

A black and white photograph of a woman in a headscarf covering her face with her hands in a room with children.

# My — Heroines —

BY RACHEL ALTEIN

This article appeared in *Di Yiddishe Heim*, Summer 5727 (1967)

**T**his is a public love letter to certain women I have long admired in secret. Some are close friends or acquaintances — I hope they recognize themselves — who would be terribly embarrassed if I told them in detail of my esteem and the reasons for it. Others I know casually, or have only heard about. All of them make me feel glad to live in a world that has people like them in it.

Somehow my respect for their deeds and personalities is more intense than what I can muster for the great women whose biographies fill our history books. I really don't quite identify with the latter. Not that I nurture much hope of being like my heroines — but their example is so refreshing.

All my heroines have a full measure of the basic ingredient of heroics — courage, courage to stick to your principles when it means being markedly different not only from most people, but even from many of your religious friends.

There are many otherwise observant couples who choose to ignore the explicit letter and spirit of Torah law, and limit the size of their families for the same social, career, economic, or convenience reasons as the Torah-less world does.

There are others, with a stronger sense of true Torah values, and a greater fear of, and aversion for, wrong-doing, who follow a more proper course, but oh, with what vehement martyrdom! Those women make it clear that each child is another bar of a terrible prison that shuts out the fascinating world and interesting accomplishments; they live for the day they will be free — a lady! The marvelous day when there will be no more babies, everyone at school, and then freedom — freedom to get a job, make some money, keep up with the Joneses. And if she is Mrs. Jones already, then freedom to indulge in the compulsive shopping and fun and pleasure-seeking that represents the good life in our society, and which pregnancies and infants do complicate, even when you have servants.

My heroines have quite a different attitude about motherhood — specifically Jewish motherhood. They consider it

And if she is Mrs. Jones already, then freedom to indulge in the compulsive shopping and fun and pleasure-seeking that represents the good life in our society.

a distinctive privilege and a serious but flattering responsibility that G-d has bestowed on Jewish womanhood. That being so, not only do they bear the children He sees fit to give them — they do so happily.

All right, the reader is thinking at this point, so she admires brainless cows who enjoy diaper-changing and bottle-washing; it's a free country. Nonsense. I do know some brainless bovines, but I hardly admire them, although in a weak moment I may envy them in their uncomplicated lives.

My heroines are capable, intelligent women, who would have been successful in any career they chose. But they have freely and deliberately chosen to expend their considerable intellect and talents on motherhood, on nurturing the holy Jewish souls that have been entrusted



All right, the reader is thinking at this point, so she admires brainless cows who enjoy diaper-changing and bottle-washing; it's a free country. Nonsense.

to them, considering it as challenging and honorable an occupation as, say, being a secretary or a nurse, a teacher or a physicist.

Maybe my heroine would enjoy such a position, and be successful at it too. But she rejects the idea of denying Jewish souls the right to be born, she knows she can't manage a career on top of the responsibilities of a large family, so she chooses what, by any real measure of Torah values, is right. What's more, she bears no resentments or regrets for her choice. Never does she think that her husband, her children, and the Al-mighty Himself owe her something for the rewarding career she might have had.

Her choice is not all negative — to avoid sin in martyred resignation, and in spite of the endless dirty dishes and runny noses. The opportunity to bring up Jewish children to devout service of their Creator represents to her the privilege par excellence, and her own humble way of best serving Him. She has no illusions about the essential difficulty, the thanklessness, and the chancy end results of the job she has chosen. Still, belief in its transcendent importance gives my heroines that aura of inner serenity and harmony, of quiet pride and satisfaction for which we all strive, and find so elusive.



I admire women who dedicate their lives to being Jewish mothers, but I hardly have the stereotyped “Jewish mother” in mind. That over-protective and over-possessive creature fills me with horror, not admiration, when I have the misfortune to meet her type, which is often enough. Oh, I could write a book about responsible motherhood, after some of the hair-raising deeds I’ve seen perpetrated in the name of maternal (or paternal) love.

Wise is the woman whose actions are based on a healthy and realistic concern for her child’s true welfare; his spiritual health — not his physical health, which is only the means to the proper end: his involvement with Torah and *mitzvos*. Nor is my ideal mother preoccupied with her own satisfactions gained from her child’s accomplishments, and his attachment to her, for she never forgets that her child and his deeds ultimately belong to G-d, not her. But the good Jewish parent is really another article, if not a book.



I have another kind of heroine, but it’s hard to give her a one-word, or even one-phrase, description. Basically, I admire the woman who sets her own standards, who has enough inner security and common sense to be the sole judge of the criteria by which she chooses to live. Her ideas, her values and aims in life,

I admire the woman who sets her own standards, who has enough inner security and common sense to be the sole judge of the criteria by which she chooses to live.

everything — down to her clothes and home-furnishings, reflect her unique personality, and hers alone. She doesn’t have to see the current magazines, and then discuss them with her friends, to learn what she is supposed to think, and to like. She has no compulsion to do what’s *in* because conformity and fashion are the breath of life to her, or for that matter, what’s *out* in order to be different for the sake of being different.

My best example is the neighbor I once had who was crazy about tennis. Every day, during the season, she would pack a picnic lunch early in the morning, take her two young children, and it was off to the tennis courts until dinner, which came from cans. She was too tired from playing for any housework; that waited for a rainy day. One memorable summer her apartment was painted, and she used her kitchen equipment from the cartons for weeks afterward; a waste of tennis



time to put things back in place. Oh, the clucking and head-shaking and gossiping in the whole apartment house! I myself am a drearily conventional housekeeper, the kind who dusts and cleans and tidies closets conscientiously, but did I give her credit for suiting herself, and not the neighbors. That's my kind of girl!

My kind of girl knows exactly what fits into her way of life, what suits her personality, her family's needs, and that's all that's important to her.

Almost all. Only one thing can stop my heroine from choosing that which pleases her, (not counting displeasing her husband; for to a happily married woman, pleasing her husband is essentially pleasing herself) and that is a conflict with the words of the Torah. Therefore, in this year of the mini skirt, my heroine's dresses cover her knees completely, not even raised a half-inch as a concession to fashion. Torah forbids it, and that's that, for my heroine.

If you don't think that requires a high degree of courage, I invite you to take a stroll in the streets of the most religious neighborhoods in Brooklyn, and count just how many women from

---

The many wonderful people who have, by their very own efforts, found the way to a life of Torah and mitzvos, kindle in me the profoundest humility. How bitter, how stormy, how strewn with struggle has been their path. Of all my heroines, these are the most inspiring by far.

the most observant homes, graduates of our best Jewish Girls' schools, have this courage. Few indeed. So the woman who has the supreme self-confidence to do what she knows is right, never mind fashion, never mind her friends who dismiss her as a dowdy drip, never mind even her own natural interest in style and appearance — that's the woman to whom I tip my hat.



My last category of heroines really includes heroes as well, but I shall discuss the feminine only. The many wonderful people it has been my privilege to meet and know, who have, by their very own efforts, in the manner of our forefather Avraham, found the way to a life of Torah and mitzvos, kindle in me the profoundest humility. How bitter, how stormy, how strewn with struggle has been their path. To complicate their problems in learning a whole new way of life, they meet at best with indifference from their nearest and dearest; more often with vicious hostility.

And we, we who were lucky enough to have been born into observant families, for whom the best *yeshivos* expended their most intensive efforts, for whom the biggest problem *yiddishkeit* presents are: it's terrible how much *glatt kosher*

meat costs, or: it's impossible, the bus connections to the *mikvah*, or: you just can't find a decent dress with sleeves for a summer wedding! — how consciously we wear our self-righteous haloes, how constantly are we reassured of our own superiority. And how contemptuously we sneer, when confronted by an especially heart breaking sacrifice, or an extremely zealous gesture of devotion to Torah: Oh, you know to what lengths those fanatic *baal-tshuvos* go!

When I consider the lives of these young women — Jewish education and background — nil — and the price they are so happy to pay for the Torah life they have chosen — estrangement from family and friends, complete reorientation of ideas and values, adjustments to new rules and mores, the search for guidance and help and acceptance, so grudgingly offered at times, even the search for new means of livelihood, I wonder: Would we feel as privileged, as fortunate, as blessed as they so rightly do? In similar circumstances, could we measure up to them?

Of all my heroines, these are the most inspiring by far.

Oh, if just a little bit of the qualities that make all my heroines what they are would rub off on me. Till then, I just want them to know how much I love and admire them all. **P**