

“Different Kinds of Heroes.”

By Rabbi David Wolpe

The Hebrew word "gibor" means "hero." Yet in the prayer for Hanukkah we thank God for *giborim b'yad halashim* — heroes delivered to the hand of the weak. Surely the Jews at the time were militarily weak, but were the Greeks heroes?

The Greeks were not only mighty, but in a certain sense heroic. Heroism was a powerful motivator in Greece: From the crafty Odysseus to the mighty Achilles, Greek mythic heroes reigned. The celebrated triumphs of the Macedonian Alexander the Great drew on a powerful tradition of heroic Greek conquest.

Many great Jewish figures fought as well: Abraham, Deborah, David. Yet classical Jewish heroism is not the heroism of battle, and victory is the victory of necessity, not of glory. If we retranslate "gibor" to "mighty" we evade the contradiction, but perhaps we should embrace it. The Greeks were heroic and the rabbis knew it. Still it was an inferior heroism, the heroism of destruction, of boastful valor, of blood. In a perilous world such heroes are sometimes needed, but to idealize them risks tipping the balance of the world's values toward ruin.

There is a disturbing renaissance of the ideal of destructive heroism. Though it masquerades as religious piety, it is a pagan ideal. The Jewish answer is Hanukkah: Fight if we must, but pay highest homage to heroism of the spirit.