

## A Rabbinic Perspective *By Rabbi Seymour Rosenbloom*

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### So Many Names



On the first anniversary of 9/11, Billy Collins, then poet laureate of the United States, read a poem before a joint session of Congress. It was titled simply *The Names* and it is reprinted in the new *Mahzor Seder Avodah*. In reflecting the enormity of the loss, Collins' composition is based on the alphabet, citing a representative name for each letter. One name to reflect many. Twenty-six names to reflect them all, from A to Z.

"So many names," he writes, "there is barely room on the walls of the heart."

About a year ago I began to read, each week, the names of the soldiers who died in Iraq and Afghanistan. Recently, someone mentioned to me, with concern, how sad he felt as the names were read. It was almost as if the sadness diminished the joy and peace of *Shabbat*. And he asked why I have chosen to do it.

It is a fair question. After all, each week there are so many losses. American service personnel in other parts of the world, policemen and firemen all over America, our Israeli victims of war and terror, the dead of Somalia and Darfur, Iraqi civilians, the innocents who lose their lives on the streets of our cities, over four hundred in Philadelphia alone in 2006. The numbers are overwhelming and it is hard to draw a line.

For me, the honor roll of soldiers who die in battle is a profound expression of what it is to be American. These men and women are our countrymen. They are white and black, Hispanic and Asian, Jew and Christian, men and women . . . but they are all Americans. They are us, and they are ours.

Little is asked of us in this war. It is a distant abstraction for most of us. Whether we support it or oppose it, we all are humbled by the selfless bravery of these good men and women who have volunteered to put their lives on the line for their country. We mourn their loss with their families. We pray that God will preserve their souls and comfort their loved ones.

It is a small gesture. Perhaps it will remind us of the enormous cost of war, and how prudent we must be in deciding when to engage on the field of battle. The dead are not numbers. They have names, they have families, they have lives that will not be completed. The least we can do, the very least, is remember them by name.

When I began to read the names I did so at the time of the Mourners' *Kaddish*. Of late, I have read them as a prelude to the Prayer for Our Country and Its Government. During the summer war in Israel, I read the week's casualties before the Prayer for the Welfare of the State of Israel, as well as a prayer for the Israel Defense Forces. Currently, I precede the Prayer for the Welfare of the State of Israel with the names of captive soldiers Gilad Shalit, Ehud Goldwasser, and Eldad Regev, and a prayer for their safety and repatriation.

During World War II, Archibald MacLeish wrote a poem, *The Young Dead Soldiers*. In it the soldiers speak. "We were young," they say. "We have died. Remember us."

The numbers of dead soldiers have surpassed the number of people killed on 9/11. Their names, too, are so numerous that "there is barely room on the walls of the heart."

But we must make room.

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