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Parashat Bamidbar - Shavuot

Every Single Soldier – Parashat Bamidbar

All that are able to go forth to war in Israel (Numbers 1:3)

כל יצא צבא בישראל (במדבר א:ג)

The state of Israel is known for its refusal to abandon even a single soldier. This comes, in part, from the strong emphasis on the importance of every single soldier in the detailed, meticulous count of the soldiers in the newly formed Israelite army described in Parashat Bamidbar. In an era when kings and despots sent thousands of soldiers to their deaths without a second thought, the detailed count of the Jewish national army emphasized the role and significance of each and every individual. Describing this ethic found in the text, IDF Chief Rabbi Rafi Peretz writes that, “Relating the final count is not the only lesson of this text. Rather, critical to us is the loving attitude, the count itself—the very need to count—the importance and unique value of every single member of the nation. And just as each soldier is critical to the total force, so too is the count of ‘All that are able to go forth to war in Israel’ (verse 3) dear and important...”

Today, the United States must apply this same principle to the American citizens being held unfairly by the Iranian regime. Last week, the Senate [unanimously passed a resolution](#) calling on Iranian officials to release three American citizens currently detained in Iran. Passed 90-0, the non-binding measure advises the Obama administration to utilize all available resources to locate and secure the return of American detainees including Pastor Saeed Abedini, Washington Post reporter Jason Rezaian and former U.S. Marine Amir Hekmati. On the Senate floor, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) discussed how Abedini has been jailed for more than two years for the “supposed crime of building and operating an orphanage.” “Beaten, denied access to medical care, and locked away in solitary confinement—that’s apparently how the Iranian regime deals with those who dare to show love and compassion to others,” McConnell said. Sen. Ben Cardin (D-MD), the top Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, urged the Iranian government “to do the right thing... and immediately release these citizens and send them home to their families and communities as soon as possible.” ■

Creating Ambassadors through Kindness - Shavuot

It has fully been told to me all that you have done (Ruth 2:11)

הגד הגד לי כל אשר עשית (רות ב:יא)

The first few days after the devastating earthquake in Nepal were extremely hard for Binood Gimira and the group of 160 Nepalese students he leads. Since last September, Gimira’s group has been studying in Israel in a ten-month course on Modern Agriculture run by a partnership between Israel’s Foreign Ministry, Interior Ministry and its Ministry of Agriculture. The Nepalese students represent only a fraction of the over one thousand foreign students from the developing world currently learning modern farming techniques in colleges across the Jewish state. When the earthquake hit, instead of rushing home to help, Nepalese officials encouraged these students, many of whom lost relatives, to stay in Israel and finish their studies, so that they could help rebuild their country upon their return. “We will first rebuild the homes that were destroyed and bring food to our children so that we can survive,” Gimira told the Israeli newspaper Mekor Rishon. “But it wasn’t only the houses [destroyed], but also the farms, the cows, the goats and other animals [that] died. Everything we have learned here can only help us in the next stage [of rebuilding].”

The power of kindness, and the benefits of that kindness, represents a core theme in the Book of Ruth, which we read during the service on Shavuot. “Said Rabbi Zeira: [This] book [of Ruth] has in it neither ritual purity nor impurity, neither [laws of] the permitted or the forbidden. Why then was it written? To teach us the great reward of those who perform acts of kindness.” (Ruth Rabbah 2:15) Rabbi Moshe Shlesinger, of Kfar Haroeh, Israel, writes that “*Gemillut Chasadim* (performing acts of kindness) isn't simply offering financial or material assistance to an individual. Rather, it is the ability to delve to the depths of a person's travails and to attempt to free him from them without consideration for the forces that brought the individual to this point; ignoring his guilt, and with total indifference to the honor of the giver of that kindness, who may be damaged or harmed by the act.” Ruth personifies exactly this type of kindness: she abandons her life in Midian to remain with Naomi and accompany her on her return to Israel. She toils to gather wheat in the fields to feed herself and her mother-in-law, and acts to help Naomi, irrespective of her own suffering. Naomi's kindness does not go unnoticed. When she asks Boaz why he is acting so kindly towards her he explains, “It has fully been told to me all that you have done to your mother-in-law since the death of your husband; and how you have left your father and your mother, and your native land and came to a people that you knew not before.” (Ruth 2:11) People notice true acts of kindness and naturally want to offer kindness in return.

King David wrote, *Olam chessed yibaneh*, (Psalms 89:3) which can be translated to mean, “The world will be built upon kindness.” It happens on an individual level and on a communal level. But it also happens on a national level when a tiny country like Israel brings in thousands of students from developing nations (over 270,000 over the past 57 years), and teaches them skills that will help them spread prosperity in their home countries around the world.

During their time in Israel, the foreign agriculture students also learn about Jewish history and culture, and the success of the Jewish state, creating a base of ambassadors who can bring Israeli knowledge and friendship back to their home countries. Said Gimira, “Now that we're focused on how we have lost our country and how to rebuild it, the story of the Israelis—how they founded their State—influences us. We remember the Shoah and Hitler because we learned about it. We see that it was a greater calamity [than our own] and the Israelis nonetheless rose and built, and even in the desert they do amazing things with technology. So why are we crying? It is possible to survive and rehabilitate. [In this way], Israeli culture influences us.” ■

Yizkor on Shavuot – Remembering America's Heroes

May the Lord remember... (Shavuot Prayers)

יזכור אלקים (תפילה של שבועות)

Jewish law prohibits mourning on any holiday, and in fact the onset of a Jewish holiday cuts short the shiva period of mourning. Why then do we recite Yizkor, a prayer of mourning specifically on days we are prohibited to mourn? Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner [writes](#) that Yizkor overrides the normal mourning prohibition because the prayer serves not so much as a prayer of mourning, but instead as a tool which unites the community together. “...this is the goal of our Yizkor - to generate a communal moment of bonding and consolation - and so we use specifically those days of greatest gathering, Shabbat and Yom Tov and Yom Kippur, for this purpose. Precisely on these days of sacred communal gathering, we bond in an act of consolation, which is viewed not as a negation of our joy but as a celebration of our community. The Jew who mourns a victim of the Holocaust, the Jew who mourns a victim of terror in Israel, the Jew who mourns a grandmother or a child or a spouse or a friend—we are all part of the same nation, the same community, and if these are the days when our community comes together as one, then these shall be the days when we find communal comfort.”

The same principle applies to the American Jewish community. A few short weeks ago, the Jewish community gathered on Israel's Memorial Day to remember the IDF soldiers and terror victims who gave their lives in defense of the Jewish state. Today, we will remember our loved ones. But we must also use the prayer to unite with the loved ones of the dedicated American service members who gave their lives to protect and defend our freedom (you can find a list [here](#)). It is our hope that these prayers will bring blessing and solace to those who made the ultimate sacrifice for our country, and that they serve to bond us together in this great community of men and women dedicated to spreading freedom and democracy around the world. ■

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