



THE JEWISH HERO'S JOURNEY

The Chanukah story is brimming with iconic Jewish heroes, most famously the Maccabees. This group of brothers from the Hasmonean family are perhaps *the* classic symbol of Jewish grit, might, and resistance. To this day, they are a go-to symbol across the Jewish world: the only Jewish sports organization is called the *Maccabi World Union*, one of the State of Israel's largest healthcare providers goes by the name *Maccabi*, and of course, the Yeshiva University athletics department shares this name as well. The understanding is that where there is a Maccabee, there is might, but not just the generic brute force kind — rather, the kind whose source is much deeper, that goes beyond physical strength and agile prowess. The Maccabees are

historical heroes because of *why* they took action: מי כמוך באלים י-ה. *Who is like you Hashem?* Their heroism and subsequent choices and actions were rooted in their relationship to G-d. For them, there was no strength, victory or progress that existed without this relationship and belief, and ultimately, that is the essence of every Jewish hero.

While the heroism of the Maccabees is generally tied to fighting assimilation, it is also deeply tied to what I would like to call The Jewish Hero's Journey, what is most commonly known as teshuva. Using the literary framework of cultural mythologist Joseph Campbell, we can see how, essentially, the Maccabees were striving for the same goals that

are found in famous Jewish themes of teshuva.

A Quick Biography of Joseph Campbell

Joseph Campbell (1904-1987), an American college professor and academic known for his research on myths, legends, and Bible, is famous for creating the “monomyth,” more colloquially known as “The hero's journey.” Campbell spent decades studying, cataloguing, and categorizing stories from history's civilizations both great and small. It was in his most famous work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), that he introduces the hero's journey, the shared systematic arc among thousands of myths,

legends, and stories that have lasted through the ages. Though there are dozens of steps to the monomyth, this article will only use three overarching steps as a means to highlight the heroism of the Maccabees, and ultimately to demonstrate how their journey and heroism are rooted in the journey of teshuva.

Step One: Call to Adventure

The transition from Jewish influence to Greek influence was a gradual one. Slowly, slowly, yet step by step, the Jews of ancient Israel embraced Greek culture until there was a large faction of Jewish people who identified with this new way of life over the traditions of their forefathers — the Hellenists. Hellenists welcomed the customs and emphases of Greek philosophy, style, and values, to the point where there were cosmetic surgeries available for Jewish men to “undo” brit millah. For the paternal figure of the Chanukah story, Matityahu, a scholar and kohen descending from the Hasmonean family, this indicated the need to take action. With a statue of Zeus in the Beit HaMikdash and basic mitzvah observance outlawed, Jerusalem, which served as the epicenter of national and individual encounter between man and G-d, looked like it would never be the same. In an effort to save his family from this fate, Matityahu moved his family to the small village of Modi'in.

It was only a matter of time until the Greeks found their way to Modi'in, where they publicly demanded that one of the men from Modi'in give a pagan sacrifice. A Hellenist stepped forward to oblige, and that was when Matityahu felt there was no choice but to take action. He killed the man, and then with the help of his sons, killed

the Greek soldiers. Spread of the news was imminent, and so Matityahu knew it was time to answer “the call of adventure,” or rather, the call of his destiny: כל המקנא לתורה העומד בברית ילך אחרי (Aryeh Ulman). Echoing the words of Moshe Rabbeinu, he created a break between what was and would be a new reality. Those who wanted to observe mitzvot had a destiny to fulfill, a destiny that would choose them if they chose it.

According to Campbell, this first step is one in which the hero departs from the status quo and into the unknown for a greater cause. Matityahu could have continued going along with the day-to-day reality of his times, practicing Judaism in secret and encouraging others to do the same.

Yet there is something incredibly powerful about admission. It separates the actual from the theoretical. Until we put our intentions into words or actions, they are only intentions. Perhaps this is why Rabbi Moshe Ben Maimon (1138-1204) begins *Hilchot Teshuva* with *viduy*, admission. This is the first step, but not because it's meant to make a person feel bad. After all, teshuva is a choice. Those who choose to embark on the journey of getting closer to G-d and to their truest self realize that they are *worthy* and *capable* of change. It takes more than wanting and yearning to make change happen; first comes clarifying the goal and committing to seeing it through. By standing up to the Greek agenda and stating loud and clear that he was with Hashem, Matityahu created a new reality for Torah-observant Jews. They didn't have to sit back and watch their nation disappear — they could enact change. They could pursue a different destiny.

Step Two: Initiation

Matityahu's choice was anything but safe. The Maccabees were fiercely outnumbered, and were far less armed than their Greek and Hellenist counterparts. Not long after his revolt, Matityahu passes away, and the torch of leadership is passed onto his son, Yehuda. He headed a guerilla army that started out as 3,000 and at its largest was 12,000 men. They fled their homes, gathering in caves, planning their next steps against an army nearly five times their size. Over years, they wore down the Syrian-Greek brigades using strategic hit-and-run attacks. Without physical power on their side, they had to strategize as intelligently as they could, making every move count, never underestimating the grave possibilities that go along with fighting the world's largest military.

The same is true in our lives. R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto discusses how the *Yetzer HaRah* (evil inclination) is programmed to keep us incredibly busy in order to prevent us from reflecting upon and strategically approaching teshuva:

ואולם הנה זאת באמת אחת מתחבולות היצר הרע וערמתו להכביד עבודתו בתמידות על לבות בני האדם עד שלא ישאר להם ריוח להתבונן ולהסתכל באיזה דרך הם הולכים. כי יודע הוא שאלולי היו שמים לבם כמעט קט על דרכיהם, ודאי שמיד היו מתחילים להנחם ממעשיהם, והיתה החרטה הולכת ומתגברת בהם עד שהיו עוזבים החטא לגמרי.

The Yetzer HaRah labors endlessly upon the hearts of humanity so that he won't have even a moment to reflect and pay attention to the road they are walking down. He knows that if a person paid just a small amount of attention to his own ways, he would immediately regret his [bad] deeds to the point where he would turn away from sin altogether.

Mesillat Yesharim 2: 9-10

Life in and of itself is a journey with many options and obstacles, helpers and detractors, opportunities and distractions. Campbell labels this step “initiation” because this is the part of the plot where the hero gets tested over and over again, initiating his self-actualization, gaining new tools and allies to overcome the enemies and challenges. The more Yehuda and the Maccabees focused on their goal, the more difficulties came their way. However, with time, effort, sacrifice, and dedication, they inched closer toward victory, and toward being able to openly practice and celebrate mitzvah observance.

Step 3: Return

“Having endured the trials and hardships of the adventure, the hero returns home. But the hero is no longer the same. An internal transformation has taken place through the maturation process of the experience” –Scott Jeffrey

The Maccabees’ battle against the Greeks comes to an end at the fortress of Antiochus, where the Maccabees overcome the battalions guarding the Beit HaMikdash. They gain control of

the Holy Temple itself and smash the statue of Zeus and rid the area of all traces of paganism. The Menorah is found and they would like to light it, and they do so with a lone pitcher of undefiled oil, still sealed and eligible for use in the Beit HaMikdash. This is only the beginning of change, and there is still a long road ahead, but the journey has come full circle; Jews no longer have to hide in caves or behind closed doors to participate in Jewish ritual and life. They have reached a point where there is hope and possibility for a renewed Jerusalem, one that revolves around Jewish values, where Jews can openly say, *מי כמוך באלים י-ה*. This time, perhaps, they meant it more than ever, because they were the ones who fought down a hard and trying road to attain it.

The Gemara in *Nedarim* 39b states, “seven things were created before the world was created,” and one of those seven is teshuva. The ability to turn inward and see what we can be, and then turn outward and make it a reality, is part and parcel of our existence. Chanukah is a time when much of our focus is on publicizing the miracle that happened *bayamim hahem* — in those days — and

making them known *bazman hazeh* — in today’s times. Surely this brings much light and joy into our lives, as it should. However, Chanukah can also be a time when we reflect on our own Jewish heroes journeys, remembering who and where we come from and how we have the potential to tap into the strength they had all those years ago. The journey initiates growth, yet the goal of that growth is to bring it back home and use it to influence the atmospheres of our homes and communities for the better, and please G-d, Jewish history as well.

Sources:

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