

## **Tibor Rubin -- Mitzvah Man**

My topic today is about a war hero. You may be wondering why I chose a topic related to war and the military for my b'nei mitzvah project. After all, this is Machar: at Machar we work for peace and against war. Well, first of all, I am very interested in history and history, whether we like it or not, is full of wars. However, some of the most interesting things that happen in wars don't happen on the battlefield. What happens both on and off the battlefield has many lessons to teach us. The story I am about to tell you is not about what happened on the battlefield. It is about the experiences of one very important person during a war and what we can learn from them.

The Congressional Medal of Honor is the highest Armed Forces decoration that a military person can receive for heroism and bravery. Since the establishment of the Medal of Honor in 1861, only 3,410 people have received it.

Eighteen Jewish soldiers have received the Medal of Honor, although some historians believe there are more because many soldiers enlisted under different names. Out of all the major wars from the Civil War to Vietnam, the Korean War is the only one where a deserving Jew did not receive a Medal of Honor right after the war.

This is the story of one such Jewish soldier who fought in the Korean War and went for years without being honored. Some historians have said that he is the greatest American war hero ever.

Tibor ("Ted") Rubin was born in 1929 in a shtetl in Hungary. Shtetls were small Jewish towns or villages in Eastern Europe. In many countries, Jews could not live outside these villages.

Rubin is still alive and lives in California. I had the honor of speaking with him on the telephone while I was working on this presentation. Here is his story and what I

learned from him about heroism, bravery, survival and being Jewish.

At age 13, Tibor Rubin was shipped from his shtetl to Mauthausen concentration camp. After surviving over a year of suffering in the hands of the Nazis, Rubin was liberated in 1945 by American troops. He was 15 years old.

He emigrated to America, intending to join the U.S. Army to show his appreciation to the soldiers who saved him from the concentration camp. After living in America for a few years, he took the test to get into the Army. He did not pass the test because of his problems with English. In 1950, he tried again. He passed and was sent to the front lines of the Korean War. He was not yet an American citizen.

Rubin joined the I (“Eye”) Company, 8<sup>th</sup> Regiment, 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division. His immediate supervising officer, Sgt. Watson, was very anti-semitic. He “volunteered” Rubin for all the dangerous assignments.

Rubin's heroism in battle during these very dangerous assignments led the commanding officers of his regiment to recommend him three times for the Medal of Honor.

However, those officers were all killed in battle. Anti-semitic Sgt. Watson did not follow their orders to complete the recommendation papers. It is assumed that Watson ignored his commanding officers' wishes for Rubin, because he didn't want a Jew to get the Medal of Honor.

After the deaths of the commanding officers, Sgt. Watson ordered Rubin to man a machine gun to secure an escape route for his fellow soldiers. Three men had already died manning the machine guns. Holding that position, Rubin never received the order, that the rest of the troops received, to withdraw. He manned the machine gun and successfully opened a passage for his company. However, he was wounded and captured by the Chinese. He would spend the next 2½ years in Prisoner of War, or POW, camps.

It was summer. Rubin and the others who were captured were in their lightweight summer uniforms. In the winter, many died because it was so cold. Many soldiers became weak. They lost the will to live. Rubin tried his best to help them, but if and when they died, he buried them.

The North Koreans and Chinese had barely enough food for themselves, let alone their prisoners. Rubin used survival skills he had learned in the concentration camp. He risked his life by stealing food from his captors. He could have been shot or tortured if he had been caught. The food he stole helped keep his fellow prisoners alive. If a soldier could no longer eat, Rubin would force-feed him.

He would soak already-used bandages in hot water in his helmet to clean them so he could use them on wounded fellow soldiers. One time, a soldier's wound became infected. Rubin jumped into the toilet and grabbed maggots. He washed them off and put them on the soldier's wound. The maggots ate the infection. Rubin pulled them away

before they could eat any flesh because, as Rubin said himself, “maggots will eat everything.”

Rubin is credited with saving close to 40 lives in the Prisoner of War camp.

Tibor Rubin told me that he helped his fellow prisoners because it was a mitzvah. He was following Jewish law and he was doing good deeds. For Rubin, who is a very religious Jew, doing mitzvahs was, and is, a big deal. He said his mother would be proud of him for doing so many mitzvahs.

I asked Rubin what he thought people should learn from his story. He said that he thought people should learn to help each other no matter what their color -- black, white, yellow, it doesn't matter. Help each other. Love your friends and family. Do mitzvahs.

So, what is a “mitzvah?” And what did Tibor Rubin mean by saying “I was doing a mitzvah?” What does he mean when he said that helping each other is a mitzvah?

Well, a mitzvah is a lot of things. Of course, as most people see it, a mitzvah is any good deed. But is that what it really means?

Actually a mitzvah is a commandment -- a Jewish law. The Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible) is traditionally said to contain 613 mitzvot or commandments which are supposed to guide a Jewish life.

So, when Tibor Rubin told me that the reason he did what he did in Korea was because it was a mitzvah, he really meant two things. He meant he was fulfilling Jewish law and he also meant he was doing a good deed.

He was committing acts of love and kindness -- the law of *gemilut hasadim* -- the ultimate good deed. In Judaism, some specific acts of kindness are considered to be among the most important of all the commandments. So the word mitzvah is commonly used to mean a “good deed.”

A Jew is supposed to love both Jews and strangers, and help others in need. We must “not stand by idly when a

human life is in danger.” This commandment is based on Leviticus 19:16 from the Bible which, in part, says “thou shalt not stand idly by the blood of thy neighbor.” You are not supposed to stand by and watch someone suffer. When someone’s life is in danger, help.

During the war, Tibor Rubin followed this commandment faithfully. What Rubin did was not to stand by idly, but rather to actively help.

Rubin’s story also reflects another core Jewish value – *"pikkuah nefesh"* – the requirement to save anyone whose life is endangered. This law upholds the sanctity of life. Living and keeping yourself alive is a mitzvah -- it is a commandment and it is also a good deed. Jews have the obligation to enjoy and preserve life no matter what. The sanctity of life is more important than almost any other law in the Jewish religion.

Jews throughout the centuries have had to struggle to survive, from the times of being slaves in Egypt, through the

pogroms in Russia, as immigrants in the U.S., during the Holocaust, and now in Israel. Tibor Rubin survived because that is what a Jew does. Survive and remember. Survive and never forget.

Rubin survived and we have not forgotten. He survived twice. He used the skills he learned from first surviving the Holocaust to help him survive a second time.

In a POW camp with unsanitary conditions, cold weather, inadequate clothing, not much food, and cruel guards, we wouldn't expect the prisoners, most of them wounded, to survive. The ones who did would be very few. But Rubin didn't think that way. He intended to survive, and wanted his fellow soldiers to survive with him. So he tried to heal their wounds and steal extra food for them.

Even though he is a very religious Jew, he took matters into his own hands to survive. He didn't wait for God to save him. Instead, because of his strong belief that, as a Jew, he must survive, Rubin saved himself and others.

When the war ended, Rubin went back to the U.S. He finally became an American citizen.

His fellow soldiers didn't even know he was still alive until he showed up at a Korean War Veteran's reunion in 1985. They started a campaign to get him the Medal that should have been his, but that he never got because of Sergeant Watson's anti-semitism.

Tibor Rubin finally got his medal 25 years later. In 2002, Congress passed a bill that required the military to review certain Jewish and Hispanic American War Veterans to see if they should have been awarded Medals of Honor. Five years earlier, Congress had ordered a similar review of Asian and Black service members.

On September 23, 2005, Rubin finally received the Medal of Honor from President Bush during a "beautiful ceremony," as he described it. He was the first Jewish soldier to be awarded the Medal of Honor as a result of the

2002 review and reconsideration. It had been 55 years since he went to Korea.

Finally, that day in September, he was recognized for everything he had done to save his fellow soldiers in Korea. “Everybody was there,” he said. By “everybody” he meant not only the President, but leaders in Congress and the U.S. military, and even the Hungarian Ambassador. It was a pretty big deal for him. As he said, (*excuse my language, but this is a direct quote*) “I was just a schmuck, a little greenhorn. Now, I’m a ‘sir.’ This can only happen in America.”

Because of what he has done during his life, I believe that Tibor Rubin is the “Mitzvah Man.” He represents what Judaism is all about. He follows Jewish law, does good deeds (mitzvahs) and, during the war, he kept himself and others alive. His actions and the way he lives his life are symbolic of the most important parts of being Jewish.

Tibor Rubin's story has shown me the real value of Judaism. Before, I felt disconnected from the religion. I celebrated all the holidays, because I am Jewish, and I like matzah and 8 nights of presents. But I didn't really get it. Now, I can really be Jewish because I know more about the important values of Judaism and I can use them in my everyday life.

I don't follow Jewish laws -- mitzvot -- that relate to how we treat and help people and how we respect our own lives just because some say it is God's word. I follow them because they make sense. Acts of kindness (*gemilut hasadim*) and saving the endangered (*pikkuah nefesh*) should be a part of everyone's life -- mine, yours, the person sitting next to you, Jews and non-Jews. I know that I should do more to help others and do things that protect lives all over the world. I know I should be determined and not give up. And, I will enjoy every moment I possibly can, including

riding bikes in the mud and watching as many Nationals games on TV that I can.

If all of us follow the laws of Judaism and what Jewish history and Mr. Rubin's story have taught us about survival and helping the endangered, about brotherhood and acts of kindness, then we will all be heroes like Tibor Rubin, the Mitzvah Man.