issued by Major General U.S. Grant on December 17, 1862 can be accessed on the Wikipedia page and further information is available at <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/order-no-11-judaic-treasures>.

⁴ Id.

Professor Sarna recently published an article reflecting on this progression in response to calls for New York City to consider removing monuments to Grant as well as to Peter Stuyvesant, a virulent racist anti-Semite, as part of Mayor DeBlasio's attempt to rid the city of "symbols of hate" (please note I do not mean to criticize this effort - certainly removing "symbols of hate" is a worthwhile endeavor, though equally clearly what constitutes a "symbol of hate" and exactly how to best remove that symbolism may cause some controversy).⁵

Sarna notes that as President Elect, Grant admitted how wrong his order was. Grant stated, "I have no prejudice against sect or race, but want each individual to be judged by his own merit. Order No. 11 does not sustain this statement, I admit, but then I do not sustain that order."⁶ Sarna continues:

During his eight-year Presidency, Grant went out of his way to prove just how unprejudiced he had become. He appointed more Jews to public office than all previous presidents combined, became the first President to attend a synagogue dedication,⁷ and actively intervened on behalf of persecuted Jews in Russia and Rumania. After he left office, he maintained friendships with many Jews, became the first President to visit the land of Israel, and, in 1881, placed his name atop a call for a public meeting of protest when anti-Jewish violence broke out in Russia. One senses that whenever he interacted with Jews, and especially when he saw them persecuted, embarrassing memories of General Orders No. 11 flooded into Grant's mind. He spent the last two decades of his life making amends for the order that stained his career, and trying to live it down.

Professor Sarna also writes about Peter Stuyvesant, who despite his virulent racism was an important part of building what was then known as New Netherland. Stuyvesant dutifully obeyed orders to admit Jews to the city, and continued to live in New York after his retirement despite its ethnic diversity. Professor Sarna concludes:

Sadly, those who seek today to knock past heroes off their pedestals rarely stop to study the full history of those whose reputations they seek to sully. The cases of Stuyvesant and Grant serve to remind us that human lives are complicated, that everyone makes mistakes, and that truly great leaders learn from those mistakes and improve their ways.

⁵ On the suggestion of removing Grant's Tomb, see <http://newyork.cbslocal.com/2017/08/22/new-york-city-statue-removal/>. On the suggestion of removing monuments to Stuyvesant see <http://nypost.com/2017/08/24/jewish-activists-target-removal-of-peter-stuyvesant-monuments/>.

⁶ Forward article cited above, footnote 2 c.f. *When General Grant Expelled the Jews*, p. 77-78.

⁷ See <https://www.jhsgw.org/history/presidential-visit>, *When General Grant Expelled the Jews*, p. 121 and following.

Professor Sarna gives relatively modern examples of an eternal truth – that no one – not even the greatest of heroes – is perfect. This is true whether our heroes are world renowned or more personal heroes, such as a revered teacher, a parent, or a friend. As the verse in Ecclesiastes says, “נֹחַ אִישׁ צַדִּיק בְּאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה-טוֹב וְלֹא יַחַטָּא” For there is no righteous person on earth who [only] does good and does not sin.”⁸ Sometimes a hero is a person who has a great deal of integrity but a blind spot that leads to serious misdeeds. Other times, a hero is an unremarkable person who rises to the occasion. Take Oscar Schindler, for instance, a man who by all accounts was no paragon of virtue until he risked everything and used every penny to his name to save 1,200 Jews.⁹

This is a truth of human history and a philosophy that is well on display in classical Jewish sources. Jewish texts are often praised for their recognition of the concept of the flawed hero. The first full fledged hero in the Torah is a good example of this. The Torah tells us “נֹחַ אִישׁ צַדִּיק נֹחַ אִישׁ צַדִּיק” Noah was a righteous man, perfect in his generation.”¹⁰ The rabbis note a certain ambiguity in this text in a way that highlights how impossible it is to be perfect. We are told that according to some sages, by telling us that Noah was “perfect in his generation,” the Torah is signaling us that Noah was “perfect” in comparison to his generation, but that if he lived in a generation of righteous people he would not have amounted to much. Other sages argued that Noah was a righteous person among evildoers, and therefore logic dictates that if he lived among the righteous he would have been even better.¹¹ Either interpretation suggests that Noah had room for improvement. Furthermore, the Torah tells us of Noah’s slip-up in a drunken episode after the flood.¹² In case you missed it, by the way, recently David Brooks had a wonderful d’var Torah masquerading as column in the *New York Times* discussing different possible criticisms of Noah.¹³

⁸ Ecclesiastes 7:20.

⁹ <http://www.yadvashem.org/righteous/stories/schindler> accessed 9/17/17.

¹⁰ Genesis 6:9.

¹¹ See Rashi on Genesis 6:9.

¹² Genesis 9:20 and following.

¹³ “Harvey, Irma, Jose ... and Noah” <https://nyti.ms/2eS1IXE>.

Abraham and Sarah, about whom we have been reading from the Torah, had their hiccups. In a scene immediately preceding the Torah portion we have been reading yesterday and today, Abraham lies to Avimelekh and tries to pass off his wife Sarah as his sister, leading Avimelekh to pretty innocently take Sarah as a wife.¹⁴ In yesterday's reading Sarah seems quite merciless toward Hagar and the young Yishmael as she kicks them out of the house, an act that would have led to their deaths were it not for divine intervention.¹⁵ In today's Torah reading, many would fault Abraham for willingly taking his son Isaac to the slaughter without so much as a moment's protest against inhumanity of it all.¹⁶ Even Moses, the greatest of prophets, sins before God and thus is prohibited from leading the Israelites into the promised land.¹⁷

The converse is true as well. Even generally negative characters can have truly positive aspects. Perhaps Peter Stuyvesant would fit into that category. Another example *might* be Robert E. Lee, who was a cruel slave master and fought to protect the institution of slavery but arguably played a key role in postwar reconciliation.¹⁸ Jewish texts also express appreciation for positive aspects of generally negative characters. For instance, Deuteronomy instructs the Israelites not to hate an Egyptian, “כִּי־גֵר הָיִיתָ בְּאֶרֶץ־מִצְרָיִם For you were a stranger in his land.”¹⁹ Rashi explains that appreciation for the fact that the Egyptians took in Jacob and his family at a time of famine was sufficient reason not to despise Egyptians despite the fact that they threw Jewish boys into the river.²⁰ In midrash, there is perhaps no more maligned a character than Jacob's brother Esav, who is used as a symbol for Rome.²¹ Nonetheless, Esav is held up as the paradigm of honoring of parents: “אמר רשב"ג לא כיבד בריה את אבותיו כמו אני את אבותי ומצאתי שכיבד עשו לאביו” Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel said, no one has honored his father as much as me, but I see that Esav honored his father even more than I did.”²² When it comes to evaluating people, things are rarely black and white. When Genesis tells us that Joseph's brothers hated him, “וְלֹא יָכְלוּ דַבְּרוֹ” וְלֹא יָכְלוּ דַבְּרוֹ”²³ Rashi comments, “מתוך גנותם למדנו, Within their criticism [the Torah] teaches us their praise, for they were not capable of saying one thing with their mouths and another with their heart.” The

¹⁴ Genesis 20.

¹⁵ Genesis 21.

¹⁶ Genesis 22. In Deuteronomy 12:31 child sacrifice is viewed as the ultimate form of religious barbarism, “לֹא־תַעֲשֶׂה כֵן לִיקוּק אֱלֹהֶיךָ כִּי כָל־תוֹעֵבֹת יִקְוֶה אֲשֶׁר שָׂאָ עָשׂוּ לְאֱלֹהֵיהֶם כִּי גַם אֶת־בְּנֵיהֶם וְאֶת־בְּנֹתֵיהֶם יִשְׂרְפוּ בְּאֵשׁ לְאֱלֹהֵיהֶם.”

¹⁷ Numbers 20:1-13.

¹⁸ Compare <http://www.vahistorical.org/collections-and-resources/virginia-history-explorer/lee-and-grant/reconciliation> with <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/06/the-myth-of-the-kindly-general-lee/529038/>, both accessed 9/17/17. My American history professor wife, Melissa Klapper, recommends *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* by David W. Blight on the subject of reconciliation.

¹⁹ Deuteronomy 23:8.

²⁰ Rashi Deuteronomy 23:8.

²¹ See e.g. Jacob Neusner, “What is Midrash,” Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1987, p. 53 and following (the relevant text is available in the Google Books preview of this book, https://books.google.com/books?id=e-CPBAAAQBAJ&source=gbs_book_other_versions) see also Pesach Schindler, “Esau and David Revisited: Demon versus Taadik,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, Jul-Sep2007, Vol. 35 Issue 3, p153, available online at http://jbqnew.jewishbible.org/assets/Uploads/353/353_esau.pdf.

²² Deuteronomy Rabbah 1:15. פרשת דברים רבה (וילנא) פרשת דברים א סימן טו

²³ Genesis 37:4.

brothers' enmity toward Joseph may have been quite negative, but they are praised for the fact that they didn't paper it over and would not misrepresent themselves.

So, what do we do with these observations? Do we abandon the concept of heroes and villains? I would hope not. Heroes and villains, I think, are an important paradigm through which we learn moral lessons and seek personal inspiration. However, I would hope we could take from the reality that no one is perfectly good nor evil some important lessons for how we relate to those heroes and toward all people we encounter personally and in history.

First, since we recognize that people are imperfect, we should not allow those imperfections to stop us from appreciating what is good and praiseworthy about a person. We have a concept in Judaism of הקרת הטוב *hakarot hatov*, which includes recognizing and appreciating the positive things that others have done, which I discussed in yesterday's sermon.²⁴ *Hakarot Hatov* serves many important purposes, not the least of which is to encourage ourselves to integrate those positive deeds into our lives. A person's misdeeds should not lead us to miss the opportunity to emulate that person's heroic, or even merely positive, traits.

The recognition that human imperfection is inevitable should also be an inspiration to forgive the shortcomings of others. The high holiday season calls upon us not only to seek forgiveness from others, but to give forgiveness to others. As I noted above, Rashi teaches that appreciating the Egyptians' hospitality toward Jacob and his family in a time of need was sufficient reason to mitigate our hatred toward the Egyptians for their violence toward the Jewish people. As we consider forgiving others, rather than simply dwelling on misdeeds, we should remember the positive aspects of the person. What has this person done right? How has this person acted kindly toward me and toward others? By appreciating the complexities of humanity and accepting that each person has his or her positive and negative aspects, we should find ample reason to forgive many, if not all, trespasses.

But appreciation of positive aspects of a person should not allow us to entirely paper over their misdeeds, either. While we should find it in our capacity to forgive, we should also recognize the flaws in even our most cherished friends and family and hopefully work with them to help them overcome those personal challenges, as we discussed last year at this time.²⁵ Since even flawed individuals have a potential for heroism, a capacity for overcoming challenges and rising to the occasion, we should relate to people both with forgiveness as well as with the recognition that they can do better and we have a responsibility for helping them achieve that goal.

²⁴ <http://www.e-ark.net/rabbi/2017rh1.pdf> (not yet posted).

²⁵ <http://www.e-ark.net/rabbi/2016rh1.pdf>.

Perhaps this outlook can also affect the way we look at institutions. Take, for example, two beloved countries, the United States and Israel. I make it my business in general not to espouse my political beliefs from the pulpit, and I'm not going to break with that practice today. However, I imagine that each of us has some reservations, as to the direction these two countries have taken, either in general or in regard to certain important issues. Regardless of those reservations, I think it is important to remember all that is good, right, and important about these two nations. Israel is the lone democracy in the Middle East. It is a leader in science, medicine, and technology. Its democracy may be flawed, but still it enfranchises a significant minority and has "constitutional"²⁶ protections for the rights of those minorities. Israel also acts as an implicit insurer of security of Jews around the world. The United States certainly has its significant flaws as well, but at the same time it has worked through some of those flaws and continued on the trajectory toward creating a more perfect union for centuries. How should we respond? I think with deep appreciation for all that is good and right about these two nations, but without allowing that appreciation to blind ourselves to their shortcomings.²⁷ Furthermore, our sense of what is good and noble about these two nations should push us to passionately and appropriately advocate for these nations to live up to the best of their values. I will avoid a detailed discussion of how and whether American citizens should exert influence on Israel. But I want to mention some provocative and thoughtful articles in the *Times of Israel* that are worth reading and that I'll link in my online publication of this sermon.²⁸ In general I think it vitally important that we remain passionate supporters and advocates for Israel. I would encourage everyone to learn more about the challenges Israel faces as well as the many wonderful things that have happened in Israel and continue to happen in Israel. You can find ways to support Israel and help move it in the direction you would like to see it go by supporting Israeli causes that are consistent with your views.²⁹

²⁶ The term "constitutional" is put in quotation marks since Israel has no written constitution. It does, however, recognize certain basic human rights that serve as a quasi-constitution. See e.g. http://knesset.gov.il/constitution/ConstIntro_eng.htm accessed 9/17/17.

²⁷ My thanks to Rabbi Robert Pilavin who pointed out the connection between how we relate to human flaws and how we should relate to shortcomings we see in Israel.

²⁸ <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/israelis-dont-care-that-youre-insulted-an-open-letter-to-american-jews/> and <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/an-american-response-to-dan-gordis-open-letter-to-u-s-jews-amoral-familism-or-jewish-morality/>.

²⁹ For a Facebook discussion of some of these ideas and some suggested causes to support, see <https://www.facebook.com/groups/43642532993/permalink/10155852159422994/>.

Finally, the message of the flawed hero should speak to us about ourselves and our own potential. Each of us is flawed. Each of us has sinned in myriad ways. But each of us is capable of doing wonderful things on a regular basis and of heroically rising to the occasion when the situation demands. While we spend time reflecting on our shortcomings, we should not allow them to obscure our tremendous potential. Take some time to reflect on the good things you have done as well, not as an excuse for your misdeeds but as a reminder of what you can accomplish. Demand more of yourself because, despite your flaws, you can achieve more. Pope John Paul II has been paraphrased as saying, "settle for nothing less than moral and spiritual greatness. That's what God created you for, [] don't cheat yourself,"³⁰ and I think that that's the perfect summation. Despite our flaws, we are all capable of great things, and we shouldn't sell ourselves short. During this season, may we all be privileged to take a good look at who we are, to celebrate the goods deeds we have been fortunate enough to perform, and to lament those moments that we have missed the mark. All heroes are flawed. They became heroes not because of their perfection, but because of what they achieved despite their flaws. May we, too, demand more of ourselves and our loved ones so that we achieve the moral and spiritual greatness for which God created us and in so doing, may we in some small measure be worthy of the guidance we received from our greatest heroes.

³⁰ Reverend Richard John Neuhaus, Meet the Press April 16, 2016. Transcript originally at www.nbcnews.com/id/12283802/ns/meet_the_press/t/transcript-april/ but currently only available online in the Google cache of that web page, accessible [here](#).