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## Martyrs and Heroes

Erich Fromm  
1990s [1967]-e

The following paper was addressed primarily to Jewish readers and indicates Erich Fromm's reaction to the Six-Day War in 1967. A publication in English is not registered, maybe because Fromm's public utterances in those days evoked furious reactions, particularly on the side of those in favor of Israel's power demonstration against the Palestinian people. Since the recent Gaza war shows the same logic of a hero tradition, the paper is published here for the first time in English.

The paper was first published posthumously in German in 1990 and is included in the German *Erich-Fromm-Gesamtausgabe in zwölf Bänden* (Munich 1999) under the title "Märtyrer und Helden" in Vol. XI, pp. 514-520 (German by Rainer Funk). In a Spanish translation (by Eloy Fuente Herrero) the paper was published under the title "Mártires y héroes" in: E. Fromm, *Ética y política. Obra póstuma III*, a cargo de Rainer Funk, Barcelona - Buenos Aires - México (Ediciones Paidós, Paidós Studio 94) 1993, pp. 191-200.

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The victory of the Israeli Army over the Arab armies in the Six-Day War of 1967 has given rise to a reaction of pride on the side of many Jews, and of admiration on the side of many Gentiles. It is as if both said: "Now we know that the Jews are not cowards, that they can fight as bravely and skillfully as the best army in the world. Now we know that the Jews can be heroes, like those who defended Jerusalem against the powerful Roman armies, preferring death to surrender, in the Jewish wars almost 2000 years ago."

This pride in Jewish heroism is closely connected with an attitude which was most explicitly expressed by many inhabitants of Israel, but not rarely also felt by Jews in the Western world. I am referring to the attitude of shame, that six million Jews had been slaughtered by the Nazis without their fighting back; that with the exception of the rebellion in the Warsaw Ghetto they let themselves be killed like sheep and died like "cowards," and not like brave men who at least make the enemy pay a high price in blood for their murder.

Against this reasoning it is sometimes argued that, indeed, there is no need to prove that the Jews are not cowards. They have shown the same courage as their countrymen when fighting in the opposing armies during the First and the Second World Wars. They showed great courage as fighters in the ranks of the Russian Revolution, and produced a general, Trotsky, of extraordinary military skill and personal courage.

Those who present these arguments add that it is, indeed, an insult to the Jews to react with such surprise to the Israeli victories; this reaction seems to imply that until now the anti-Semitic accusation that the Jews are cowards had been accepted by many Jews and non-Jews without their being aware of it. Otherwise, why the surprise? While



in my opinion these arguments are valid, as far as they go, they do not touch the very depth of the problem: the difference between two ideals of human behavior, that of the *hero* and that of the *martyr*. What do they have in common? What is the difference between these two ideal attitudes? What was the prevailing ideal in the Jewish tradition from Jeremiah to those who were slaughtered in Auschwitz?

There is perhaps no more dramatic story of martyrdom in Jewish history than the report of Rabbi Akiba's death at the hands of the Romans. R. Akiba, one of the greatest figures in the rabbinical tradition, who had been an anti-nationalist all his life, persuaded himself, in contrast to a number of his colleagues, that Bar Kokhbah, the false Messiah leading the Jewish rebellion against the Romans in 135 A.D. was the true Messiah, and decided to defy the Romans by violating their prohibition against religious teaching and the ordainment of young rabbis.

This is the Talmudic report of what happened:

Our Rabbis taught: Once the wicked Government<sup>1</sup> issued a decree forbidding the Jews to study and practice the Torah. Pappus ben Judah came and found Rabbi Akiba publicly bringing gatherings together and occupying himself with the Torah. He said to him: "Akiba, are you not afraid of the Government?" He replied: "I will explain to you with a parable. A fox was once walking alongside of a river, and he saw fishes going in swarms from one place to another. He said to them: 'From what are you fleeing?' They replied: 'From the nets cast for us by men.' He said to them: 'Would you like to come up on to the dry land so that you and I can live together in the way that my ancestors lived with your ancestors?' They replied: 'Art thou the one that they call the cleverest of animals? Thou art not clever but foolish. If we are afraid in the element in which we live, how much more in the element in which we would die!' So it is with us. If such is our condition when we sit and study the Torah, of which it is written, *For that is thy life and the length of thy days*<sup>2</sup>, if we go and neglect it how much worse off we shall be!"

It is related that soon afterwards R. Akiba was arrested and thrown into prison, and Pappus ben Judah was also arrested and imprisoned next to him. He said to him: "Pappus, who brought you here?" He replied: "Happy are you, R. Akiba, that you have been seized for busying yourself with the Torah." Alas for Pappus who had been seized for busying himself with idle things; when R. Akiba was taken out for execution, it was the hour for the recital of the *Shema* and while they combed his flesh with iron combs, he was accepting upon himself the kingship of heaven.<sup>3</sup> His disciples said to him: "Our teacher, even this point?" He said to them: "All my days I have been troubled by this verse, '*with all thy soul*,' which I interpret 'even if He takes thy soul.' I said: 'When shall I have the opportunity of this?'<sup>4</sup> Now that I have the opportunity shall I not fulfill it?" He prolonged the word *ehad*<sup>5</sup> until he expired while saying it. A *bath ko*<sup>6</sup> went forth and proclaimed: "Happy art thou,

<sup>1</sup> Id est, Roman.

<sup>2</sup> Deut. XXX, 20

<sup>3</sup> Id est, recited the *Shema*: V. *supra* 13a.

<sup>4</sup> Lit., 'when will it come to my hands.'

<sup>5</sup> 'One' in Hear, O Israel, etc.

<sup>6</sup> V. Glos.



Akiba, that thy soul has departed with the word *ehad*.” The ministering angels said before the Holy one, blessed be He: “Such Torah, and such a reward? [He should have been] *from them that die by Thy hand, O Lord*.”<sup>7</sup> He replied to them: “*Their portion is in life*.”<sup>8</sup> A *bath kol* went forth and proclaimed, “Happy art thou, R. Akiba, that thou art destined for the life of the world to come.”<sup>9</sup>

R. Akiba is an exemplary figure of the martyr. He acts according to his conscience, and is willing to give up his life and to endure the pain of torture. And not only willing, but experiencing deep joy at the victory of the spirit over the biological need of survival and the physiological urge to avoid pain.

There have been many martyrs in Jewish history. Those like Rabbi Akiba who actively defied the law, the less active ones who simply refused to become converts. They were considered in the Jewish tradition examples of the most valued exponents of human conduct; they were called those “who gave their lives for the sanctification of God’s name.” Even those who were killed without being confronted with such a decision, during the persecutions of the Middle Ages or the pogroms of Czarist Russia were called by the same expression. The ninth of Ab, the traditional day of mourning for the destruction of the first and the second Temples, is in the Jewish tradition the day of remembrance and for honoring all those who gave their lives for the sanctification of God’s name.

The word “martyr” means “witness” in Greek and Latin, one who voluntarily suffers death as the penalty of refusing to desert one’s belief, or one of its tenets. He is a witness to the truth of his belief. The martyr does not fight, he does not avenge his death on those who condemn him; he does not try to use power; on the contrary, he is a witness that man can reach a height where truth is stronger than power. He affirms his identity as a man who is true to himself, even at the expense of dying. He is not supported in his action by his body; in fact, he has to overcome all the bodily strivings (and their physiological equivalents) which are in opposition—contrary to his act of martyrdom. He has not the advantage of the soldier in war, of being with others and being praised by those at home for his courage. The martyr is usually alone; he is in the hands of enemies who sneer at him and make him feel that he is a fool.

The martyr is the most admired figure in the Jewish tradition. The same holds true for the Christian and Buddhist tradition; it holds true for the philosophical and political martyrs of the humanist tradition. The Christian martyrs in the first centuries of Christianity, Socrates and Giordano Bruno, the Buddhist monks in Vietnam, they all are witnesses of the greatest human self-affirmation there is; to remain true to oneself in spite of extreme suffering, and to experience, let us say it, joy in this act of the utmost affirmation of that which is most human in man, that is his conviction.

What is it to be a hero? Of course, the word can be used in many ways; in fact, it would not contradict accepted usage to call the martyr “heroic.” But the meaning in which the word hero is mostly used is specific. One refers by it, first of all to a historical phenomenon, that of the Greek hero. The hero has in common with the martyr one

<sup>7</sup> Ps. XVII, 14. E. V. ‘*From men by thy hand. O Lord.*’

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Berakoth*, 61b, transl. by Dr. I. Epstein, The Soncino Press, 1958.



trait: he pursues his aim without being deterred by the risk of death, pain, or in some forms of war, torture. His goal is more important to him than his individual life, and he transcends the normal wish for survival in the act of heroism.

But when we ask what is the hero's goal, then the difference to the martyr becomes clearly visible. For the Greek hero, the goal was fame, conquest, affirmation of his virility and skill. These aims were pagan aims; human existence does not transcend the material sphere, although it is often shown to in its reflected symbols of fame, glory and revenge. There is no truth to be affirmed, no self to be true to, nothing transcending the physical realm to be a witness to.

The concept of the hero as it exists in its most popular form, has its starting point in the Greek hero, but it is more general. It seems to me that by and large the hero represents the ideal of survival, of physical self-affirmation. If survival is the most fundamental motivation of man from a biological standpoint, the hero is the most admirable figure from this same standpoint. While it is true that in many cases survival is better served by flight than by fighting, in many other cases the key to survival lies in the heroic courage to defy death and to risk one's life for the sake of one's own or one's group's survival. There is, indeed, good reason to admire the hero who demonstrates the strength of the human mind in his pursuit of life.

The martyr represents the utmost of spiritual or, if you please, human self-affirmation; the hero represents the utmost of biological affirmation. The human race may owe its physical survival to the heroes; it certainly owes its spiritual survival to the martyrs. Whether one admires the hero more than the martyr, or *vice versa*, depends on one's philosophical and religious attitude. But whatever one's own preference is, there is no need to minimize or even to belittle either one of the two ideal forms of human behavior.

It just happens that the Jewish tradition, like most religious traditions, found the most admirable figure in the martyr, not in the hero. Thus the Book of the Maccabees, the true heroes of the Jewish tradition, was not even accepted by the Rabbis as part of the Bible. A hero like King David is severely castigated for his moral sins by the Prophets, and his heroic deeds do not make up for his moral misdeeds. The Jewish future was based on the act of 'treason' by Rabbi Jochanan ben Sakai, who secretly left the city besieged by the Romans (70 A.D.) and surrendered to the Romans as the condition for their permission to found a Jewish Academy in Jabne. On the other hand, the Zealots, who defended Jerusalem to the last man and engaged in the killing of their own brothers never were admired in the Jewish tradition. David, the Maccabees and the Zealots were true heroes; but the Jewish tradition never accorded to them the exalted place of the martyrs.

But, so one must ask, does the example of the Zealots not show that there is very little difference between the martyr and the hero? Were the Zealots not martyrs too, who gave their lives for the survival of Jerusalem? At first glance this argument may sound convincing, but if we think further it is not. First of all, the Zealots were men of violence and of fanaticism; they were willing to die, but only under the condition of killing their opponents, Roman or Jewish. Secondly, they sacrificed their lives in vain; the war was lost when they went on fighting. They did not die knowingly for the affirma-





tion of a truth, but blindly, attempting to stop fate. They were nationalists for whom national survival was the ultimate aim, not the spiritual truth.

But is there not another type of hero, one who does not fight mainly for the physical survival of his group, but exactly for its spiritual survival, its freedom, dignity, the very conditions for living humanely? Indeed, there are many examples of this type of heroism, even though the wish for physical survival or even conquest is rationalized as the desire to serve spiritual values. Maybe revolutionary movements, inasmuch as their goal transcended the purely material and biological realm, and inasmuch as they were genuine movements for liberation, belong to this group, which is neither that of the martyr nor that of the hero in the sense described above. In the Jewish tradition, Moses himself would be the representative of this group, and undoubtedly none is more admired than he, the prophet and leader in the fight for liberation from Egypt. But I shall not pursue this line of thought further, and shall restrict myself to the actual alternative: the witness who gives his life for the affirmation of his spiritual integrity, and the hero who gives his life for biological survival.

As a psychoanalyst, I can hardly be expected to deal with the topic of martyrs and heroes purely on the conscious and behavioral level. What matters is the real and often unconscious motivation for both kinds of attitudes. It is well known that martyrdom can be motivated by self-destructiveness, masochism, depression and narcissism. Undoubtedly many martyrs have been motivated by one or a combination of several of these motives, without being aware of it. In their own consciousness, their motive was only that of being a “witness.” The same holds true for the hero. Many heroes have been motivated by hate, destructiveness, sadism, depression and narcissism, while consciously they were aware only of their intended aim.

But it would be most naive to believe that every martyr is a hidden masochist, or every hero a hidden sadist. Is there a way to find out? Indeed there is, and it is a simple one: the knowledge of the whole personality. If martyrdom or heroism are motivated by any tendencies like narcissism, depression, masochism, sadism, destructiveness, etc., one will notice these trends in other manifestations of a personality. There is no need to “psychoanalyze” a person, in order to obtain these data; close examination of his life history, behavior, dreams and many other expressions of his personality will suffice for the skilled observer. There is one motive which is probably the most important one in indicating the genuine quality of heroism, and especially of martyrdom: the degree of love of life (“biophilia” - Cf. E. Fromm, *The Heart of Man*, Harper & Row, Inc., New York, N.Y. 1964, Chapter III.). He who truly loves life will not be attracted by death, neither his own, nor that of others. Again, to discover the degree of biophilia in a person is not too difficult for any—and especially the skilled—observer.

But we are dealing here not only with individual motivations but with affective patterns within a given culture. Did the Jewish culture promote the spirit of suffering? Did the Buddhist or the Christian tradition? Did the humanist philosophy of Plato and of the Renaissance? The answer is very definitely “no.” The Jewish, as well as the Buddhist and Christian traditions, discouraged martyrdom. Even the validity of Rabbi Akiba’s martyrdom was questioned. The Talmud makes it an obligation to transgress the religious law if health and life are in danger. Only under very special and unusual circumstances is martyrdom thought to be legitimate. Without going into details, suffice it to say that



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Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and secular humanism are biophilic in the affirmation of life; they highly value joy, and consider sadness as almost sinful. They affirm life, physical existence, as well as all manifestations of aliveness.

Although they praise the capacity to give one's life for the affirmation of a spiritual principle, they all are united in the praise of and admiration for life, and could have said with Menander: "Only he lives who in living, lives joyfully."

The Jewish tradition from Jeremiah to only a few decades ago chose the martyr as its ideal. I, myself, and those who prefer the Jewish to the Greek tradition, do not belittle the hero, but we do raise our voice in protest when the martyr is called a coward, when Jewish history is falsified as having had an admiration of heroes, or when the history of 2500 years is written off and the inhuman heroes who conquered Canaan (even though in the fight against idolatry) become the lost link of Jewish history which is immediately followed by the wars of 1948, 1956 and 1967. If the inhabitants of Israel and many Jews outside of Israel now begin to admire heroes, military victories and preventive wars, they have every right to do so. But they should know that by disparaging the martyrs they disparage their greatest traditions, and not only theirs, but also those of the human race since the dawn of humanistic conscience, when values transcending the biological ones became the highest ones for men to reach.