

Death's Heroes?

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In 1954, the great Israeli poet Natan Alterman was disturbed by the way that the new Jewish State was observing Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Memorial Day, with a primary emphasis on the Warsaw Ghetto rebels. Hear now this excerpt of Alterman's poem, imagining words of those martyred rebels:

"And on Yom HaShoah, the fighters and rebels have said:

Do not place us under a spotlight, severing our connection to all others who lived in Exile.

At this hour of commemoration, we step off the pedestal
To mingle again in the darkness amidst the story of the whole House of Israel.

The fighters and the rebels said: The day of witnessing,
Its principal and true symbol is not a flaming barricade stronghold
And not the image of a young man or woman who came out to assault or die,

...

No, that is not the essence of the period. Do not crown it with battle flags,
Seeing only in them its essence, its redemption, and its justification.

The fighters and rebels said: We are a part of many people,
And part of the people's honor and bravery and its deep, stifled weeping.

We are a part of that time like no other, a time that rejects the banality of platitudes ...

Those who fell with weapons in their hands might not accept the *mechitzah*, the separation

Between their deaths and the deaths of all the [others].

...

The fighters and rebels have said: The bravery and honor of this people
Also belong to the fathers who said, 'The underground will bring disaster upon us.'

And to the boy or girl who marched and marched until being lost who knows where,

Leaving nothing but one little white sock in the archives for remembrance.

...

God's stars are the witnesses of them all."ⁱ

Through his poetry, Alterman insists that death has no particular heroes. All are worthy of remembrance.

Studying this poem in Israel this summer with the brilliant Rachel Korazim, I contemplated more broadly than the Holocaust context: Who is a hero in death? The person who lives the longest? The one whose funeral is best attended? People who mount vigorous struggles against overwhelming physical or mental illnesses, taking up arms, as it were, to keep death at bay? Or those who accept life's end with equanimity, trusting that whatever follows life in this world can only be a blessing?

Even that range of options suggests that we are defined by the way we die. Alterman insists, though, that nobody is more heroic than another in death.

New York *Times* columnist David Brooks suggests a different measure. "It occurred to me," Brooks writes, "that there were two sets of virtues, the resume virtues and the eulogy virtues. The resume virtues are the skills you bring to the marketplace. The eulogy virtues are the ones that are talked about at your funeral – whether you were kind, brave, honest, or faithful. Were you capable of deep love?"ⁱⁱ

Brooks argues that "We all know that the eulogy virtues are more important than the resume ones."ⁱⁱⁱ The trouble is that too many of us behave as if good grades, career achievements, athletic conquests, public accolades, and stock portfolios are life's ultimate measuring sticks. They are not. Brooks proposes that each of us adopt a "moral bucket list." Cultivating our best selves requires practice and commitment.

Adapted from Brooks' "moral bucket list," let me suggest:

Item 1: Humility. Let us acknowledge our imperfections in order to work on them. Let us embrace our self-worth to know that we deserve to be better.

Item 2: Connect to others with purpose. Nurture the loving bonds that give life its meaning. Join with others to improve ourselves, each other, our community, and the world.

Item 3: Whatever our chosen field – in the paid workplace, at school, as a volunteer – Brooks urges us to "turn a career into a calling." Set about to achieve purpose, big or small, beyond the self.

Item 4: Follow your conscience. And if any of us doesn't have one yet, we must find it. Being good is so much more important than being great.

Even as this hour turns our thoughts to those we have loved and lost, *Yizkor* also reminds us of our own mortality. One day, our loved ones will sit in this Sanctuary or another, remembering us on Yom Kippur. *Yizkor* urges us to ask ourselves: How do we want to be remembered?

Like the ghetto fighters of Alterman's poem, we do not want to be recalled for how we died, and none of us should need to be remembered as more special than everybody else, except to our own dear ones. A precious few among us may leave behind some feat of public progress, an identifiable imprint enduring on Earth after our time is done.

For most of us, though, our heroism will be recalled in private moments. In our individual struggles to be our best selves. In the ways we touched the people in our lives and how we made them feel. In the lifetimes of love that are our legacy, living in this world long after we have gone.

On this Yom Kippur, let each of us begin to write a "moral bucket list." Let each item be an action we must take or a way that we must grow to transform ourselves into the person we hope to become before our time on Earth is done. As uncertain as we are about the days that remain to us, we know for sure that we'll never check off every item on that "moral bucket list" to our full satisfaction. The reward is in the struggle. Then, when the time comes for our name to be called at *Yizkor*, let us be counted among the heroes – of life.

Amen.

ⁱ Natan Alterman, *Yom HaZikaron v'haMordim (The Day of Remembrance and of the Rebels)*, 1951. Translation by Rachel Korazim (2018), as adapted and excerpted by Barry Block.

ⁱⁱ David Brooks, "The Moral Bucket List," *The New York Times*, April 11, 2015. Accessed on July 29, 2018 at <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/12/opinion/sunday/david-brooks-the-moral-bucket-list.html>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.