

Lo Alekha Hamelakha Ligmor: Only by Sharing in the Task Can We Ensure Israel's Survival Parashat Yitro

By Rabbi Jason Miller

During this past winter break from school, I had the opportunity to meet some new friends. I met Yisrael Abayov, a successful architect from Tel Aviv, at the Dead Sea, where Elissa and I spent a couple of days relaxing at the end of our vacation in Israel. Yisrael shared his story with us over a traditional Israeli breakfast, as we looked out at the Dead Sea and the Jordanian Hills. While fighting for Israel in 1978, Yisrael 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. He was serving in Lebanon at the time and the villain was named Yassir Arafat. I remarked to Yisrael how we now sit in Israel twenty-five years later, and it seems like some things never change.

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, who risked their lives in protecting our Jewish homeland. They are known as *N'khei Tzahal* - the disabled veterans of T'zva Hagganah L'yisrael, the IDF. 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. Others still, were not injured while on active duty, but rather suffered life-long disabilities from a terrorist explosion while waiting at a bus stop just trying to get back to the base after a weekend off. They were at the Dead Sea to find some temporary relief from their disabling pain through the therapeutic powers of the Dead Sea.

The *N'khei Tzahal* come each year for two or three weeks, and most of the hotels are very accommodating to their needs, displaying a level of handicapped accessibility that is unmatched anywhere in the world. 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'khei Tzahal* range in age and represent each of Israel's many wars, some having served in as many as three. 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 who were on the beach with their wives. 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 for a couple of weeks, 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 troubled me deeply, because after seeing these many 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, whether serious or inconsequential, and it is wearing on him greatly. It is emotionally and physically taxing. 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.* So, acting as an "outside management consultant," Yitro gives some invaluable 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 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 the burden. Had Moses continued being the "be-all, do-all" leader of the people, where would we be today? It truly does take a village.

Yitro's message to Moses brings to mind Rabbi Tarfon's well-known teaching in Pirkei Avot: *Lo alekha hamelakha ligmor, v'lo atah ben chorin l'hibatel mimenah* - 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, a group of North American Jews, with the message that Israel belongs to all Jews, not only to Israelis. "It is as much yours as it is mine," she told us. Indeed, 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. Like the U.S., Israel also felt the financial repercussions of the bursting of the dot-com bubble. However, Israel's high-tech industry shows a return on investment that pales in comparison with its tourism industry. In fact, for every dollar that Israel spends encouraging tourism, they in turn receive seventeen dollars; but the current situation, the *matzav*, 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.

We must visit Israel. If we take seriously the dictum of *kol yisrael aravim zeh bazeh* - that all Jews are responsible one for the other, then we must book our flights and show our Israeli brothers and sisters that we do in fact stand in solidarity with them. It can no longer be a mission statement of words and not of action. Now, this doesn't mean that I am not sympathetic to the concern that this is a dangerous time to travel to the Middle East. Our world is, no doubt, in a stark time of uncertainty, but our family in Israel needs us now more than ever.

I am very fortunate to have had two opportunities to travel to Israel over the course of the past several weeks. Each of these visits was under a different premise. The first visit, with Elissa, was what I describe as the "*stam kakha* visit," because for each of the seemingly thousand times we were asked by Israelis why we were there, I answered with a shrug of the shoulders, *stam kakha* - just because. This was not a solidarity mission. There were no strings attached. We wanted to go on a vacation and simply could not find a place more important to visit right now. And they were so glad to see us. The shop keepers, like Jan Elazar whose wife suffered closed head trauma in a terrorist attack, came out from behind his counter to embrace us each time we visited his store. Cab drivers, like the one who gave us Israeli candies during our ride, couldn't express enough how happy he was to see Jewish tourists in his backseat. And I know you've heard it all before, but it is so true; the El Al flight attendants, the hotel clerks, the waitresses - they were all so glad to see us. This is why we chose to go to Israel now. Yes, all of those other reasons why Jews are going to Israel - to show solidarity, to boost the economy, to make the statement that terrorism will not deter us - those were all bi-products of our visit, but our main reason for going was because we love Israel. We feel an emotional attachment to the land, to the nation, and especially to the people.

My second visit this winter - a much shorter stay - was with over 100 colleagues from the Jewish Theological Seminary. We were invited to Israel through the joint efforts of the Seminary and the Israel Ministry of Tourism to spend four days learning about the real state of affairs in Israel today, not what we learn from CNN and the evening news. We were given a behind-the-scenes tour of Shaare Zedek Hospital to see how they respond to the traumas of a terrorist attack. We met with representatives of the Parents Bereavement Circle, a group of Israeli Arab and Jewish parents who lost children in acts of terror, and are now working in partnership for peace. We heard from the founder of SELA, a mitzvah organization whose mission is to help new immigrants who have suffered a trauma, whether by surviving an auto accident or losing a parent in a bus bombing or surviving a terrorist incident themselves. We, as the future leaders of the Jewish community, learned how Israel is coping during these painful times and what we must do to help in the effort, how we can share in the task.

I leave you with one more encounter from the Dead Sea. I am told by those older than me that throughout Jewish history, there has been one place where deep, engaging theological discussion takes place. No, I am not referring to the yeshivas or to the synagogues. I am, of course, talking about the shvitz. And I experienced this first hand. Sitting in the steam-room with a disabled man in his late seventies, I heard war stories about fighting the British in pre-1948 Palestine. All in Hebrew, he spoke no English, we discussed the implications of Diaspora Judaism on Israel, and the difficulties of making aliyah. This was only during the first fifteen minutes mind you. And if you've ever sat in a shvitz for fifteen minutes, you know that's about the time to make your way to the exit.

But it was then, that this war hero really got me thinking. He told me how lucky he has felt his whole life for surviving Israel's wars. Though not a religious man, he expressed how *blessed* he was for seeing this tiny nation reach her tenth anniversary, then her twentieth, then her thirtieth, and soon, God willing, it's sixtieth. But he also shared with me that while he survived Israel's wars, his son was not as lucky. His son, whom he referred to as his *korban* - his sacrifice, perished fighting for our shared homeland. It was silent in the shvitz for about a minute. With all the steam I could barely make out the man's face anymore. I was crying or sitting stoic. And then he uttered, For Israel to continue to exist, we need *korbanot*, we need sacrifices.

I now understand his message with newfound clarity. It is the message of Rabbi Tarfon. We might not all put our lives on the line for Israel, but feeling the love for our nation and our deep emotional attachment to the land, we must contribute to the cause. We must share in the task, in the effort of *klal yisrael*. The Israelis fighting for the stability of Israel cannot do it alone. And the survivors of terrorism cannot do it alone. And the bereaved parents cannot do it alone. The Israeli citizens cannot do it alone. And they shouldn't have to do it alone. They need us! They need us now more than ever. Let us not desist from our task. Am Yisrael Chai. And let us say Amen.

Shabbat Shalom.