

In My Opinion

They're My Heroes

By Amy Krakovitz Montoni

In Hebrew class, we learned the word *g'vurot*.

"Acts of heroism," I told the third-graders.

"Like the policemen and firemen!" they all called out.

"Yes," I said, "policemen and firemen do heroic things every day. They do *g'vurot*."

"No, no," some of the children responded. "We mean the policemen and firemen in New York and Washington, DC."

I raised my eyebrows. "What they had to do on September 11 was extraordinary," I reminded them, "but policemen and firemen everywhere have to be heroes every day."

It's odd to think that deciding who is a hero is a subjective decision, but apparently it is. The choices people make of heroes are so diverse that it's clear that it is strictly a matter of opinion. The police and fire departments of New York and Washington are the selected heroes of today's youth. Those of us a little bit older might

opt for all police and fire departments.

One of my personal heroes is someone that a lot of people haven't even heard of. Deborah Lipstadt is a professor at Emory University whose book on Holocaust deniers was challenged in court by Dr. David Irving, a notorious denier and Nazi sympathizer. He sued her for libel in the British courts where she was forced to prove what she said was the truth, quite the opposite of libel suits in the US.

Dr. Lipstadt withstood six years of preparation, court appearances, and a trial in a situation where a weaker person might have just settled the case. And she emerged triumphant as Dr. Irving was proven in court to have falsified documents and outright lied in both speeches and publications.

Two years ago I saw Dr. Lipstadt speak at the University of South Carolina and I asked her if she ever feared for her life.

Absolutely, was her reply. She had been receiving vicious and

threatening emails since the beginning of the David Irving trial. But she wasn't about to let that kind of thing stop her from speaking out in public against the lies perpetrated by Holocaust deniers.

She's a real hero. Sometimes your heroes are just people who give you a hand. In the past few months, I have made specific appeals for Voluntary Subscriptions to *The Charlotte Jewish News*. This small donation offsets some of our costs and frees up funds from the Federation to do its good works in Charlotte and around the world. Since my last appeal, the following heroes have come to my aid:

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Thanks to you all, you are heroes.

And don't fret. You, too, can still be a hero to *The Charlotte Jewish News*. Just fill in the form below and send us a Voluntary Subscription. We would appreciate it so very much. ☆

POINT OF VIEW

Each issue of the CJN features an article written by one of the rabbis active in the Charlotte community.

This month:

Rabbi Yosef Edelstein of The Charlotte Torah Center/Congregation B'nai Shalom

"MEDITATIONS ON FREEDOM"

Freedom is certainly one of our most prized possessions as Americans. As historian Eric Foner writes (in his book, "The Story of American Freedom"), "No idea is more fundamental to Americans' sense of themselves as individuals and as a nation than freedom." Indeed, the whole purpose of our current war on terrorism, we are told, is to preserve our unique way of life with its blessed freedom and liberties.

How do our Jewish sources view this hallowed American concept? It would certainly be nice to quote the Torah in clear support of freedom, to break out some bubbly biblical quotations that praise and glorify the concept (and there are some). The only problem is that we have to define our terms first. Does "freedom" mean the same thing to the Torah that it does to modern Americans?

Perhaps we will find that the Torah perspective on "freedom" and "liberty" differs from that of, say, Thomas Jefferson or 19th century British philosopher, John Stuart Mill (both influential theorists on the subject). Perhaps the Torah has something unique to say to us Jews about the parameters and the purpose of freedom, seen in the context of our people's unique covenantal relationship with God.

If so, there is no better time to listen than in these days right before Pesach — the holiday designated by our Sages as "the season of our freedom." For there is an ironclad rule when it comes to Jewish observance (if not all life experiences, in general): the more thought we put into it beforehand, the more meaningful it will be, experientially, during the execution.

The Torah portions that deal with the Exodus from Egypt reveal to us the basic Torah perspective on freedom, insofar as the concept applies to the Jewish people.

In the Torah portion of *Va'eira*, for example, God instructs Moshe to inform the Jewish people that He will remove them from Egypt, redeeming them with great and awesome wonders. Then He makes the following statement: "I shall take you to Me for a people, and I shall be a God to you; and you shall know that I am Hashem, your God, Who takes you out from the burdens of Egypt." (6, 7)

This verse reveals to us the purpose for which we were rescued from Egyptian slavery: to assume

the "yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven" by becoming God's people. That is to say, we were given freedom from a human master, Pharaoh, in order to have the ability to accept the responsibility (and privilege) of serving a divine master, the Creator of heaven and earth.

Indeed, there are many other such verses in the Torah that highlight the central purpose of the Exodus. At the very outset of Moshe's mission (in the biblical scene of the burning bush), God tells him of the final stage of the Exodus: "When you take the people out of Egypt, you will serye God on this mountain (i.e., Sinai)" (Exodus 3, 12). Or consider the verse traditionally said every day as part of the recitation of the Shema, after we mention the mitzvah of tzitzit (fringes traditionally worn on a four-cornered garment): "I am Hashem, your God, Who has removed you from the land of Egypt to be a God unto you; I am Hashem, your God." (Numbers: 14, 41)

The true greatness of freedom, the Torah teaches, is that we can thereby devote ourselves to the service of God. When we were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, that was impossible.

Has it never struck you as odd that at the Passover Seder, the festive meal commemorating our freedom, we are positively hemmed in by mitzvot (commandments)? Drink four cups of wine, lean here, eat this amount of matzo and maror, etc. This is not accidental. We are being shown that the goal of our freedom is to serve a higher Master.

You may ask: Where has our freedom gone, then, if we are still servants, albeit of a different master?

The answer is that "service of God" is a qualitatively different experience than other forms of service. To serve a human master is debasing and enervating. To serve the one God, by contrast, is elevating. By accepting God's offer of the Torah at Sinai, the Jewish people were elevated to a new status: "a kingdom of priests [or, spiritual teachers]" and "a holy nation" (Exodus: 19, 6). To serve God, our ethical masters teach us, is in fact to attain true freedom. Serving God enables us to achieve freedom from the mundane and the transitory, freedom from the tug of our lower selves — which, you'll agree, often pull

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Aviva Rav Shechter, counselor at the Israeli Embassy in Washington, DC, will talk at Davidson College on Tuesday, March 12, about Israel and the Middle East crisis.

The free, public lecture will begin at 7:30 PM in the C. Shaw Smith 900 Room of the Alvarez College Union. Call 704-894-2440 for more information.

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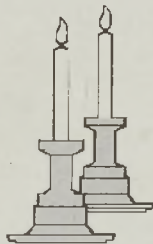
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