

The Legacy of the Maccabees: Should Courage be Encouraged?

Rabbi Mordechai Schiffman ▪ 15th of Kisleiv 5774

PART I – Moral/Psychological Courage

1) Deuteronomy Chapter 1 דברים

17 Ye shall not respect persons in judgment; ye shall hear the small and the great alike; ye shall not be afraid of the face of any man; for the judgment is God's; and the cause that is too hard for you ye shall bring unto me, and I will hear it.'

יז לא-תכירו פנים במשפט, פקטון פגדל תשמעו--
 לא תגורו מפני-איש, כי המשפט לאלהים הוא;
 והדבר אשר יקשה מקם, תקרבוני אלי ושמעתי.

2) Talmud Sanhedrin 6b

R. Joshua b. Korha says: Whence do we know that a disciple, who is present when his master judges a case and sees a point which would tell in favour of a poor man or against a rich man, should not keep silence? From the words of the text: Ye shall not be afraid[lo taguru] of the face of any man.

רבי יהושע בן קרחה אומר: מניין לתלמיד
 שיושב לפני רבו וראה זכות לעני וחובה לעשיר,
 מניין שלא ישתוק - שנאמר לא תגורו מפני איש

3) Talmud Bavli, Ketuboth 105b

Abaye said: If a scholar is loved by the townspeople [their love] is not due to his superiority but [to the fact] that he does not rebuke them for [neglecting] spiritual matters.

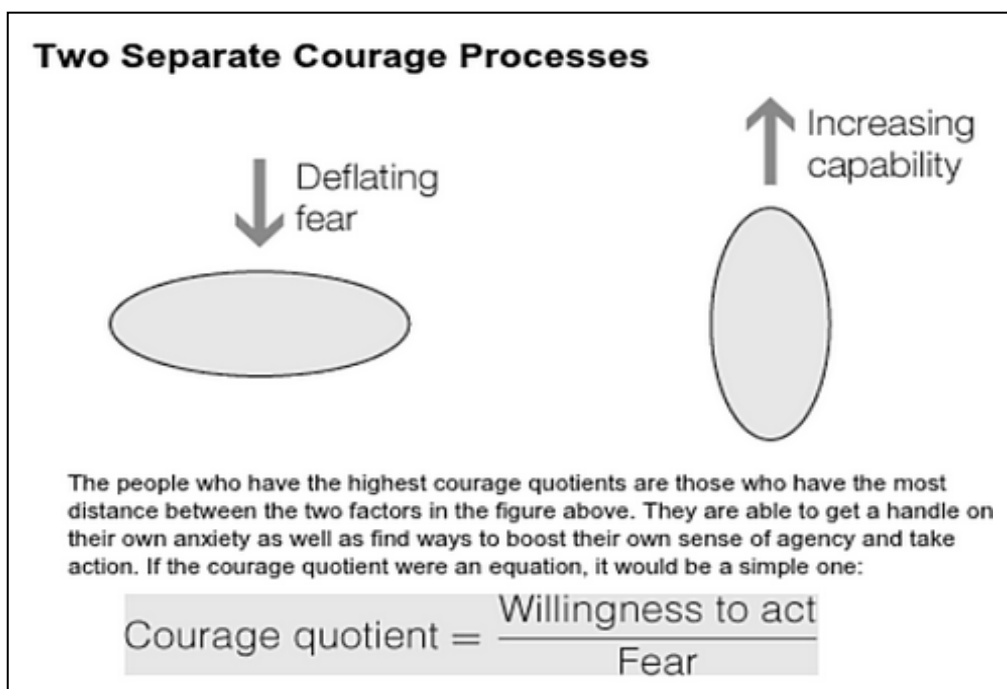
אמר אביי: האי צורבא מרבנן דמרחמין ליה
 בני מתא, לאו משום דמעלי טפי, אלא משום דלא
 מוכח להו במילי דשמיא

4) Pirkei Avot, 4:1

Who is he that is mighty? he who subdues his [evil] inclination, as it is said: He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that ruleth his Spirit than he that taketh a city.

איזהו גבור הכובש את יצרו שנאמר (משלי
 טו /טז/) טוב ארך אפים מגבור ומושל ברוחו מלוכד
 עיר

5) The Courage Quotient, Dr. Robert Biswas-Diener, P. 11



PART II – Physical/Military Courage

6) Deuteronomy Chapter 31 דברים

6 Be strong and of good courage, fear not, nor be affrighted at them; for the LORD thy God, He it is that doth go with thee; He will not fail thee, nor forsake thee. {S}

ו חזקו ואמצו, אל-תיראו ואל-תערצו מפניהם: כי יהוה אלהיך, הוא ההלך עמך--לא ירפק, ולא יעזבך. {ס}

7) Deuteronomy Chapter 20 דברים

3 and shall say unto them: 'Hear, O Israel, ye draw nigh this day unto battle against your enemies; let not your heart faint; fear not, nor be alarmed, neither be ye affrighted at them;

ג ואמר אלהם שמע ישראל, אתם קרבים היום למלחמה על-איביכם; אל-ירד לבבכם, אל-תיראו ואל-תחפזו ואל-תערצו--מפניהם.

8 And the officers shall speak further unto the people, and they shall say: 'What man is there that is fearful and faint-hearted? let him go and return unto his house, lest his brethren's heart melt as his heart.'

ח ונספו השטרים, לדבר אל-העם, ואמרו מי-האיש הירא וירד הלבב, ילך וישב לביתו; ולא ימס את-לבב אחיו, כלבבו.

8) Rambam, The Laws of Kings, Halacha 15

To whom does the phrase 'Is there a man who is afraid or faint-hearted?]' refer? The phrase should be interpreted simply, as applying to a person whose heart is not brave enough to stand in the throes of battle.

Once a soldier enters the throes of battle, he should rely on the Hope of Israel and their Savior in times of need. He should realize that he is fighting for the sake of the oneness of God's Name. Therefore, he should place his soul in his hand and not show fright or fear. He should not worry about his wife or children. On the contrary, he should wipe their memory from his heart, removing all thoughts from his mind except the war.

Anyone who begins to feel anxious and worry in the midst of battle to the point where he frightens himself violates a negative commandment, as it is written ([Deuteronomy 20:3](#)): 'Do not be faint-hearted. Do not be afraid. Do not panic and do not break ranks before them.' Furthermore, he is responsible for the blood of the entire Jewish nation. If he is not valiant, if he does not wage war with all his heart and soul, it is considered as if he shed the blood of the entire people, as *ibid.* 20:8 states: 'Let him go home, lest he demoralize the hearts of his brethren like his own.' Similarly, the prophetic tradition explicitly states: 'Cursed be he who does God's work deceitfully. Cursed be he who withholds his sword from blood.' [Jeremiah 48:10](#)

In contrast, anyone who fights with his entire heart, without fear, with the intention of sanctifying God's name alone, can be assured that he will find no harm, nor will bad overtake him. He will be granted a proper family in Israel and gather merit for himself and his children forever. He will also merit eternal life in the world to come as [I Samuel 25:28-29](#) states: 'God will certainly make my lord a faithful house, for my lord fights the wars of God and evil will not be found with you... and my lord's soul will be bound in a bond of life with God.'

מי האיש הירא וירד הלבב כמשמעו, שאין בלבו כח לעמוד בקשרי המלחמה, ומאחר שיכנס בקשרי המלחמה ישען על מקוה ישראל ומושיעו בעת צרה וידע שעל יחוד השם הוא עושה מלחמה וישים נפשו בכפו ולא יירא ולא יפחד ולא יחשוב לא באשתו ולא בבניו אלא ימחה זכרונם מלבו ויפנה מכל דבר למלחמה, וכל המתחיל לחשוב ולהרהר במלחמה ומבהיל עצמו עובר בלא תעשה, שנאמר אל ירך לבבכם אל תיראו ואל תחפזו ואל תערצו מפניהם, ולא עוד אלא שכל דמי ישראל תלויין בצוארו, ואם לא נצח ולא עשה מלחמה בכל לבו ובכל נפשו, הרי זה כמי ששפך דמי הכל, שנאמר ולא ימס את לבב אחיו כלבבו, והרי מפורש בקבלה ארור עושה מלאכת ה' רמיה וארור מונע חרבו מדם, וכל הנלחם בכל לבו בלא פחד ותהיה כוונתו לקדש את השם בלבד, מובטח לו שלא ימצא נזק ולא תגיעהו רעה, ויבנה לו בית נכון בישראל ויזכה לו ולבניו עד עולם ויזכה לחיי העולם הבא, שנאמר כי עשה יעשה ה' לאדוני בית נאמן כי מלחמות ה' אדוני נלחם ורעה לא תמצא בך וגו' והיתה נפש אדוני צרורה בצרור החיים את ה' אלהיך

9) Proverbs Chapter 28 משלי

14 Happy is the man that feareth alway; but he that hardeneth his heart shall fall into evil.

יד אֲשֶׁרִי אָדָם, מִפְּחָד תָּמִיד; וּמִקְשָׁה לְבוֹ, יִפּוֹל פְּרָעָה

10) Ralbag, Mishlei 28:14

אשרי אדם מפחד תמיד - למי שראוי לפחד ממנו כי זה סבה אל שיתחכם בלקיחת העצה ההוגנת להמלט מהרע אשר הוא מפחד ממנו ואולם מי שהוא מקשה לבו ושם לאל הדברים שראוי לפחד מהם הוא יפול ברעה הלא תראה כי הקשא' הלב החריבה ב"ה הראשון והשני וזה שאם לא היה צדקיה מקשה לכו והיה משים צוארו תחת עול מלך בבל לא גלינו מארצנו אז וכן הענין בבית ב' לא היו נכנעין למלכות אחרת ונותנין צוארם תחת עולם

11) The Sages Vol. II, Rabbi Dr. Binyamin Lau, p.346-348

THE FEARFUL AND THE FAINT-HEARTED: THE DISPUTE BETWEEN RABBI AKIVA AND RABBI YOSE HAGLILI CONCERNING THE SELECTION OF SOLDIERS

Bar Kokhba's first step as military leader was to recruit fighters. His recruitment method was both wondrous and worrisome: wondrous to the young new recruits, and worrisome to the sages.

Ben Koziba was there, and he had two hundred thousand troops who had cut off their little fingers. The sages sent word to him: How long are you going to turn Israel into a maimed people? He said to them: How otherwise is it possible to test them? They replied to him: Anyone who cannot uproot a cedar of Lebanon while riding on his horse will not be registered in your army. So there were two hundred thousand who were qualified one way, and another two hundred thousand who were qualified the other way. (Jerusalem Talmud, *Ta'anit* 4:5 [68d])

Young men flocked to enlist in Bar Kokhba's army, and were willing to undergo the brutal requirements to do so. Their first test was to cut off a finger to prove their fearlessness and high threshold for pain. The sages did not approve of the brutality with which Bar Kokhba selected his soldiers: "How long are you going to turn Israel into a maimed people?" they asked. We have a record of one particular sage who harshly condemned Bar Kokhba:

"And the officers shall speak further to the people, and they shall say: What man is there that is fearful and faint-hearted? Let him go and return to his house" [Deuteronomy 20:8]. Rabbi Akiva says: "Fearful and faint-hearted" is meant literally, referring to one who cannot endure the rigors of warfare and face a drawn sword. Rabbi Yose HaGlili says: "Fearful and faint-hearted" refers to one who is afraid because of transgressions he has committed; therefore the Torah has placed him in the same category as others, so that he might return on their account. (Mishna, *Sota* 8:5)

The Tosefta continues where the Mishna leaves off:

"And the officers shall speak further to the people, and they shall say: What man is there that is fearful and faint-hearted? Let him go and return to his house" [Deuteronomy 20:8]. For he is afraid on account of the transgressions he has committed, as it is said: "Why should I fear in bad days" [Psalms 49:6]. These are the words of Rabbi Yose HaGlili.

Rabbi Akiva says: "What man is there that is fearful" – certainly. But then why does the Torah also say "and faint-hearted"? To teach that even if he is the strongest of the strong men and the most powerful of the powerful men, he should go home if he is merciful, as it is said: "Lest the heart of his fellows melt as his heart" [Deuteronomy 20:8]. (Tosefta, *Sota* 7:22)

As Professor Saul Lieberman has noted, we do not have any earlier evidence of a person being excused from the army because of faint-heartedness.¹⁵ And so it seems that this law originated with the Bar Kokhba revolt, in which soldiers were expected to be particularly hardy and tough.

In an early Midrash on the book of Deuteronomy, we have an additional testimony from Rabbi Yose HaGlili:

Rabbi Yose HaGlili says: From where do we know that a person should not go forth to war unless he has arms and legs and eyes and teeth? (*Sifrei Devarim* 190)

This source later states:

"The fearful and the faint-hearted" – Rabbi Yose HaGlili says: [This means] that he has a deformity. (*Sifrei Devarim* 197)

Rabbi Yose HaGlili could not accept that so many Jews would be maimed in Bar Kokhba's recruitment exercises,¹⁶ a reality which left Rabbi Akiva untroubled given that he understood the phrase "fearful and faint-hearted" literally: Soldiers needed to be exceedingly brave. Nonetheless, the Talmud relates that Bar Kokhba changed his army entrance exam from cutting off fingers to uprooting cedars. In response, he was applauded as a leader who was willing to heed the instructions of the sages and change his ways accordingly.¹⁷

12) Talmud Shabbos, 21b

What is [the reason of] Hanukkah? For our Rabbis taught: On the twenty-fifth of Kislev [commence] the days of Hanukkah, which are eight on which a lamentation for the dead and fasting are forbidden. For when the Greeks entered the Temple, they defiled all the oils therein, and when the Hasmonean dynasty prevailed against and defeated them, they made search and found only one cruse of oil which lay with the seal of the High Priest, but which contained sufficient for one day's lighting only; yet a miracle was wrought therein and they lit [the lamp] therewith for eight days. The following year these [days] were appointed a Festival with [the recital of] Hallel and thanksgiving.

מאי חנוכה? דתנו רבנן: בכ"ה
בכסליו יומי דחנוכה תמניא אינון, דלא
למספד בהון ודלא להתענות בהון. שכשנכנסו
יוונים להיכל טמאו כל השמנים שבהיכל,
וכשגברה מלכות בית חשמונאי ונצחום, בדקו
ולא מצאו אלא פך אחד של שמן שהיה מונח
בחותמו של כהן גדול, ולא היה בו אלא
להדליק יום אחד, נעשה בו נס והדליקו ממנו
שמונה ימים. לשנה אחרת קבעום ועשאום
ימים טובים בהלל והודאה

13) The Sages, p. 427-430

Jewish historical memory combines five catastrophes into a single day of mourning, the Ninth of Av. Listed among these catastrophes is the fall of Beitar, which signified the defeat of Bar Kokhba and the end of the revolt. Eighteen hundred years later the flames of this revolt were rekindled when, at the second Zionist Congress in 1898, Max Nordau called for a "muscular Judaism," and a Bar Kokhba club was founded in Berlin.¹

The Zionist movement emphasized the historical connection between the Bar Kokhba revolt and the modern struggle for Jewish independence. It became customary to sing songs on Lag BaOmer that praised Bar Kokhba as a bold independent fighter. As Levin Kipnis lyricized: "A hero he was / freedom his cry / and all the nation loved him."

Zionist youth movements in the Diaspora adopted Lag BaOmer as the national holiday of Jewish youth. In 1916 the World Zionist Organization in Warsaw organized a mass camping trip in the forests for all the children in Zionist youth movements. Several of the movements designated Lag BaOmer as the day when new members were officially inaugurated. The bow and arrow, a symbol of the holiday, became the emblem of the Gadna (the pre-military training program for Israeli youth), which was founded in Jewish high schools under the British Mandate on Lag BaOmer 5701 (May 15, 1941). The purpose of this organization was to "prepare Jewish youth in the land of Israel for the work of national defense." The Palmah was founded on the same day, and on Lag BaOmer 5708 (1948) the command was issued to establish the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF).

Beitar became a symbol of the Revisionist movement led by Ze'ev Jabotinsky, as his "Song of Beitar" attests:

From the pit of decay and dust, with blood and sweat,
Shall arise a race – proud, generous, and cruel.

Jabotinsky had no patience for compromise. He was convinced that the flames of the revolt, regardless of their consequences, would nourish the dawning nation:

Whether you go up or down in the flames of revolt, carry the
flame to kindle. No matter! For silence is filth, unvalued is blood
and soul for the sake of the hidden glory.

And so the Israeli national dream was kindled by the embers of the Bar Kokhba revolt. Growing up in Israel, we would spend Lag BaOmer pretending to ride on Bar Kokhba's lion, as if we were part of the liberating army that battled to drive the Romans from the land. On school trips we

visited the tunnels and excavations left by Bar Kokhba's fighters, from the Judean desert to the coastal plain. We read with excitement Yigal Yadin's book about the letters discovered in Nahal Hever.

But amidst all the proud accounts of the Bar Kokhba revolt, I do not remember ever learning anything about its consequences: Five hundred and eighty thousand Jews died in battle, while innumerable others died from illness, hunger, and the ravages of war. Fifty forts and nine hundred and eighty villages were destroyed; any able-bodied survivors were sold into slavery; and Judea was emptied of its inhabitants. Known in rabbinic literature simply as "the persecution," the devastation in the land of Israel after the Bar Kokhba revolt was far worse than in the wake of the Temple's destruction. The sages' description of the fall of Beitar is particularly horrifying:

Rabbi Zeira said in the name of Rabbi Abahu who said in the name of Rabbi Yoḥanan: Eighty thousand military leaders entered the city of Beitar when it was captured. They slaughtered men, women, and children, until their blood flowed into the Mediterranean. (*Gittin* 57a)

From a halakhic perspective, the tragedy at Beitar lingers in Jewish memory every time we recite the fourth blessing of the Grace After Meals: "Who is good and who does good." As we have seen, the rabbis explain that "who is good" is an expression of our gratitude to God for not letting the corpses rot, and "who does good" expresses our gratitude that the bodies were eventually buried. This source reminds us that anyone who entered the city of Beitar after the climactic battle would have confronted unspeakable atrocities.

In the early 1980s, Yehoshafat Harkavi published an article claiming that Bar Kokhba had led the Jewish people down a path of ruin, not redemption.² Yisrael Eldad launched a vigorous counterattack, and a dispute ensued.³ Their polemic serves as one of the markers of both the collapse of national pride among secular Zionists as well as the rise of theological Zionism among the religious right-wing. Jabotinsky's Beitar legacy, sunk in political quagmire, lost its splendor, and few continued to invoke it proudly. But some wings of religious Zionism found themselves drawn to the Beitar vision. These nationalists rallied around the ethos of Beitar and consolidated their forces against their more conciliatory opponents. The cultural heroes of the nationalist camp were those who waved the flag of Beitar as guerrilla fighters of the underground and as poets of the resistance. The spirit of the Bar Kokhba revolt is still alive in these quarters. Students of Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda Kook quote their teacher, who defended Rabbi Akiva's identification of Bar Kokhba as the "Messiah son of Joseph."⁴ On the other hand, ultra-orthodox Jews who do not take part in the Zionist project continue to hold fast to the model of Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Zakkai, as evidenced in a Hasidic pamphlet from the *beit midrash* of the Ruzhiner Rebbe: