

Kehillat Mevashei Derech,
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Jewish Community and Creativity since 1962

(4 Tevet / December 7, 2013)

Shabbat Vayigash – Dvar Torah **– Gila Cohen**

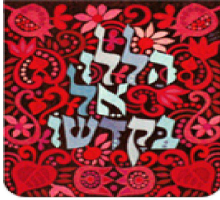
Not long ago Jeremy and I crossed the "60th" yard line into the next decade of our lives. About half of that time – 30 years – we have had the good fortune to spend together. We give thanks for having each other in both the good times – times of joy, of raising our two wonderful children, of an enriching and loving family life, of wonderful friendships and of a supportive community – and in the not so good times – those of sadness, loss and difficulty.

Last year, when Jeremy turned 60 and I was stuck in the U.S. following our accident and my subsequent operation – we were not able to celebrate his special birthday as I had planned. When we approached the date of my birthday this year, I said to Jeremy: I still can't travel either here or abroad. I would like to celebrate both birthdays together with family and friends – and that's what we are doing. Thank you all for being with us – it makes this day so much more meaningful. We are especially happy that both of our mothers can be with us and that our dear friend, Penny – who so generously and lovingly cared for us in her home in New York after the accident – could be with us.

In light of the fact that this date is so soon after Chanukkah – a holiday of light, of renewal and of heroism, and in light of what we, and especially I, have been through in the past year – I decided to devote some time to thinking about the concept of *gevurah* (strength/heroism) and about the question "Who or what is a *gibbor* (strong person/hero)?"

Perhaps I should really pause for a moment in order to give you some time to think about "heroes" – about people you regard as heroes. I have asked several friends and relatives who are here today this very question, and I received all kinds of different answers. I will try now to share some of these answers and some of my own thoughts with you.

When I asked my niece Aviva, who teaches Bible and Jewish thought, what is a "*gibbor*", she immediately answered with a quote from the Mishnah (Pirkei Avot): "Ben Zoma asks: Who is a *gibbor*? The person who controls his impulses." The use of the word *gibbor* here reflects the basic meaning of the Hebrew root *g.b.r.*: strength. Ben Zoma asks: "Who is a strong person?" and answers: He is the person who is not afraid to confront his impulses and to take control of them and to direct them toward positive goals in life. This person does not give in to the impulses that drive people to negative or forbidden or totally egotistical deeds. On the contrary, he **overcomes** (a Hebrew verb with the same root *g.b.r.*) those impulses that may drive him to do such



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deeds. *Gvurah* in this context involves strength that is directed inward, towards oneself. Each of us has the potential to be a *gibbor* of this type.

In contrast, when I think of *gibborim*, I imagine myself in the physical therapy unit of the rehabilitation center at Hadassah Hospital, where I spent quite a bit of time in the past year. I see around me many people who have been injured – and one of them in particular stands out: a young man whose body was completely burned. The physical therapist told me that every movement that he made caused him great pain. This patient came (or was brought) to physical therapy every day and was determined to return to a normal life.

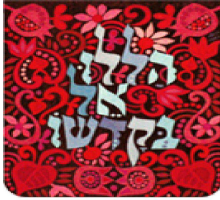
I would call this young man a *gibbor*. And I ask myself: Why? Perhaps because of his determination to return to a normal life and because of the fact that he was willing to stand up to the pain and the difficulties and fight them. Whereas the first kind of *gibbor* (the one in Pirke Avot) was required to use his strength to **rein in** his urges, this second kind has to **break out** of his limitations: he has to overcome the pain and the fear that stop him.

We might ask: Is there a difference between calling this young man "a very brave person" and calling him a *gibbor*? I think that there is a difference. The noun *gibbor* conveys the fact that I see him as having a somewhat higher status, as being somewhat more special than the other brave people in the physical therapy unit and in general.

This notwithstanding, I would say that in many cases there is not really any difference between a "brave person" and a *gibbor*, especially when we do not compare the use of these two terms in one given context. We tend to use these words as synonyms. In today's Hebrew, there is no **noun** from the Hebrew root ג.מ.ח (the root of the adjective "brave") that denotes "a brave person." Therefore, we simply use the noun *gibbor* for this purpose. The noun *gibbor* in this sense has no parallel noun in English, since we are **not** speaking here of a hero, but rather a brave person.

Here is another example of the use of the word *gibbor* in the sense of "a brave person": When a child is afraid of getting an injection, he **overcomes** his fear and submits – and afterwards we might say to him or her: "Wow, you are such a *gibbor*!" At this moment we acknowledge how hard it was for the child to overcome his fear. We acknowledge that his behavior required extra special inner strength on his part.

At this juncture I would like to speak about the differentiation between "a brave person" and a *gibbor* suggested by our friend Aharon Loewenschuss. He says: A paratrooper who is not afraid of jumping out of a plane is a "brave person." A paratrooper who is afraid to jump but **overcomes** his fear and jumps is a *gibbor*.



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In this example we can see that both words "brave" and "*gibbor*" are **subjective** terms. I personally – like Aharon – see both of these paratroopers as brave people because I am afraid to jump out of an airplane. Someone who is not afraid would not necessarily see them as brave. He might see the first paratrooper as simply "normal" and the second perhaps even as a coward. Only when the second paratrooper is viewed within the context of himself – as someone who is afraid – or as compared to other people who are afraid – will he be seen as brave or even as a *gibbor*: He feels fear and he **overcomes** his fear.

If we now reconsider the young man who was burned and other people who are called *gibborim* – I wish to point to another factor involved in determining whether someone is a *gibbor*, and that is: the number of times they are required to confront difficulty. If someone – let's say a soldier or a member of the police force or a person confronting serious illness – has to deal again and again, on a daily basis, with danger or fear, and repeatedly is required to be courageous and to overcome – I would regard these people not just as brave, but as *gibborim*.

Now I would like to relate to another trait of *gibborim* – and here we enter the realm of the "hero" (the English word comes from the Greek and means "protector" or "defender").

If a person enters a burning building in order to save the lives of people trapped there and he endangers his own life – we see him as a *gibbor*. This is the traditional hero – the war hero, the fire fighter, and others – people who are willing to sacrifice or endanger their lives for the sake of others or for the sake of an idea such as their country or democracy, for example. This is the national hero – and often there a consensus regarding his or her status as such. Judah Macabee was certainly a hero of this type.

However, Judah Macabee was not only a *gibbor* – he was a *super-gibbor*. He has come to symbolize the war hero and the brave leader. Not only the extent of his heroism, but also the extent of his **influence** on other people – on the whole Jewish people – and on the course of Jewish history is what has made him a super hero.

There are also national heroes of a different type – culture heroes. This type of hero includes brave people who are not afraid to express their opinions and worldviews even when such views stand in stark contrast to widely accepted views and even when such views put their lives in danger. Thus, for example, my mother called Baruch Spinoza a heretic and a "hero," since his views influenced generations of thinkers and people. Yitzchak Rabin was a hero of this type in the eyes of many – since as a seeker of peace he was willing to pursue his vision despite the vocal disagreement of many Israelis. Obviously, a person like Rabin or Begin or Sharon are called "heroes" mainly by those who identify with their views.



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And what about people such as the inventor of the wheel? Or the inventors of the internet? – people of tremendous influence on history. Or people who have had enormous influence in our local society such as R. Ovadia Yosef or the singer and actor Arik Einstein? If we judge by the extent of media coverage of their deaths, we can say that these latter two have had an enormous impact on Israeli society. Can they be called *gibborim*? The type of influence of each had and has is very different and the circles that they have influenced are also very different. What type of *gibbor* are these two? Are they closer to the one who overcomes difficulty and fear? Or to the one who endangers his life for others? Or to those who have had a huge impact on society or on history through their inventions or their philosophies?

Perhaps this is the place to point out the irony (which is perhaps not a surprise) in the fact that many people who we might call *gibborim* of the first type we mentioned, who take control of their impulses.

I would like to return now to the personal *gibbor*. When I asked Aharon Loewenschuss who is a *gibbor* in his eyes, he immediately pointed to his mother. After having gone through what she did in the holocaust, she found the strength and courage to raise a family here in Israel. This was not only a matter of strength, of determination and of courage, but also, as I mentioned above, it is a subjective matter, dependent on how another person views the *gibbor* and what is required of him or her to overcome hardship. Just as the traditional hero has great influence over society or the course of history, so the personal hero has great influence over the life of the individual who sees him or her as a *gibbor*. On a personal note I would say that over thirty years ago, when my mother encouraged me to come to Israel since she knew how meaningful that was to me – she was to me a *gibbora*, in that she both put aside the personal loss that my move might entail and had a tremendous impact on the course of my life.

In conclusion, as I look at our lives here, I see around me many *gibborim* who are struggling with difficult problems – and at the same time are able to see the bright side of life and to give to others as well. To Selma, who is celebrating her 86th birthday today, a *gibbora* and dear friend, I wish health, happiness and strength. To Jeremy, the *gibbor* who is dealing not only with the difficulties of life, but also with the additional challenges that I set before him, I wish many years of health, happiness and fulfillment.