Finding Your Inner Why: *Ometz Lev* and the Courage to Do What's Right

By Pam Morris, Early Learning Center director

In the tapestry of Jewish values, some threads are woven with quiet strength, and none is quite as inspiring as *Ometz Lev*. Directly translated, it means "courage of the heart" or "heartfelt strength." It is more than just bravery; it is the deep, internal fortitude—the unwavering commitment—to choose the moral path, even when that path is riddled with fear, difficulty, or unpopularity.

Often, when we think of courage, we picture grand, heroic acts: rushing into a burning building or charging into battle. But *ometz lev* is the courage we need every single day. It is the bravery required not to be stronger than others, but to be stronger than our own anxieties, inertia, or desire to fit in.

In Jewish thought, true courage isn't the absence of fear; it's the presence of action despite that fear. When we face a choice that we know is morally right but personally challenging, that hesitation—that knot in our stomach—is exactly where *ometz lev* is needed.

It's the courage to speak up when a friend or colleague is being treated unfairly, even if you fear becoming a target yourself.
It's the courage to admit when you are wrong and seek reconciliation, which often takes far more strength than defending a mistake.
It's the courage to maintain your values in a challenging environment, standing firm against social pressure.

This value reminds us that while physical strength fades, the strength of the heart endures and defines our character.

The Jewish narrative is rich with examples of *ometz lev.* Think of the hidden Jews during the Inquisition, during the Holocaust, in the tunnels over the last two years, all who maintained their faith, followed traditions, prayed in silence, while preserving their faith to pass on to the next generations.

A powerful, timely example comes from the story of the Maccabees, whose bravery we commemorate during Chanukah (beginning at sundown on December 14). Facing a massive, powerful army that sought to crush their way of life, they weren't the strongest, but they had the deepest *ometz lev.* They weren't fighting just for land; they were fighting for the right to be themselves and practice Judaism. Their story is a timeless reminder that when one acts with moral conviction, a small few can indeed overcome vast obstacles.

How can we, in our daily lives, develop and practice this courage of the heart?

Start Small: *Ometz lev* is a muscle. Practice it in low-stakes situations. Apologize quickly. Refuse to gossip. Say "no" when you mean "no." These small acts build the confidence for larger ones.
Define Your Values: You can't be brave if you don't know what your values are. Take time to clarify the moral non-negotiables in your life. When the difficult moment arrives, you'll have a clear compass.

Remember Your "Why": When faced with a scary or hard decision, remember the reason you are choosing the hard path—the person you are protecting, the principle you are upholding, or the integrity you are preserving. This deep sense of purpose is the fuel for your courage.

Embracing *ometz lev* can be uncomfortable. The feeling of difficulty is often the signal that you are precisely where your moral courage is needed most.

This Tuesday, the country celebrated Veteran's Day. As we reflect on the bravery to do what's right, we must pause and offer a moment of profound gratitude and respect for those who embody this courage in the most demanding circumstances. The men and women who have served in the military exhibit an extraordinary level of *ometz lev*. They have demonstrated the ultimate courage of the heart, choosing to face danger, separation, and unimaginable challenges, not for personal gain, but for the higher purpose of service, protection, and the upholding of fundamental freedoms.

Thank you for your service. Your dedication is a powerful, enduring light—a true testament to the courage of the heart.
#ShabbatShalom