

N'chei Tzahal: Honoring Israel's Disabled Veterans Parashat Yitro

By Rabbi Jason Miller

During this past winter break, I had the opportunity to meet some new friends. I befriended Yisrael, an architect from Tel Aviv, at the Dead Sea, where my wife and I spent a couple of days at the end of our vacation in Israel. Yisrael shared his story with me over a traditional Israeli breakfast. While fighting for Israel, he was hit with a bullet. It was a direct shot to his left temple leaving him disabled for the rest of his life. He was lucky to be alive.

Yisrael was not the only disabled veteran of the IDF whom I encountered while at the Dead Sea. There were hundreds of men at our hotel who became severely disabled while fighting for Israel's continued existence. They are known as N'chei Tzahal. Some, like Yisrael, can barely walk anymore, even with the aid of a cane or a walker. Others are amputees, missing an arm or a leg, and bound to a wheelchair for the rest of their lives. They were at the Dead Sea to find some temporary relief from their pain through the therapeutic powers of the Dead Sea.

The N'chei Tzahal come each year for two or three weeks, and most of the hotels are very accommodating to their needs. The Israeli Government pays for their much-deserved vacation, but if it is not taken by the end of the year, the opportunity is lost. Thus, many of them make their vacation to the Dead Sea at the end of every December; making the Dead Sea, in essence, the unofficial convention and reunion of Israel's disabled veterans. Mostly men, the N'chei Tzahal range in age and represent each of Israel's many wars. I met men who fought for Israel's statehood in 1947, as well a young man on crutches, disabled during the current Intifada. I spent an hour talking about politics and religion with a couple of veterans on the beach. One of these men, whose foot was blown off by a land mine in the Sinai Desert in 1956, explained that he and his wife had been coming to the Dead Sea for three decades and it is the only time he feels any relief from his injuries. When I remarked to the other veteran how nice it is that the Israeli government provides them with a complimentary vacation, he looked me in the eyes, put his hand on my shoulder, and said, "Trust me, we paid for it."

I could not have agreed more with his statement. However, his words also deeply troubled me, because after seeing these individuals whose lives were so visibly changed by their devotion to Israel, I was left wondering about my own contribution to Israel's continued existence. What was my role as a Zionist living in the Diaspora? I never risked life and limb like these heroes.

In Parashat Yitro, our people's preeminent leader is exhausted. Moses is making all of the judicial decisions for the people. He is hearing every single dispute, and it is wearing on him greatly. When his father-in-law Yitro, a Midianite priest, observes how Moses is handling his leadership role, he exclaims, *Why do you act alone, while all the people stand about you from morning until evening? The task is too heavy for you and you will surely wear yourself out.* Therefore, acting as an "outside management consultant," he gives some very valuable advice to Moses, urging him to reserve only the most important legal cases for himself, while appointing judges from among the elders of the people to rule on all other minor matters. Moses heeds his father-in-law's good counsel, putting the new legal system into practice; and in so doing, sets the Israelites on the right path toward becoming a nation. Our ancestors' journey toward peoplehood would not have been possible without Moses sharing in the task.

Yitro's message brings to mind Rabbi Tarfon's well-known teaching in Pirkei Avot - *It is not [incumbent] upon you to finish the task, but neither are you free to desist from the task.* This mishnah never spoke to me more than it did a few weeks ago while a participant on the JTS Solidarity Mission to Israel. In the same room where David Ben-Gurion proclaimed Israel's independence, a third-generation Israeli woman charged us with the message that Israel belongs to all Jews, not only to Israelis. We all share in the responsibility of ensuring Israel's survival, and those of us in the Diaspora can achieve this through tourism to our homeland. Israel's economy is dependent on tourism, realizing a return on investment as in

no other sector, but the current situation has led to a dearth of Jewish tourists. Israel is calling us to come home and we must heed that call and do our share.

Feeling the love for our homeland and our deep emotional attachment to the land, we must follow the message of Rabbi Tarfon. Those Israelis fighting for the stability of Israel cannot do it alone. And Israeli citizens cannot do it alone. They need us. They need us now more than ever. Let us not desist from our task.

Shabbat Shalom.