

Chapter 4 – Learning Guide

I-In-Class Discussion Questions

1-The statement from *Pirkei Avot* with which the chapter begins reads as follows. “Who is mighty? He who subdues his passions.”(Avot: Chapter 4, Mishnah 11) How does the author of the chapter interpret this *mishnah*? How is it connected to Natan Shransky’s story? How else can this statement be interpreted?

2-In Jewish life today, who are the heroic leaders?

3-Heroic leaders are “statistical outliers.” What does this phrase mean?

4-Why is the author of this chapter ambivalent about using heroic leaders as our role models?

5-Who is Natan Sharansky? Using your own words describe what happened to him while he was living in the former Soviet Union.

6-How was it that Sharansky was able to stand up to the Soviet Union for such a long time?

7-Do you believe that Sharansky was willing to die for his ideals?

8-Even though Sharansky was in jail, he describes himself as being free. What does he mean by this? Is it really possible to maintain one’s freedom while one is in jail?

9-While Natan Sharansky was in jail, he sang the following song: “The entire world is a narrow bridge, and the important thing is not to be afraid at all.” What does the symbol of a narrow bridge mean to you?

10-Sharansky notes that upon his arrival in Israel he, “soon learned that defending one’s freedom in the ocean of love can be no less challenging than defending it in the sea of hatred.” Is Sharansky exaggerating here or do you think this statement is literally true for him?

II-Essay Questions

1-Even the greatest heroes, when examined carefully, are carried along by the currents of time. Do you agree with this statement or disagree? And, why?

2-Great heroes are better role models than quiet leaders because....

3-Quiet leaders are better role models than great heroes because...

4-How might Abraham have defended his decision to destroy his father's idols? Was this an act of passion or was it a well-calculated decision on Abraham's part?

5-In Israel, daily life is much less harsh, but the moral and political dilemmas are grayer and less obvious than they were in the former Soviet Union. What are the major moral dilemmas that Israel, as a nation, faces?

6-Maimonides wrote in the **Mishna Torah** that the one should always strive for the "middle way." In his words:

The way of the upright is [to adopt] the intermediate characteristic of each and every temperament that people have. This is the characteristic that is equidistant from the two extremes of the temperament of which it is a characteristic, and is not closer to either of the extremes. Therefore, the first Sages commanded that one's temperaments should always be such, and that one should postulate on them and direct them along the middle way, in order that one will have a perfect body. How is this done? One should not be of an angry disposition and be easily angered, nor should one be like a dead person who does not feel, but one should be in the middle - one should not get angry except over a big matter about which it is fitting to get angry, so that one will not act similarly again. Likewise, one should not have lust except for those things which the body needs and without which cannot survive, as it is written, "The righteous eat to satisfy his soul". Similarly, one should not labour at one's business, but one should obtain what one needs on an hourly basis, as it is written, "A little that a righteous man has is better, et cetera". Nor should one be miserly or wasteful with one's money, but one should give charity according to what one can spare, and lend as fitting to whoever needs. One should not be [excessively] praised or merry, and nor should one be sorrowful or miserable, but one should be happy for all one's days in satisfaction and with a pleasant expression on one's face. One should apply a similar principle to the other temperaments - this is the way of the wise. (Chapter 1: Mishnah 4)

Is the middle way always appropriate? Would this have been good advice for Sharansky while he was imprisoned in the Soviet Union? Would this be good advice for him today as political leader in Israel?

III-Connections

In April of 2004, Natan Sharansky, Head of the Israeli Delegation to the OSCE Conference on Anti-Semitism, concluded his speech by stating the following:

For real progress to be made there, the free world must be willing to pursue a policy of linkage against states that support anti-Semitism.

The effectiveness of a policy based on linkage was powerfully demonstrated a generation ago after a group of dissidents inside the Soviet Union, including myself, decided to form the Helsinki Group in the wake of the Helsinki accords – the very agreement which led to the establishment of the OSCE.

With the help of courageous leaders in the West who were willing to link their relations with the Soviets to their treatment of their own people, the Helsinki Group helped ensure that the Soviets could not take one step in the international arena without their human rights policies becoming an issue. As a result, real progress was made. Today, linkage can be used to marginalize the extremists in the Moslem world and to encourage and support the moderate Moslems who can and should be our partners in bringing understanding and peace between people and religions.

It has been said that anti-Semitism begins with the Jews, but does not end with them. Well, in looking out at everyone who has come today to stand with the Jewish people in combating an evil that endangers the entire civilized world, I am proud to say that the fight against anti-Semitism begins with the Jews, but it does not end with them.

Armed with moral clarity, determination, and a common purpose, I know that this is a fight that we can, must and will win.

Give some concrete examples of what Sharansky would like the international community to do with regard to problem of contemporary anti-Semitism. Is this speech an example of Sharansky as the “heroic leader” or Sharansky as the “quiet leader?”

IV-Personal Journal

- 1-What value or values would you be willing to die for?
- 2-Who is your all-time favorite hero from Jewish history?
- 3-Who is your all-time favorite hero from American history?
- 4-Who is the person in your extended family that you most admire?

V-Group Project

Directions: Each member of the group must conduct a brief survey asking five friends or relatives who their Jewish hero is. The group members should tabulate their results and share them with the whole class. What did each group discover about Jewish heroes?

VI-Vignette

To Disclose Or Not to Disclose, That is the Question

Jon Pryor had been working as an investigative reporter for the *Jewish Newspaper* for two years. After graduating Columbia University's School of Journalism, Pryor decided to forgo a number of seemingly more prestigious job offers to accept his current position. Pryor loved writing and certainly had high ambitions, but he also had a deep desire to serve the Jewish community, as well.

In his two short years with the paper, Pryor had already established himself as an important and constructive voice in the Jewish community. His articles on Jewish education, Israel-Diaspora relations, anti-Semitism, and Jewish political power in the city were impeccably researched and nearly universally well-regarded.

It was not surprising then to Pryor's well-seasoned Editor, Sam Wise, when Pryor uncovered a potentially explosive story concerning Irving B. Macher, one of the Jewish community's most beloved and active philanthropists. In fact, many people considered Macher the front runner for a highly contested leadership position at a major Jewish organization.

Pryor told Wise that he had learned through the grapevine that Macher's first marriage, which ended five years ago, had been a disaster. According to Pryor's sources, including Macher's first wife, Macher had been cheating on his wife from the get go. But, that was not all. His former wife also alleges that Macher physically and emotionally abused her on more than one occasion. Finally, Macher did agree to a divorce, but only on his terms. In order to receive her "Get" Macher's wife had to agree to a divorce settlement which left her with almost nothing in terms of financial support. Macher's wife freely uses the term "blackmail" in describing her former husband's behavior.

Sam Wise has been around a long time and is anything but naive. "Jonathan," he started, "Let's slow down here. Suppose all of this is true. Is it really newsworthy?" "I know Irving and I know his current wife", Wise continued. "They're the happiest couple I know."

"Your story is five years old, it's about his personal life, not his professional activities, and sounds more like *lashon hara* (gossip), than anything else."

Pryor nodded but pressed on. "The story is old, but it's still relevant. This is about character. How can you trust this guy if he's beating his wife? Besides, this is an issue which needs raising in our community, and this is a perfect opportunity."

Sam Wise looked like he was thinking. Suddenly, he got up from his desk walked over to Pryor and said, “Listen kid, I’m killing the story and I’m doing it for you. If we go with this story, nothing will really change. Yes, maybe it will bring Macher down, but he’ll bring you and me and a lot of other good people down with him. You got a long and great career ahead. Don’t blow it on this schmuck.”

Question: What would you do if you were Jon Pryor?