



Torah Thoughts from the YIGC Community

A Light unto the Nations: The Jewish Soldier in Camp and Field During the American Civil War

William A. Evans

The Jewish nation, according to the Bible, was chosen by G-d to be a "light unto the nations" (Yishayahu 42:6). History has borne out this responsibility. Time and again, the Jew has contributed a disproportionate amount to society, whether the field be law, science, economy, medicine, politics, or even the military. As an example, 201 of the 892 Nobel laureates to date were Jewish. That is 22.5% of all awardees although Jews comprise approximately .02% of the world population.

The Jewish soldier's conduct during the American Civil War was no exception. Records and letters of the time demonstrate that, descendants of Abraham demonstrated valor, patriotism and ingenuity far beyond the expectations of a typical soldier.

A Medal of Honor

There is no higher personal honor that can be bestowed upon a United States soldier than the Medal of Honor. The award was created in 1862 to be given "to such non-commissioned officers and privates as shall most distinguish themselves by their gallantry in action and other soldier-like qualities during the present insurrection."¹ The wording of this Congressional act indicates that not only must the soldier be brave but that they must "distinguish" themselves. To put it another way, they are required to be a shining example of what a soldier should be.

Abraham Cohn, a Jewish soldier,² received the medal for conspicuous heroic actions at two major battles in the Eastern theater of war. Originally hailing from Prussia, he enlisted in the 68th New York Infantry regiment in 1861. After being discharged in 1862 as a captain, he reenlisted in the 6th New Hampshire Infantry where he was with Grant during the Virginia Overland Campaign. The first battle of the campaign was the "Battle of the Wilderness,"³ a bloody three-day slog in some of the worst battle country anywhere on the continent. The Wilderness, as the area was known, was a tangle of trees and undergrowth in which visibility was significantly reduced. The soldiers often fired blindly, unable to see their opponents even a few yards away.

It was during this battle that, in the words of the citation awarding him the Medal of Honor, Abraham Cohn, "rallied and formed, under heavy fire, disorganized and fleeing troops of different regiments." In the most dire of circumstances, he was able to find the presence of mind to not only escape destruction at the hands of the surging Confederates but to rally men to shore up the battle line and save a good portion of the Union line from destruction.

Captain Cohn's activities in the "Battle of the Crater" also factored into the awarding of his medal. The Union attempted to destroy a portion of the Rebel defenses surrounding Petersburg by digging a mine under the trenches, placing and then igniting a large quantity of explosives.⁴ The plan was sadly mishandled, with many Union soldiers losing their lives in the ensuing attack. During the fiasco, Abraham Cohn, as his Medal of

Honor citation states, "coolly carried orders to the advanced line under severe fire." This Jewish soldier stood out as a paragon of bravery, a light unto the nations.

The Surgeon Stays Behind

Dr. Simon Baruch, father of the famous businessman Bernard Baruch, came to Charleston, South Carolina from West Prussia at the age of 15 and soon became interested in medicine. He joined the Confederate Army as an assistant surgeon in the South Carolina 3rd Infantry Battalion, becoming a full surgeon thereafter.⁵

Dr. Baruch was present at the momentous Battle of Gettysburg when some 18,000 Confederate soldiers were wounded.⁶ His brigade sustained especially substantial casualties during the attack on the Peach Orchard.⁷ According to Dr. Baruch's own account:

"All day and night the work continued at the field hospital, and throughout the following day also the wounded came pouring in, many on foot, among them several captured Union soldiers, on two of whom I operated. The field hospital contained now 222 seriously wounded men, 10 orderlies, and 3 surgeons."

Dr. Baruch, along with other hospital staff, felt it his duty to remain behind with the wounded. He surrendered on the 5th of July, and after caring for his patients for six weeks, was imprisoned at Fort McHenry for two months.⁸

This Jewish surgeon could easily have retreated along with the army, yet he remained with his men despite the risk to his own freedom. Another example of a Jew serving as a light unto the nations!

Never Give Up the Colors!

The Civil War was fought under circumstances very different from today's wars. Without modern battlefield communications, much of the progress of a battle was determined by seeing where the flag was carried. Through the smoke and haze of battle, one determined where his fellow soldiers were by spotting his regiment's colors (referred to simply as "the colors") held aloft. One indication of how well a battle was fought was the number of colors captured during the fight. These regimental colors, typically carried by a sergeant or corporal, were of such extreme importance that many brave men were killed or seriously wounded defending them.

The 57th Massachusetts regiment had a color sergeant of Jewish descent, Leopold Karpeles. He was badly injured during the Battle of North Anna, but refused to give up the colors. As remembered by his comrade in arms, John Anderson:⁹

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simon_Baruch

⁶ More on this battle: <https://www.civilwar.org/learn/civil-war/battles/gettysburg>

⁷ 12 men killed, 31 wounded, and 3 men missing - <http://civilwarintheeast.com/confederate-regiments/south-carolina/3rd-south-carolina-infantry-battalion/>

⁸ <http://behind.aotw.org/2006/12/11/confederate-surgeon-simon-baruch/>

⁹ *The American Jew as Patriot, Soldier and Citizen*, Volume 3 - pp 205

<https://books.google.com/books?id=qULB1Cr-Ef8C&pg=PR3#v=onepage&q&f=false> (Punctuation added.)

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Medal_of_Honor

² For more on this soldier see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham_Cohn

³ For more on this battle: <https://www.civilwar.org/learn/civil-war/battles/wilderness>

⁴ For more on this battle: <https://www.civilwar.org/learn/civil-war/battles/crater>

Yes Karpeles, I well remember you at the Battle of North Anna. I remember that you carried the colors of the glorious old 57th far beyond any other colors. Your bravery was conspicuous. I remember that you fell, badly wounded. Another Sergeant was sent to take the colors from you but you refused to give them up but carried them forward until loss of blood or another wound- I have forgotten which- compelled you to give them into the hands of another. I remember all of this distinctly, as I felt justly proud of you as a Sergeant of Company E.

Sergeant Karpeles served bravely in a situation where he was already wounded yet conspicuously refused to give up, and thereby was an example to all those fighting by his side.

Conclusion

Cohn, Baruch, and Karpeles are just three of a multitude of examples of fortitude, patriotism and heroism during the American Civil War. Jewish soldiers did not simply perform well during the course of the war, but served as a shining example to those around them, both North and South, as to how one must conduct themselves in such trying times. Indeed, they were a true "light unto the nations"!

Hishtadlus and Bitachon: Finding the Balance

Michael Gottesman

Parshas Mikeitz begins by stating that two years after Yosef interpreted the dreams of the baker and butler, Pharaoh had two dreams of his own. It was Pharaoh's determination to find satisfactory interpretations of his dreams that led to the butler remembering Yosef and informing Pharaoh of his dream-interpreting skills. Ultimately, this led to Yosef's release from prison and ascent to greatness in Egypt. The Midrash famously tells us that, as a punishment for Yosef's reliance on him for salvation, the butler forgot about Yosef for two years after Yosef asked him to put in a good word on his behalf. (Bereishis Rabbah 89:3; see also Rashi Bereishis 40:23) Instead of putting so much of his faith in the butler, he should have relied more heavily on G-d.

This Midrash is somewhat troubling. Do we not have a principle of "*lo samchinan anisa*" – that we are not to rely wholly on miracles? (Kiddushin 39b) Is there not an expectation that we put forth our own *hishtadlus* - personal effort? Why, then, is Yosef held accountable for being responsible and doing what he could to help ensure his release from prison?

The Kli Yakar (40:23) explains the primary component of Yosef's sin in a way that makes this more understandable. When speaking to the butler, Yosef had stated "*Im zechartani*" - "if you remember me." The Kli Yakar suggests we may understand this as Yosef telling the butler, "if you remember me, there is hope. But if you do not remember me, all hope is lost." Essentially, according to the Kli Yakar, Yosef's primary sin was not in his putting forth responsible effort but in his belief that all hope was lost if his efforts failed. While his effort may have been appropriate, he should have recognized that even if the butler failed him, Hashem could find a way to take care of him.

Along the same lines, the Midrash itself stresses that Yosef sat an extra two years in prison because, when speaking to the butler, he told him **twice** to remember him: "if you will remember me (וזכרתני) with you... and mention me (והזכרתני) to Pharaoh, and he will take me out..." (Bereishis 40:14)

Thus, based on the Midrash, we can suggest that it was Yosef's repetition of the request that warranted a consequence - but not the request in and of itself. It would have been okay for him to ask the butler to remember him, but by repeating the request it became clear that he was relying too heavily on the butler's support. Once his

repetition of the request revealed a reliance on the butler that was excessive, he even needed to be punished for the original request, as it was clear that an overly heavy reliance on the butler was behind that request as well.

The common denominator between these two suggestions is that Yosef erred not necessarily in the action he took, but, rather, in the attitude with which he approached his action. Yes, putting forth responsible and reasonable effort indeed may have been appropriate. But the attitude of believing that his fate was dependent on the success of his personal efforts and that he was wholly dependent on the actions of others was that for which Yosef was held accountable.

The story of Yosef always overlaps with Chanukah. For eight consecutive days, we recite "*Al Hanisim*," in which we state that "YOU, G-d, delivered the strong in the hands of the weak, the many in the hands of the few, the impure in the hands of the pure, the evil in the hands of the righteous, and the wanton sinners in the hands of those who immerse themselves in your Torah." To those who think only rationally, the story of Chanukah makes no sense. Our fate should have been determined by strength and numbers. We had no business winning the battle against the Greeks. But to those who learn from the story of Yosef that, despite the need for us to put forth our *hishtadlus*, our fate is totally dependent on the will of G-d, the story of Chanukah is easy to understand. Strength and numbers do not determine our success and fate but the will of G-d does, and it was G-d's will that we experience salvation on Chanukah.

We live in a time when there is much tension among people and it is difficult to have faith that those around us will support us. Unfortunately, this is nothing new, as historically there have been many societies in which people have preyed on each other. In light of our vulnerabilities, it is comforting to recognize that our fate depends on G-d and not on other humans. However, mere recognition of our full dependence on G-d is not enough. Rather, this recognition must spur us to take action. We must turn to G-d and beseech HIS support with at least the same amount of energy as we exert trying to secure support from others. Increased commitment to Torah study, mitzvah observance, and prayer can demonstrate to Hashem that we recognize the need for His support, helping us earn that help to rise above the challenges we face.

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