

Rabbi Lisa Edwards  
BCC Memorial Day weekend  
May 28, 2010 Ruach Chayim

Back when Tracy and I lived in Iowa City, IA one of my friends had an annual one week job of helping mow the lawn at the City's largest cemetery getting it ready for Memorial Day.

How many of you lived in towns small enough or times long ago enough or perhaps you come from a military family or worked for a Veterans organization that you took part in Memorial Day observances? When I was a kid growing up in Glencoe, IL Memorial Day was one of the most important days of the year, not for sales at the store, but for a parade down the Main Street of town – I remember how proud I was to walk with my Brownie troop (though I much preferred the uniforms of the Cub Scouts!). We trained like good soldiers to take turns carrying the American flag. By the time I was old enough to be an actual Girl Scout, I couldn't stomach either the uniform or what I perceived to be the military aspects of scouting in any form. I flew up and dropped out on the same day, so much for my "military" career.

The job of mowing the cemetery lawn for Memorial Day was an important one in Iowa City, and added to the task was the planting of a small American flag on the grave of each of the many veterans buried there.

Perhaps some of you have visited or grew up in synagogues where the memorial boards include small American flags next to the names of veterans. One of my rabbi colleagues likes to tell the story of looking at the board with a young boy who asked why the flags were there. There's a flag for each congregant who died in the service, replied the Rabbi. The boy looked horrified, as he asked, "Which service? Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur?"

War and military service have always been part of the Jewish experience, as this week's Torah portion – *B'ha-ah-lot'kha* – tells us with its detailed descriptions of how the troops and

tribes in the wilderness are to travel in formation, called to order by the sounding of trumpet blasts. “And when you are at war in your land against an aggressor who attacks you, you shall sound short blasts on the trumpets, that you may be remembered before Adonai your God and be delivered from your enemies.”

[Numbers 10:9]

The *haftarah* from the book of the prophet Zechariah counters the Torah’s assumption that the children of Israel will always be called upon to be soldiers. “Shout for joy,” says God to Israel, in the years when Darius, king of Persia, continues the foreign policy of Cyrus permitting the Jews to return from their exile in Babylon and take up their religious practices once again in Jerusalem [see Etz Hayim Torah commentary, p. 836]. “Shout for joy” says God, “...for I come to dwell in your midst [again]... [and] in that day many nations will attach themselves to God and become God’s people” And a few verses later God delivers a famous message of peace, not war: “...Not by might, nor by power, but by MY spirit --- says the God of hosts [Zechariah 2:14-15, 4:6]. And lest we question by My spirit – what? our friend, the liturgist/songwriter Debbie Friedman adds on “...Not by might, nor by power, but by MY spirit “*alone, shall we all live in peace.*”

Despite it being the “official start of summer” and a treasured day off for many people, Memorial Day is still taken seriously in this country especially in times like these when our country is still engaged in wars and U.S. troops are still fighting and losing their lives in “service to their country.”

And this year our Congress has done something extra special in observance of Memorial Day and in anticipation of Pride Month the month of June. Under the legislation passed today by the full House and Senate Armed Services Committee, the ban on gays in the military would be lifted – when the following happens: a report by a Pentagon Working Group of how best to lift the ban, certification by President Obama,

Secretary Gates and Admiral Mullen, and a 60 day review period by Congress. The Senate will now consider the repeal language as part of the 2011 Defense Authorization Bill. [from Palm press release]

My cousin, Prof. Aaron Belkin, director of the Palm Center, a think tank that since 1998 has been a primary mover in commissioning and disseminating research in the areas of gender, sexuality, and the military, said of today's vote:

"It was never going to be easy to dismantle the gay ban, but the White House and Congressional leadership have launched a process that will do just that," stated [Aaron Belkin](#) Director of the Palm Center. "For seventeen years, taxpayer money has gone to fire Arabic linguists, doctors and mission critical specialists in every field and every service because they are gay, lesbian or bisexual. Today, the House of Representatives and the Senate Armed Services Committee have said that prejudice cannot be more important than national security. Keeping good troops is good policy."

The legislation has a ways to go – it could still fall away, but it almost certainly would have fallen away had they not voted today.

And in case you're wondering where the Jewish community stands on all of this, a group of ten Jewish groups signed a letter to Congress asking it to repeal the "Don't Ask Don't Tell" policy on gays in the military. The letter was organized by the Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA); signing were the American Jewish Committee, the American Jewish Congress, the Anti-Defamation League, B'nai B'rith International, the Jewish Labor Committee, the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation, the National Council of Jewish Women, the Union for Reform Judaism and the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism."

Absent – not surprisingly – were the major Orthodox organizations.

[http://www.thejewishweek.com/blogs/political\\_insider/jewish\\_groups\\_congress\\_repeal\\_dont\\_ask\\_dont\\_tell\\_policy\\_gays\\_military](http://www.thejewishweek.com/blogs/political_insider/jewish_groups_congress_repeal_dont_ask_dont_tell_policy_gays_military)

Submitted by James Besser on Tue, 05/25/2010 - 15:48

I'm always of two minds about DADT – I don't want to send anyone to war. And especially on Memorial Day I am saddened by the thought that all these centuries after Zechariah said, "not by might and not by power but by MY spirit," our legislators still must occupy themselves with thoughts of war and the military.

On the other hand, I certainly felt a lot of pride last week reading the article in the Jewish Forward about Frank Kameny's 85<sup>th</sup> birthday – did you see the article? Do you know who Frank Kameny is? The nice Jewish gay boy from Queens, WWII combat veteran and Harvard PhD in astronomy, was ousted from the military in 1957 because he was gay.

"In 1960, Kameny protested his firing right up to the Supreme Court, marking the first civil rights [claim](#) based on sexual orientation. As a Jew, he wrote that the U.S. government's anti-gay policies were "no less illegal and no less odious than discrimination based upon religious or racial grounds." Kameny lost his case, but soon co-founded the [Mattachine Society](#) of Washington, a pioneering gay/lesbian civil rights organization, and even made an unsuccessful run for [Congress](#) in 1971.

[the article continues]... But Kameny is far from a merely historical figure. Last year, the Director of the Office of Personnel Management formally apologized to Kameny on behalf of the U.S. government for his 1957 firing. Last month, when President Obama [signed](#) a memorandum expanding benefits for partners of gay Federal employees, Kameny stood next to him for photographs." [from The Jewish Forward, Benjamin Ivry, May 18, 2010]

I hope you like your birthday present from Congress, Mr. Kameny. The 85 year old Kameny, like BCC's own 89 year old

Harriet Perl, must be reeling from how far we've come and how long it's taken, as well as from how far we've yet to go.

In that too we're not unlike the Israelites in this week's Torah portion gathered in the wilderness having come so far from slavery through the parted sea to receive Torah at Mt. Sinai, yet still ahead of them and as yet unbeknownst to them will come nearly 40 more years of making camp and breaking camp, never certain when they would stand still, or when they would be called to arms or at least to move forward: "And when the cloud lifted from the Tent of Meeting, the Israelites would set out; and at the spot where the cloud settled, there the Israelites would make camp. At a command from God the Israelites broke camp, and at a command from God they made camp....Whether it was two days or a month or a year..."

I suppose as Jews and queers we'll always be embattled in one cause or another, called upon to fight for our own rights and the rights of others. On this weekend of Memorial Day, let's give each other the gift to pause and reflect and REMEMBER those who have come before us and even to consider those who will yet go to battle for us; those who, including many of us, will take on the tasks assigned because - as Torah so often reminds us - we know the feelings of a stranger, know what it means to be an other. And let us this Memorial Day weekend also dream of the time foretold, when NOT BY MIGHT and NOT BY POWER BUT BY SPIRIT ALONE - shall we all live in peace.

Shabbat shalom

[Juval leads us in Debbie Friedman's "Not by Might"]

## BEFORE KADDISH

The young dead soldiers do not speak.  
Nevertheless, they are heard in the still houses:  
who has not heard them?  
They have a silence that speaks for them at night  
and when the clock counts.  
They say: We were young. We have died.  
Remember us.  
They say: We have done what we could  
but until it is finished it is not done.  
They say: We have given our lives but until it is finished  
no one can know what our lives gave.  
They say: Our deaths are not ours: they are yours,  
they will mean what you make them.  
They say: Whether our lives and our deaths were for  
peace and a new hope or for nothing we cannot say,  
it is you who must say this.  
We leave you our deaths. Give them their meaning.  
We were young, they say. We have died; remember us.

Archibald MacLeish, born in my small town of Glencoe, IL in 1892