

Heroic Redemption

BY RABBI DAVID WOLPE

How do you win? Is it the patient accumulation of small advantages or the masterstroke? Singles or a home run? The daily performance of *mitzvot*, or a last, heroic gesture that redeems a life?

There is a story in the Talmud of the Roman torturer who compassionately speeds the death of Rabbi Hanaiah Ben Teradyon. The Roman is brought into the world to come, and the Talmud comments that some acquire eternity in an instant. This cuts against the grain of most of the rabbinic tradition; living a good life, day to day, is the ideal. But there is a possibility that a single magnificent moment will prove the worth of all that has gone before.

From his Catholic tradition, Miguel De Unamuno expressed it beautifully: “May God deny you peace and grant you glory.” The idea of living from peak to peak, or epitomizing your life in a single powerful moment, is hardly a useful way to teach a tradition or inculcate goodness. But sometimes the world offers an unrepeatable possibility, and then like Samson razing the pillars of the Philistine Temple, everything becomes clear in retrospect. He lived a dissolute life, but like the Roman torturer, his story is ennobled and enshrined by a great final act.