



HISTORY LEADERSHIP ETHICS JEWISH VALUES

EIGHT DEGREES OF *GEVURAH*

A 45-60 minute activity for 6th – 9th grade students

*Photo: A partisan feeding his wounded comrade in a Soviet partisan camp in a forest. Photographed by Yakov Davidson.
Date unknown. Source: Ghetto Fighter's House.*



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Lesson Overview

Help students discover that anyone has the potential to become a hero—and that *Tzedakah* is much more than charity—through a study of Maimonides' Ladder and inspiring stories of Jewish partisans who pursued justice by helping others.



Conforms to Common Core Standards
jewishpartisans.org/standards

Who Are the Jewish Partisans?

par-ti-san *noun*: a member of an organized body of fighters who attack or harass an enemy, especially within occupied territory; a guerrilla

During World War II, the majority of European Jews were deceived by a monstrous and meticulous disinformation campaign. The Germans and their collaborators detained millions of Jews and forced them into camps, primarily by convincing them that they were going there to work. In reality, most Jews who entered these so-called "work camps" would be starved, murdered or worked to death. Yet approximately 30,000 Jews, many of whom were teenagers, escaped the Nazis to form or join organized resistance groups. These Jews are known as the Jewish partisans, and they joined hundreds of thousands of non-Jewish partisans who fought against the enemy throughout much of Europe.

What Did They Do?

Partisans were determined to do battle with the Germans. They were not powerful enough to attack them frontally; that was the task of Allied Armies. But partisans could use speed, surprise, mobility and full knowledge of the area to attack the Germans and then escape before their enemies had time to confront them. Jewish partisans blew up thousands of German supply trains, convoys, and bridges, making it harder for the Germans to fight the war. Partisans also destroyed power plants and factories, focusing their attention on military and strategic targets, not on civilians. Jewish partisans forced the Germans to expend massive amounts of resources on combating them, disrupting their focus from multiple fronts against the Allies. One German commander called the Jews a "dangerous element" for their participation in partisan units in Russia.¹ In Lithuania, where Jewish partisans made up approximately 10% of all partisan fighters, they were responsible for 79% of derailed German trains and injuring nearly 50% of all enemy soldiers.² Jewish partisans saved thousands of Jewish lives, in some cases literally breaking Jews out of the confines of well-guarded ghettos, and in at least one situation, digging a tunnel to free 250 people from a ghetto. It is important to note that many partisans credit three things for their survival—luck, knowledge, and opportunity—not heroism, courage, or bravery.

How Did Other Jews Resist?

Resistance against the Germans took many different forms. In addition to the physical resistance of the partisans and ghetto fighters, spiritual resistance took the form of prayer services, and teaching children to read Hebrew. Artistic resistance produced art and poetry in ghettos and camps. Without taking up arms, these Jews stood in defiance to the Nazis, who sought to strip Jews not only of their lives, but also of their dignity and self-respect in order to facilitate the killing process. Jews countered the Germans and their collaborators in still other ways. Smugglers sent children to safety and couriers carried messages between the ghettos. Forgers created documents to ensure Jews safe passage to non-occupied countries or create fake identity cards that allowed Jews to "pass" as non-Jews. Jews in the work camps also sabotaged guns and other products they were forced to make for the Germans.

Why Should We Learn About the Jewish Partisans?

Most students falsely believe that Jews went "like sheep to the slaughter". They perceive the Holocaust as a piece of Jewish history only about victimization and the loss of hope. The experience of thousands of Jewish partisans who stood up to tyranny and oppression, fought courageously—and often successfully—against the Germans, and saved countless lives is an important part of Jewish history that few students are aware of. This information has the power to transform people's perception of the Jewish experience during the Holocaust, providing a clearer picture of Jewish heroism and character. After learning about the partisans, non-Jewish teens acquire a greater understanding about the Jewish people, leading to interfaith dialog and tolerance, while many Jewish teenagers often feel empowered, developing a stronger sense of Jewish identity and pride. The story of the Jewish partisans is empowering, and demonstrates how young people can make a positive difference in the world.



A group of Jewish members of the Lenin battalion of the Lipczany forest. 1944. Location: Belorussia. Source: Museum of Jewish Heritage

Life Lessons of the Jewish Partisans

Most of the Jewish partisans that JPEF interviewed agreed that three important life lessons must be passed on to future generations:

- *Young people can make a difference*
- *Stand up to tyranny, oppression, and discrimination...early*
- *Never give up*

JPEF encourages educators to discuss these with their students throughout this lesson.

What is JPEF?

The Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation develops and distributes effective educational materials about the Jewish partisans, bringing the celebration of heroic resistance against tyranny into educational and cultural organizations. JPEF produces lessons, study guides and films for 6th–12th grade History, English, Ethics, Leadership, Jewish Studies and more. JPEF educational materials are a key curriculum component in thousands of Jewish and secular schools worldwide.

1. Documents of the Holocaust, edited by Yitzhak Arad, Israel Gutman, and Abraham Margalit (Lincoln, The University of Nebraska Press, Jerusalem, Yad Vashem 1999), 441–444.
2. Fighting Back, Dov Levin, (New York, Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1985), 196.

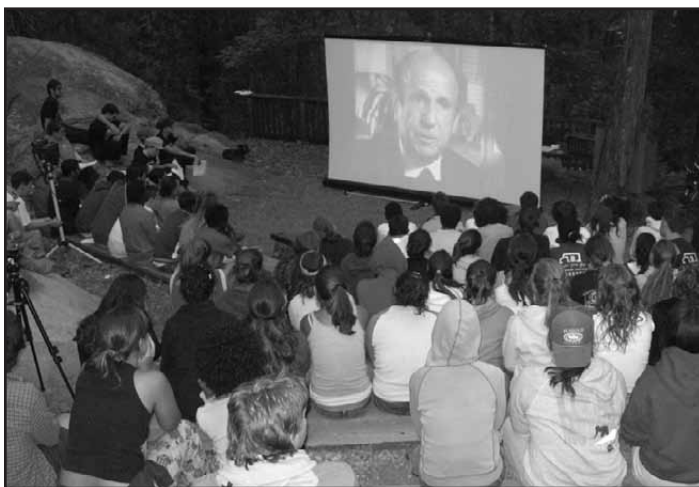
How To Use This Lesson

The Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation has produced a comprehensive and thought-provoking new curriculum called RESIST. The lessons of RESIST transmit values and enduring understandings arising from the stories of the Jewish partisans.

This RESIST lesson is divided into five sections. These sections provide teachers and instructors with an overview of the lesson, a guide containing background information on the subjects at hand, instructions on how to prepare for the lesson, an easy-to-follow lesson procedure, materials and attachments necessary to conduct the lesson, and an evaluation component that gives teachers and instructors the ability to assess the effectiveness and impact of the lesson. The following is a list of these five sections.



Recreation of how partisans laid explosives on train tracks. Location: Lithuania. Date unknown. Source: Ghetto Fighter's House



JPEF presentation at Camp Tawonga. 2005. Source: JPEF Archives

Overview

Contains a summary of the lesson and learning objectives.

Guide

Provides additional information for the teacher/instructor about the topics at hand.

Setup

Lists the materials and space necessary to carry out the lesson and explains how to prepare for the lesson.

Procedure

Lists step-by-step instructions for running the lesson. Action words are boldfaced.

Attachments

The worksheets, forms, and other materials needed to complete a particular lesson.

Overview

Lesson Summary

Who is a hero? We often think of them as individuals who possess incredible gifts and who are confronted with extraordinary circumstances – the ballplayer that hit the game-winning home run in the playoffs, the firefighter that helped to evacuate the Twin Towers, or even the Jewish partisan that rescued fellow Jews from a Nazi work camp. It would seem that heroes are far removed from our own lives and that heroism is a idea reserved for others, not ourselves.

In this lesson, *Eight Degrees of Gevurah*, students will explore the question "who is a hero?" and will discover various ways in which they can act heroically in their own lives. In defining heroism as possible and accessible, we bring together two frameworks, one from the Jewish tradition and another from history. The value of *tzedakah*, often thought of as 'charity', but also meaning justice or righteousness, will be explored through a study of "Maimonides' Ladder," a graded hierarchy of *tzedakah* which ranks the various ways of giving, taking into account the effects on the recipient and donor alike.

Heroic action will also be exemplified through the stories of Jewish partisans, many of whom were teenagers when they joined organized resistance groups to fight against the Nazis in World War II. This powerful juxtaposition of *tzedakah* and acts of heroism will help students to recognize their own roles in working for social justice and to discover that anyone has the potential to become a hero.

The stories and images of the Jewish partisans provide particularly dramatic examples of resistance heroism during the Holocaust, but they are hardly the only Jewish heroes. In fact, there were millions of acts of Jewish heroism every day of the Holocaust, ordinary people doing whatever they could to help each other survive and retain their humanity in circumstances we can read about, but hardly imagine the reality of. To quote Jewish partisan Sonia Orbuch, "People were fighting back every which way they can,"—mostly through unarmed resistance.

To honor the memory of all who perished and survived, it is crucial to approach this lesson with the understanding that the vast majority of Jews who suffered during the Holocaust were not just victims, but heroes as well. Those who had the opportunity to fight back with weapons were not braver, nobler or more heroic; they were luckier, and had opportunities or knowledge unavailable to others.



A group of Greek partisans who are serving in the ELAS-EAM resistance movement walk along the street. Among those pictures are two Greek Jews: Louis Cohen (left) and David Broudo (far right). Date: 1943. Location: Greece. Source: JPEF Archives.

Lesson Objectives

- Define the words: גבור (hero), גבורה (strength/might), צדקה (charity), and צדק (justice/righteousness)
- Investigate the heroic actions of selected Jewish partisans
- Apply the heroic actions of selected Jewish partisans to the degrees of *tzedakah* on Maimonides' Ladder
- Identify with the heroic actions taken by various Jewish partisans
- Express the relationship between giving and acting heroically
- Recognize various ways in which anyone has the potential to become a hero

Guide

Gevurah...

can be defined as "strength" or "might" and is the source of accomplishment, creativity, and self-preservation. *Gevurah* is primarily an act of constraint and restraint. According to Jewish mysticism, the primary force in the world is *chesed* (kindness). It is a manifestation of G-d's desire to give humanity whatever possible. The second force, *gevurah*, restrains the first basic force of Divine Providence and bids G-d *not* to give. Imagine a parent watching a toddler struggle to walk. As the toddler falls again and again, the parent must muster every ounce of strength *not* to extend a hand. This is *gevurah* at its most powerful.

We are most familiar with *gevurah* from our liturgy:

"Eternal is your might, O G-d" - Gevurot, the Amidah

"Not by might, nor by power, but by My spirit, says the Lord of Hosts." - Zechariah 4:6

"Who is strong? One who is able to overcome his evil inclination." - Pirkei Avot 4:1

Gevurah (גבורה) is not about military might, physical prowess, or winning. Rather, it is about spirit, using strength to do good, and overcoming our own impulses. These attributes and actions are crucial to becoming a גבור (gibor)—a hero—the Hebrew word for which comes from the same root as *gevurah*.

Tzedakah...

is the Hebrew word for the acts that we call "charity" in English: giving aid, assistance, and money to those in need. However, the nature of *tzedakah* is very different from the idea of charity. The word "charity" suggests benevolence and generosity, a magnanimous act by the wealthy and powerful for the benefit of the poor and needy. The word "*tzedakah*" (צדקה) is derived from the Hebrew root: צדק (*tzedek*: justice or righteousness). In Judaism, giving to the poor is not viewed as a generous, magnanimous act. It is simply an act of justice and righteousness, the performance of a duty, giving the poor their due. Some sages have said that *tzedakah* is the highest of all commandments, equal to all of them combined.

Maimonides...

or Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, known as the Rambam, was born in Spain, and learned mathematics, astronomy and philosophy

as well as more traditional Jewish subjects from his father. Maimonides taught himself medicine and was so renowned that the sultan Saladin appointed him court physician. His great love of detail and of exposition led him to write extensively, and he is well known for his lists: 13 Principles of Faith (a Jewish catechism), the *Mishneh Torah* (an annotated list of all the legal decisions of the *Talmud*, the basis for Jewish religious and community law), and the Eight Degrees of *Tzedakah*, a guide to charitable action, which is used in this lesson. Although some of his works were banned at the time, Maimonides has become one of the preeminent contributors to Jewish law and thought.

The Film...

is entitled *Introduction to the Jewish Partisans*. It is 7 minutes long and can be viewed as a part of this lesson (See Procedure: Step A-19). The film gives students the opportunity to meet some of the approximately 30,000 Jews who committed thousands of acts of sabotage against the Nazis during World War II. They destroyed trains, bridges, convoys, and power plants. These brave men and women, many of them teenagers, saved thousands of Jews from ghettos and work camps. They fought as guerrilla fighters—partisans—all throughout Western and Eastern Europe and their story is hardly known.

The Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation produced this film after interviewing over 50 surviving partisans. Narrated by Ed Asner, it includes rare stock footage and photographs of partisans in action. The film can be ordered through JPEF by emailing dvd@jewishpartisans.org or calling (415) 563-2244. The film can also be viewed at www.jewishpartisans.org/films.

The Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation...

develops and distributes effective educational materials about the Jewish partisans, bringing the celebration of heroic resistance against tyranny into educational and cultural organizations. JPEF develops curricula for 6th-12th grade classes on History, Leadership, Ethics and Jewish Values. JPEF educational materials are a key component to curricula in Jewish and secular schools worldwide.

For more information about the Jewish partisans, please visit: www.jewishpartisans.org where you can view additional films, partisan profiles (with video testimonials, photographs and mini-bios), maps, and other resources about the Jewish partisans.

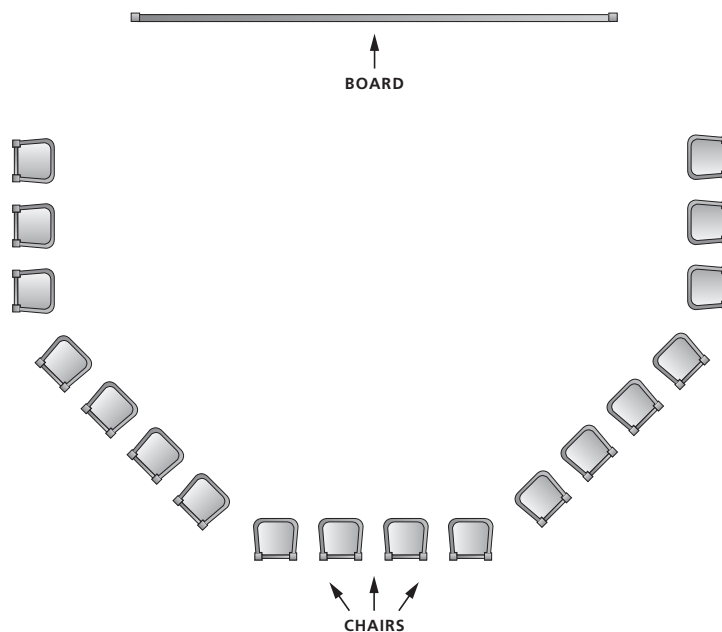
Setup

What You Will Need

- Pens and writing surface for each student
- Chalkboard with chalk or a dry erase board with dry erase markers
- The film that can be utilized for this lesson, *INTRODUCTION TO THE JEWISH PARTISANS* is 7 minutes long and can be viewed on a computer with internet access. A computer projector is helpful for presenting this film. The film can be viewed at: www.jewishpartisans.org/films. You can also contact dvd@jewishpartisans.org for a DVD of this and other films.
- If you are not able to show the film, hand out copies of *WHO ARE THE JEWISH PARTISANS?* on page 1 of this lesson plan.
- *LESSON PROCEDURE* printout (page 6)
- 1 *MAIMONIDES' LADDER* printout for each student (page 7)
- 1 *GEVURAH STRIPS* printout per team of 3-5 students, pre-cut into 8 strips along the dotted lines (page 8)
- 1 uncut copy of the *GEVURAH STRIPS* printout for your own use (page 8)
- 1 *POWER SHEET* printout for each student (page 9)

This activity should take place in a large multi-purpose or classroom. Chairs should be placed in a semi-circle in the center of the room. In addition, this activity requires a chalkboard and chalk or a dry-erase board with markers. Refer to the illustration below for a suggested room setup. The space should also be conducive to presenting a DVD presentation if possible.

Suggested Setup



Procedure

A) Introduction – 15 minutes

1. Seat students in a circle.
2. Write or display the Hebrew word "נבור" in front of students. If you prefer to use English, you may write "GIBOR."
3. Ask: "Does anyone know the meaning of this word?" Field responses.
4. Inform students that the word "נבור" is most often defined as a "hero."
5. Write or display the Hebrew word "נבורה" in front of students. If you prefer to use English, you may write "GEVURAH."
6. Ask: "Does anyone know the meaning of this word?" Field responses. Hint that this word has the same root as the word "נבור."
7. Inform students that the word "נבורה" literally means "strength" or "might."
8. Ask: "Why might the word for 'hero' come from the same Hebrew root word for strength or might?" Field responses.
9. Ask: "Does one have to be strong or mighty to be considered a hero? Why or why not?" Field responses.
10. Write or display the word "צדקה" in front of students. If you prefer to use English, you may write "TZEDAKAH."
11. Ask: "Does anyone know the meaning of this word?" Field responses.
12. Inform students that the word "צדקה" is most often defined as "charity."
13. Write or display the Hebrew word "צדק" in front of students. If you prefer to use English, you may write "TZEDEK."
14. Ask: "Does anyone know the meaning of this word?" Field responses. Hint that this word has the same root as the word "צדקה."
15. Inform students that the word "צדק" literally means "justice" or "righteousness."
16. Ask: "Why might the word for "charity" come from the same Hebrew root word for justice or righteousness?" Field responses.
17. Ask: "Do you think there is a connection between being a נבור (hero) and giving צדקה (charity)?" Field responses and take notes on them.
18. Ask: "Is there a connection between נבורה (strength or might) and צדק (justice or righteousness)?" Field responses.
19. Present the short film: *Introduction to the Jewish Partisans* (6:37). If the film cannot be shown, read aloud WHO ARE THE JEWISH PARTISANS? (page 1)

B) Maimonides' Ladder – 5 minutes

1. Distribute sheet: MAIMONIDES' LADDER to each student.
2. Ask: "Has anyone ever heard of "Maimonides' Ladder" before?" Field responses.
3. Explain: "Moses ben Maimon, or Maimonides, was a great rabbi and philosopher who lived in the 12th century C.E. He was an expert in Jewish law and organized Judaism's many insights and directives into an ingenious hierarchy of *tzedakah*, commonly referred to as "Maimonides' Ladder." Within this "ladder," Maimonides ranked the ways of giving charity, taking into account the effects on the recipient and donor alike.
4. Choose a student to read the highest degree of *tzedakah* on Maimonides' Ladder.
5. Ask: "What types of actions could fulfill this degree of *tzedakah*?" Field responses and take notes on them.

C) Eight Degrees of *Gevurah* – 25 minutes

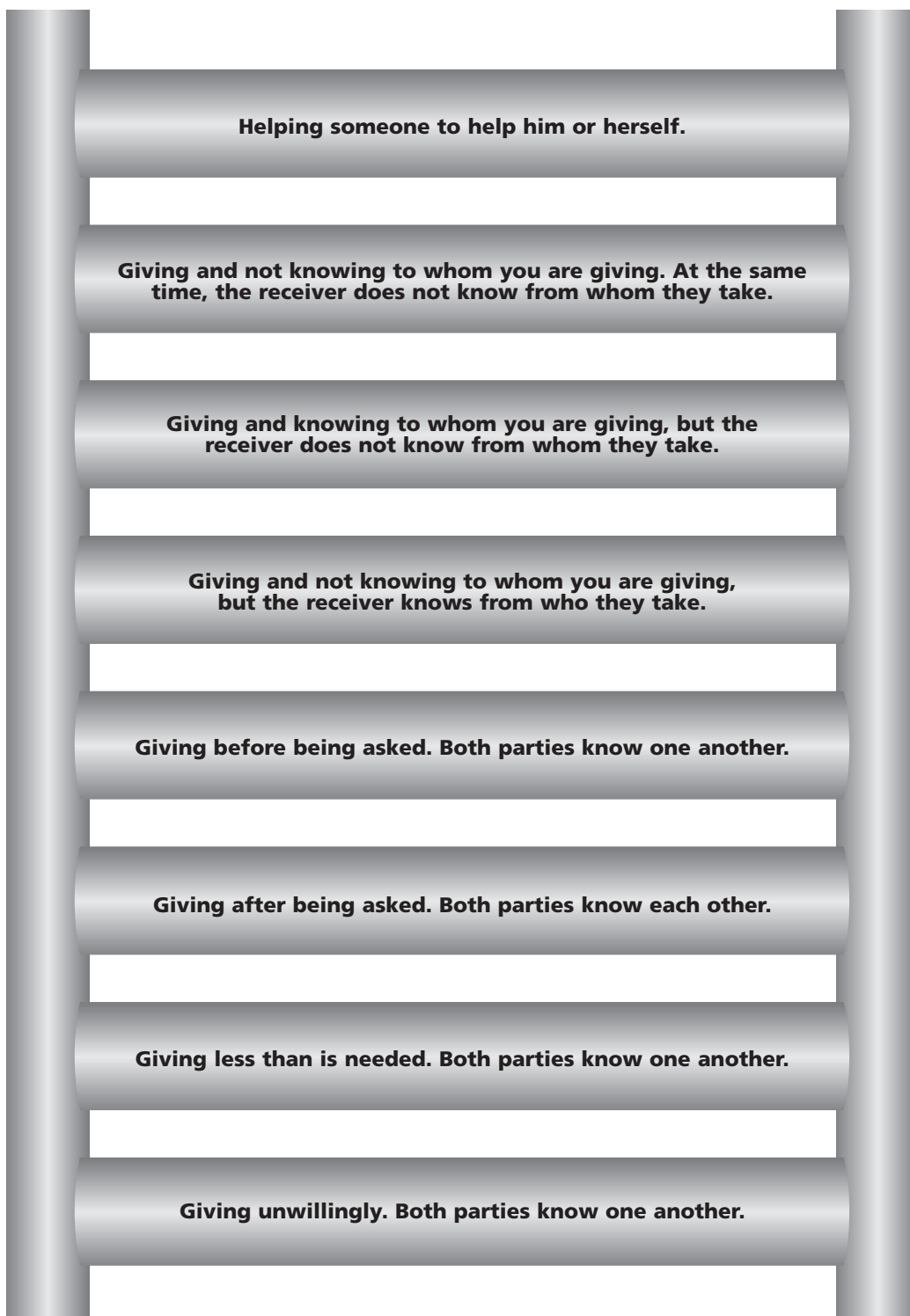
1. Divide students into teams. An ideal team would consist of three to five participants, but could work with more. Teams should go to their own section of the room, away from other teams.
2. Distribute a set of the 8 *GEVURAH STRIPS* to each team.
3. Explain: "Every team has received one set of *Gevurah Strips*. A *Gevurah Strip* is a strip of paper that features a specific action taken by a Jewish partisan. Your team's mission will be to put these rectangular strips in the same order that Maimonides would have, according to the 8 degrees of giving *tzedakah*.
4. Allow participants 8-10 minutes to complete this task.
5. Ask teams to present their answers in reverse order from lowest to highest, similar to the reading of a "top ten" list, saving #1 (top of the ladder) for last. Alternate with the other teams and call on different participants to explain each rung of their team's ladder. As you go, ask if teams agree on the placement of each partisan action. Compare to the order on your copy of the *GEVURAH STRIPS* sheet.

D) WRAP-UP – 15 minutes

1. Distribute one POWER SHEET to each student.
2. Review the instructions with the class and allow students up to 7 minutes to complete their answers.
3. Review and discuss the answers to this sheet as a class.
4. Conclude by challenging students to think of ways they can use Maimonides' Ladder of Tzedakah as a guide not just for giving charity, but for taking righteous action in their own lives. If time allows, field answers in this or next class.

Maimonides' Ladder

Moses ben Maimon, or Maimonides, was a great rabbi and philosopher who lived in the 12th century C.E. He was an expert in Jewish law and organized Judaism's many insights and directives into an ingenious graded hierarchy of *tzedakah*, commonly referred to as "Maimonides' Ladder." Within this 'ladder', Maimonides ranked the ways of giving charity, taking into account the effects on the recipient and donor alike.



***Gevurah* Strips**

When Joe Kubryk's partisan unit turned away Jews who wanted to join because they had no weapons, Joe and his friends began hiding guns they captured from enemy soldiers. Joe would give the weapons to other Jews, allowing them to join the safety of his unit, defend themselves, and start fighting back.

Simon Trakinski's partisan unit destroyed many Nazi railroad lines to disrupt German transportation. Simon understood that the people who benefited most from his actions were unknown to him: Allied soldiers that were fighting the Nazis.

When Martin Petrasek was a partisan, he pretended to be a non-Jew to protect himself. As a partisan, Martin went out of his way to help families he knew to be Jewish. He knew that he was aiding his people, while never revealing his true identity.

Tuvia Bielski established a partisan unit that consisted of 1,200 partisans. Though Tuvia did not necessarily know everyone that his group helped, everyone knew that it was Tuvia and the Bielski Brigade that saved them.

Sonia Orbuch volunteered to join the partisans as a medic, risking her life at the Battle of Kovel. She worked non-stop for 10 days: barely eating or resting while under attack from enemy planes and artillery. Many of the injured partisans she treated were conscious enough to know she helped them.

After narrowly escaping capture by the Nazis, Harry Burger was living in a barn when a partisan group discovered him. In order to survive, Harry asked if he could join them. The group took him in and he was issued a rifle on the spot.

Ben Kamm's partisan unit successfully liberated 600 Jews from a forced labor camp. However, the partisan unit was unable to provide the appropriate medical attention, food, or shelter necessary for their survival. Many of the liberated Jews died outside of the camp or were recaptured by the Nazis.

When partisan commander Zus Bielski ordered several partisans to find a missing woman, they refused his order on the grounds that the mission was too dangerous. Zus threatened to kill any partisan that did not follow his orders and the partisans complied, finding the missing woman.

Power Sheet



NAME(S):

1) What is the Hebrew word for HERO?

2) What is the Hebrew word for STRENGTH or MIGHT?

3) What is the Hebrew word for CHARITY?

4) What is the Hebrew word for JUSTICE or RIGHTEOUSNESS?

5) Which of the actions taken by a Jewish partisan resonated with you the most? Why?

6) What do you think there is the connection, if any, between giving and acting heroically? Please explain.

7) In what ways could you act as a hero in your own community?
