“Nitsana Darshan-Leitner: Throwing the Book at Terrorism”

MAGAZINE PAGES 6–7

This article is an interview with Nitsana Darshan-Leitner, the Israeli lawyer whose organization, Shurat HaDin, uses the court system to sue terrorist organizations, freeze their assets, and get compensation for victims of terror. In this lesson, students consider what it means to be a hero, discuss whether Nitsana is a hero, and look at Jewish texts on what it means to be a hero. They also explore the balance between gevurah and hesed.

OBJECTIVES

► Students will share their own heroes and ideas of heroism.
► Students will learn how Jews are supposed to be heroic by imitating God.
► Students will learn elementary facts about Kabbalah and apply them to the discussion of law and heroism.

VOCABULARY

(hero) ישרד
(lawyer) עורך דין
(might) עליון
(heroism)表現

QUOTES & QUESTIONS

“By that I mean, financial judgments against terror organizations allow us to seize their property and freeze their bank accounts. When we do that, terrorists can no longer use those resources for financing terror.”

Make sure students understand what it means to seize property and freeze bank accounts.

Do terrorist organizations actually pay money to their victims? If not, what does Shurat HaDin accomplish?

“I think courage comes when one sees the limitations and the inability of the state to act.”

Can you think of examples of when the government can’t see something the right way or can’t act the way you want it to? How can we respond in such cases?

How are those responses heroic?

“Having faith in God helps us face Israel’s enemies, and there is no doubt that God stands by us and helps us succeed.”

What do you think Nitsana means when she says this?

Have you ever felt that faith in God has helped you overcome a challenge?

ACTIVITY: GEVURAH IN THE BALANCE

1. Begin by writing the word gevurah on the board and asking students to guess what it means. Also, for a class with strong knowledge of Hebrew, have the class brainstorm a list of related Hebrew words and their meanings.

Move to the definition “heroism” if it was given, or supply it if not. Ask students to describe someone they think is a hero and why. Make separate lists of the heroes and the qualities those heroes have. (This can be done by the whole class or in groups, depending on class size; you may also draw upon discussions from other articles or lessons in this issue of BABAGANEWZ.)

2. Read the article about Nitsana Darshan-Leitner and Shurat HaDin on pages 6–7 of BABAGANEWZ, using the Quotes & Questions above. Focus on whether students think Nitsana Darshan-Leitner is a hero and why or why not.

3. Study the following Jewish texts.

GEVUROT, THE SECOND BLESSING OF THE AMIDAH

Your might, O God, is eternal. You give life to the dead; great is Your saving power.

You cause the wind to blow and the rain to fall. Your lovingkindness sustains the living. Your great mercies give life to the dead. You support the falling, heal the ill, free the confined. You keep Your faith with those who sleep in dust. Whose power can compare to Yours? You are the master of life and death and deliverance.

What specific things do we praise God for doing in this prayer?

How does this prayer help us understand what it means to be a hero?

How does this text fit with the way we defined a hero earlier in class?

DEVARIM 10:17–19

For God, your God, is God of gods, and Ruler of rulers, the great God, mighty and awesome, Who favors no person, nor takes bribes. God executes the judgment of the orphan and widow, and loves the stranger, giving them food and clothing. Therefore, love the stranger; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Do any phrases in the first verse sound familiar to you? [One appears in the first paragraph of the Amidah.]

What aspects of heroism do these verses add to our list?

Why, according to this text, should we be kind to strangers in our midst?

Why do you think that the Torah instructs us to imitate God?

4. Compare the qualities that the texts ascribe to God as a role model for heroism to the qualities students brainstormed earlier. Are they a direct match? Chances are they won’t be. Explain that to help resolve this apparent problem, the class will turn to the mystical side of Judaism, called Kabbalah.

“I think courage comes when one sees the limitations and the inability of the state to act.”

—Nitsana Darshan-Leitner

“Having faith in God helps us face Israel’s enemies, and there is no doubt that God stands by us and helps us succeed.”

—Nitsana Darshan-Leitner
Write the word “Kabbalah” on the board and ask students its root/meaning (from kibbel, received—tradition that is received from past generations). Explain briefly that Kabbalah is a way of studying Judaism that tries to understand God better. It was very popular in the 16th century, especially in the Israeli city of Tzefat.

Explain that kabbalistic thought explores ten, sometimes seemingly opposing, aspects of God.

The fourth aspect of God identified in kabbalistic thought is hĕsed, which was last month’s Babaganewz theme. Lead students to reactivate their understanding of hĕsed as love, kindness, etc.

The fifth aspect of God identified in kabbalistic thought, called din or gevurah, is considered to be the opposite of hĕsed. It is defined as strict law, judgment, following the rules, and punishning people who break them without any mercy.

The Kabbalists believed that God creates and maintains the world by balancing these two divine aspects. In particular, gevurah’s role is to limit and give structure to hĕsed. Ask students:

What would the world be like if it were ruled only by hĕsed? What would the world be like if it were ruled only by gevurah?

Instruct students to illustrate this image or to invent their own to depict the balance between gevurah and hĕsed. Remind students that gevurah gives structure to hĕsed. Invite students to share their illustrated metaphors with the rest of the class.

6. To sum up the lesson, bring the discussion back to Shurat HaDin.

Is the organization more on the gevurah side of responding to terror or more on the hĕsed side?

What would the other side’s response look like?

Is one more important than the other? Why?

Does this help us better understand why our tradition combines elements of hĕsed even when describing God as gībor, mighty or heroic?

5. Kabbalists often use imagery as an analogy for their abstract ideas. Here is one analogy for the balance between hĕsed and gevurah:

Gevurah without hĕsed is like an empty juice glass, but hĕsed without gevurah is just a puddle of juice staining the carpet.

Which of the metaphors or illustrations that we came up with for the relationship between hĕsed and gevurah best applies to Nitsana and the work she does at Shurat HaDin?