

BE STRONG, BE OF GOOD COURAGE

A commentary on *Parashat Vayeilech*

By Maureen Kendler

Two ideas in *Parashat Vayeilech* seem to be interlinked in a strange way. Twice, G-d warns that in the future He will “hide His face.” Three times, Moses tells Joshua to “be strong, be of good courage, do not fear, or not be frightened by them.” G-d saying “I will hide my face” is one of the most mysterious and terrifying pronouncements He ever makes. What is humanity’s response supposed to be? Surely the answer is also there in the *Parasha*, to “be strong, be of good courage....”

Despite the fact that G-d will “hide His face”, our path forward is not to be afraid. It does not mean that we do nothing, give up, absolve the self of responsibility. It must be a call to humanity to respond with bravery.

G-d’s face may have been hidden in Warsaw in 1939, but Janusz Korczak’s face was not. Korczak headed up an orphanage in Warsaw like no other. Born in 1878 into a well-off Warsaw Jewish family, he played with poor children while young and his passion for helping disadvantaged youth continued into adulthood. He studied medicine and also had a promising career in literature.

In 1912, Korczak established a Jewish orphanage, in a building which he designed himself to advance his progressive educational theories. He envisioned a world in which children structured their own world. For example, in his manifesto, ‘The Rights of The Child’ he spoke against corporal punishment at a time when such treatment was considered a parental entitlement or even a duty. Later in ‘The Child’s Right to Respect’ he wrote:

In what extraordinary circumstances would one dare to push, hit or tug an adult? And yet it is considered so routine and harmless to give a child a tap or stinging smack or to grab it by the arm. The feeling of powerlessness creates respect for power. Not only adults but anyone who is older and stronger can cruelly demonstrate their displeasure, back up their words with force, demand obedience and abuse the child without being punished. We set an example that fosters contempt for the weak. This is bad parenting and sets a bad precedent.

Korczak was a well-known and highly respected figure in Warsaw and after his orphanage was moved

inside the ghetto in 1940, he received many offers to be smuggled out. But he refused to abandon the orphans. On August 5, 1942, Korczak joined nearly 200 children and orphanage staff members who were rounded up for deportation to Treblinka.

It was said the sight of Dr Janusz Korczak leading the orphans to their fate dressed in their best clothes with combed hair and calm dignity made the very pavements of Warsaw weep. I would like the ending of Korczak’s story to be very different, but there is no happy fairy-tale last-minute escape. He and his orphans all went to their deaths in Treblinka, together with other orphanage staff members who could have, like Korczak, gone free.

Surely if ever there was a period in which G-d was hidden, this was it. It is impossible to understand what it means for G-d to “hide His face” - but we know what it means for man to show *his* face.

Moses tells Joshua to “be strong be of good courage, do not fear, or not be frightened by them.” Despite all the obstacles, there is a way of being, a way of behaving, and morality that can be pursued. Not everyone can do this, not everyone can be expected “to be strong, be of good courage, not to fear.”

There are many faces of Korczak left for us to admire. In his pre-war life there is the doctor, writer, the healer, the listener. In the war years he becomes the rescuer, the fighter, always on the side of the child, driven by a selfless responsibility to protect. And ultimately, he is the martyr.

We cannot imitate this. But we can aspire to his ideals, we can revere the memory of someone who in the time of G-d’s “hidden” face showed his face unflinchingly to us.

There are so many stories from Poland in the war that crush us with their despair, so many tragic tales that erode our hope, our sense of humanity itself. But we must also never forget the stories from that time that sustain us. There were other Korczaks, whose bravery provided the moral compass and pointed the way. We must endlessly examine the stories

of those who were “strong brave and of good courage” and perhaps even the act of retelling of such courage and bravery with a refusal to succumb to fear will help us uncover G-d’s “hidden” face.

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