

“An Army of One”
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War in any form is horrible. The loss of life is devastating, no matter the proportions. At the beginning of the second war in Iraq, I remember Saddam Hussein making the claim that we were in for the “mother of all battles.” It was his way of saying that although he may not win we were going to sustain casualties the likes of which the American people would not be able to stomach. You see, the civilized world has little tolerance for loss of life. That prediction never truly held up as we bombarded them with shock and awe. However, as the war waged on and the casualty rates rose we grew ever more squeamish – and the war became increasingly more unpopular. Laughingly the Arab world pointed their collective finger at us suggesting we couldn’t see this through. They know we value individual life too much. They know what had been told to me during the first Gulf War by a professor of mine at Tel Aviv University. We had been discussing the “land for peace” models that were being explored with the Palestinians. The professor said to me, “There is not a single blade of grass in Israel with one single hair of my son’s head. We just value individual life too much.”

By most accounts the war in Gaza was a success and, by one criterion, it was certainly considered a victory of sorts. That criterion is whether or not the children of Sederot can sleep at night. The people at the southern end of Israel will certainly suffer for many years to come from these sounds that go “bang” in the night. You see, these noises can startle even if there is no danger. Our brothers and sisters have certainly grown accustomed to living in fear and that is why the Gaza war was necessary, never desired, but certainly necessary. You might know that at its territorial height, the Roman Empire may have contained between 45 and 120 million people and almost half of the funds raised by the Roman state were spent on its military. While the same may be true for Israel’s defense budget, certainly the numbers of people affected are way off. That is why the story told last week about Avi Cohen, a lieutenant in the Israel Army, was particularly poignant.

The night before Avi lead his 20 men into Gaza, they finished their training around 3 o’clock in the morning. Finally, he was able to get some much needed rest before their operation began. At 4 o’clock in the morning his cell phone rang. It was the father of one of his soldiers. The father was calling because his son, one of the best of the best, a highly-trained, elite forces soldier, was appropriately afraid. A young 23 year-old commander had found the young soldier sitting alone in the dark crying. He recognized that more than likely this was not an isolated individual afraid. More than likely all of his soldiers must be feeling this way, so he gathered his men around and they sat and talked about their fears. This young commander had already seen combat in Lebanon and he knew what to expect ... and so they talked. This was a time of people sitting together, bound together by common feelings. They shared their feelings while sitting together in the dark, and they found that they had each other.

This week’s parashah teaches this same lesson quite powerfully and it begins with a new book. At the beginning of the parashah a census is, once again, ordered. Moses was a great leader, not because of his eloquence or political prowess but because of his military genius. Implementing the demographic configuration of the Israelite people insured their safety. However, it was the

assessment of military readiness that was their first order of business, so a census was taken. Every eligible soldier was counted and then they were arranged. The Torah gives us their names immediately. Intuitively our insightful tradition teaches the lesson we have all learned so well – never reduce a person to a number. When we want to see if we have a minyan, we assign every person a word from a verse – because we can never be reduced to a number. In a post-Holocaust age when the Nazis, *yemach shemam*, tried to assign each of us a number, we were once again reminded of the dangers of thinking of people as just a number tattooed on a forearm. So, no matter who tries to convince you this book ought to be called *The Book of Numbers*, it is not. This book is about the names, it is about what those people do, what our purpose is, what we should try to accomplish and who we are.

The Book opens with a census to document who is there. The Torah immediately reflects and says, “Wait a minute, this book is not about how many people are available for military service, it is not about how many can pick weapons, it is about who is there and, more dramatically, it is about who is not. It is this approach that forces us to value every one. If we stop for a moment and think about who is not here, to focus on what they did in their life and about the impact they had, we must recognize the urgency and the immediacy of our time.

This week we began a new book and, as much as we get a new start, a new chapter is to be written so we begin with who is here and who is not. That is why Nadav and Avihu are mentioned again. We step back and recognize that there are people who, two years into the journey, have survived. Unfortunately, there are those who have not. The loss of Nadav and Avihu, two of Aaron’s sons, has left a gaping hole in the heart of a nation. So, before looking forward they must look back and then, it is that event that not only marks time, but motivates.

In a screenplay entitled “Doubt,” by John Patrick Shanley, there is a great opening scene in which the priest comes forward to offer his weekly homily. Father Flynn says,

“What do you do when you’re not sure? That’s the topic of my sermon today. Last year, when President Kennedy was assassinated, who among us did not experience the most profound disorientation? Despair? Which way? What now? What do I say to my kids? What do I tell myself? It was a time of people sitting together, bound together by a common feeling of hopelessness.

But think of that! Your BOND with your fellow being was your Despair. It was a public experience. It was awful, but we were in it together. How much worse is it then for the lone man, the lone woman, stricken by a private calamity?

‘No one knows I’m sick.’ ‘No one knows I’ve lost my last real friend.’
“No one knows I’ve done something wrong.” Imagine the isolation. Now you see the world as through a window. On one side of the glass: happy, untroubled people, and on the other side: you.”

But you are not. We are a people who have grown accustomed to living in fear. We are a people who feel a unique isolation. We need friends, we need allies, and we need our story to be told

because we know whom we have lost. It is true of us as a people, a nation so alone, and it is true of us personally as well. We have done things to protect ourselves and this week is all about protecting ourselves. It is not about the numbers. It is just one person. It is about the one we have lost and how that person lives on within us. It is not a story about how we as a people have grown accustomed to fear, it is about how we as individuals have found a way to live every day. The census is not about numbers, it is about who is going to show up and with a loss, who will stand in their place.

This week in our parashah we recall the death of Nadav and Avihu. This week we also recall a death of communal proportions. Like Moses in his last allotted time here on earth, Rabbi Gerald Wolpe (z"l) climbed a difficult mountain and he stood atop and looked into the promised land. He saw his family surround him, he felt the love of friends embrace him, and he saw a community honor him. He longed for a father taken way too early and he made preparations for his dear life-long traveling companion. An only child was never lonely. Then, with the sound of music playing in his heart, he found a place only he could occupy and with God by his side he took his last breaths. Although he has been taken, Rabbi Wolpe is forever with us. His indelible imprint has made its impression on our hearts, in our minds and on our souls. Today we must commit ourselves to pick up where he left off. Today, you must make the pledge to take his place. It is not my job – it is our job. For together we are greater than the sum of our parts...but you are going to have to do your part.