Mishmar Ha Negev

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Yes, Bill is AWOL while the rest of us put together gas mask kits in Ashdod, but who's to say he isn't making his own contribution to individual happiness and national security in what Israelis stoically call 'these difficult times?' Bill, a spry 84-year old from the Philadelphia area, is part of the group of 100 American and Canadian volunteers milling around Ben Gurion airport in Tel Aviv on a late October day, waiting for our hosts, Sar-El (the word is an acronym for Sherut l'Yisroel*—service to Israel), to figure out which army bases to send us to. Twice as many volunteers show up from the States as were expected, and it's going to take the Sar-El folks a while to sort things out.*

Lest anyone should see these people in their 50s, 60s, 70s, and 80s, with lined faces and drooping bellies, and fear for Israel's prowess at arms, I should add that none of us is being posted to infantry or paratroop units. We won't be assisting soldiers who patrol the outskirts of Jenin, Ramallah, and Nablus, or guard the railroad stations or petrochemical plants. Instead, we're to be assigned to bases housing transport equipment, medical supplies, soldiers' gear—the grinding, unglamorous, grease-splattered work units that maintain the trucks, refurbish the tanks, and make up the medics' kits; all the unseen logistics that keep the Israeli army in high readiness.

Recruiting the volunteers, meeting them at the airport, shuttling them to bases accompanied by *madrichot* (guides), providing evening education programs and once-a-week sightseeing trips, is what Sar-El is all about. Since General Aharon Davidi, the paratroop commander, first had the idea for the program back in 1982, Sar-El has brought 75,000 foreign volunteers to Israel. The numbers fell during the late '90s, but rose sharply after the unprecedented wave of barbarous attacks on Israelis began in 2000. By the time we showed up, more than 6000 volunteers a year were flooding into Israel.

Sar-El tells us that every volunteer who comes enables a reservist to stay at home with his family, and thus to continue working at his civilian job, but I'm dubious. How does the army take a bunch of untrained foreigners—almost none of whom speaks Hebrew—and put them to work efficiently?

Discomfited by the wait, I examine anew the impulse that brought me here. Will my effort bring tangible benefit to the army, or is it nothing but an act of gratuitous personal validation masquerading as selflessness? The answer matters; after all, I am the one who convinced my wife Frederica to dedicate two weeks of her vacation to this trip.

Usually the airport rendezvous goes more smoothly, but on this day, as the Sar-El people readily admit, it is near-chaos. Pamela, the Sar-El program coordinator in Tel Aviv, and Tamara, one of the *madrichot*, frantically work their cellphones, looking for army bases to take these extra volunteers, many of whom have just staggered off 11-hour flights from North America. One of them is Bill. Along with two North Carolinians, Ronnie and Frank, Bill gets assigned to Matzrap, a medical equipment depot at the huge Tel Ha Shomer base.

TEN days later we catch up with Ronnie, a born-again Baptist who runs his own landscape business and is funny enough to be a late-night TV host, and Frank, a lawyer and former state senator, when Sar-El reunites us in Ashdod. That's when we hear about Bill's excellent adventure. It seems that the previous weekend, when each of us went our separate ways—to visit relatives, sightsee in Jerusalem, climb Masada—Bill landed in Haifa. There he met a woman (I think of the camp song we used to sing about the deacon who went down to the cellar to pray, met a blonde, and stayed all day), and never came back to the base.

Afterward, I ask Tamara, our *madricha*: on any of your trips have volunteers just disappeared? "The Russians," she says with a smile. They sign up for Sar-El, having applied to immigrate, she explains. If they get approval before the volunteer stint is up, some of them take off, never to be seen again.

UNTIL the bus trip to Ashdod, we are stationed at Mishmar Ha Negev (MHN), an army base in the desert, 15 kilometers north of Be'er Sheva. For a week-and-a-half here I've been cleaning the grease from gigantic truck tarps, painting the front raised panels of truck trailers, or checking the storage compartments of those trailers for giant U-shaped hooks. Chains with links as big as oranges pass through the hooks to secure tanks to the flat beds, and if any of these ponderous fasteners is missing, we have to fetch another from a supply vehicle.

Our work area is the long line of trailer flatbeds that stretches to our right—55 just in our section of the base. Tony—who used to run legal affairs in Universal's theme park division—and I walk back and forth in our khaki army work uniforms and our stiff-as-dead-squirrel leather boots, clambering onto the trailers, tugging open the heavy steel doors of the supply commpartments, checking, toting, checking, toting.

Our supervisor is Alex, a Russian immigrant and career soldier who is built like a wrestler, squat and immovable. All day he drives trucks, switching from vehicle to vehicle, making sure they all start. Once or twice a day he swings by, leans out the cab, gives me a big grin. "*Hakol b'seder*?" he asks. Everything okay? "*B'seder*," fine, I reply. He repeats "*Hakol b'seder?,*" cautions us to work

"*leyat, leyat*" (slowly, slowly), and off he goes.

Funny about the work: it is all the things we've been warned about: menial, repetitive, poorly organized—but not disagreeable. The physical labor has the effect of dulling the reflex to question why. Instead of "Are we helping the army?" I'm now wondering when the sun will duck below the warehouse roof and give us much-needed shade, whether I need to lug more hooks from the supply vehicle, and, of course, how many more trailers before the day's end.

We work slowly, as Alex advises, our uniforms stained with perspiration, because the hooks are heavy as dumbbells and because climbing up and down the trailers under the desert sun tests our agility. One day when we are painting red rectangles on yellow trailer fronts, the base commander pays a visit and asks us the kind of questions commanders ask: how's the work?, how are the living conditions?, how's the food? (don't ask, I'm tempted to say—but I hold my tongue).

The lieutenant colonel explains that every one of these vehicles was mobilized in early April '02, after the Passover massacre in Netanya, when the army rolled into the West Bank in force. Now the trucks and trailers have returned to base to be readied for service again. This is work that needs doing, he says, and we thank you for doing it.

His words do not erase my skepticism, but, after several days, I notice that skepticism is not my dominant frame of mind. Sar-El has taken 20 disparate individuals and formed them into a team—Tamara, with her knack for the right word, deserves a lot of the credit—and a group dynamic is taking hold. We kid each other, we watch the soldiers watching us, we talk a bit about Israel's awful predicament, we fall into a sort of Tevye-the-milkman rhythm: sunrise, breakfast, a row of trucks, lunch, another row of trucks, sunset, and then the evening air that soothes away all cares.

WHILE Tony and I toil in the sun, other volunteers have been taking inventory in cavernous warehouses or assembling the contents of kit-bags for reservists. On the day that we are to go to Ashdod, we will work in a vast hangar that has been commandeered by the army's emergency response and civil defense units.

There is an air of anticipation as we climb into the bus at 7:30 A.M., ten minutes after finishing our breakfast of cottage cheese, Israeli salad (tomatoes, cucumbers, red peppers), hardboiled eggs, and stale bread. At MHN, the algorithm for removing bread from the bread cupboard is FIFO: first in, first out, thus guaranteeing that a loaf that was fresh on Sunday is moldering when it finally makes it to the table on Tuesday.

The mornings are cool and quiet in the desert; the sun has only recently climbed above the horizon to cast its pale light on the sere landscape of Mishmar Ha Negev. A wire fence that stretches forever encloses vast layered tracts of brown and beige, some of them recently shaped into huge parking lots meant to accommodate flotillas of earth-moving equipment.

AS we file down the aisle of the bus we notice two remarkable things. First, the passengers already seated are speaking French. Second, they are calling out "*shalom*," "*boker tov*," "good morning"—and smiling; 20 Frenchmen we've never seen before, smiling at us! I take a seat and find myself in conversation with a kindly fellow of 71 who is unabashedly pro-American. He'll never forget being 13 and living in Normandy when the Allies landed in June '44. "Have you seen the American cemetery there?" he asks me in his old-fashioned French, courtly and self-deprecating. "Row after row of young Americans who died to liberate France. They were not people like you and me—people who have lived. They were young kids, 18 and 19, who barely had an idea what Europe was, only that they had come to save it."

Over the years I've spent a fair amount of time with the French—as a teacher in Ivory Coast, as a volunteer on kibbutz Kfar Masaryk, as a tourist in Paris. But this bus ride is the first time the French have ever smiled at me without gritting their teeth from the effort not to snicker at my accent.

At the Ashdod warehouse, nearly 100 volunteers have been mustered together from bases around the country, including Ronnie and Frank—but, we learn, not Bill.

Before we begin work we're offered coffee and cake, all but nonexistent at Mishmar Ha Negev. Then, when we divide ourselves into groups of 10, we are given clear explanations of what to do, how to do it, why we are doing it—and the tools for the job are right at hand. Quite a change from MHN, where we're asked to clean tarps, but not given detergent or mops until we demand them, or told to touch up trucks with a paint brush that has seen more army service than the duty sergeant.

Today our job is to assemble gas masks to protect children against biological and chemical weapons. Every Israeli is supposed to have an updated kit, but for those without, there must be a stockpile. Our job is to build the stockpile.

In the U.S., newspaper articles about chemical and biological weapons have a certain remoteness to them, but in Israel this is deadly serious: 39 Scud missiles landed here in 1991, and no one underestimates the potential devastation should weapons loaded with anthrax or sarin gas strike Tel Aviv.

THE way to get people to do a job for which they have no experience in a country where most of them do not speak the language is to break the job into a series of idiot-proof steps. This is what Liat, the second lieutenant in charge, has done. The workstations are simple: one volunteer to assemble new boxes, open the old kits and check that the masks are not outdated, another to do the same for the air filters, another to replace outdated syringes (loaded with atropine, a nerve-gas antidote), a fourth to apply new stickers to the box, and a fifth worker to seal it. I'm the sealer, and am given a large roll of black tape and a box cutter. Stationed between the man with the stickers and me is Tamar, a soldier who checks the kits to make sure we've done it right.

Tamar, a 19-year old Ethiopian with two months to go in the army, wears her hair in tight African braids, dyed henna color. She can't sit still for more than a few minutes. Her favorite distraction is to seize a roll of wide packing tape and wrap it round and round the torso of the first sergeant, Tomer.

Tomer is a fine-featured 21-year old, also born in Ethiopia. With his handsome face and slender build, it is easy to see why the young female soldiers might want to wrap him up and take him home. Opposite Tamar is another female soldier, Nomi, who checks the kits from the team across the table. Nomi has a triangular-shaped face and long, copper-colored hair. To make sure the volume is turned up as loud as possible, she makes periodic visits to the CD player that is pumping world music technopop into every corner of the hangar.

It annoys me to see these soldiers frolicking and flirting while we labor. Can't they take their jobs seriously? But, of course, Tamar and Nomi aren't saving Israel from danger the way we think we are; they're serving out their time in the army like tens of thousands of other recruits, frolicking to dispel the boredom and, yes, the tension.

The tension is so much part of the fabric of daily life that Israelis never talk about it,

except in offhand, often ironic, asides. During a work break, Liat and Tomer gather us in a circle for a Q&A. Someone asks about the suicide bombings and now, finally, we get a glimpse of their feelings. It must be the rare person here who has not gone to a funeral of a friend or relative killed in an attack. This is a small, close-knit country, and 1,000 Israelis killed, the majority of them civilians going about daily life, are the equivalent of 50,000 in the U.S. It's a number too staggering to contemplate. And Liat answers honestly: yes, it hurts a great deal to lose a friend, to get a one-day pass to go grieve at a funeral, and then come back to your job in the army the next day. But we have no choice, she explains; this is what we do; this is how we live.

AT noon, we break for lunch. Along one side of the hangar, they've set up a buffet; we collect our plastic plates and pile on salad, bread, couscous, chicken, eggplant—it feels like a big fat Moroccan wedding, so different from the normal lunch at MHN. There they plunk a large serving platter of the main dish—brisket, chicken or schnitzel, laden with cooking oil and surrounded by yellow or orange rice or potatoes—down on any free surface.

After a few days, we joke that, before we say farewell to the base, we'll have to buy the Mishmar Ha Negev cookbook, as well as the video entitled "Cooking with Shimi." Shimi, the sleepy-eyed cook and server during our first week—mercifully he is furloughed afterward—frequently sets the table with a key utensil missing. If the dessert is yogurt, there are no spoons; if there is meat to cut, there may be no knives. When I charge into the kitchen to ask, "*Shimi, efo ha sakinim?*" (Where are the knives?), the answer is invariably, "*Ein sakinim*," there aren't any. In the old days in Israel, which for me was 1969, good restaurants were in short supply; so were big cars, villas, and U.S. dollars. Now that all these things are available—at a price, everything at a price—it is a plastic utensil weighing less than an ounce and costing a penny or two that is mysteriously missing.

Here in Ashdod there are plenty of utensils and plenty of food. We make quick work of our chicken and couscous. After a while, a tall man with a melancholy face and a gray-white beard asks for quiet. He has a colonel's stripes, but there is something of the healer or pastor in his manner. I can imagine him in a hospital room or on the bima of a synagogue. This is Moshe Bitton, commander of Sar-El. First in English, then in French (another soldier delivers the version in Russian), he thanks us gracefully for the important work we are engaged in.

Then, after a 10-minute break for *mincha*, the afternoon service—conducted in a corner of the warehouse—it is back to the assembly line. On a small base like MHN, *mincha* is the only service that regularly draws a minyan. That's important for those in our group like Little Bob (Big Bob is another of my bunkmates), who needs to say kaddish to mourn his father's recent death. MHN is a commuter base; soldiers arrive by 8 and leave as early as 5, so a minyan for *shachrit* (morning) and *ma'ariv* (evening) is iffy. But for *mincha*, right after lunch, someone can always corral the required complement of 10 Jewish men.

Making the army religion-friendly is more important than ever in Israel, given the percentage of Orthodox 18-year-olds who can opt out of service because they are studying fulltime in a yeshiva (an exclusion that greatly rankles secular Israelis). So the army goes to great lengths to accommodate Orthodox soldiers. Army kitchens are strictly kosher; on Friday night, those on duty get wine in order to make kiddush—the only time alcohol is allowed on base. And every base has a synagogue.

MHN's synagogue, standing 30 feet to the right of the barracks entrance, is a pristine, plush oasis in the midst of desert heat and dust. It has upholstered pews, an *aron kodesh* (ark) for the Torah scrolls, prayer books, and books of psalms—as well as a powerful air conditioner that keeps everything cool. Often, in late afternoon, I wander in, dirty uniform and all, for a few minutes of meditation. It makes a nice counterpoint to the hours in the sun spent slapping yellow paint onto the trailer fronts (in the process, drizzling it down my pant legs and onto my black boots).

Among the faithful who daven there daily is one of the warrant officers at MHN, a short man with dark eyes the size of five-shekel pieces, a full black skullcap, and a 5-o'clock shadow even after his morning shave. I see him trotting out of the *bet knesset* at 7:45 on his way to work, a smile on his face. Sometimes he flings a few words of English in our direction—good morning, how are you? One morning I come out of the *chadar ochel* as he is hurrying along the walkway from the synagogue. His smile widens; he jabs a finger high in the air, pointing toward the heavens, nodding energetically: "God," he says, winking. "Number one."

I WONDER what the non-Jews in our group make of the synagogue—so sparsely attended and yet so prominent. Secure in their own faith, they keep their curiosity about Judaism under wraps; their questions are polite, never probing. They are solid citizens with feet planted in the here and now: Manny, 76, a retired Navy pilot; John, 70, an ex-Marine pilot; Bernice, 74, who volunteered 13 years ago and is doing so again; Katie, 29, a teacher from Zimbabwe. After two weeks, what stands out about these people is their innate decency, as firmly grounded as the limestone bedrock that underpins the Western Wall in Jerusalem.

In all, there are five Christians out of 20 volunteers—an impressive number. And the question that keeps turning, turning in my mind is: Is it their faith or something quirky, personal, unique that brings them here? How to understand the phenomenon of these Christian men and women traveling to Israel at their own expense, willing to get their hands dirty, to sleep on thin mattresses and eat army food at such a dangerous time in Israel's history? Dozens of Jewish organizations and youth groups have cancelled trips or pulled their children from summer programs, but the Christians keep coming.

I talk to these fellow volunteers about why they are here. John, a Catholic, remembers reading about the liberation of the death camps at the end of World War II, and says the words "Never again" took on a personal meaning for him. Manny, also Roman Catholic, visited Israel once before, in '92, and was struck then by the greenness of the fields in the midst of the desert, the energy of its cities. (I know what he means; sometimes it seems the whole country is pulsing to the beat of the technopop we hear in the Ashdod hangar.) Israel is a wonderful country, he says, with no echo of the "but, but, but . . ." that even native-born Israelis voice. Katie, the young woman from Zimbabwe, has just finished nine months on a kibbutz; no sooner had she arrived on a visit than she knew she had to stay.

Sharing the communal washroom with these new friends, eating, working, cracking jokes with them, I am struck by the ordinariness of conviction, or more accurately, of those with conviction. What I mean is this: the face of decency, like its inexplicable opposite, the face of evil, is the face of the man next door. Most of the people in our

group are the guys and gals next door, nothing extraordinary about them in appearance, brains, eloquence. The first night, when our group arrives at a hostel in Jaffa, prior to the bus trip down to the Negev, we are greeted by news of a car bombing near Chadera that blows out the inside of a bus, murdering 14. No one flinches. Ronnie, the Baptist from North Carolina, says, "Well, that's why we're here, isn't it?"

MY wife Frederica and I cap our two weeks with 24 hours in Jerusalem; after a day of meandering, we find ourselves standing at the *kotel*, the Western Wall, as the first stars wink on overhead. On the way back to the hotel, I think of my Peace Corps days in the Ivory Coast, some 38 years ago. Every day under a fiery sun I used to walk to school along the pothole-dotted main street in Grand Bassam; every day I'd shake hands with my French colleagues, teach my classes, and walk back along the same route to an empty house.

No volunteer, however well briefed about the environment in which he will work, can ever appreciate fully how that environment will seize hold of his consciousness. In my case, that consciousness took the form of the insidious, cumulative, irreversible realization that nobody in Bassam cared in the least whether I stayed or left. The arrival of another young white face had as much influence on West Africa as the introduction of a grain of salt has on the taste of a 50-gallon cauldron of soup. People don't change Africa; Africa changes people.

Why should Israel be any different? Even after two weeks at MHN, contact with the soldiers is fleeting (which is why Bill, with his new friend in Haifa, may have made the most lasting connection of all). Most of the recruits—18- and 19-year-olds—can't figure out why we're here; neither can my cousins Daphna and Yoav, whom we visit that first weekend, although they welcome us warmly and install us in the best bed in the house. We, in turn, can't appreciate how young the soldiers are. It's Ronnie who puts his finger on it: in the States, he says, when you read about a bus bombing that kills three soldiers, they never tell you that the soldiers are 18-year-old girls who like to giggle about boyfriends and makeup.

Nothing we did at Mishmar Ha Negev changed the Israeli army. The more pertinent question is how the Israeli army changed us. Back in New York I call Pamela in Tel Aviv—she's the one who met us that wild, disorganized day at Ben-Gurion. She's been on the job for Sar-El only two months; before that she volunteered with Sar-El nine times in five years, and ran the Chicago office that recruited volunteers from all over the Midwest. She tells me of the words spoken to her and her comrades the first time she volunteered by Michael Allouche, the intense, charismatic deputy commander of Sar-El: Some people love Israel with their heads, others with their hearts, but, for a few, the feeling is so strong that they love Israel with their gut. "Those words made a big impression on me; I couldn't get them out of my head," she tells me. In 2001 she sold her house in Chicago and made *aliyah.*

"Love Israel with your gut": those words reverberate in my skull, bringing to the surface an emotion that was tamped down when we were in Israel. There's not much room for emotion when you're painting rectangles on trucks. It's only afterward that a chance remark or the mental image of a fellow volunteer clowning for a group photo or recalling the weather on a special night helps me see the experience for what it was: a time of inner peace in a country torn by war.

OUR last night at Mishmar Ha Negev is the night we come back from the gas masks in Ashdod. It has been a strange, exhilarating day: on the one hand, the numbing routine of an assembly line; on the other, the feeling that here, at last, was work that could save a life. Many of us are restless. Something in me isn't ready to say goodbye in the morning. In our bunkroom, the two Bobs, Jerry, a lawyer from Toronto, and I pack, make cracks about each other's malodorous laundry; swap phone numbers—anything to avoid going to sleep. Every night at MHN has been idyllic, the evening breeze soft and caressing, like April in Florida. But tonight something is in the air. At a quarter-to-11 there is a crack in the sky, much louder than a rifle shot, and then a rustling in the shrubs outside.

Can this be rain? They get so little in the Negev—eight inches a year. The rustling continues, grows stronger; sure enough, those are raindrops coming through the screen. I shut the window and, without a word, all of us clatter down the stairs to the front door of the barracks building. Larry is there, and Manny, Big Bob and Little Bob, Jerry, and a few others. We watch the water sweep across the parking lot and feel the wind push it in our faces. No one goes inside. There's something miraculous about the rain here in the desert. How can it be raining? we ask Larry. He lived on a kibbutz barely 10 miles from here; he has all the answers.

The two Bobs have been going to synagogue regularly and Larry offers them a link between nature and liturgy. "This is the season," he says, reminding us that every day from the end of Sukkot in October until Passover in April, Jews pray for rain, a prayer that has its origins in the plea of farmers in parched Eretz Yisroel more than 2000 years ago. "*Mashiv ha ruach*," he repeats from memory, "*u-morid ha geshem*." The verse praises Ha Shem (also known to the dark-eyed warrant officer as Number One), who brings the wind; who causes the rain to fall.

LIKE so many prayers, this one isn't as simple as it sounds. Are we praying for rain, I wonder, or to be worthy of rain? And for those for whom prayers of supplication do not come easily, can a few weeks on a truck base (whose insignia is an elephant and whose motto is "*tov li b'hovalah*"—'it's great to be in transportation') take the place of prayer?

In any event, my perplexity about the purpose of our journey has ebbed; apparently the rest of the group had no such doubts. If they questioned anything, it was whether they would measure up—physically, emotionally. Those who passed the test—frankly, one or two did not—have drawn strength from an unlikely place, an Israel bloodied by bombings and beset by murderous enemies. In Jerusalem I overhear a shopkeeper thank an American visitor for coming. "Your presence strengthens us," she says, but in truth, it's the other way around. It's their bravery—the bravery of soldiers, policemen, nurses, bus drivers, and ordinary Israelis—that strengthens and inspires us.

The morning after the rain, the desert looks much the same, though with puddles here and there. The sun is up as we carry our belongings to the bus. As we depart, the soldiers are arriving for work. One of them is Alex, the Russian-born corporal who starts up the trucks, oversees the stenciling, and husbands the paint, the turpentine, and the large, much-used paintbrush. "*Boker tov, Alex*," I call—good morning—and then, "*L'hitraot, anachnu yotzim*"—so long, we're leaving. "*Boker tov*," he says; nothing more, and without slowing his step he heads up the stone stairs to his trucks.

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