

Integrity, Courage, and Commitment to Principle

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Dov S. Zakheim was a Deputy Under Secretary of Defense (1985–1987) and an Under Secretary of Defense (2001–2004). He earned his Bachelor’s degree at Columbia, his doctorate at Oxford, and his semikha from HaGaon Rav Shmuel Walkin zt”l. This article appears in issue 41 of *Conversations*, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

The Cambridge dictionary defines integrity as “the quality of being honest and having strong moral principles that you refuse to change.” Integrity and courage go together, since the most stressful test of integrity occurs when the cost of adherence to principle is exceedingly high and demands unusual courage. When joined together, therefore, integrity and courage yield a stellar reputation worth more than its weight in gold. It is perhaps because the combination of these two traits is far from common, that King Solomon tells us, *Tov shem miShemen tov*—a good name is better than good oil.^[1]

Integrity Begins with the Beginning

Over the course of millennia, some of the greatest Jewish leaders behaved not only with the greatest integrity, but did so courageously despite the cost of doing so. Mordechai and Esther are often viewed as Scriptural paragons of integrity and courage. And rightly so. Nevertheless, the Torah itself offers models of both of these admirable character traits.

In the course of two consecutive chapters in *Bereishith*, the Torah recounts acts of courage and integrity on the part of the two great progenitors of Israel’s royal families. Chapter 38 tells the story of Judah mistaking his daughter-in-law Tamar for a harlot, who then conceived a child from their intercourse. Tamar had disguised herself in this manner because Judah had failed to marry her to his third son Shelah, after she had been widowed from his first two sons.

Judah’s first reaction reflected the male domination of women that prevailed until only the past several decades and still prevails in some traditional societies: He ordered that she be burned as an adulteress. When she proved that he was the father, Judah nevertheless could have acted in the manner of many contemporary politicians. He could have covered up what clearly was damning information

and, given the norms of his day, had her burned anyway, since she clearly was a source of sufficient embarrassment to harm his reputation as a tribal leader.

Instead, Judah demonstrated both integrity and courage. He publicly acknowledged the rightness of Tamar's case,^[2] even though it exposed him as a reckless philanderer. In so doing, he not only salvaged his reputation, but merited that his progeny would become the royal house of Israel.^[3]

The following chapter of *Bereishith* offers a similar story with at least in the short term, an unfortunate outcome. Joseph had been sold as a slave to an Egyptian senior official (the sale had been instigated by none other than Judah). Despite his youth, Joseph was immensely talented and having earned his master's absolute trust, became his senior administrator. His talent and good looks rendered him exceedingly attractive to the official's lascivious wife who tried to seduce him. Many men might have simply gone along with the woman's wishes. The husband was unlikely to discover his wife's adultery. As for the woman, she was not acting in an especially unusual manner; license was common in Egypt, as it remained common among ruling classes for centuries afterward and is not exactly a rarity today.

Joseph surely recognized the cost of denying the woman's overtures. He was, after all, still a slave and she could ruin his reputation, which indeed she did. Moreover, he was not immune to a woman's blandishments; the Talmud relates that it was only his mental image of his father that restrained him.^[4] In any event, Joseph rejected the woman and paid a high price for doing so—he was slung into a dungeon that no doubt was as vermin infested as any medieval cell.^[5] Ultimately, like Judah, his integrity and fearlessness in the face of certain adversity saw him through and he became the ancestor of Joshua bin Nun, as well as of a line of kings of Israel, and, indeed according to tradition, the Messiah who will initiate the redemption prior to the arrival of the Davidic redeemer.^[6]

Judah and Joseph are of course only two of the many models of courage and integrity that permeate Tanakh and Midrash. The Bar Kokhba rebellion in particular was the backdrop for the martyrdom of many of Judaism's greatest rabbis. Rabbi Akiva, perhaps the greatest of all martyrs, brought on his fate by resisting the Roman ban on teaching Torah publicly. So did nine of his leading colleagues. The tradition of the Ten Martyrs, which many Jews recite on both Yom Kippur and Tisha B'Av, indicates the impact that their principled defiance of Rome's injunction had on the later generations of Jews who suffered from persecution but clung to their beliefs.

Two Heroes of the Middle Ages

Many great leaders followed the example of these great men throughout the course of Jewish history. The Middle Ages, notably the era of the Crusades, were witness to the courage of countless Jews, both famous and anonymous, who, like R. Akiva and his colleagues, made the supreme sacrifice rather than sacrifice their integrity. Still others, who did not submit to martyrdom, nevertheless refused to compromise their values regardless of the cost to their personal well-being. One prominent example was Rabbi Meir of Rothenberg, the great Tosafist and "supreme arbiter in ritual, legal and community matters in Germany."^[7] When leading an exodus of thousands of Jews from Germany in response to an increase in their already crushing tax burden, R. Meir was arrested and delivered to Emperor Rudolf I. When the Emperor demanded a huge ransom, R. Meir, refused to permit his great disciple, Rabbi Asher ben Yehiel (known by his acronym *Rosh*) to pay. He argued that the Talmud had ruled against paying excessive ransoms for Jewish prisoners. He died in prison, refusing to compromise his principles.

Two centuries after R. Meir's passing, another Jewish leader had the courage to uphold his values in the face of adversity. Don Isaac Abravanel, the wealthy and powerful financier, who had lost a fortune when driven out of Portugal in 1483, had become the financial advisor to Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile and once again amassed considerable wealth. In 1492, however, faced with deportation if he clung to his Jewish heritage or conversion if he remained in Spain, Abravanel chose deportation despite considerable pressure from the two monarchs that he convert as other Jewish leaders had done. Instead he emigrated to Naples, leaving behind another vast fortune.^[8] Once again, however, he found himself forced to flee in the face of a French invasion; once again he left his possessions behind, including, by his own account, his "enormous wealth" as well as "much of his precious library."^[9] He lived briefly in several Italian towns until, as he recounts in his commentaries to Tanakh, he finally found peace in Venice where once again he became an invaluable advisor to the city's rulers.

Heroes of the Holocaust

Courage and integrity in support of Jewish values certainly did not disappear with the Middle Ages. Among those who exemplified these values in the twentieth century was R. Yisroel Meir Kagan, better known by the title of his great work, *Chofetz Chaim*. "The Chofetz Chaim"—as he was universally referred to—was a model of integrity, even if that meant significant financial loss to his exceedingly modest means. Indeed, his moral probity was so great, and so widely recognized, that not only did the *New York Times* publish his obituary, but it also related an example of his exalted character. As the *Times* recorded: "Despite his fame as 'the uncrowned spiritual king of Israel,' the Chofetz Chaim was a modest and humble man. His career as a merchant was of short duration. Because of his popularity all the Jews of the town [Radin] flocked to his store. The Chofetz Chaim thereupon closed the store on the ground that he was depriving other Jewish merchants of a living."^[10]

The Holocaust represented perhaps the greatest challenge Jewish leaders had ever faced. Yet some rose to that challenge. One of these truly great men was Rabbi Yekusiel Yehuda Halberstam, founding *rebbe* of the Sanz-Klausenberg dynasty. Having been arrested and released, he returned to Klausenberg, where in spite of the risks of capture, he refused to leave his Hassidim and made no effort to save himself from further searches for Jews. On the contrary, he devoted his efforts both to assisting those Jews who had managed to escape to Hungary as well as to supporting his Hassidim. When the Nazis occupied Hungary in 1944, R. Halberstam was arrested and deported to Auschwitz. While in the camp he not only personally adhered to rigorous standards of kashruth despite the horrible environment—often going hungry—but also fostered and strengthened the religious faith of his fellow inmates.

R. Halberstam was then dragooned into a forced march to the camp at Dachau and then moved again to a forced labor camp at Muldorf. There as well he was a source of spiritual leadership for fellow laborers, adhering to the norms of kashruth, living for nine months on a diet of bread and water. Indeed, he would not eat the bread until he had completed *netilat yadayim* (ritual washing of the hands), and since water was scarce, he would often wait days before he collected sufficient drops that dripped from a water tank in order to carry out the ritual.^[11]

At the other end of the Jewish religious spectrum stood Rabbi Leo Baeck, no less a man of integrity and courage. Leader of Germany's Reform Jewish community, he refused to leave Germany when the opportunity was afforded him. Instead, he "was fearless in the face of the Nazi menace,

emotionally steady, and a source of strength, courage, and inspiration for Germany's Jews. He refused to abandon what remained of his people as anti-Semitic persecution intensified in Germany before the war. As a moral actor he followed his people into the concentration camps, though his daughter, son-in-law and granddaughter escaped to the United Kingdom."[\[12\]](#)

And Then There Were Others

There were many other rabbis who likewise served their flocks with integrity during the Holocaust and the years that led up to it. And then there were others. These men, many of them Hassidic rebbes, looked after themselves and left their followers to their deadly fates. Perhaps the most prominent among these individuals were two Hassidic leaders, the Rebbeim of Satmar and Belz.

The story of the Satmar Rebbe is a complicated one. On the one hand, he actively raised funds to rescue both ordinary Jews and leading rabbis from deportation and incarceration; on the other hand, beginning in 1939 he attempted to escape from Europe on multiple occasions. Moreover, during his time as an inmate of the Cluj ghetto, or his subsequent stay in Bergen-Belsen, where he "was given preferential treatment,"[\[13\]](#) or when he reached in Budapest, he chose to remain aloof from his fellow Jews and even refused to interact with leading rabbis. Moreover, despite his vehement and seemingly uncompromising anti-Zionism, the rebbe chose to join the group of Hungarian Jews that Zionist Rudolf Kastner had ransomed from Adolf Eichmann. The Rebbe did have misgivings about Kastner's plan and "the fact that the [Kastner] train would be under the supervision of Zionists." Nevertheless, "Rabbi Yoel decided to embark on the journey ...with the knowledge that no other rabbis...would be considered for the [Kastner] list, nor would the rest of the Satmar entourage" that had joined him in Budapest.[\[14\]](#)

Once the Rebbe escaped on the Kastner train, he moved to Switzerland (where his efforts to rescue Jewish children from Christian homes came to little), in contrast to many other rabbis who returned to their hometowns or Displaced Person camps to assist their surviving followers. During his brief stay in Palestine, he failed to acknowledge those who had sought to assist him such as Rabbi Moshe Porush of Agudat Yisrael and Chief Rabbi Isaac Herzog, both of whose institutions he instead attacked. Indeed, he attacked the American Agudath Israel as well as the Union of Orthodox Rabbis, "whose leaders had headed the Rescue Committee that endeavored to rescue Hungarian Jews."[\[15\]](#) The Satmar Rebbe may have been a great scholar, but he was also what the Talmud criticizes as *kfui tov*, one who is ungrateful for the good that others do for him.

The behavior of Rabbi Aharon Rokeach, the Belzer Rebbe, was perhaps even more disturbing than that of the Satmar Rebbe. He too was fully aware of the danger that his community faced. Yet on January 17, 1944, a mere two months before the Jews of Hungary began to be deported to Auschwitz, Rokeach and his half-brother Mordechai fled from Budapest to Palestine with the help of Zionists, although like the Satmar Rebbe, they too were bitterly anti-Zionist. The day before they escaped, however, Mordechai publicly read a farewell sermon that his half-brother had approved to an audience of thousands in the great hall of Budapest's *Kahal Yereim* synagogue.

Mordechai denied allegations that the Rebbe was leaving his flock to their fate. He asserted that the Belzer Rebbe had always dreamed of moving to Palestine and now had the opportunity to do so. Moreover, Mordechai assured his audience that "the Tzaddik [the Rebbe] sees that rest and tranquility will descend upon the inhabitants of this land [Hungary] ...the Tzaddik sees that good, and all good, and only good and grace will befall our Jewish brethren the inhabitants of this land."[\[16\]](#) As was the

case with respect to the Satmar Rebbe, it could hardly be said that either the Belzer or his brother displayed anything in the way of courage or integrity.

Power Corrupts

Even as the power of Orthodox political parties has grown over the past several decades, integrity on the part of some of their most prominent leaders has remained in short supply. If anything, they have repeatedly borne out Lord Acton's aphorism that "power corrupts." Chief Rabbi Yona Metzger was arrested in 2013 on charges of bribery, tax fraud, and interfering in the trial process. He was jailed four years later.[\[17\]](#)

R. Aryeh Deri, leader of the Shas Party, who had served in a variety of ministerial posts beginning in 1988, was convicted in 2000 for taking \$155,000 in bribes and sentenced to three years in jail. Remarkably, he returned to politics just over a decade after he was released from jail on good behavior in 2002. He was elected to the Knesset in 2013 but resigned after an Israeli television station released footage of the great Sephardic leader Rav Ovadia Yosef "calling him a wicked man and a thief."[\[18\]](#) Remarkably, the *Moetzet Chachmei HaTorah*, the ultimate rabbinical authority for the Shas Party, refused to accept his resignation and it was only accepted by Yuli Edelstein, speaker of the Knesset.

Deri's resignation hardly meant the end of his career, however. Once again he headed the Shas list in 2015. Once again he was elected to the Knesset. Once again he held the first of several ministerial offices during the Prime Ministership of Benjamin Netanyahu, who himself has been charged with corruption. Deri was again charged, this time with tax evasion, while serving as Netanyahu's Interior Minister. He only left the position when the Netanyahu government fell, but then acknowledged his guilt in a plea bargain, resigned from the Knesset and was fined 180,000 shekels (about \$50,000) and received a year's suspended sentence.[\[19\]](#) He may yet return to politics and yet another ministerial post in a new right-wing government.

Then there is Yaakov Litzman, long time Knesset member and former Minister of Construction and of Health. The leader of the Agudat Yisrael party and a leading figure in the Ger Hassidic community, Litzman was convicted for criminally assisting alleged pedophile Malka Leifer's attempt to evade extradition to Australia. She eventually was extradited. Like Deri and Metzger, Litzman agreed to a plea deal; he paid a relatively small fine and resigned from the Knesset.[\[20\]](#) He too could return to politics.

Whatever their degree of piety, and Torah knowledge, all of these men violated a fundamental talmudic principle: The lack of integrity results in *hilul Hashem*, the desecration of the Creator's name. *Hilul Hashem* offsets Torah knowledge. The Talmud speaks of a scholar who sullied his reputation for which R. Judah placed him under a ban (*Shammeta*). R. Judah's basis for imposing such a harsh penalty was the verse: "For the priest's lips should keep knowledge and they should seek the law at his mouth; for he is the messenger of the Lord of Hosts," which was interpreted as "if the Master is like unto a messenger of the Lord of Hosts...seek the law at his mouth; but if not, do not seek the law at his mouth."[\[21\]](#) It is indeed regrettable that instead of serving as positive role models for their communities, they did quite the opposite.

Men and Women of Integrity

Happily, there are still leading figures in the Orthodox community both in the United States and in Israel, who are unafraid to take risks in the name of what is right. Deborah Lipstadt, currently the United States Special Envoy for Monitoring and Combating Anti-Semitism, has long been an outspoken critic of Holocaust denial. She famously defeated a libel suit in Britain against the denier David Irving, despite the fact that English law places on the defendant the burden of proof of innocence. She has spoken out against racial hatred in all its forms, regardless of the consequences to her own career. Indeed, she did not back down when Senator Ron Johnson blocked her confirmation for months because she tweeted that he “advocated white supremacy/nationalism.”^[22] Ultimately she was confirmed by voice vote.

To cite another example, the Vishnitzer Rebbe, R. Yisroel Hager, is no moderate; he opposes the use of smart phones. Nevertheless, in the face of violent attacks perpetrated by supporters of the Gerer Rebbe, Rabbi Yaakov Alter, against those who support his cousin, Rabbi Shaul Alter,^[23] R. Hager issued a public statement condemning the violence.^[24] Moreover, he made it clear that he was not only speaking to his own followers, but to Orthodox Jews of every stripe. Such condemnations can enflame radicals, who have no compunction about verbally abusing and physically attacking their critics. It took both integrity and courage for R. Hager to speak out as he did.

Conclusion

Integrity is not risk-free. Integrity in one’s personal life requires courage. Integrity in the public sphere, where personal loss can be significant and permanent, requires an extra dose of courage. That, however, has long been the Jewish standard for true leadership. Perhaps Yitro put it best when he outlined for Moshe those qualifications that he deemed necessary for all who would assume leadership positions under the greatest leader of them all: “men of substance, God fearers, men of truth, who hate monetary gain, and you shall appoint over them [Israel] leaders over thousands, leaders over hundreds, leaders over fifties, and leaders over tens.”^[25]

Such persons could be found in every generation. They can be found in our own time as well. They can be men, or women, Hareidi, Modern Orthodox, or non-Orthodox. What these individuals, like their many illustrious predecessors, have in common is commitment to the truth, abhorrence of corruption, and the fearlessness that enables them to speak out in support of what is right and just. And in so doing they not only meet Yitro’s demanding standards for leadership, but serve as role models for the Jewish people wherever they may reside.

[1] Eccl. 7:1.

[2] Gen. 38:26.

[3] Ruth 4:18–22.

[4] *Sota* 36b.

[5] Gen. 39:20.

[6] See for example, *Targum Yonatan ben Uziel*, Ex. 40:11.

[7] “Meir ben Baruch of Rothenburg,” in *Encyclopedia Judaica* vol 11 (Jerusalem: Keter, 1972), 1247.

[8] B. Netanyahu, *Don Isaac Abravanel: Statesman & Philosopher* 5th ed. (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1992), 59.

[9] *Ibid.*, 69.

[10] *The New York Times*, September 16, 1933 p. 13.
<https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1933/09/16/issue.html>

[11] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yekusiel_Yehudah_Halberstam

[12] <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/a-new-biography-of-rabbi-leo-baek-leader-of-pre-wwii-german-jewry/>

[13] Menachem Keren-Kratz, “The Satmar Rebbe and the Destruction of Hungarian Jewry: Part 2,” *Tablet* July 17, 2014
<https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/arts-letters/articles/satmar-rebbe-2>

[14] Keren-Kratz, “The Satmar Rebbe and the Destruction of Hungarian Jewry: Part 1,” *Tablet* July 16, 2014
<https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/arts-letters/articles/satmar-rebbe-1>

[15] Keren-Kratz, “The Satmar Rebbe...Part 2,” *op. cit.*

[16] Lawrence Kaplan, “Daas Torah,” in Moshe Z. Sokol, ed. *Rabbinic Authority and Personal Autonomy* (Lanham, MD.: Jason Aaronson, 1992), 59.

[17] <https://forward.com/news/breaking-news/361071/ex-chief-rabbi-yona-metzger-headed-to-prison-for-fraud/>

[18] Yair Ettinger, “After Split With Shas, Yishai Releases 'Doomsday Weapon' Tape on Deri” *Haaretz* (December 29, 2014)

[19] <https://www.timesofisrael.com/aryeh-deri-admits-to-tax-offenses-as-part-of-plea-deal-will-resign-from-knesset/>

[20] <https://www.timesofisrael.com/haredi-leader-litzman-departs-knesset-wednesday-as-part-of-plea-deal/>

[21] *Moed Katan* 17a.

[22] <https://twitter.com/deborahlipstadt/status/1371073969961467905>

[23] Israel Hershkovitz, "Dispute tearing apart Israel's Gur Hasidic sect turns violent," *Al-Monitor* (May 25, 2022),

<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/05/dispute-tearing-apart-israels-gur-hasidic-sect-turns-violent>

[24] "Vizhnitzer Rebbe Speaks Out Against Ger: 'These Disputes Can Literally Lead to Murder'," *VINnews* (June 26, 2022) <https://vinnews.com/2022/06/26/vizhnitzer-rebbe-speaks-out-against-ger-these-disputes-can-literally-lead-to-murder/>

[25] Ex. 18:21.