

The Face of Empathy

Behaalotecha 2013

The Jewish Center

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This past Wednesday evening, The Jewish Center hosted our annual community-wide Memorial Day commemoration. But this year we did something that we hadn't done in the past. We read the names of the 42 Jewish men and women who have died while serving in the US armed forces since September 11, 2001. While there were certainly a number of moving moments, to me, this was the most powerful part of the event.

I've always found בהעלותך to be something of a sad פרשה. It's all about frustrated expectation and missed opportunity. Here we are on the last leg of a great redemptive journey, ready to march triumphantly into the Promised Land: ויהי בנסע הארון - with the ark as its lodestar, the Jewish people are ready to go.

And then – at the drop of the hat – everything goes south.

The מתאווננים and the אספסוף and קברות התאווה – a series of missteps that cascade into the ruinous deployment of the מרגלים.

But before this happens, the Torah takes us on a brief narrative excursion.

Moshe pulls his father-in-law aside and says, יתרו – this is it. We're about to enter the Promised Land.

לְכֵה אִתְּנוּ וְהִטְבַּנּוּ לָךְ

Please Yisro – won't you join us?

וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו לֹא אֵלָךְ כִּי אִם אֶל אֶרְצִי וְאֶל מוֹלְדֹתַי אֵלָךְ:

Thank you, Moshe, but I must decline. I'm going home – back to my land, back to my family.

The story should end here. Moshe has made his case. Yisro has considered it, but insists that he has other priorities.

And yet Moshe won't let it go. *Don't leave us*, he says. *Stay with us. It will be good for you. It'll be good for us.* Moshe's almost pleading with his father-in-law to stay. And the question is why.

Surely Moshe loved his father-in-law. They had a long relationship and deep connection. But we've seen this picture before. When tasked with leading the Jewish people out of Egypt, Moshe takes leave of Yisro quite unceremoniously.

וַיֵּלֶךְ מֹשֶׁה וַיָּשָׁב אֶל יִתְרֵהוּ חֹתְנוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ אֵלְכָה נָא וְאַשׁוּבָה אֵל אֶחָי אֲשֶׁר בְּמִצְרַיִם וְאַרְאֶה הַעוֹדֶם חַיִּים וַיֹּאמֶר יִתְרוֹ לְמֹשֶׁה לָךְ לְשָׁלוֹם:

Moshe is all business. There's a mission to be done and it's time to go. No hug. No tearful goodbye. Shalom.

And yet this time around – and remember – this is only two years later – Moshe can't let go. Yes – Yisro had been a voice of sage counsel and a source of wisdom to Moshe when he was struggling as a leader. But those days are past, the mission is all but complete, and Yisro is anxious to return home. Why can't Moshe leave well enough alone? Why can't he let Yisro go?

I've been thinking and reading and speaking quite a lot recently about the issue of empathy. I believe it's one of the most important virtues we can cultivate. So allow me to share with you a simple observation.

There's a phenomenon we've all surely experienced called "the identifiable victim effect." When we can put a face to an event or calamity, that face is much more likely to evoke our empathy or compassion.

As the economist Thomas Schelling wrote fifty years ago: "Let a six-year-old girl with brown hair need thousands of dollars for an operation that will prolong her life until Christmas, and the post office will be swamped with nickels and dimes to save her. But let it be reported that without a sales tax the hospital facilities of Massachusetts will deteriorate and cause a barely perceptible increase in preventable deaths—not many will drop a tear or reach for their checkbooks."

And the phenomenon is not just anecdotal. Scientists have actually demonstrated it empirically.

In the Journal of Behavioral Decision Making – the existence of which was actually unknown to me before this week – two Israeli psychologists at Hebrew University reported the findings of their laboratory studies.

Tehila Kogut and Ilana Ritov asked a group of subjects how much money they would contribute to help develop a drug that would save the life of one child, and then asked a second group how much they would give to save the lives of eight children. The answers were roughly the same. But when they told a third group a child's name and age, and showed them her picture, the donations shot up. As soon as there was a face, hard-boiled reason began to give way to empathy, with the numbers favoring the life of the one over the lives of the eight.

As Paul Bloom put it recently in the New Yorker, twenty million American children may go to bed hungry at night, but the headlines that grab our attention are the ones about one little girl with a name, an age and a family.

It's with this in mind, I believe, that we can begin to understand what Moshe says when he tries to persuade Yisro to stay:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל נָא תַעֲזֹב אֶתְנוּ כִּי עַל כֵּן יִדְעֶתָ הַנְּחַתְנוּ בַּמִּדְבָּר וְהָיִיתָ לָנוּ לְעֵינָיִם:

Please don't go – for you know where we should camp in the wilderness. You'll be our eyes – you'll be our guide.

But the Targum Yerushalmi translates the pasuk a little differently:

דאת ידע נסיא דעבד ה' עמן בכל אתר דחזינן שרין ונטלין במדברה ותיהוי לן לסהדותא

Yisro – Moshe says – we need you. For you've seen first-hand the miracles that Hashem performed in the wilderness. If you stay with us, you'll be our סהדותא – you'll be the living testimony to the Jewish past. It's one thing to talk about a national history. It's quite another to home in on a real live person. If you'll permit the anachronism, Moshe says to Yisro: You'll be our Baby Jessica.

People will look at you – they'll see you – they'll hear you – and they'll be able to relate to you in a way that's not possible when they try to understand the Jewish people from the perspective of a nation.

The stories of societies and civilizations, communities and commonwealths are easy to gloss over. But the identifiable victim – or even the identifiable party – changes the entire way in which we perceive something.

So it is little wonder that the names and faces of real young men and women mentioned here on Wednesday night elicit so much stronger a response than thinking about the idea of remembering. And of course here in our own shul, we always think at this time of year of Jewish Center member Fred Wiesen, who was killed in the Battle of the Bulge.

But this morning we're not only thinking about the past, we're also thinking about the future – as we celebrate David's aufruf. While the Gibber family has held up the pillars of so many of our communal institutions, it's the attention they pay to the individuals that's the true measure of their humanity.

As we hang up our morning suits and doff our top hats – as spring transitions to summer and our schedules become just a little less crazed – we have opportunities before us – opportunities to connect – not just with an abstract sense of community – but with real, live individuals.

So I urge you to notice: Who are the individuals – who are the faces – that need a little more attention, a little more help, a little more empathy?

Each time we do, we'll be re-affirming the notion that – in the end – it's our face-to-face encounters that matter most.