

MAY 22, 2017

## Parashat Bamidbar-Shavuot

### Working Together – Bamidbar

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

כל יצא צבא בישראל (במדבר א:ג)

Earlier this month, Israeli and American fighter pilots took to the skies near Eilat for joint training exercises, the Times of Israel [reported](#). U.S. F-15 fighter jets flew together with Israel's Red Squadron of F-16s, which typically play the role of enemy aircraft during simulations. According to Lt. Col. Richard Hecht, the Israel Air Force's international affairs chief, "People are seeing there's a lot to learn from Israel," Hecht said. "We provide a sort of battle lab in which forces can hone a spectrum of skills needed to combat growing threats." The exercise is one of several in which the United States and Israel participate to hone their skills against possible threats. As ISIS and other radical regimes continue to grow, democratic nations—including Israel and the U.S.—recognize that they can most effectively handle these threats when working together.

As we see in Parashat Bamidbar, these concepts of unity and cohesiveness represented values critical to the building of the Israelite army in the desert. The Torah describes the counting in military terms. Moses must count, "From twenty years old and upward all that are able to go forth to war in Israel..." (1:3). Rashbam (on verse 2) writes that, "Now the Children of Israel are about to embark on their journey to the Land of Israel. The males above the age of twenty are of fighting age - eligible for the draft..." Rabbi Lazer Brody notes that the military nature of the count conveys the importance of an attribute vital to the success of any military: unity. He [writes](#), "An army that lacks unity and cooperation between its various branches isn't worth very much. What's more, every branch and every soldier within his respective branch of service has a unique and important task to fulfill. No one soldier or branch is independent—they all need one another, for no one can fight alone... A soldier who considers himself better than any other soldier lacks basic common sense. The infantry, when attacked by enemy planes, needs the help of their own fighter pilots. By the same token, the fighter pilot, when downed by enemy anti-aircraft fire, is dependent on the dedicated soldiers of an elite infantry unit to go behind enemy lines and bring him to safety. Every soldier needs every other soldier and every individual is dependent on the cohesiveness function of the army as a whole."

While every army understands and appreciates the values of unity and cooperation as fundamental to their ability to function and succeed, today the need for cohesion applies not only within each individual army, but among allied nations as well. For this reason, the militaries of the United States and Israel work closely together not only to improve each-other, but to complement one-another in the ongoing struggle against radical regimes and the terrorism they unleash around the world. On May 9, Gen. Joseph Dunford [made his third visit to Israel](#) as chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff. During the visit he was awarded a Medal of Appreciation by Israel Defense Forces Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Gadi Eisenkot for his personal leadership in strengthening U.S.-Israeli defense cooperation. Gen. Dunford and Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman subsequently met to discuss a range of regional issues, such as "the tri-border region, where Israel, Jordan and Syria come together" and where the Islamic State (ISIS) has a growing presence. Lieberman also thanked Dunford for his "great friendship with Israel" and underscored that the general's visit to the Jewish state is "further proof of the depth of the security relationship between Israel and our great friend the United States."

General Dunford's visit came as the heels of a [visit by U.S. Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis](#) who highlighted America's commitment to Israel's security and described the security efforts shared by both countries. "We're not

alone in how we look at terrorists. We're not alone how we look at Iran's problems, so it's time for us to all work together," Mattis said.

Like the Israelites in the desert, who recognized that they would achieve their goals when they functioned as a cohesive unit, Israel and the United States understand the importance and value of working together to combat the dangers that threaten the free world. ■

## Shavuot – The Holiday of Kindness

You have shown more kindness in the end (Ruth 3:10)

הטבת חסדך האחרון (ג:י)

On Shavuot, Jews around the world read the Book of Ruth. One explanation for the reading of the *megillah* on Shavuot is based on the core value of *chessed* (kindness) that underlies Ruth's personal ethic. In the Midrash (Rut Rabbah 2:15) we read, "Said Rabbi Zeira: This scroll has neither [laws of] purity or impurity, the prohibited or the permitted. For what was it written? To teach us the great reward given to those who perform acts of loving-kindness." The Talmud (Sotah 14a) teaches us that, "Rabbi Simlai taught: The Torah begins with *gemillut chassadim* and ends with *gemillut chassadim*. It begins with *gemillut chassadim* as it is written, 'And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins, and clothed them.' (Genesis 3:21) [The Torah] ends with *gemillut chassadim* as it is written, 'And [God] buried [Moses] in the valley.' (Deuteronomy 34:6)." As we read in Pirkei Avot, two of the three pillars upon which the world stands are Torah and *gemillut chassadim*—they go hand in hand. For this reason, on the holiday of Shavuot, when we celebrate the giving of the Torah, the story of Ruth reminds us that our connection to the Torah must also instill within us an ethic of kindness and giving towards others.

Here at home, we strive both as individuals and as a community to translate this ethic of *chessed* into action. Moreover, the very work that we do for Israel is a reflection of our need to give to others. At the same time, we take great pride in the fact that in the state of Israel *chessed* is a core value across Israeli society. Last week, Israeli President Reuven Rivlin recognized 56 outstanding young male and female volunteers from every sector of society, who represented almost 18,000 young Israelis performing national service across Israel this year. According to the [Jerusalem Post](#), "There was a high ratio of Arabs—both male and female—among the honorees. There was also a high ratio of volunteers from the National Religious movement and a smaller but not insignificant number from the Haredi community." Known in Israel as "*Sherut Leumi*," or "National Service," youths from across Israeli society spend one to two years performing service in myriad areas, from working in education and youth at risk to serving as paramedics with Magen David Adom and as voluntary police, as well as in state institutions and government ministries. In his address to the honorees, Rivlin told them that they are partners in Israel's achievements. "Without you we would not be able to do what we do for 'the other,'" he said.

Adult volunteers also play a major role in changing the face of Israel. According to [Israel21c](#), in 1976, a former teacher named Uri Lupolianski, who later served as mayor of Jerusalem, began lending humidifiers and respirators to needy neighbors in winter to avoid hospitalizations for respiratory distress. Eventually he created Yad Sarah, an organization dedicated to providing free services to the sick, elderly and needy. Today, 40 years later, Yad Sarah is the world's largest lender of medical apparatus, loaning out 150 types of equipment—from electric breast pumps to electric hospital beds—for a refundable deposit. With over 100 branches across Israel run by 7,000 volunteers and only 160 employees, Yad Sarah serves as a testament to the incredible power of *chessed* to not only save lives, but to change the face of society for the better.

The reading of Megillat Rut on Shavuot reminds us that as we celebrate the giving of the Torah, we must also focus on the central role that *chessed* must play in our Jewish lives. For this reason, we take great pride in our work to support and build a strong, independent Jewish state, which models the attribute of *chessed* on a national scale. ■

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