

"Who Knows?"
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Was Esther brave enough to approach King Ahasueros?

Not at first. Not on her own.

She needed encouragement from Uncle Mordecai.

His words of encouragement provide a lesson we can all use when we wonder whether we have enough courage to act.

Here is the scene in the book of Esther.

Haman has persuaded King Ahasueros to issue a decree that all the Jews are to be killed. Mordecai sends a message to Esther urging her to go to the king and ask him to rescind the decree.

Esther refuses. She says, "If any person enters the king's presence in the inner court without having been summoned, he will be put to death. Only if the king extends the golden scepter to him may he live. Now I have not been summoned to visit the king for the last 30 days."

Mordecai sends this response: "Do not imagine that you, of all the Jews, will escape with your life by being in the king's palace. On the contrary, if you keep silent in this crisis, you and your father's house will perish. And who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis."

"Mi yodea, im l'et cazot higa'at la'mal'chut."

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"Mi yodea." "Who knows?"

When a crisis occurs, or an opportunity to take bold action presents itself to us, will we have the courage to act?

We may not have a Mordecai around to give us a pep talk. But we should remember his question: "Who knows? Mi yodea? Maybe we are meant to be right here, right now, to meet this exact crisis."

I have stories about two people who had just that attitude. When they confronted a crisis, when there was a need for them to act, they responded as Esther did when she heard Mordecai's question. They thought, "Who knows? Maybe I am here now just so I can take the action that's needed."

Our first example is Violet Cowden. She was born in 1916 in South Dakota and raised on the family farm. She became a first grade teacher.

She was passionate about teaching, but even more passionate about an unusual activity for a woman in the early Twentieth Century: she loved to fly airplanes.

Ever since she was a child, watching hawks swoop over the family farm, Cowden had yearned to fly. She was not quite sure how one went about it, until she discovered a marvelous thing called the airplane. Once she made that discovery she used to ride her bicycle six miles each way to a local airfield for her first flying lessons.

She knew immediately that she had found her calling. She once said, "The air is such a comfortable place for me. I feel so in oneness with life and with the world and everything when I'm in the air."

After Pearl Harbor was attacked, Cowden, by then a licensed pilot, asked to join the Civil Air Patrol but she got no reply. Then she learned of a new program that seemed dangerous but for which she also felt she was ideally suited. She might have given herself Mordecai's advice to Esther: "Who knows? Maybe I have come along just when my country needs my particular talents the most."

She was one of 25,000 women who applied for the program. Only 1,800 were accepted. The program was the Women Air Force Service Pilots, or WASPs.

The WASPs provided the solution to the following problem. Soon after the U. S. entered World War II, our factories were busily producing military aircraft. But our military pilots were deployed overseas for combat. We needed some way to transport planes from the factories to the airfields. That became the job of the female pilots like Cowden.

The WASPs became the first women in US history to pilot American military planes. Cowden became one of only 114 WASPs to fly fighter planes during the war, including her favorite, the P-51 Mustang, a swift single-seat fighter she called "the love of my life."

Cowden worked seven days a week, sleeping on commercial flights that ferried her to and from assignments. She flew in all weather, came

down on runways without lights and sometimes took the controls of planes so fresh from the factory they had never been tested.

The work of Cowden and her colleagues was considered so vital that the airlines were ordered to displace any passenger if a WASP needed to be shuttled to an assignment.

Cowden saw what a difference this made one day after she was provided a seat this way on a commercial flight to Memphis. Disembarking, she faced a throng of women huddled on the tarmac. They looked disappointed, but at first she didn't know why. Then she learned that the person she had bumped was Frank Sinatra.

In 1944 male pilots were returning to America and wanted their jobs back. That December, on a day Cowden recalled as one of the worst in her life, the Army dissolved the WASPs.

Few airlines would hire a woman as a commercial pilot. Cowden went to work in New York in the only aviation job she could get — behind the ticket counter at TWA. It was painful, she later said, to be so close to planes yet so far from the cockpit. She soon left.

Cowden went on to become president of the national WASP veterans' group. After years of lobbying for recognition of their wartime service, the 300 WASPs who were still living in 2010 received the Congressional Gold Medal, one of the country's two highest civilian awards.

Although Cowden had long since given up her pilot's license, she never lost her love of flying. When she was 89 years old, she went skydiving with the elite Army Golden Knights. On her 90th birthday she decided to go paragliding. In 2009, at age 93, she again flew her beloved P-51 Mustang, co-piloting and taking the stick for the take off, for the landing and for some fast flying in between. In 2010, Cowden took part in an aerial mock dogfight over Fullerton Municipal Airport in Orange County, California.

The following year Violet Cowden passed away. She was 94 years old.

Our second example is someone who might well have asked more than once in his life, "Who knows? Maybe I was meant to do exactly this at exactly this time."

Dewey Stone was born in Brockton in 1900. After serving as a sergeant major in World War I, Stone graduated from Boston University with a business degree in 1920. He and his brother Harry ran a successful business, the Converse Rubber Company.

When Stone was 40 years old he attended a lecture in Boston by Chaim Weizmann, the head of the World Zionist Organization who would become the first President of Israel.

Weizmann was in Boston to raise money for a research institute in Israel. After his talk, Weizmann invited Stone and a few others back to his hotel room. They spoke about the future state of Israel for many hours.

The next day, Stone drove Weizmann to Harvard, where he was giving another speech. On the way, they stopped in front of MIT – the very model of the university Weizmann wanted to build.

Stone later said, “It was at that moment that the seed of hope that this dream might really be achieved was planted within me – sitting in a stationary car with a silent visionary.”

Over the next few years, Stone took on the important but illegal work of raising funds to support the Jews in the war for the future of the land that was then the Palestine Mandate. Stone raised money for arms and for ships to rescue Jewish refugees from Europe.

In 1946 Stone was in charge of that effort here in America. One of the ships purchased with his help was the “Exodus.”

Because Stone was doing this work under the nose of the FBI, he had to be discreet. He knew that the phones in his office and home were tapped.

This is one of the times Stone could have decided the work was too dangerous. But perhaps he thought, “Who knows? Perhaps it for just such work that I am here now.”

So he found a simple solution. He went to his sister’s house nearby to make the calls he couldn’t make from home.

A couple of years later, Dewey Stone had a second “Mi yodea” moment.

Stone met with Chaim Weizmann in New York City on March 12, 1948. Just a few months earlier, our State Department had persuaded President Harry S. Truman not to recognize Israel.

Jews had been lobbying Truman to make that recognition. By the time of the meeting between Stone and Weizmann, though, it seemed we had lost the argument. Truman even went so far as to shut the White House doors to all Zionists.

Weizmann, who was waiting anxiously in New York, expressed his frustration to Stone in their meeting on March 12, 1948. That same night a visibly shaken Stone returned to Boston, where he was honored at a

B'nai B'rith dinner along with Frank Goldman, the national head of the organization.

Goldman asked Stone what was the matter. Hearing about Weizmann's predicament, Goldman said he might have a solution. He had just attended a Kansas City B'nai B'rith event recognizing Eddie Jacobson, who had been Truman's partner in a clothing store business. Goldman suggested, why not see whether Jacobson would intervene with his old pal Truman.

In those days long before cell phones, the only way to call Jacobson was to use the pay phone in the lobby. Goldman and Stone went from table to table collecting coins for the pay phone from fellow dinner guests. They then hustled into the lobby and called Jacobson. Stone offered to meet Jacobson in New York and introduce him to Weizmann.

Jacobson agreed.

This was the second "Mi yodea" moment for Stone. The President had given strict orders against any more lobbying for Israel. But Stone thought, "Who knows? Perhaps it is just for this moment that I have lived my life as I have, in order to be ready to defy the president and take this action to save Israel."

Once Jacobson understood how urgent this was after meeting Weizmann, they hopped on a train to Washington. Truman was always willing to see his old friend Jacobson. They knew each other from Kansas City, had served in the Army together, and had run a haberdashery business together.

Truman met with Jacobson but explained that the State Department didn't want him to recognize the new State of Israel when it was declared, which was going to happen the very next day. Truman said he had made his decision to go along with the State Department and he didn't want to see any more Zionist spokesmen.

At this point Jacobson had his own "Mi yodea" moment. He refused to accept the President's rejection.

Instead, Jacobson reminded Truman about his admiration for Andrew Jackson. He said, "Your hero is Andrew Jackson. I have a hero, too. He's the greatest Jew alive. I'm talking about Chaim Weizmann. He's an old man and very sick, and he has traveled thousands of miles to see you. And now you're putting him off. This isn't like you, Harry".

Truman relented. He agreed to meet with Weizmann, but only if Weizmann would come into the White House through a side door.

Truman and Weizmann then met. After hearing out the Zionist leader, Truman did an about-face. As we know, as soon as Israel declared its independence, Truman issued his famous letter making the United States the first country to recognize Israel.

Violet Cowden discovered she could dare to join the war effort of female pilots. She understood that it might be just for such an opportunity that she had been imbued with a love of flying and granted the skill to be accepted for this work.

Dewey Stone could have been content with a successful business career. Instead, he realized that he had been fortunate to be in a position where he could help Israel win her independence, and then could play a supporting role in getting the United States to recognize the State of Israel.

Whether we have similarly grand opportunities, or need to respond to the needs of more ordinary but still important challenges, the encouragement of Mordecai to Esther can also inspire us. Mi yodea? Who knows? Perhaps it was to respond to this very challenge that we were placed in our present position.

When our moment comes, may we respond with the courage of Esther and of Violet Cowden and of Dewey Stone. And let us say, Amen.