

The Hard Questions: A Jewish Perspective
Heros, Role Models, and Ethics
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Even in our dogmatically capitalist culture, self-sacrifice is considered the ultimate moral virtue. Our heros are the saints working among the lepers, or the Israeli soldiers who rammed an explosive-filled car to save a bus of schoolchildren. Or at least we say they are.

But our role models, and the role models we recommend to our children, are successful people, people who have done well for themselves. Few Americans, Jewish or not, raise their children to be aspiring martyrs. Indeed, we find cultures that do alien and repugnant.

Why are our heros not our role models? I think we have a fundamental mistrust of selflessness, an intuitive suspicion that people who willingly sacrifice themselves often do so not out of a lack of self-esteem but rather out of a lack of esteem for life. Even when we admire a particular cause, we are scared by truly intense devotion to it. People who are willing to die not because they are insignificant, but because life is less significant than their beliefs, are as likely to kill as to die.

Heros are extremists - that is, they embody the extremes of particular virtues - and often set an example dangerous to emulate. The heroic personality feels the need to exceed the norm in all areas of life, including the moral. The world would be poorer without them, and yet, if we were all heroic, what would heroic personalities do?

Perhaps we should distinguish between self-conscious and instinctive heros. People who perceive themselves as heros tend to look for opportunities to be heroic. People who act heroically without realizing it do not. The latter can be nonfrightening heros, but they still can't be role models; by consciously trying to be like them, we become unlike them.

Conscious self-sacrifice creates another moral difficulty as well. Ayn Rand argued powerfully that consciously doing something for the sake of another creates in the giver's mind the sense that he or she is owed, and, generally, owed more than he or she gave. A similar critique may be behind the Mishnaic sage Hillel's famous negative formulation of the Golden Rule - "What is hateful to you, don't do to others". Failing to punch someone else in the nose does not generate a sense that he or she owes us. Perhaps Hillel was suggesting that we should regard all our generous or gracious acts merely as failures to act cruelly. Perhaps this is humanly possible, perhaps not.

Conscious selflessness can also be dangerous when used as an absolute standard for moral behavior.. The belief that one can act only when completely disinterested disqualifies the most morally stringent among us from acting with regard to many issues. Can I fight an immoral bill if its passage would harm me? Can I defend somebody against attacks if I'm likely to be the next victim?

The narrative of Abraham's challenge to and negotiations with G-d over the proverbially wicked city of Sodom, found in this week's Torah portion, provides a useful framework for exploring the role of selflessness in our morality. What looks initially like a flat tale of heroism - Abraham braving G-d's potential wrath because of his concern for even the most despicable of human lives - turns out upon analysis to be a complex story involving numerous moral ambiguities.

Why is Abraham so concerned about Sodom? Perhaps because of his general concern for humanity. But there are more convincing alternatives.

Several chapters earlier in Genesis, Abraham intervenes militarily to rescue the king and polity of Sodom. The Torah implies that Abraham has the power to restore or depose the monarchy, and he chooses to restore it. Perhaps he gets involved here because he feels responsible for the population's fate, as he did not intervene to improve their culture. Perhaps he simply feels frustrated that his efforts will be so quickly made irrelevant. His heroism may stem from a strong sense of self rather than from selflessness.

Abraham's reason for leaving Sodom, though, was his acknowledgement of the Randian critique. When the King of Sodom suggested "Give me the people, and you take the property", Abraham replied that he would take no property "and you will not say "I have enriched Abraham". In other words, your motivation for "giving" me a share of the spoils is to put me in your debt. So Abraham recognizes that selflessness can be a cover for selfishness.

The negotiation with G-d may actually be a record of Abraham's struggle with this issue. Perhaps Abraham's real concern throughout is actually the life of one resident of Sodom, his nephew Lot, whose capture was also the cause of Abraham's earlier military intervention. But Abraham feels that his selfish concerns have no right to affect G-d's justice, so he argues and pleads for a general change of Divine plan. Perhaps he would have been more effective had he simply expressed his emotions - perhaps if he had asked for mercy rather than justice, G-d's mercy would have extended beyond Lot. Perhaps his insistence on the appearance or even the substance of selflessness destroyed Sodom.

Because ironically - or perhaps highly appropriately - the conclusion of the story is that Sodom is destroyed, but G-d saves Lot for the sake of Abraham.