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Profiles in Courage, 1957.

PROFILES IN COURAGE

Some Thoughts on the Heroic in Jewish Life

Rabbi Daniel Jeremy Silver - Jan. 6, 1957

I am sure that many of you have spent several very pleasant hours during the past month reading through the series of biographical essays which Senator Kennedy of Massachusetts has brought together under the title "Profiles in Courage".

As I was reading this little volume, a scene flashed back into my mind with a confirmation class of several years ago. We were trying to sum up the year's work and I asked the young people what story of all the narrative and all the episodes of the Bible had made the most lasting impression. I was astonished by the result because of all the Bible stories the ^edu^l of David and Goliath was the one which received more mention than any other. I was a little bit taken aback that they had rejected so many of what I had considered to be the richly/^{developed} character studies with which the Bible abounds for a simple tale of military prowess. Yet as I think back upon that incident, I need not have been. Children, young people, and yes even adults, respond instinctively to the appeal of bravery and of heroism. It is not a matter of chance that the great literature of the world and the great theater of the world - the literature which has had the greatest constancy of appeal - Homer, Plutarch, The Adventures of King Arthur, Robin Hood, the Adventures of James Fennimore Cooper, yes even the great plays of Shakespeare, - I believe center upon some act always of ~~the heroic~~ the heroic, center upon a hero figure and appeal to people because

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of that fact. Men it seems are animals who are born to action, Civilization, education teaches us caution and prudence but we respond to that type of bravery of valor which can sweep aside in a moment all the web of restrictions and conventions with which society surrounds us and perform some great and noble act. And these young people had simply chosen the noblest act of combat, of heroism in the Bible - an act in which the weak and the young had challenged the experienced and the strong.

Now some of us, today, tend to discount physical prowess. We know that there are many other areas in which courage can and must be shown, and we know that often the ablest warrior is not the finest of men. And yet I would submit to you that we should not be so quickly to shrug off military valor, the courage of the battlefield. If men had not the courage to bare their breast to the sword of the exploiter and ^{of} the enslaver and of the oppressor, society would be much the worse. We need to fight for our rights and to secure more rights. Think how much darkness there would be where there is now light, if men such as the young men who fought with the Maccabees and men such as the young men who fought on the streets of Paris during the French revolution, and men such as ~~men~~ manned the picket lines at Gettysburg and men such as placed themselves in the cockpits of the planes during the battle of Britain, if such men had not been willing to sacrifice their lives in the field of combat. No, we should not be so quick to shrug aside displays of military courage. We should not be so quick to say that an honor such as that of the Congressional Medal of Honor is not only dearly won but of great value.

Jewish tradition maintains that a wise God, an all-knowing God, gave man two gifts. Into his right hand He placed a book, into his left hand

a sword. Into his right hand was placed the Bible, into his left hand was placed the arms, the means, the strength with which to protect the ideals which the Bible teaches in which to win for all men the view of a golden age of peace and plenty such as the Bible envisages. We need strength to protect that which is right. We cannot allow only the bully and only the oppressor to man the battlefields and to be successful in war.

But if it's true that the sword and the book must join together in common effort, it is also true that the sword wielded without thought to the values of the book, is a useless virtue - is without value. It is also true that those who go into combat only for the thrill, only for pay, only for the sake of adventure, are men who are pursuing useless careers. We must dare to stake our lives on the battlefield when we cannot live unless we can we secure that for which we fight. But to flaunt destiny simply for the sake of the thrill is aptly called to dare the devil. Rather we must on the battlefield, when we must, serve the God.

Now it has been maintained that our people, our Jewish people, are without heroic virtues. Hitler, you will know, was fond of trumpeting that we are a weak, a craven, a cowardly race - yellow-livered. We are a people who succeed only because we are crafty, because we are cunning, because we know how to operate through subterfuge and through deceit, that we never dare meet our enemies, meet our opponents in open, free, honest combat. And still today, I think we can sometimes hear a weak echo of this charge.

Now, none of us who has lived through the last twenty years need bother ourselves with historical research to refute this slander. No man who has read of the heroic defense of the Warsaw ghetto, when a few thousand

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unarmed Jews - Jews without hope of ultimate victory - managed to defeat for four and a half long months, the best of Hitler's Panzer divisions. None of us who have lived through the experiences of the second world war, in which a Jewish brigade and the British army manned the defenses of Tobruk, none of us who saw in 1948 how a few hundred thousand young men and women in Israel were willing to challenge the wrath of the whole Arab world, and none of us in this congregation who can walk behind this pulpit and read in the pages of a book in our war memorial alcove and on the walls ~~and~~ windows in our chapel the deeds of valor, the heroism, the courage of a sample of the Jewish young men of the Allied forces in the second World War. None of us need to bother ourselves with historical research to refute this challenge.

The seed of David has been willing in the last two decades again, and again, and again, to go out, to challenge the Goliaths of the world. But, of course, this canard has never been true. It is interesting that some of the medieval monks were unwilling to translate sections of the Bible because the heroism revealed in them, the military courage, might, they felt, have caused their parishioners to be afraid of the Jews who lived among them. After all the pages of the books of ~~the~~ Judges and of Joshua and of Samuel and of Kings are filled with the heroism of a Deborah against the Moabites, of a Gideon against the Amalekites, of a Samson against the Philistines, of all the Kings of Israel against all of the enemies of Israel, the victory of the Maccabees, the victory of a few, a pitifully few, against the armed might of paganism and ~~idolatry~~ idolatry secured for the world the continuation of the belief in the one God and ranks with Thermopylae and Valley Forge as one of the unique annals of heroism in all of world history.

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And most interesting of all, when Rome was at her height, when the Empire of Rome managed to conquer the whole known world, the little kingdom of Judea, less than it is in its partitioned state today, was willing because of a variety of grievances to challenge this might, and in the seventh decade of the common era, to dare to revolt against the peace of Rome, to dare to break out in armed rebellion. The emperors had to send twenty of their best legions. They had to fight bitterly for five years before this rebellion was extinguished and it is an interesting footnote in history that when the commanding general of the empire's legion sent his victory report back to Rome to the Senate, it is the first occasion ever known in which a Roman general did not conclude with a postscript - I and my legions are well. Such casualties had been inflicted upon the Romans, that though victory had been won, it had been won at a terrible cost. Indeed it is only in medieval times that the Jews did not particularly distinguish themselves in the field of battle and the reason there is a self-evident one - chivalry, feudalism arrogated the battlefield to the nobility - the common man, the burgher, the Jew, the foreigner was not allowed to enter the lists. It was not because the Jew was incapable of combat or unable to fight but because he was not allowed to arm himself and to enter the battles. But even in the medieval Jewries and the pitiable ghettos of medieval Europe, many a knight armed to the hilt and his retinue learned to their hurt that it was not a particularly easy pastime to loot the ghetto and to make sport of it.

Now, I do not cite these evidences of Jewish military valor to claim any special distinction to Jewish arms. We have been no stronger, no braver than any other people, but simply to lay to rest once and for all

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the canard which we hear about Jews, about the colored people, about any religion or race in the world that they are less willing to be courageous, less willing to fight and fight for their lives, if need be, than any other group. It is simply not so.

But I would turn this morning away from considerations of purely military courage. These have been the most universally applauded of our acts of valor and of bravery. They are the least complicated. They are the most easily recognized. But though we call the battlefield the field of valor, I submit that there are many other fields in which you and I and all men must prove their mettle. And I think that one of the reasons that Senator Kennedy's book appeals is that he has not taken a single one of his heroes from among the military, from among the adventurer, but that he has concentrated on men who fought in the world of ideas, of men who fought in the political arena, of men who were faced with principle on the one hand and the passions of their constituency or special interests on the other, of men who had to decide between personal integrity and political advantage - and it makes fine reading. It makes fine reading because many of us today are faced with similar problems between the forces which try to push us towards conformity^{ITY} and between our own sense of our ~~personal~~ integrity and our feeling that we are not always being asked to conform to that which we consider to be right.

But even more important is the fact that Senator Kennedy's book reveals to us that courage is not a simple matter. It is not a matter simply of dissenting and of damning the fates and of telling them do your worst - I am willing to bear the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. Courage is not, as he shows us, a matter of always being the nein-sayer, the sayer

of no. Courage is a matter which must lead to something positive for the human race. The politician must choose sometimes between compromise and ineffectuality. Which shall he choose? As we read through Senator Kennedy's pages we realize that prudence and caution are not the opposites of courage, rather that honor belongs to cowardice, and though prudence and caution are often used as the mask with which to hide our cowardice, it is not always true that men who compromise at one moment in their lives are not building towards some future moment of courage. For what would a senator be, a senator such as Mr. Kennedy deals with, if he could not be elected, if he could not appeal in the first place to his constituency. What power would he have? And once elected if he will not go along with his party in the senate, what responsibility will be given him. What opportunity will he have to see through to the passage of bills dear to his heart if he has not, at the same time, helped others/^{among} his friends to the passage of their bills?

Courage is no easy matter. It is a matter which requires understanding and wisdom as well as heart. And I think that mankind has always devoured literature which deals with courage because each of us in our own lives, in a hundred ways, requires guidance and help to decide when it is the moment to take our stand and when it is the moment to be compliant and to be prudent. And I believe that the effect and the appeal of our Bible is that it, too, is a book which deals with a panorama of profiles and studies in courage. More than any other piece of world literature, you can find in the pages of this great volume, hundreds upon hundreds of instances in which men and women such as you and I were called upon to prove themselves, to prove that they were truly created in the image of God, to prove their

manliness, to prove their courage. Think of some of the self-evident instances of courage which the Bible describes and think how often the tensions and the resolutions which these heroes attain mirror the tensions and the dilemmas of our own life.

There is the courage of the first Jew - of Abraham. The courage of a man who had to be willing to pull up stakes, to leave behind him well-known habits of life - his family, his friends - in order to seek out a new life, a new land. Think how many of the European members were faced within with the need for similar courage during the last decades.

Think of the courage of Jacob - the courage which each of us needs at a time in his life when we must be willing to admit the error of our ways and seek forgiveness of those that we have wronged. There is no more moving passage in all of world literature than that of the repentant Jacob, returning to make his peace with the brother whom he had wronged, wrestling the whole night long with his conscience, wrestling with his desire to avoid unpleasantness - to avoid shaming his ego - wrestling all night to find the strength to beg forgiveness.

Think of the courage of a Moses. The courage of a man who persevered in his mission despite the meanness of those who are following him, despite their short-sightedness and the constant frustrations which they place in his way.

Think of the courage of a Joseph. The courage of a man to forgive. Joseph, more than any other person in world literature, was wronged by his family - sold into slavery - and then he is put into the position whereby his family needing a favor comes to him, and Joseph shows the courage, the

of understanding for the reader, that as turn
courage to forgive and to forget and to/injustice into favor for his family.

Think of the courage of a David. The courage which had appealed to
the members of this confirmation class - the courage of the young man, the
weak man, to go out and challenge the vested interest, the strong, and the
skilled
powerful, and the ~~skilled~~ in our world.

Think of the courage of an Amos. The courage of a man who knows that
he must speak but when he speaks he will disturb vested interests and gain
for himself only the slander, the calumny, and the hatred of those to whom
he is speaking.

Think of the courage of a Jeremiah. The courage of a man who knows
that he must stand by what he has spoken, stand by the truth of the words
he feels God has told to him, that would cost him his life.

Think of the courage of an Esther. The courage of a woman safe -
safe from the fate of her people - who nevertheless prizes truth and honesty
above this safety and is willing to go her husband, the King, and say "I am
one of my people, I must share their fate." The courage of a person who
will be honest even to his own hurt.

Think of the courage of a Ruth. The courage of a love which is given
unreservedly, without thought of self.

The Bible is replete with such studies of courage. Each of them can
be generalized and applied to our lives. We see the tensions which men
need to resolve and we see the resolutions which these creatures of flesh
and blood, such as you and I, make to these tensions. And I submit that
the appeal of the Bible is that it is a constant source of inspiration and
action, when nothing but efficient living tools - not human beings - Plato

of understanding for the reader, that each of us can find on its pages some incident applicable to the dilemma of our life.

But the Bible contains more than studies in courage - profiles in courage. It contains a philosophy of courage. One of the interesting facts of the Bible is that of all the world literature of its day, it is the only literature which emphasizes the classlessness and the castlessness^d of courage. Abraham is the son of an indigent shop-keeper, Moses is the son of slaves, David of shepherd stock. None of the prophets came from a distinguished and noble family. Ruth, herself, the greatest heroine of the Bible, is ~~the~~ of the most despised and hated people - the Moabites. The Bible does not pick its courage from the priestly group or from the noble caste or only from the Jewish group themselves. It is universal in its understanding of where courage is to be found. Compare this with the other world literature of its day. Compare it with the literature of Buddhism, the literature of asceticism and of resignation, of detachment, but whose leaders nevertheless from the Gautama down are all of the nobility - a literature replete with the feeling that the levels of caste must be maintained.

Think of the literature of Greece. Read through the epochs of Homer and you will not find a single hero who is not born to the purple. And more impressive yet, read through the teachings of Plato and of Aristotle and of the Greek philosophers, the men we consider ~~with~~ the finest minds of antiquity, and you will find that they too cannot see courage among common, ordinary folk. To Aristotle, slaves are beneath contempt. He calls them nothing but efficient living tools - not human beings. Plato

cannot conceive of any state in which the common folk, whom he calls vulgar and coarse and depraved, in which these common folk are not ruled by those more able to dictate to them to know what is best for them.

Only the Bible had the vision to see among all men, all classes of men, all types of men, all shades of belief - men of courage. And then because of this, from Greece, from the ancient near East, flows all of these philosophies still abroad today which despair of man, which say that man cannot achieve his own destiny, which say that politically and religiously and economically and socially, man must be driven to his task and not allowed to ^{determine} the means of government and the types of religious belief and of religious organization which are best suited to him. Only the Bible gives us the insight which leads to a democratic way of living and of thinking, for only the Bible thinks of man as created in the image of God - all men - rich and poor, noble and low-born. Only the Bible speaks of all men as a little lower than the angels. Only the Bible looks ^{mists} behind the ~~myths~~ of class and caste and heredity to the universal elements which are in each of us and sees that class is no guarantee of nobility and being born into slavery is no guarantee that we are slavish and servile.

The Bible is a great document of world advance because this faith in the common man, in the uncommon common man, this faith has led to the gospel of social progress. It has motivated the leaders, the Moseses of all age to secure for their underprivileged followers an equal place in the sun.

But more important than ascribing greatness to the Bible at this moment is to ask the question - how is it that the Bible arrived at such

opposed
a diametrically/view of mankind than all other literature of its day? How was it that the authors of the Bible were able to look at men with eyes that were totally different than the eyes of quite astute observers in other cultures? Is that the Jews were singularly Valorous and courageous? Is it that there was a type of nobility of being among the average Jew not to be found in any other race? Obviously, the Bible makes no claim to any physical superiority. There is no conscience of being biologically chosen anywhere in the Bible. I submit to you that the reason that the Bible was able to see greatness in many an average man is to be found in the fact that from the day, at the foot of Sinai, when Israel received the Ten Commandments and the Law, and throughout its history the Jewish folk, our ancestors and you and I, have been motivated by an ideal which ennobled life and made life more than the mere daily living. We are living for a vision - a vision splendid of a time when there shall be peace among all men, when every man may dwell under his vine and under his fig tree and none need be afraid. We are living with a great faith - a faith which imposes upon us hard and severe obligations - obligations to be more than selfish, obligations to be more than self-seeking, obligations to ~~make~~ make more of our lives than simply a triumph of personal attainment. We have imposed upon us the obligation of mission, of teaching to the world through our own example the value of cooperative living, the meaning of universal brotherhood, the attainment for all people of justice and of mercy and of equal rights. And because we have this added obligation imposed upon us, because we have this faith, it is easier for our people to sacrifice and to show their courage. We are sacrificing for a goal - 'tis not needless.

There is an old story of three men who were cutting stone along the road. A traveller-by stopped and asked each of them in turn why they were cutting the stone. The first man said I am cutting the stone because I was told to. The second man replied I am cutting stone in order to earn five dollars a day - my daily wages. The third man said I am cutting stone in order to build a great cathedral. And when the traveller returned along the way several days later in a rain-storm, in a terrible tempest, he saw two/^{men}huddling under a tree, out of the rain. They had ceased to work. And the third man, the man who was building in his dreams a cathedral, had continued with his work - had stayed at his task. When you are building in the cathedral of a better world, when you are building in the cathedral of a fine/^{united}and loving home, when you are building in the cathedral of a community rich in social service and social consciousness, when you are building the cathedral of a world united for peace, when you are building a cathedral to the brotherhood and to the divinity of all men - you will not be so desirous of always coming in out of the storm. You will not be afraid of sacrificing, of showing your courage, because the goal will have so inspired you that you cannot but be courageous.

And so, as we read these studies in courage, what better prayer could we offer to God than simply this: that He grant us the understanding to have an intelligent and meaningful faith, the vision to see the importance of our own contributionstowards this goal, and the strength to stand up and be counted among the courageous when courage is demanded of us.

Amen.