



Celebrating the Outstanding Work of our Students

**“Heroes and Role Models:
Sandy Koufax, Hannah Senesh, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.”
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I would like to talk about some of my heroes and role models, who were also trailblazers and inspirational leaders.

I didn't choose them because their values matched mine, although some of them did. I chose to talk about them because I was inspired by what they did and the way they lived their lives. They inspire me to want to do something meaningful with my life too.

Today I will be talking about Sandy Koufax, Hannah Senesh, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Sandy Koufax was both a role model and a trailblazer. In 1965 he was already the best pitcher on the Dodger's team, and had won three Cy Young awards for best pitcher of the year. He was the first pitcher to throw four no-hitter games.

But he refused to pitch in the first game of the 1965 World Series against the Twins, because that day also happened to be Yom Kippur. Instead of pitching, Koufax spent game time in his neighborhood synagogue, praying and fasting. People were shocked. Everyone thought that his decision would mean the Dodgers would lose to the Twins, and they did.

The day after the game, a newspaper article said: “**The Twins love matzoh balls!**” After the Dodgers won the second game, Koufax wanted to send a note to the newspaper that said “I hope your words are as easy to eat as matzoh balls!” But he didn't do it, because he was a good Sportsman. In the end the public respected Koufax for his decision not to play on Yom Kippur. Of course it helped that the Dodgers did go on to win the World Series that year.

Sandy Koufax's story had more meaning for me, because I have pitched for my Little League team. I'm not sure that I could skip a big game if it fell on Yom Kippur. The decision not to pitch must have been really difficult for Koufax. He knew how important the World Series game was, and he knew a lot of people would be very angry with him, but he decided it was more important observe his religion's customs and not grow apart from them. Even if I didn't skip a big game, that's still something that I can relate to.

Sandy Koufax demonstrated the value of K'lal Y'israel: Jewish solidarity. It's important to stay close to your Jewish heritage even if it means giving up something you love.

Hannah Senesh was both a trailblazer and a hero. She was born in 1921 in Budapest, Hungary. Shortly after World War II began, she moved to Palestine to help establish a Jewish homeland. However, she could never stop worrying about the friends and family she had left behind in her home country.

In 1943, she joined the Palmach, which was the commando wing of the Haganah. Hannah volunteered for a raid that would drop commandos behind enemy lines to rescue American prisoners of war. She wanted to prove to the Allies that the Haganah would be useful in the war against the Nazis. She also wanted to try to rescue her mother, who was in danger from the Nazis in Hungary.

She was the only woman selected to go on the raid. Hannah was captured and tortured for military secrets and information that would have led the Nazis to the underground fighters. The Nazis even brought her mother to the prison and threatened to kill her in front of Hannah. But Hannah never broke, and as a result was sentenced to death by a firing squad. She was executed on November 8, 1944. She was 23-years old.

Hannah always had a very positive attitude. Her teammates have said that she was the one who would cheer them up when they were down. She wanted to save people from the Nazis even if it meant losing her own life. She showed the world that Jews would fight back. I chose to write about her because she had so much stacked against her but she never quit. She demonstrated the Jewish value of Ometz Lev: Courage.

In 1950 Hannah Senesh's remains were reburied on Mount Herzl in Jerusalem. When I went to Israel in February I visited her grave and put a stone on it in remembrance. It was important for me to say that I will not forget her courage and what she did.

Martin Luther King was both a role model and an inspirational leader. He was a famous civil rights leader. He was also the youngest person to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, on October 14, 1964.

In 1955 King led the year-long Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott that resulted in the Supreme Court outlawing segregation on city buses. This was King's first major Civil Rights success.

King is probably most famous for his "I Have a Dream" speech during the 1963 March on Washington. More than a quarter of a million people of different races attended the march. My dad was there too. He marched for Civil Rights in many demonstrations in the sixties.

In 1965 King continued to successfully fight for African Americans' rights to vote, against segregation, and for fair hiring. In 1967, King protested the Vietnam war, calling it an occupation and, "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today."

In 1968 King helped to create the "Poor People's Campaign." The campaign began with a march on Washington D.C. demanding help for the lower-class communities in the United States.

During the many years of his Civil Rights work, King was arrested, his house was bombed, and he received many threats on his life. On April 4, 1968, King was assassinated on the balcony of his motel in Memphis, Tennessee. Three-hundred thousand people attended his funeral.

Even heroes and role models have flaws, and King was no exception. He was known to have had affairs with other women. The FBI threatened to reveal Martin Luther King's affairs and destroy his reputation if he did not stop his Civil Rights work. But King refused to back down.

In the 1980s questions were raised about whether King had plagiarized others' work for his PhD degree. He had copied a third of his work for his thesis from a paper by an earlier graduate student. Authorities decided not to revoke his degree because the paper still made, quote, "an intelligent contribution to scholarship."

Even though King was a great man and people did not expect this from him, we must remember that he was human, just like the rest of us, and I'm sure if we search for a while, we can find many flaws in ourselves too.

Martin Luther King demonstrated the Jewish Value of Tikkun Olam: Healing the World. Healing the world means not being silent when you see injustice. I chose to write about Martin Luther King because he developed such a large movement that was responsible for tremendous change in human rights and civil rights.

King inspires me because he changed the world so greatly without using violence, and I wish it was a little easier for me to grasp how he did that, and to model myself after him in learning how. He inspires me because if he could change people's opinions just by talking to them, his words must have been very powerful and many people had to trust that he was a good man down to the core.

Hannah Senesh wrote this poem that to me describes heroes and role models like herself, Sandy Koufax and Martin Luther King, and what they mean to us:

There are stars whose radiance is visible on earth
Though they have long been extinct.
There are people whose brilliance continues to light the world
Though they are no longer among the living.
These lights are particularly bright when the night is dark.
They light the way for mankind.