

## Everyone who goes out to the legion in Yisrael – you shall count them according to their legions. (1:3)

The men appeared to have been counted as soldiers. The minimum age to serve as a soldier in the army (Jewish) – the legion – was twenty years old, since people achieve their physical maturity by then. Men older than sixty were no longer counted; they were past the age of military service. The *Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh* teaches that (miraculously) every Jew between the ages of twenty to sixty was physically able to serve as a soldier. The *Kli Yakar* says that each Jew was not only physically fit for Army service, but he was also spiritually fit to serve in the Heavenly *tzavah*, *tzvah marom*, the group of ministering angels who serve Hashem. Indeed, we find the terms commonly associated with military service used freely concerning *Am Yisrael*: *tzvah*; *machane*, camp; *pikudim*; each and every Jew without physical or spiritual flaw prepared to serve Hashem as a soldier, in both the physical and spiritual realms.

Anyone acquainted with the military understands that in every one of its six branches (American), teamwork is critical to any successful operation. Teamwork is based upon leadership and mutual respect for each member of a team. At times, an operation requires the services and input of members of varied branches all working in harmony for the greater good. The United States Army recognizes seven values that all soldiers must internalize: loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity and personal courage. While all of the above are critical for the success of a military unit, I would like to focus on the third value – respect – and how it affects the Jewish People who have been inducted into the *ligyono shel Melech*, the legion of the King – *Hashem Yisborach*.

“The Army values reinforce that all people have dignity and worth and must be treated with respect. The Nation (United States) was founded on the ideal that all are created equal. In the Army, each is judged by the content of their character. Army leaders should consistently foster a climate that treats everyone with dignity and respect...” These words are not taken from a *mussar* sefer, but from the Army’s manual – a book written by non-Jews, by and large for a non-Jewish audience. Everyone recognizes that for a group to function as one unit, it is crucial that all members of that group treat everyone with dignity and respect. The reason for this is simple: We are all human beings; we are all in this together; why should one person hold sway over another?

Furthermore, in an Army unit, everyone makes his own unique contribution to the success and welfare of all involved in an operation. It could be an operation involving infantry that suddenly goes bad. Paratroopers come to the rescue, backed up by Air Force, etc. Likewise, all Jews work together *b’achdus*, in harmony and unity, each one occupied in his personal or communal act of service. Some learn Torah; others perform *chesed*, acts of lovingkindness; still others are engaged in prayer, etc. One thing is for certain: Every Jew is invaluable. To denigrate a Jew is tantamount to casting aspersion on Heavenly angels.

The following story of Hershel the Shoemaker (related by *Horav Lazar Brodie*) should give us all

reason to pause and ask ourselves if we are ever guilty of treating people who appear to be “different” inappropriately. In a small village in Poland (circa mid to end of eighteenth century), there lived a (seemingly) simple Jew – unerudite, could not read or write, poverty-stricken, physically misshapen (facial countenance). For all public intent and purposes, he seemed (and was considered to be) mentally challenged. He spoke to no one (people thought he was unable to speak), mumbling incoherently to himself all day. He would sit on the outside steps leading into the *shul* all day repairing shoes. He had his little box with a shoe form on it, a hammer and nails, and would earn his meager living by repairing whatever shoes people gave him. His name was Tzvi Hirsch, and the members of the community had nicknamed him, “Hershel the Shoemaker.” Sadly, he was the brunt of everyone’s jokes, from scholar to children. A day did not pass that someone who entered the *shul* did not in some manner denigrate him. Hershel never responded – always accepting the ridicule with grace, as he continued mumbling to himself and banging his hammer onto the shoes.

No one lives forever, and Hershel, too, was called to his eternal rest. The community’s *rav* ran to the shack which Hershel called home to search for any form of identification that might align Hershel with a member of the community to whom he might be related. While he might not have had anyone who cared for him during his lifetime, but, in death, who knows – someone might care. Perhaps he might locate Hershel’s will. He searched all over, and all he found were an old broken bed, one chair and a makeshift table. In the corner of the room he discovered an old wooden box filled with written papers. Upon careful perusal, he realized that these were Hershel’s *divrei Torah*, original thoughts that he had written, covering all areas of the Torah.

Hershel was far from a simple shoemaker. He was an outstanding *talmid chacham*, Torah scholar, who had concealed his identity beneath the façade of derangement. In a second container (within the box), he found a *Tallis* and *Tefillin* together with a *Siddur* whose pages were tear-drenched from years of fervent prayer. From within the pages of the *Siddur* there fell out an envelope containing a note that clearly was penned years earlier: “To my dear friend, the righteous, pious, *Rav Tzvi Hersh, Shlita*... wishing you much success and good fortune... Yisrael Besht (acronym for the holy *Baal Shem Tov, zl*). Apparently, Hershel the nondescript shoemaker, was actually a holy rabbi, close confidante of the *Baal Shem Tov*, who was on a mission. He was most certainly one of the *lamed vav*, 36 righteous Jews, upon whose merit the world was maintained.

The people were clueless as to Hershel’s true identity. He did such an amazing job of covering it up. It was difficult to even gather a *minyán*, quorum of ten men, for his funeral. “Why should I close my store for the funeral of a bumbling shoemaker?” was a common response. “That is why we have a *Chevra Kaddisha*, Sacred Burial Society (to attend to the needs of the deceased).” The *rav* arranged for a *minyán* and saw to it that Hershel was buried in the portion of the