

The Modern Maccabees

Category: Shemos, Va'eira

Ryan Turell gave up full scholarships for Kosher & Shabbos.

Yeshiva University Basketball Team

The “Maccabees” are the basketball team of Yeshiva University, the only religious college in the United States. They’ve recently become famous because their team has broken the record in college basketball with an amazing streak of fifty consecutive wins.

This team is unique; in Yeshiva University, the players pray every morning, they eat only kosher, they don’t play on Shabbos, and several of the players are studying for Rabbinic ordination. Playing on that team is much more intense than playing on any other.

One of the main causes for the winning streak is a young player named Ryan Turell, a religious 22-year-old who stands at an immense 6 feet and 7 inches. His most famous quality is his powerful jump; that is what constantly makes headlines.

Ryan’s story is special, because he was qualified — and accepted — to play on teams in the most prestigious colleges in the country with full scholarships. Nonetheless, he chose to attend a Yeshiva.

He related that when he was still in high school, he committed to play for West Point Military Academy where he was going to receive a full scholarship, and they also promised that they wouldn’t interfere with his mitzvah observance. However, he decided to call the local Chabad rabbi in the area, and the rabbi advised against it; it would be too difficult, he said, to remain an observant Jew in that climate. Kosher food would be an issue, and not practicing on Shabbos would be difficult.

He decided to give up West Point. He was raised an observant Jew all his life, and he wants to remain so in the future; why would he give it all up in one moment?

Right now, he is very proud to play for Yeshiva University, and his goal is to make the entire Jewish people proud. Most importantly, he wants to show religious kids that they are able to be successful as Torah observant Jews and that a person can have a successful basketball career while wearing a kippah.

Background

When I heard about this boy, I decided that I needed to find out more about his background. Who are the parents that raised him to reject the best scholarships and fame for the sake of eating kosher and keeping shabbos?

Ryan was born in Los Angeles to parents who grew close to their Judaism during their youth. His father became Orthodox and his non-Jewish girlfriend followed along and underwent a Halachic conversion. Today, they are both Torah observant Jews, and serve as great examples for their son in both Judaism and basketball.

When his parents asked him why he was ready to give up everything to attend yeshiva, he asked them a question in return: “Why did you send me to a religious elementary school and a religious high school? You raised me that Judaism is important.” That’s why he chose to go to Yeshiva instead of accepting the many offers he had to play on an elite team.

Who is Moses?

Last week, we read about a baby born to Levite parents. The mother hid the baby for three months, and when she could no longer do so, she put him in a box at the edge of the river where she was discovered by Pharaoh’s daughter — and the rest is history.

But who were his parents? In last week’s Torah portion, no information about the parents is given. We continue reading how he killed an abusive Egyptian who was hitting a Jew. As a result, he was sentenced to death and forced to escape to Midian.

Why did he do it? What pushed him to make that decision?

As the Torah portion progresses, we discover his first relative; he has a brother

named Aaron.

After G-d is revealed to Moses at the burning bush, Moses comes to Egypt, gathers his brother and all the Jewish elders, and he tells them that he was sent by G-d to redeem them. Everyone was excited, and they all trusted him. But as they approached Pharaoh's palace to tell him, "Let my people go," there was an interesting development. The Torah says, "And then, Moses and Aaron came and said to Pharaoh..."

Where were all the elders?

Rashi says, "But the elders slipped away one by one as they approached the palace, because they were afraid to go inside." (Shemos 5:1)

The Midrash describes it at greater length: "Where were the elders? Rabbi Eliezer said: When they arrived at the royal palace, they saw dead bodies at one side, crucified bodies at another side, and people whose hands and feet were cut off lie at a different side. Seeing that sight, the elders grew fearful and they escaped" (Midrash Hagadol). It's no surprise that everyone slipped away before entering the palace.

Only two people were unafraid — Moses and Aaron. They gathered courage, entered the palace of the world's greatest superpower, and dared to tell him, "So says the G-d of Israel, let my people go."

Who were these two brothers who were so ready to sacrifice their lives for the Jewish people? At first, we read about one brother, Moses. At times, one person is ready to die for a cause. But when there are two brothers, the question immediately arises: Who were their parents? In what sort of home were they raised? Where did they receive such an education?

Be The Right Parents

The answer finally appears in our Parsha, where the Torah reveals the identity of the parents. "And Amram took Yocheved his cousin as a wife, and she gave birth to Aaron and Moses." (Vaera 6:2). Now, as the Rebbe explains, the secret is uncovered. They weren't just two random brothers; they were born to the right parents.

Who was Yocheved?

At the very beginning of Shemos, when Pharaoh decides on the final solution for the Jewish nation, the first thing he did was call the midwives and tell them, “When you deliver the babies of Israelite women, kill the newborn sons.” They were commanded to be his agents, and to kill each newborn son before the mother understood what was going on. But the midwives refused to follow his instructions. “They didn’t do what Pharaoh had instructed, and they gave life to the children.” They fought the dictates of Pharaoh, the Hitler of the day. But Pharaoh didn’t give up. “The King of Egypt called the Israelite midwives and said to them: why did you give life to the children?” They responded that the Jewish women don’t really need midwives. Jewish women, they explained, deliver the baby themselves before they arrive, and it is too late to kill them.

One of the midwives was Yocheved.

The Rebbe points out that Moses and Aaron were born to a mother who was ready to defy the most powerful man in the world, and to a father that was willing to bring children to the world despite the fact that Pharaoh was out to kill them.

Moses and Aaron inherited their parents’ traits — and that is what gave them the strength to stand up to Pharaoh and to ultimately win him.

(See Likkutei Sichos vol. 16 pg. 58, Sichos Kodesh 5739 pg. 709).

In 1991, the top TV executive in Brazil came to visit the Rebbe, and asked the Rebbe one question: “How can I raise good children?” The Rebbe responded that when children see that the house is run according to G-d’s will, they want to emulate you, but when parents act otherwise, the children can’t be expected to do better. “If you and your wife will show a living example in your home and they will see your behavior on a daily basis, your words will be able to influence them.”

(Zorea Tzedakos pg. 56).