Who is a hero?

“Ben Zoma says: Who is strong? The one who controls himself...”

“Ben Zoma o-mer. Ei-ze-hu gi-bor? Ha-ko-veish et yitz-ro...”

(Pirkei Avot, Ethics of Our Ancestors 4:1)

Jewish perspective on heroes

Ben Zoma’s definition of strength reveals that in Jewish thought, a hero is not necessarily someone with large muscles, extraordinary talents, fame, or wealth. According to Rabbinic writings, heroes exercise self-control and consistently strive to “walk in God’s ways” by showing compassion to those in need (Sotah 14a). The Bible is full of heroes who overcome obstacles and struggle to attain their goals. Biblical heroes are remarkably human, with an array of strengths and character flaws. For example, Jacob cheats Esau out of his inheritance, and Moses has trouble controlling his anger. The everyday shortcomings of biblical heroes emphasize the Jewish belief that all individuals can develop their inner strengths and become heroes.

Your own perspective

• Who do you think of when you hear the word “hero”?
• What character traits of a hero do you find important?
• What do you suspect is your students’ current concept of a hero?
• What aspects of heroes do you hope your students will internalize?

Introduce the concept of heroes

• Identify traits of a hero. Ask students to describe people they consider heroes and why. Encourage students to think about historic heroes as well as everyday heroes.
• Look out for heroes. Throughout the year compare and contrast the characters you encounter in stories and Jewish holidays. Use this Hero Trait Chart to track your findings: pjfor.me/herotraitchart.
• Emulate heroes. Challenge your students to tell a story of a heroic act they have performed, or how they became a hero to someone else. What acts of heroism can your class perform?

Continuing investigation

• Create an evolving hero banner or mural for your classroom. Choose flexible fabric or felt so that you can roll it up between classes if you share space. Encourage students and families to add images of heroes or inspiring statements to the banner on a regular basis. As students add to the banner, ask them to explain their choices.
• Invite your students to come to school as superheroes – imaginary, current, from history, or from literature. An imaginary hero might possess powers dedicated to performing a mitzvah. For example, Super Tzedakah Hero brings food, clothes, and toys to those in need, carries tzedakah boxes, and is able to produce coins with a finger snap. How will you recreate historical heroes? Moses might show up with the Ten Commandments, and Rebecca could carry a water bottle and toy camel.

Growing Jewish Heroes Through the Year

“Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit...”

“Lo ve-cha-yil ve-lo ve-ko-ach ki im br’u-chi...”

(Zechariah 4:6)

We can be heroes from head to toe and all throughout the Jewish year. Use these tools to guide your thinking while learning together.

How can we use our bodies to be heroes? Fill in the blanks!

Head: Think about what’s right.

Eyes and ears:

Mouth: “I don’t speak because I have the power to speak; I speak because I don’t have the power to remain silent.” – Rav Kook

Heart: __________

Arms: “I ask not for a lighter burden but for broader shoulders.” – Jewish Proverb

Hands:

Legs: “Run to do a mitzvah.” – Pirkei Avot 4:2

Feet: “When I marched in Selma, my feet were praying.” – Abraham Joshua Heschel

There are heroes in every holiday and Torah story. Here are some examples, and space to add your own.

WELCOME TO SCHOOL

Rosh Hashanah

Yom Kippur

Sukkot

Simchat Torah

Noah

Sarah

Lech Lecha

Thanksgivng

Hanukkah

Tu B’Shvat

Shabbat

Pesach

Yom Ha-atzmaut

Shavuot

Ester/Mordecha

Pesach

Hoshaana

Hanukkah

Tu B’Shevat

Yom Ha-atzmaut

Shavuot

OFF TO BE A HERO!