

“Remembering the Soldier”
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“On November 10th, [2005], precisely one year after [this] photograph was flashed around the world, Lance Cpl. James Blake Miller was medically discharged from the marine Corps, diagnosed with full blown PTSD [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder]. Three years after leaving the Kentucky hills for a career in the Corps, he was back home. He feels adrift and tormented, dependent on his new bride, his family and his military psychiatrist to help him make sense of all that has befallen him.

“He barely sleeps. On most mornings, Blake says, he has no good reason to get out of bed. Often, his stomach is so upset, that he can’t eat. He has nightmares and flashbacks. He admits that he’s often grouchy and temperamental. He knows he drinks and smokes too much.

“He’s not the same as before,” said Blake’s wife, Jessica, who has known him since grade school. “I’d never seen the anger, the irritability, the anxiety.”

“Blake says he feels guilty about taking money - \$2,528 in monthly military disability checks – for doing nothing. Yet he’s also frustrated that two careers made possible by his military training, police officer or U.S. marshall, are out of reach because law enforcement is reluctant to hire candidates with [post-traumatic stress disorder].

“So he broods, feeling restless and out of options: ‘I’m only 21. I’m able-bodied..., yet I’m considered a liability. It’s like I had all these doorways open to me, and suddenly they all closed on me. It’s like my life is over.’

So reads an article from the front page of Los Angeles Times, May 19, 2006. It is just a few paragraphs from one article about one soldier, but his story is not unique.

“... Ordinary people can’t comprehend [said Blake’s wife Jessica] what it’s like to be constantly shot at and have to kill other human beings. They need to know what it means to send people like Blake out to fight wars. You’re going to have a lot of people breaking.”

Jessica is right. We cannot understand what it is like to be shot at, to have to kill another human being. But we have to try.

For American Jews, the past year has been defined by war. In Iraq. In Afghanistan. In Gaza. In Lebanon. With so many young people placed in harm's way, we need to remember the toll war takes not just on the bodies of those who are injured and killed. War takes a terrible toll on the soul.

In parshat VaYishlach, Jacob returns not just to the land of Israel but to confront his brother Esau who, the last time Jacob saw him, was in a murderous rage because Jacob stole his blessing from their father. Jacob sends messengers to greet Esau and the messengers return with word that Esau is coming to meet him, and 400 men are with him, and the Torah says, וַיִּירָא יַעֲקֹב מְאֹד וַיֵּצֵר לוֹ, which translates to something like, “Jacob was very afraid and he was distressed,” about which the commentators ask: Why the repetition? Wouldn't it have been enough to say he was very afraid? Rashi answers: וירא שמא י'הרג, ויצר לו, אם יהרג הוא את ה' אחרים
He was afraid lest he be killed, He was distressed lest he'd have to kill others.

Jacob feared “lest he be killed” – my father told me how, in his childhood, he used to be awakened in the middle of the night by the terrible screams of his father who was awakened by nightmares from when he fought in the American army and was wounded in the trenches in France in World War I. War leaves its scars not only on those who are killed, but on those who are injured or who survive the terror of battle only to re-live it for years and years to come.

Jacob also feared - “Lest he would have to kill others.”

A few years ago, I sat across the table at a local restaurant and held the hand of a man who trembled and cried as he told me stories from World War II that he had told to no one else in 60 years, not to his wife, not to his children, not to his friends. Some were heroic stories but others weighed upon him, had weighed on him for 60 years. Some were stories of close calls he survived. But what haunted him were the things he did, the things he had to do. He had to kill others. “As I grow closer to meeting my Creator, I don't know what to say rabbi.” As Jessica said, war creates a lot of “broken people” and it is we who must help them to heal.

One of the most devastating descriptions of what war demands of a soldier, of what it does to his soul, comes from an HBO mini series called “The Band of Brothers.” It is based upon Stephen Ambrose's historical work, which follows the experiences of the 101st Airborne Division in World War II. In the mini series, Lt. Ronald Spiers is an “infamous” figure in the outfit. Late in the war, Spiers takes over command of Easy Company during a crucial attack on the town of Foy and heroically leads the company to victory with almost super-hero acts of bravery. Earlier in the war, Spiers counsels Private Blithe after Blithe has confessed to him that when he landed at D-day, he did not join up with his unit, did not fight, but avoided combat until he was found by American soldiers. This is what he told him:

“We're all scared,” says Spiers. “You hid in that ditch because you think there's still hope. But Blithe, the only hope you have is to accept the fact that you're already dead. And the sooner you accept that, the sooner you'll be able to function as a soldier is supposed to function. Without mercy. Without compassion. Without remorse. All war depends on it.”

My heart breaks when I heard those words. My heart breaks when I think, even if just for a moment, that what we ask of a soldier to function in a time of war is to accept the fact they are already dead. That we ask young men and, young women, to function without mercy, or compassion, or remorse. I, of course, hope that is not what we ask; I hope this is not what war becomes in the hearts of our soldiers. But I have not faced the terror of a battlefield and I have to recognize that that may be what the temporary moment of battle requires so that a more permanent peace can prevail. The battlefield's casualties are not measured only in lives lost; they are measured in souls coarsened and damaged, sometimes forever. In post traumatic stress disorder. In the words of Lance cpl Blake:

“I'm only 21. I'm able-bodied..., yet I'm considered a liability. It's like I had all these doorways open to me, and suddenly they all closed on me. It's like my life is over.”

My heart breaks when I read stories of soldiers coming home, when I think of all of the soldiers who are at war right now. Few things unite Americans across the political spectrum – but Blake's wife Jessica is right – ordinary people, you and I, we “need to know what it means to send people like Blake out to fight wars. [There are...] a lot of people breaking” and we all must do whatever we can to take care of them while they are away, and when they return.

I am both proud and ashamed to tell you a part of me wants to enlist in the armed forces – proud of the patriotism that wells up in me at that feeling, ashamed that it is an impulse I have not follow through on. As a rabbi, I can think of few more honorable ways to serve God than to try to bring God's light to Jewish and non-Jewish soldiers serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, and I feel spoiled and small in my car and my suit and drinking my coffee while others answer our nation's call. I feel guilt when I think of my grandfather who fought in World War I and my father who served in the Navy in World War II but I have not volunteered. I would do my duty if called and, sometimes I wish that our county had a draft, or a compulsory period of national service that would give all American citizens a deeper sensitivity to the sacrifice upon which America's freedom survives.

In August of 2006, former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld testified that approximately 133,000 American troops were in Iraq. And in October 2006, Rumsfeld wrote that approximately 20,000 American troops were in Afghanistan. That is, conservatively, more than 150,000 Americans who spent the holiday season we just celebrated not with their families, but in a war torn country thousands of miles away, from their spouses, from the parents, from their children. Troops rotate. So tens of thousands more have already gone and returned, as did Lance Cpl Blake. And many

more may go, including my own brother-in-law who currently serves in the U.S. Navy.

What is the Jewish response at this moment in history? Having finished the holiday season and on the brink of the 2007 year, what should we do as American Jews?

First – it is appropriate for us as Jews to pray for the well-being of American soldiers. The rabbis taught – *dina de malchuta dina* – that we as Jews accept the law of the land and in fact should first pray for the welfare of the land in which we find ourselves. "Seek the welfare of the city where I have caused you to be exiled," says Jeremiah, "and pray to God on its behalf " (Jeremiah 29:7). That is the reason why in Siddur Sim Shalom, the prayer for our country precedes the prayer for the State of Israel. In our prayers each Shabbat and each day, we should pray for the welfare of America's soldiers. We should pray that God protects their bodies and souls, that God returns them to their families in peace, and that they find comfort and healing once the war has ended.

Second, we should feel and express a sense of gratitude for their sacrifice. As people who enjoy freedom, as people who, this holiday season, enjoyed the blessing of living an ordinary life, fighting traffic and lines at the airport, we should feel a sense of gratitude to those who volunteered to serve in the armed forces and give up what we too often take for granted. Beyond just *feeling* grateful, we should express our gratitude too. When you see an American soldier in an airport or on the street, walk up to them and thank them for their service. Buy them a meal. If you have a business, give a discount to soldiers. Read "milblogs" – some "military" blogs written by American soldiers from the front lines about their experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan. We, and our children, should write emails and letters to soldiers to remind them that they are not alone, not forgotten by the American Jewish community. Go to kcal9.com and click on "send a message to the military" to send an email to a soldier. The root of the Hebrew word to thank – *l'hodot* – also means "to acknowledge" because one way we show thanks is by taking an interest in, and acknowledging, the reality of war that is theirs, and should be ours too.

Third, beyond prayers and writing letters, we can do something concrete: give. And make veterans affairs a political issue that we care about. It is nothing short of a disgrace that veterans in this country lack. They lack adequate counseling. Medical care. Rehabilitation. Benefits. Every one of the 150,000 troops in Iraq and Afghanistan should have received not one, but dozens of care packages during the holiday season! I fear they did not. I want to share with you the names of a few organizations that are sending care packages to American soldiers overseas. I want the Library Minyan and Temple Beth Am to demonstrate to the larger Jewish community how caring about America is a Jewish commitment, a Jewish obligation.

First – there is the Jewish Chaplains Council of the Jewish Welfare Board. They will make it possible for Jewish military personnel in Iraq and Afghanistan and all over the world to celebrate the Jewish holidays - Hanukkah just recently, Purim and Passover

in a few months, and Shabbat every week that they are away from home. JWB Jewish Chaplains Council is a U.S. Government accredited agency to serve the religious, educational and morale needs of Jewish personnel in the armed forces, their families, and patients in VA hospitals and they've been doing this since for the Jewish military personnel in the United States Armed Forces since World War I.

Second, you can participate in the SOS (Support our Soldiers) program of the Jewish War Veteran's association to get packages to Jewish servicemen and women who are currently serving in Iraq and Afghanistan – the website is www.jwv.org. You can call 202-265-6280 and talk to Ruby Deschamps and she can take your donation over the phone. Or you can mail a check to Jewish War Veterans, 1811 R Street, NW, Washington DC 20009, to Ruby's attention. Make sure to note the gift is for the SOS fund, and that you are from Temple Beth Am. All this is on their website: www.jwv.org.

In a thank you note to the JWV, Mordechai Schwab – a Jewish name if there ever was one! – wrote:

“I received your care packages you sent us. I distributed these gifts to the Jewish soldiers here at LSA Anaconda, Balad, Iraq. It goes without saying since you and those in the Jewish War Veterans of the U.S.A. know this already. But for the soldiers here, many deployed for the first time, knowing they are not forgotten by fellow American Jews boosts their morale, reassures them that they are doing an important job and increases their pride in being a Jewish soldier. On behalf of the soldiers here at LSA Anaconda, thank you for your thoughtfulness, kindness and generosity. Sincerely, Mordechai Schwab. 1st MI Bn Chaplain”

Third, you can give of your time. Here at our local VA there is something called the Volunteer Driver Corps – a group of more than 9,000 people nationwide who drive veterans to their VA medical center and clinic appointments as part of the Disabled American Veterans Volunteer Transportation Network. You can contact the Volunteer Service Chief at the VA here in LA to do a mitzvah for a disabled Veteran hurt while in service to our country.

Finally, in this year of war in Gaza, war in Lebanon, war in Afghanistan, war in Iraq, as Jews we can pray and pursue peace. In the words of the Psalmist, “Sur me'rah, v'aseh tov, bakesh shalom, v'rodfehu” - “Turn from evil and do good, demand peace, and pursue it.” Every significant Jewish prayer – the Amidah, the kaddish, the birkat hamazon – all end with a hope for peace. Let me be clear – finding peace is not an uncomplicated process, nor is it the purview of any particular political party. War is sometimes a necessary evil for a more lasting peace. Sometimes it is a misguided mistake. As a rabbi I am no more able to speak on which political party holds the key to those decisions than anyone else in this room. But behind every strategy, every tactic, every decision our leaders make, as Jews we can never lose sight of the horror of war and of the imperative to search for peace, of the hope that one-day it will come and our soldiers will come home. We pray for peace: peace for Lance Cpl Blake and

all soldiers who are home, but don't feel at home. Peace for the soldier still on the front lines. Peace for the families filled with fear and anguish this holiday season while their loved ones are far away. "oseh shalom bimromav" – We pray that the One who makes peace in the heavens, "hu ya'aseh shalom aleinu" – he will make peace for us, "v'al kol yisrael," – and upon all of Israel, and let us say, Amen.