

R. Yitzchak Blau is the Rosh Kollel at Yeshivat Shvilei Hatorah. His book, *Fresh Fruit and Vintage Wine: The Ethics and Wisdom of the Aggada* was recently published by Ktav.

IS COURAGE A JEWISH VALUE?

Courage does not rank high on the list of common topics in traditional Jewish literature of moral and religious exhortation. More popular topics include *bitahon* and *emunah*, faith and belief, *hesed* and *mishpat*, compassion and justice, and *shemirat ha-mitsvot*, commitment to observing God's commandments. This literature has much to say about character flaws such as anger, arrogance and laziness but less about cowardice. In theory, we might conclude that Judaism exhibits little interest in the tension between courage and cowardice.¹

This conclusion is unwarranted. Sometimes, a concept appears in a terminology with which we are unaccustomed. Thus, our searching turns up empty only because we look in the wrong places for the wrong words. Furthermore, some values may be so interrelated with other values that discussion of one invariably implies the significance of the other. Since courage represents a value deeply interconnected with other values, the ideal of courage may lie implicit and unstated in many Jewish texts. Some Jewish texts clearly emphasize the need for courage while other sources implicitly assume its significance.

A fairly common biblical phrase, "*hazzak ve-amats*," suggests the divine call for courage. In four of the places where that phrase appears, the verse also says: "do not be afraid." Moses uses the phrase when telling the people not to fear the Canaanite nations (Devarim 31:6). God employs it when charging Joshua with his mission of leadership, telling him not to be afraid of the challenge (*Joshua* 1:9). Joshua also says "*hizku ve-imtsu*"

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¹ Lionel Trilling argues that "there is no mention in the *Aboth* of courage or heroism." See his essay entitled "Wordsworth and the Rabbis," *The Moral Obligation to be Intelligent: Selected Essays by Lionel Trilling*, ed. Leon Wieseltier (Farrar, Strauss, Giroux: New York, 2000), p. 186.

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to encourage the people not to be intimidated by the Canaanites (*Joshua* 10:25). Finally, Hizkiyah's officers use the phrase when exhorting the people to stand brave despite the threat of Sennaherib (II *Divrei Ha-Yamim* 32:7). These examples indicate that the phrase relates to overcoming fear. A biblical phrase employed by God conveys the need to stand resolute in the face of dangers and difficulties.

Jewish law includes two specific *mitsvot* that depend upon courage. The Torah relates that a priest addresses the populace before battle, exhorting them not to fear the enemy. While some prominent authorities do not view the priest's words as a commandment, Rambam understands the verse as normative. In his *Mishneh Torah*² and in his *Sefer ha-Mitsvot*,³ Rambam lists a negative prohibition not to fear the enemy and desert the battle. According to this view, one of the six hundred and thirteen commandments represents a call for courage.

The Torah also charges the judge: "do not be afraid because of a man" (*Devarim* 1:17). Hazal, on *Sanhedrin* 6b, derive from this verse that a judge cannot back out in mid-case because one of the litigants is a rough fellow liable to harass the judge if the ruling goes against him. In the same gemara, R. Yehoshua ben Karha suggests that this verse instructs a student sitting in front of his master to speak up if he sees a reason why a rich litigant should lose the case. Rashi understands that we want this student to overcome his reverence for the teacher.⁴ This interpretation does not explain why the wealth of the litigant is a relevant point. R. Barukh Epstein explains that the student is worried about offending the powerful in society in addition to concern about his teacher's honor.⁵ Our verse warns rabbinic judges not to cater their decisions to aristocrats or bullies.

SETTING UP A FRAMEWORK

Before analyzing many more traditional sources pertaining to courage, we will first set up a framework for our investigations. For most topics of this nature, I find helpful insights in the great literature of the Western world; all the more so regarding a topic less clearly discussed in Jewish sources. The discussions of Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, and others help

² *Hilkhot Melakhim* 7:15.

³ Negative commandment 58. *Mishneh Torah* cites *Devarim* 20:3 as the source of the prohibition whereas *Sefer ha-Mitsvot* cites *Devarim* 7:21.

⁴ Rashi, *Sanhedrin* 6b, s.v. *she-yoshev*.

⁵ R. Barukh Epstein, *Torah Temimah*, *Devarim* 1:17, no. 25.

frame the questions for us so that when we return to our own literature we can see how Jewish thinkers responded to these questions.

Let us begin with a survey of important philosophical questions regarding courage. 1) Is courage manifest only at wartime or only in response to mortal danger, or is courage relevant and significant in a much broader canvass of human life? 2) Does courage entail the absence of fear or the ability to accomplish one's goal despite fearful emotions? 3) What is the relationship between fear and other virtues? After looking at the general literature regarding these questions, we shall return to Jewish sources with a ready framework at hand. The Jewish sources bring a new angle to the discussion. How does belief in God and divine providence impact on the question of fear and courage? Do the specific value judgments of various religions influence the discussion? Clearly, the last question opens up the possibility of Judaism differing from other religion regarding our issue.

One final introductory point merits mention. A standard Christian concept speaks of four cardinal virtues and three theological virtues. The four consist of prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice while the theological virtues add faith, hope, and charity. The presence of fortitude among the cardinal virtues meant that many great Christian writers, including Augustine, Ambrose, and Aquinas devoted considerable energy to analyzing courage. We cannot ask why fortitude does not appear on the Jewish list of cardinal virtues because no such list exists. Why Jewish thinkers never developed a parallel list is an important question that lies beyond our current scope of investigation.

FACING DEATH AND OTHER SCENARIOS OF COURAGE

Plato's Republic (Book 4) lists four virtues that enable the success of the State: wisdom, fortitude, temperance, and justice. Some virtues depend, for their realization, on every member of society, whereas others depend upon a select group. "Temperance is unlike courage or wisdom, each of which resides in a part only, the one making the State wise and the other valiant; not so temperance, which extends to the whole, and runs through all the notes on the scale."⁶ Only the Guardians who run the State need wisdom and only those who go to battle require courage. For Plato, the courage that stands up to social ostracizing or other such fears does not constitute the necessary and relevant courage.

⁶ Book 4, 432. The translation is from *Plato's Republic*, tr. Benjamin Jowett (Airmont Publishing: New York, 1968).

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One criticism of Plato argues that emphasizing the importance of those who wage war leads to a glorification of martial life, including its more unsavory aspects such as rampant cruelty and plundering innocents. As Rollo May points out, this type of courage can “denigrate into brutality.”⁷ If Jewish thinkers were wary about glorifying the military, this might explain their reticence about courage. On the other hand, the Platonist can offer a ready response. We can exalt the soldier’s willingness to die for his country on the battlefield while simultaneously denigrating the morally pernicious aspects of wartime. Praising one aspect of war does not entail an endorsement of the entire edifice.

Medieval Christians would be less likely to emphasize the courage of the soldier and indeed, Aquinas broadens the concept of courage to include the martyr. In his *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas contends that Christians who chose to relinquish their lives rather than renounce their faith represent the heights of fortitude. He also restricts courage to scenarios in which the hero withstands the fear of death. Like Plato, he excludes people who stand up to other forms of intimidation from authentic courage.

Aquinas offers two arguments for his position but each invites criticism. “A virtue by its nature always presses to its utmost objective.”⁸ The basis for this assertion remains unclear. Why can we not attribute the existence of a virtue even to instances where that virtue is not pressed to the utmost? In other words, why view the virtue of courage as an all or nothing affair? Aquinas also mentions a Talmudic style *kal ve-homer* or *a fortiori* argument. “He who stands firm against greater evils naturally stands firm also against the lesser.”⁹ The person who sticks to his ideals even to the point of death will certainly do so when confronted with lesser dangers—so we know he has courage. Conversely, the person willing to lose a job may not be so quick to join the battle and we remain unclear about his courage.

We could criticize this *kal ve-homer* as suffering from the same all or nothing flaw mentioned above. A more fundamental problem is that the very *kal ve-homer* may be false. Different fears affect people in different ways, and the willing martyr or soldier may falter when confronted with physical pain or emotional distress. Emerson says it well:

⁷ Rollo May, *The Courage to Create* (W.W. Norton: New York, 1975), p. 14.

⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Question 123, Article 4. All translations of Aquinas come from *Summa Theologica*, tr. the fathers of the English Dominican Province (Burns, Oates and Washburn: London, 1935).

⁹ *Ibid.*

There is a courage of the cabinet as well as a courage of the field; a courage of manners in private assemblies, and another in public assemblies; a courage which enables one man to speak masterly to a hostile company, whilst another man who can easily face a cannon's mouth dares not open his own.¹⁰

We could attribute this to the unfathomable and irrational workings of the human psyche.

Alternatively, we could provide logical explanations for these cases. In some ways, death represents an easier challenge as it happens once and is quickly over. Facing up to other challenges frequently entails an acceptance of long term suffering. It is not obvious that death always represents the “*homer*” in the equation.

On the other hand, the fear of cheapening the concept of courage until anything qualifies can make us more sympathetic to Plato or Aquinas. In Rollo May's *The Courage to Create*, he enumerates various kinds of courage, such as physical courage, moral courage, and social courage. The latter consists of the willingness to “relate to other human beings, the capacity to risk one's self in the hope of achieving meaningful intimacy.”¹¹ No doubt, forming personal relationships can be frightening. At the same time, this position lends itself to easy caricature. Imagine a comparison between the nervousness accompanying attending some mundane social gathering and the fears of a crusader for freedom in Soviet Russia. The very equation seems offensive.¹² We may need to expand courage beyond facing the fear of death while still not expanding it to include dealing with just any kind of nervousness.

Senator John McCain, in collaboration with Mark Salter, writes that American culture “has defined courage down” and “attributed courage to all manners of actions that may indeed be admirable but hardly compare to the conscious self—sacrifice on behalf of something greater than self—interest that once defined courage.”¹³ McCain's book adheres to this sentiment as his volume profiles mostly people who risk death on behalf of an ideal. I am sympathetic to McCain's concerns but the response need not go to the opposite extreme of limiting courage to those who face mortal danger.

¹⁰ “Courage,” *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson Volume 7: Society and Solitude* (Houghton Mifflin and Company: Boston, 1968), pp. 267-268.

¹¹ *The Courage to Create*, p. 17.

¹² Dr. Will Lee correctly pointed out to me that, for select individuals, confronting these social fears requires great courage. Nevertheless, I stand by the general point.

¹³ John McCain with Marc Salter, *Why Courage Matters: The Way To A Braver Life* (Random House: New York, 2004), p. 13.

ABSENCE OF FEAR OR OVERCOMING FEAR

Does the courageous person feel frightened and yet do the right thing or reach a point where they simply feel no fear? We could argue that the person indifferent to danger shows no courage because courage involves overcoming feelings of trepidation. Robert C. Roberts and W. Jay Wood offer two cogent responses to that argument. Our hero may have achieved fearlessness through previous instances in which he or she faced up to danger. If so, the current absence of fear stems from courageous choices made earlier in life in which the person overcame the pressures of such feelings. Surely, a person deserves credit for lack of fear achieved through extensive efforts. Secondly, if the circumstances are such that most people would experience fear, we can still term courageous the person who somehow rises above standard human reactions.¹⁴

Other examples exist where the lack of fear may indicate an absence of courage but that is more because of what the absence of fear reflects about the scenario than because of the lack of fear per se. Aristotle lists five cases that seem like courage but are not truly so.¹⁵ People who assume that they are in no danger due to previous similar experiences or those who are ignorant of the danger do not exhibit courage. In the latter example, the person does not knowingly face the test of courage since they think no danger exists. In the former example, the person may actually know that little danger exists and therefore does not truly confront a situation that calls for courage. Neither of the above resembles a case with real danger that the hero has accurate awareness of. Absence of fear in instances of genuine danger can still be courageous.

This issue takes us to the heart of the debate between Aristotle and the Stoics. The Stoics claimed that we should only care about things we control such as virtue and character. We maintain control of our choices and no one can remove that power. On the other hand, all issues relating to material flourishing including health, wealth, and the like, remain out of our ultimate control and are not truly significant. The Stoic sage who fully internalized this perspective would know no sadness of fear since death, suffering, and misfortune constitute unimportant aspects of life.

In Letter 123, Seneca explains what the Stoic must overcome to achieve virtue:

¹⁴ Robert C. Roberts and W. Jay Wood, *Intellectual Virtues: An Essay in Religious Epistemology* (Calendon Press: Oxford, 2007), p. 218.

¹⁵ *Nicomachean Ethics* 3:8.

The enticements come from wealth, pleasure, beauty, ambition, and everything else which is attractive and appealing. The repulsions come from effort, death, pain, public shame, and a restricted lifestyle. Hence we ought to train ourselves not to fear the latter and not to desire the former.

Poverty is only bad for you if you resist it. Death is not evil—do you ask what it is? Death alone is the even—handed law which governs the human race.¹⁶

Epictetus, a former slave turned Stoic philosopher, provides an even more radical formulation:

Such a one's son is dead. What do you think of it? Answer: it is independent on choice, it is not an evil. Such a one is disinherited by his father. What do you think of it? It is independent on choice, it is not an evil. Caesar hath condemned him. This is independent on choice, it is not an evil. He hath been afflicted by it. This is dependent on choice, it is an evil. He hath supported it bravely. This is dependent on choice, it is a good.¹⁷

Nothing is good or evil but choice.¹⁸

The extent of this Stoic position may horrify us, but it expresses a logical position taken to an extreme. The important part of life is the part we control, the virtue manifest in our choices and reactions. Even when tragic news reaches us, the real question remains how we react. If we react with fear or sadness, we fail to exhibit virtue. If we react with equanimity, we have achieved Stoic virtue.

This position sheds new light on Aristotle's famous doctrine of the Golden Mean. Our initial response to Aristotle may wonder about the importance of this idea. Does not everyone agree that extreme character traits are bad? Stoic philosophy clarifies that this point is anything but obvious. Seneca compares the call for moderation of the passions to a call for becoming "moderately insane" or "moderately sick."¹⁹ If these things are bad, we should resist them in total. Of course, Aristotle

¹⁶ *Seneca: Selected Philosophical Letters*, tr. Brad Inwood (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2007).

¹⁷ *The Moral Discourses of Epictetus*, Book 3, Chapter 8. The translation is from *The Moral Discourses of Epictetus*, tr. Elizabeth Carter (J. M. Dent and Sons: London, 1966). For a good discussion of Stoic approaches to courage and their application to contemporary military culture, see Nancy Sherman, *Stoic Warriors: The Ancient Philosophy Behind the Military Mind* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2005).

¹⁸ *The Discourses of Epictetus*, Book 3, Chapter 10.

¹⁹ Seneca, Letter 85.

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resists Seneca's comparison between fear and sadness and insanity and sickness. We entirely avoid the latter but find some value in a moderate dosage of the former. Thus, the question hinges on how we view the passions.

A religious person may be tempted to adopt a position similar to the Stoics. If we assume that listening to the word of God represents the only true value, then nothing else should matter. Perhaps the religious Stoic will care only about choices regarding fulfillment of spiritual duties. Here, different religious attitudes come into play. Aquinas believes that temporal goods are goods, albeit on a lesser scale. Since they are goods, it makes sense to fear their loss. If religion values human life and some basic comfort, then the religious person may fear the loss of such things. Aquinas contrasts the Stoic view with that of Augustine and Aristotle. The Stoics held that temporal goods are not goods so it makes no sense to fear their potential absence. According to Augustine, "these temporal goods are goods of the least account, and that was also the opinion of the Peripatetics. Hence, their contraries are indeed to be feared."²⁰

Aquinas points out the possibility of courage coming from an improper religious attitude. "Hence it may happen that a man fears death and other temporal evils less than he ought, for the reason that he loves them less than he ought."²¹ From this perspective, Stoic equanimity actually constitutes moral failure.

Leroy S. Rounen expresses a critique of the Stoic position quite sharply.

All full blown Stoicisms, for all their nobility, are inherently anti-humanistic. The reason for this is that humanistic values are based in love for the human, and love—for all its rewards—is always, also, a source of pain. Yet Stoicism, in its various forms, is always an attempt to rise above pain.²²

If a parent feels no fear for the safety of a child or expresses no remorse upon that child's untimely death, we have reason to question the extent of parental love. Can one have love with no accompanying possibility of fear and sadness? If we answer in the negative and we assume that we value such loving relationships, the Stoic position loses its attractiveness.

When we return to Jewish sources, we now have a helpful framework for applying this question. The Jewish attitude to fear may depend

²⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Question 125, Article 4.

²¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Question 126, Article 1.

²² Leroy S. Rounen, "Stoics, Christians, and the Courage to Be," *Courage* ed. Barbara Darling Smith (University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame, 2002), p.35.

upon Judaism's position on temporal goods and on human loving relationships.

COURAGE AND OTHER VALUES

The link between courage and other virtues can be approached in two ways. We can say, as did Dr. Johnson: "Courage is reckoned the greatest of all virtues; because, unless a man has that virtue, he has no security for preserving any others."²³ As Winston Churchill put it, courage is "the first of human qualities . . . because it guarantees all the others."²⁴ C. S. Lewis also notes: "you cannot practice any of the other virtues very long without bringing this one into play."²⁵ All other virtues sometimes confront frightening situations. We want to be honest but fear we will lose our jobs as a result. We want to be generous but fear that we will not save enough money in our pension plan to support ourselves later in life. The person dominated by fears will soon find it impossible to practice any virtue successfully.

We can also tackle this point from another angle. Honesty and beneficence are basic good traits which seem to almost always be of worth. Even if we just want to know who won the World Series in 1946, we value an honest answer to our question. Even if the generous act is just a gift to someone not truly in need, we tend to evaluate such giving positively. This all changes when we investigate courage. When thinking about someone who resists fears and takes risks, we invariably need to know what ideal motivated them to do so. We do not admire the person who bravely plays Russian roulette with a revolver, or the person playing chicken with cars speeding along a major highway. As a result, analysis of courage invariably entails an analysis of other values. Which things in life are worthy enough to takes risks for and which things are not?

Note that I am not endorsing the doctrine of "the unity of the virtues" which contends that, in their more developed form, all the virtues invariably come together.²⁶ My argument is that courage relates to other ideals more intensively than do other virtues. David Pears writes: "courage is a virtue exhibited in predicaments in which two different values

²³ James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, April 5, 1775.

²⁴ Cited by John McCain with Marc Salter, *Why Courage Matters: The Way To A Braver Life*, p. 39.

²⁵ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Harper Collins: San Francisco, 1952), p. 79.

²⁶ See Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* Book 6, number 13.

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conflict with one another, the value of the external goal and the disvalue of the countergoal.”²⁷ In other words, courage always involves an evaluation of goals a person hopes to accomplish and fears he hopes to avoid.

I am avoiding a widely discussed philosophical question. Namely, is the willingness to take risks for a foolish cause an example of courage used poorly or not courage at all? While many philosophers address this point, I think it less crucial for our purposes. Even if we define such instances as courage poorly applied, our analysis still reveals the connection between courage and other value judgments. We do not ask as many questions about context and circumstances where a person acts honestly or with generosity as we do when he acts courageously. Evaluating the act depends upon whether the end goal justified the risk.

JEWISH SOURCES

Whether or not some Hebrew analogue for the term “courage” appears frequently in Jewish literature, I believe that the concept lurks in the background on many texts. We have already mentioned Rambam’s position regarding wartime and a prohibition for the judiciary. Jewish stories of martyrdom also grant value to courage. When the gemara relates the story of a mother and seven children who went to their deaths to avoid idol worship (*Gittin* 57b) or of R. Hananiah ben Teradyon refusing to actively hasten his death despite great suffering (*Avodah Zarah* 18a), we surely have profiles in courage.

One Talmudic story clearly contrasts those with courage and those lacking this important trait. A slave of King Yannai killed a man and the king himself was called to court. When Shimon ben Shetah asked Yannai to stand, he replied: “I will not do what you say but what your colleagues say.” When Shimon turned to his right and left, he found that the other judges were looking down at the ground (*Sanhedrin* 19a). This story places the bravery of Shimon ben Shetah in stark opposition to the cowardice of the other judges.

All the aforementioned examples relate to scenarios with danger to life. This is true about going to battle, about martyrdom, and about standing up to a monarch’s pressure. Other stories highlight courage in different contexts. The gemara praises Judah for publicly sanctifying the divine name when he admits that he fathered Tamar’s baby (*Sotah* 10b),

²⁷ David Pears, “Courage as a Mean,” *Essays in Aristotle’s Ethics*, ed. Amelie Oksenberg Rorty (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1980), p. 181.

and presumably also conveys that it took great courage to do so. Judah risked not loss of life but tremendous loss of stature. Abaye's critical comment that a rabbi with universal popularity must not be rebuking his community (*Ketubot* 105b) indicates the need for another type of courage. In all probability, this rabbi is not in mortal danger from angry parishioners but he does run risks by challenging them to improve.

Some rabbinic authorities extend Rambam's prohibition beyond the battlefield. Rabbenu Yonah derives from the verses prohibiting fear in wartime that if a person sees that a "*tsara*" (danger or a trouble) is close, he should trust in divine salvation.²⁸ This perspective moves beyond wartime, although, depending upon how we understand "*tsara*," it may still be restricted to mortal danger. R. Hayyim Shmuelevitz also expands the prohibition to other contexts. He works with an interpretation of Rambam in which the frightened soldier is guilty for endangering others and causing them to lose spirit. R. Shmuelevitz says that anyone lacking faith and confidence, thereby negatively impacting upon the community, should not be part of the community.²⁹ He directs his message at yeshiva students so it does not seem to relate to immediate threats to personal safety.

If we have established that Judaism does value courage in a myriad of contexts, we can then ask the next question: does the Stoic worldview have a place in Jewish thought? Two theological questions influence the answer. Different views of the workings of divine providence have an impact. Someone who maintains a very intensive conception of divine providence in which every irritation and each benefit reflect a precise application of divine judgment may well adopt a Stoic position. Why fear what simply reflects cosmic justice? If, on the other hand, we think that providence often works in a general or collective fashion, and the innocent do sometimes suffer for various reasons (perhaps to preserve free will), it makes more sense to be afraid of suffering *per se*.

Now, the above divides too neatly. Even the heavy-handed view of providence should allow for fear. A person can fear sin itself. Furthermore, the sinner may justifiably fear punishment for his sins. Yet, from this perspective, it makes sense to be more nervous about sins since they cause the suffering. The point is that the "hothouse" conception of providence view makes it less reasonable to fear "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune."³⁰

²⁸ Rabbenu Yonah, *Sha'arei Tesbuva* 3:32.

²⁹ R. Hayyim Shmuelevitz, *Sibot Mussar, Shoftim* 5731.

³⁰ I borrow the term "hothouse" from Shalom Carmy's perceptive discussion of different conceptions of providence. See his "Tell Them I've Had a Good Enough

R. Yisrael Kanievsky, in the course of analyzing two possible explanations for Rambam's prohibition against cowardice in wartime, provides an example of how conceptions of providence can influence courage. He rejects a position in which soldiers confidently assume freedom from harm—soldiers lack such a guarantee. However, soldiers can assert that victory depends totally on the will of God and has nothing to do with the strength of the enemy. This understanding enables the Jewish soldier to avoid fear in battle.³¹ A different rabbinic thinker with a stronger conception of the natural order might counter that the quality of an enemy's weaponry and troops do impact on the outcome. Here, different ideas about providence directly affect our thinking about fear and courage. Be that as it may, Judaism certainly incorporates various positions of the question of providence and contemporary thinkers have enough precedent to rely upon either position.

As Aquinas noted, the theological question of the value of temporal goods and human relationships also exerts influence. Should we be afraid of losing a job or of being separated from family members? That depends on whether or not we think these things matter. Does Judaism say that the only true value is adhering to the word of God, or do other things also rate?

A religious expression akin to the Stoic view appears in *Orhot Tsaddikim*, an anonymous ethical tract from the late middle ages. The author states that worry about this world is *meguneh me'od*, very degrading. To worry about sin makes sense but one should not worry about aspects of this world. The author tells the story of a sage who saw another person looking worried. "He said to him: 'If you are worried about this world, God should diminish your worry. If you are worried about the next world, God should add greater concern to your worry.'"³²

Orhot Tsaddikim's response to suffering reminds us of the Stoic perspective. If a person loses a relative, he should be concerned that his own sins may have caused that relative's demise. If a famine or plague hits your area, worry that your sins brought the calamity. The Stoics claim that the only thing worth focusing on is character and virtue while nothing else should alarm or concern us. This Jewish ethical tract contends that only sin should concern us. Fears for the fate of loved ones goes unmentioned as a response to difficulties.

Life," *Jewish Perspectives on the Experience of Suffering*, ed. Shalom Carmy (Jason Aronson: Northvale, 1999), pp. 97-154.

³¹ R. Yisrael Kanievsky, *Birkat Perets, Shoftim*.

³² *Orhot Tsaddikim, sha'ar ha-da'aga*.

Thos of us who share Aquinas' view that some things this in world, especially the people we love, are worth caring about, might find it hard to accept *Orhot Tsaddikim's* position. Fortunately, other strands exist in our tradition as well. In the famed *aggadah* of the mother and seven children who resist coercion to worship idols; the story includes a seemingly unnecessary element. Just before the Romans slaughter the youngest of the children, the mother asks if she can kiss the child. Why is this point relevant to a tale of martyrdom? R. Shaul Nathanson explains that we might have thought that this woman had been so dulled by tragedy that she no longer felt affection for her children. The kiss reveals that she intensely loved them but still thought that some ideals are worth dying for.³³ We imagine that love for the children also means that she feared their death and was pained by it.

R. Soloveitchik offers a powerful alternative to Stoic religion:

Judaism, in contradistinction to mystical quietism, which recommended toleration of pain, wants man to cry out aloud against any kind of pain, to react indignantly to all kinds of injustice and unfairness. For Judaism held that the individual who displays indifference to pain and suffering, who meekly reconciles himself to the ugly, disproportionate and unjust in life, is not capable of appreciating beauty and goodness. Whoever permits his legitimate needs to go unsatisfied will never be sympathetic to the crying needs of others. A human morality based on love and friendship, on sharing in the travails of others cannot be practiced if the person's own need-awareness is dull and he does not know what suffering is.³⁴

R. Soloveitchik argues that participation in loving relationships means that we will feel the pain of others and fear for their welfare. Even more strikingly, he states that this also requires concern for one's own welfare. The individual indifferent to his own pain will soon lose concern for the suffering of others. R. Soloveitchik's perspective leads to an endorsement of nervousness regarding human welfare in this world and not only concern about sin.

A similar religious divide concerns conflicting verses about fear. *Mishlei* 28:14 tells us: "Fortunate is the person always afraid." However, *Isaiah* 33:14 states: "The sinners of Zion are afraid," and a Talmudic sage interpreted this verse as identifying fear as the mark of the sinner. The gemara pits these two verses against each other and resolves the conflict by saying

³³ R. Shaul Nathanson, *Divrei Shaul, Gittin* 57b.

³⁴ R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah," *Tradition* 17:2 (Spring 1978), p. 65.

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that the appropriate fear relates to matters of Torah (*Berakhot* 60a). One could understand this legitimate area of fear in a narrow way that agrees with *Orhot Tsaddikim*. The only worthy nervousness relates to religious performance. On the other hand, the gemara applies the verse in *Mishlei* to the story of Kamtsa and Bar Kamtsa (*Gittin* 55b). R. Hanokh Zundel from Salant explains that in the context of the Kamtsa story, “they had reason to be afraid as they were under Roman control and prophets had foreseen their suffering.”³⁵ This fear relates to subjugation to the Romans more than to worry about sin.

The same position appears in R. Levi ben Gershom’s commentary on that verse in *Mishlei*. He writes that we should fear frightening things and try to avoid them. Those that harden their hearts against appropriate fear will soon fall victim to the lurking dangers. As an example, he writes of Jews unwilling to submit to the Babylonians at the end of the first temple or to the Romans at the end of the second temple. Apparently, a healthier dose of fear would have prevented unnecessary provocations of the ruling powers. This verse inspires Ralbag to write of fear of suffering, not fear of sin.

Ralbag’s staunch belief in general providence fits with this perspective.³⁶ As noted, those who believe that God constantly manages every detail of existence to conform to justice may have less cause for fear regarding matters of this world. Those who think that God sometimes employs general providence, and who therefore emphasize the role of human effort and initiative in determining our well-being, should have greater cause to fear the difficulties of our current existence.

I hasten to emphasize that endorsing fear of misfortune does not negate the value of a healthy fear of sin. Religious thinkers view sin as an evil to be avoided and feared. The point is merely that fear of sin does not exhaust the category of justifiable or even of admirable fears for a religious person.

A MORE PRACTICAL QUESTION

Let us put aside the theological questions and return to a practical question. Does the Torah demand that we feel no fear? Rambam’s prohibition

³⁵ *Ets Yosef*, *Gittin* 55b.

³⁶ For a good study of Ralbag’s views, see Robert Eisen, *Gersonides on Providence, Covenant, and the Chosen People: A Study in Medieval Jewish Philosophy and Biblical Commentary* (SUNY Press: Albany, 1995).

regarding fear at wartime could be understood in that way. Ramban³⁷ and Ra'avad³⁸ disagree, arguing that no such prohibition exists. Ramban's critique points out that the priest tells those afraid to go home and not hurt the battle effort (Devarim 20:8). How could the priest publicly endorse wrongdoing? Both the *Meshekh Hokhma*³⁹ and the Steipler Gaon defend Rambam in the same fashion. The Torah only prohibits abandoning one's brethren on the battlefield. The priest's announcement takes place before the battle begins, at a time when admitting fear does not violate a Torah prohibition. It seems that apprehension regarding battle is quite normal and natural. What is problematic is to hurt your people by deserting on the battlefield. This approach moves the problem from the realm of emotions to the realm of action.

Admitting the legitimacy of certain fears should not blind us to the dangers of excessive fear. R. Kook insightfully explores some of these pitfalls. He notes that disproportionate nervousness often brings about the very danger generating the fear. The nervous driver is dangerous behind the wheel and the person panicked about social interaction will not succeed at making friends. R. Kook recommends not denying those fears but putting them in proper perspective. He utilizes the image of artistically filling in the rest of the painting. Bad accidents may happen but their likelihood is quite small. Fear comes from focusing on the small possibility while ignoring the larger canvass. After we comprehend this, the nervousness can actually be of help. A bit of nervousness provides powerful energy when the concerns are placed in perspective due to a vision of the total portrait.⁴⁰

R. Kook also notes the dangers of excessive fear of divine punishment. Such fear could entail a pagan perspective of God as a capricious tyrant who indiscriminately metes out punishment. That perspective does not honor God nor does it engender love of God.⁴¹ Furthermore, excessive religious fear sometimes lapses into fear of thought or into an overwhelming emotion negating a person's natural ethical intuitions.⁴² R. Kook views all of the above as religiously problematic. Thus, even fear of God has appropriate measure and proportion.

³⁷ See Ramban's glosses on the *Sefer ha-Mitsvot*, negative commandment 58.

³⁸ Ra'avad's position appears in his glosses on the list of commandments at the beginning of *Mishneh Torah*.

³⁹ R. Meir Simha Hakohen, *Meshekh Hokhma*, Devarim 20:3.

⁴⁰ R. Avraham Yitshak Hakohen Kook, *Middot ha-Ra'aya* "Pahdanut" 4.

⁴¹ *Middot ha-Ra'aya* "Kavod" 3.

⁴² R. Avraham Yitshak Hakohen Kook, *Orot ha-Kodesh* 3 (Mossad Harav Kook: Jerusalem, 5754), Introduction, pp. 26-27.

TRADITION

CONCLUSION

We have seen the strong interrelationship between evaluations of courage and other theological questions. Questions such as “How do we conceive of divine providence?” and “What value does Judaism grant to human loving relationships?” impact on our conceptions of courage and fear. I believe that for most of us, the possibility of innocents suffering is part of our human experience. In addition, we think that worrying about the welfare of our loved ones is very much a worthy religious attitude. At the same time, we remain aware of R. Kook’s concerns regarding the many dangers of excessive nervousness. Perhaps faith in God helps us avoid the overdone fear even though we remain concerned on a more moderate level.

Recent years of Jewish history reveal the importance of courage and the need to emphasize it more in our communal discourse. Several factors make intimidation a powerful and potentially pernicious force in our Orthodox community. It is small and tight knit and thus communal pressures loom larger. Debates with the outside world often generate a “circle the wagons” mentality that would then castigate anyone involved in communal criticism. The positive values of loyalty to our community and its rabbinate sometimes stifle the need for legitimate introspection. Finally, the force of religious zealots may frighten even the intrepid crusader for justice.⁴³

Great rabbis are not automatically immune to these pressures either. R. Yehiel Yaakov Weinberg was one of the greatest rabbis of the twentieth century. After spending World War II in a German POW camp for Russian nationals, he moved to Montreux after the war. Despite many offers of significant rabbinic positions in more populous Jewish cities, he remained in Switzerland until his passing in 1966. In a letter, he explains his decision.

I am afraid to go to the Land of Israel. There are different worlds there, which reject and hate one another. I am part of two worlds, and which one should I choose when I go there. In the end, I will have to remain in solitude. Therefore, it is better for me to be alone in an empty desert than in a noisy and raucous atmosphere.⁴⁴

⁴³ For some discussion of the influence of religious zealots on the community, see Menachem Friedman, *Hevra ve-Dat: ha-Ortodoksiya ha-Lo Tsionit be-Erets Yisrael 1918-1936* (Yad Ben Zvi: Jerusalem, 5738). A particularly relevant episode appears on pages 345-348.

⁴⁴ Marc Shapiro, *Between The Yeshiva World And Modern Orthodoxy: The Life and Works of Rabbi Yehiel Yaakov R. Weinberg* (Littman Library: London, 1999), p. 170, note 16.

I do not cite this letter to criticize R. Weinberg. He had a very difficult life and deserved the peace and quiet of Montreux. Moreover, he contributed many important responsa from his Swiss home. But the letter does indicate that the finest rabbinic scholars can also be motivated by nervousness and worry. Frightened emotions prove challenging for our laity and for our leadership. Orthodoxy needs to articulate these challenges more openly.

Think about how our community has responded to some of the ethical lapses of public figures involved in monetary dishonesty or in cases of sexual abuse. In many examples, the accused were well—connected and charismatic leaders with devoted followers. Someone trying to put a stop to their behavior must be willing to undertake certain risks and show mettle in the face of harsh threats. I believe that we have performed poorly in this regard.

Of course, this does not mean that we should immediately give credence to every accusation. But when concrete evidence exists, we dare not shirk our duty. It may be that fear of physical harm does not often occur in our internal communal tensions, although at times it does. However, plenty of other intimidation tactics exist, including threats of besmirching a name, ruining a *shiddukh*, or hurting job prospects.

Absence of courage generates a spillover effect that causes a myriad of personal and communal shortcomings. Due to the strong connection between courage and other virtues, the absence of courage negatively affects those other virtues. Lack of courage can lead to a diminishing of honest and integrity. Coventry Patmore expresses this point well:

The failure of courage in the Conservative party has been followed by failure of insight and intellectual ability. Men lose the power of seeing the truth when they drop the custom of obeying it—that is to say, when they cease to be ready, if called upon to make personal sacrifices for it.⁴⁵

In response to our community's contemporary forms of intimidation, we should side with Dr. Johnson. Those who lack courage cannot ultimately stand for any other religious ideal.

⁴⁵ Coventry Patmore, *Courage in Politics and Other Essays* (Books For Libraries Press: Freeport, 1968), p. 14.

