

“Challenging Ourselves to Greatness, Not Domination”
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Rabbi Jay M. Stein

While fighting in the Pacific during World War II, General Douglas MacArthur, whose father was Civil War hero Lieutenant-General Arthur MacArthur, wrote this letter to his son, Arthur IV:

“Build me a son, O Lord, who will be strong enough to know when he is weak; and brave enough to face himself when he is afraid; one who will be proud and unbending in honest defeat, and humble and gentle in victory.”

“Build me a son whose wishes will not take the place of deeds; a son who will know Thee -- and that to know himself is the foundation stone of knowledge.”

“Lead him, I pray, not in the path of ease and comfort, but under the stress and spur of difficulties and challenge. Here let him learn to stand up in the storm; here let him learn compassion for those who fail.”

“Build me a son whose heart will be clear, whose goals will be high, a son who will master himself before he seeks to master other men, one who will reach into the future, yet never forget the past.”

“And after all these things are his, add, I pray, enough of a sense of humor, so that he may always be serious, yet never take himself too seriously.”

“Give him humility, so that he may always remember the simplicity of true greatness, the open mind of true wisdom and the meekness of true strength. Then I, his father, will dare to whisper, ‘I have not lived in vain!’”

An amazing soldier, the son of a heroic soldier, prays for his son. He has developed the most incredible insight from all he has learned while fighting on the battlefields. “Build me a son whose heart will be clear, whose goals will be high, a son who will master himself before he seeks to master other men, one who will reach into the future, yet never forget the past.”

The words, “A son who will master himself before he seeks to master other men,” resonate. Can you imagine a man who could glorify the battlefield but instead prays for a day when we are more concerned about conquering ourselves rather than others. It seems as though that ought to be a dream we are never willing to give up.

These words are incredible because they are truly the dreams of a father for a son. They are truly the words a father offers a son after seeing life and experiencing war. They are what a father gives his son. Soldiers, those who have seen war face to face, those who have experienced bloodshed and emerge from the dead and try to live, don’t glorify the battlefield and they don’t delight in the conquest. The same is true of Abraham.

A few weeks ago, we read that Abraham mustered his troops, 318 people, to wage war against Chedorlaomer – and he won. He ambushed them in the middle of the night and returned victorious.

Though an amazing defeat, that is not what defines him and it does not become the marker of his life. In fact, we never hear of another battle, skirmish or victory which involves Abraham. In many ways Abraham makes the determination that he will not fight again. He negotiates treaties and becomes a man of faith. No more wars. He has personal struggles for certain, but no more wars. He found a life of service but not armed service.

Then the Torah offers us this wonderful insight that must be read through the eyes of the commentary on the page.

Vayitain Avraham et kol asher lo l'yitzchak. “And Abraham willed all that he owned to Isaac.” (Genesis 25:5) The rabbis quickly, almost reflexively respond. It was not about possessions, it was about something bigger, it was about ideals, values and attention. When the text says, “Abraham gave everything he had to Isaac,” it meant that he gave all of himself to Isaac.” It is Rashi who offers the most beautiful comment. *V'haya beracha*, “And you will be a blessing.” *Hab'rachot misorot b'yadecha l'vareach me she'tirtzeh*, the blessings are in your hands and you can give them to whomever you desire, *V'avraham masran l'yitzchak*. Abraham gave them to Isaac. Abraham was blessed with life, family, and an unshakable belief in the Almighty. He could offer those blessings to whomever he desires and he faithfully transferred them to Isaac.

Rashi says it and I repeat it. *Hab'rachot misorot b'yadecha l'vareach me she'tirtzeh*, “The blessings are in your hands and you can give them to whomever you desire.” I wish we could replace the Marine Corp with the Peace Corp. I wish we could replace service to God and that humanity would replace armed services.

War is incomprehensible. War doesn't make sense. Yet generation after generation finds it is unable to exist without it. We pray for a day when a nation shall not lift up a sword against a nation, yet we keep doing it. We pray for a day when we will beat our swords in plowshares, yet we keep making more guns and more bombs. We actually employ not just armies but private contractors to act as armies.

Week after week I stand in front of this congregation and speak of the ills that beset our society. I speak of the lack of progression in the human project. The problems that have always existed continue to beset us. As we make advances in science and technology – many of those advances have made life much better. In so many ways, the quality of life we enjoy today far exceeds any ever enjoyed previously in human civilization. However, we seem to be moving even further backwards. Not only can we kill each other, we can do it many times over. But I will not and cannot give up hope for a day without war.

Andy Rooney recently offered an editorial on 60 minutes lamenting the need for a Veterans Day.

“Wars have been fought throughout time. Although we may think we're more civilized now than 100 or 500 years ago, there's no sign that fighting wars is a thing of the past. There's always a war going on somewhere.”

More than 5,200 American men and women, most of whom were very young – have been killed in Iraq and Afghanistan. It may be a small number in two small wars but if you're one of those killed, or even a father or mother of one, there's nothing small about it.

Instead of only commemorating Veterans Day, perhaps we could also establish a "No War Day." The name doesn't have much of a ring to it but a day like that would be worth celebrating."

Just as MacArthur did with his son, Abraham spoke to his son, "I have blessings that I share with you and they have nothing to do with conquering another – it is about knowing who you are." This is what must be shared. There is great power in our hands. Just like our rabbis have taught and thousands of soldiers have learned while fighting and losing friends in the fields of war, they must be used for blessings. I have never served in an infantry unit and I have never been to a forward area. In addition, I have never put my hands in another man's hands and I have never asked that he put his hands in mine but I see the images of the young men and women who ready themselves for deployment and then the faces of those same people when they return. I am saddened that we live in a world which still turns on itself and that we still must have those who stand on the wall and say, "Nothing will hurt you, not on my watch."

To each and every one of our troops we owe incredible gratitude. We owe them nothing less than every effort to put an end to war. We must try and make sure that coming generations will not have to dress their children in uniform and send them to far off and strange lands to protect our nation. There is nothing exotic about it. Honor, loyalty, and service are learned in the theater of defending nations. They must be used for the betterment of humanity or those who have fallen, will have done so for naught. President Ronald Reagan, speaking in 1986 on the tragic day when the Shuttle Challenger exploded, said, "We will never forget them, nor the last time we saw them as they prepared for their journey and waved goodbye and 'slipped the surly bonds of earth' to 'touch the face of God'."

This week we are grateful that so many have returned. As we remember Veterans Day, we make a commitment to those who stand with us today, and those who have served in our armed services, that we will work to end the violence in the world. Aaron Sorokin, inspired by Ronald Reagan's magnificent speech at the tragedy of the Shuttle Challenger in 1996 wrote, "This is a time when two powerful nations challenged each other and boldly raced into outer space."

What will be the next thing that challenges us? What will make us go farther and work harder? Did you know that when smallpox was eradicated, it was considered the single greatest humanitarian achievement of this century? Surely we can do it again, as we did in the times when our eyes looked towards the heavens and, with outstretched fingers, we touched the face of God. Here's to absent friends and the ones that are here now.

A generation ago two nations challenged each other and then they raced into space. That is the type of challenge we ought to dream of, not two nations challenging each other to global domination or even control of natural resources. I pray that someday the only armies we have are not made of soldiers but of legions of Nobel laureates, Kyoto Prize winners, and Wolf Foundation awardees.