

"Worth Noticing? The Spanish Civil War Vet, the Lamed Vovniks, and the People
of Gaza"

(Steven E. Ostrow: Rosh Hashonah Dvar for Boston Workmen's Circle,
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I think the first two or three words out of my mouth, when dear Linda Gritz of our Ritual Committee invited me to speak today, were "Oy.....oy.....," and "oy" -- thereby establishing my Yiddish-speaking credentials to appear before you.

My initial (private) response to Linda's kind invite was an on-going sense of terror, followed by anguish: Why me, and what to say?

As for the "Why me?" -- I imagined that the invitation came from my Workmen's Circle pals realizing that I had just come part-way through a very particular year; maybe they thought, that with my surviving this long, in more or less familiar shape, perhaps I had gained a modicum of "wisdom" that I might be willing to share with you all. This has been a memorable year for my family & myself, marked by an alarming number of deaths of dearly beloved family and very close friends, some from within this community. I know that some of you have suffered the same, and you have my very deepest sympathies.

This has also been my own personal, first ever, full-term "medical year," August to August, during which I have begun shedding noticeable parts of my physical self: a 3-millimeter kidney stone, off to the lab last September; a small but noticeable internal organ sliced out by an expert surgeon at the end of May; and then, just last month -- in the middle of Italy -- a wee bit of clear vision in my right eye, vanished into thin air. (I'm happy and hugely lucky to assure you all that I'm "fine," functioning, can see perfectly straight -- and am drinking lots of water with my hummous, these days!) But in case I had any doubts, my body kept on reminding me that the years really are marching on. So one tidbit of (newly acquired) "wisdom" I'm eager to share with you: for me, it's really begun to sink in, that there are only so many seasons ahead -- which prompts me to pick up

Phil Ochs' urgent refrain again: whatever sits at the top of your and my "to-do" lists, "I guess we'll have to do it while we're here"!

So much for the "Why me?" But "what-to-say"? I went through most of the summer at home and during the teaching gig that Annie and I were doing in the Naples area, "looking for a sign."

And then, in the final days of August, there it was -- on my dear Mom's kitchen table in Worcester: the September issue of "The Volunteer," magazine of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. My eye fell on the cover announcement of a newly discovered memoir -- to be published next month, in fact -- titled War is Beautiful: An American Ambulance Driver in the Spanish Civil War, by one James Neugass, a writer born into a prosperous New Orleans Jewish family in 1905 who served as an anti-fascist volunteer in Spain for several months in the late 1930's. I'd like to share one excerpt with you. I've read sadly little about the Spanish Civil War -- which was among other things the great European rehearsal for World War II, and can be framed, to put it very simply, in terms of democratic forces fighting against those of fascism. Neugass' words offered me a rare, vivid glimpse into tortured lives and moral ambiguities produced by one of the lesser known 20th-century wartime horror shows.

"Before I go to Bed.....," our Jewish ambulance driver writes, "The fascist head-case had been giving us much trouble. He makes more noise than the rest of the patients. His arms catch at the air. He pulls the sheet over his head and stares at us from under it with a single terrible eye.

"A great change came over the fascist this morning. Sana had soft-boiled a quantity of eggs for the patients. As she worked down the ward, carefully feeding liquid gold into the mouths of each man, I wondered what she would do when she got to the fascist... he was for once quiet.

"The eyes of even the half-conscious were on him and on Sana. Would he be fed? We do not hate the fascists when they lie in our hospital, but only when they do not.....

"Therefore the fascist should be given an egg although the other wounded men in the ward look at him as if he were the one who shot them, and perhaps he was.....

"With the entire ward looking at her, Sana held the fascist head-case in her arms and fed him two soft-boiled eggs. She is not Mary Magdalen and he is not Christ. If this is religion, then I am religious.

"But if the fascist head-case were an aviator, we should not have given him an egg. I am sometimes thankful that my job does not require me to kill people, but if I ever have a chance to get at an aviator I will strangle him.... [and then] he should be buried in one piece, unlike so many of his victims."

This peek into a bloody infirmary ward in Civil War Spain reminded me how easy it is, to lose track entirely of people who deserve our concern, at times even our struggle to ease their lives -- or to celebrate their achievements. If it's too late for victims or heroes from 1930's Spain, there are plenty of others alive and well -- or not so well -- who demand our attention. And so I've made it my modest mission this morning, to take notice of a few of our fellow human beings - - in the hope that ultimately, by noticing, and by caring, we all push forward a little bit the work of Tikkun Olam, repairing the world.

James Neugass and the front cover of the Lincoln Brigade magazine brought us a first example. Another struck me from the back cover of our own new house organ, "Jewish Currents" (the July-August issue), where I read an amazing prose poem by one Mikhail Horowitz.

He called his piece, "Thirty-Six Sentences on Lamed Vovniks," a title which mystified me no end, 'til the Google wonders of this world led me deep into old Jewish folklore (and Talmudic debate) focussed on this remarkable phenomenon of the Lamed Vovniks. These folks -- their name derived from the Hebrew letters that stand for the number "THIRTY-SIX," -- emerge as, precisely, 36 good, simple souls -- Jewish or non-Jewish, it doesn't matter -- of extremely humble station, whose efforts enable the rest of humanity to endure, maybe even prosper. Without these 36 crucial "Pillars of the Universe" all of Creation would, in an instant, fall to dust. But Horowitz puts it all so much more movingly than

any of the websites that I sampled -- among the 1,510 that Google makes available! In fact, his portrait of them is more compelling even than that ultimate great Talmudic tractate, "Vikipedia"! And so I'm eager to give you some of his own take on these remarkable earthly companions of ours:

"It snows on one of them; rains on another. Both are without shoes. Another is shlepping a heavy box and not complaining; another is stroking the sodden fur of a blind cat..... to most of us they are smudges on the sills of the world, shmutz on the discarded shmattes of the quotidian. But when one of them has gooseflesh, the universe trembles; when one of them sneezes, there is a momentary brownout throughout the Milky Way. I thought I [met]..... one..... once, at a soup kitchen in Minneapolis. He was doling out stew to a bunch of losers, not the beautiful kind but the other kind, whose dreams have been flattened by steamrollers of neglect, that bastard offspring of capitalism. But he was beaming, beaming at each of the stubby shadows as they shuffled in front of him, rekindling the dead light in their eyes with the light in his if only for a moment....."

"....the world.....hides them in plain sight, unassuming as dust. They are gelt not meant to be given; afikomens not meant to be found....."

"Even their mothers do not know who they are.....They have been cobblers, carpenters.., masons, blacksmiths, but these days are just as likely to be nurses, garage attendants, pizza flippers, computer technicians. They have not, and never will be, brokers, bankers, politicians, attorneys, or journalists. They are flies on the wall that have melded with the wall; they are undetected by any radar, even and especially their own."

From Horowitz's anonymous "little people," doing endless good, suffering much, no ethnic or religious or national label attached to them, I'd like to move on to one final example, of "those who should be noticed." And this time around, they really must be identified by a national and ethnic name-tag -- a people who deserve, perhaps especially, to be noticed by the likes of us -- a progressive, American, mostly Jewish community. And so I switch gears abruptly -- I hope you won't feel too harshly -- and move to the Middle East, and to Israel and

Palestine, and in particular to that one giant slice of the Palestinian population in Gaza -- one and a half million strong -- who have been suffering in especially acute fashion ever since the 2006 elections, when Hamas won with impressive numbers -- in a generally agreed "free and fair" fashion.

From that time, and the subsequent near-civil war among Palestinians that led to Hamas control in Gaza, Israel and its Western partners -- led by the United States -- have imposed a punitive siege -- an extremely harsh blockade of the Gaza territory. Yes, Israel had withdrawn its settlers from Gaza in 2005, but it has still maintained a chokehold over the territory: its borders, its air space, and its sea lanes. The entry of food, fuel and medical supplies has been severely restricted. This collective punishment aimed to deny Hamas the support of the Gazan people: that goal has certainly not been achieved; rather, the major result has in fact been to exacerbate massive unemployment, widespread impoverishment and malnutrition, and the ever more fragile state of public health among the people of Gaza.

Perhaps some of you heard, at the end of August, of a brave attempt on the part of the "Free Gaza movement" -- composed of Palestinians, Israelis, and international peace activists -- to draw the world's attention to the plight of Gaza, by launching a pair of small fishing boats from Cyprus, headed to Gaza in defiance of the Israeli blockade. After some dicey times on a choppy sea, this miniature "navy for peace" succeeded in putting in to Gaza. If you saw these reports, you may have been puzzled, as I was at first, by the mention of one special cargo aboard the boats, consisting of some 200 hearing aids. And then I was reminded, that unceasing flights by Israeli Air Force jets across the Gaza region have produced countless sonic booms, which have caused widespread deafness among the people of Gaza, along with predictable and tragic psychological impact.

If this grim state of affairs in Gaza and in all the region sorrows you, as it does myself, here is a situation, and now we're in the season, that really does call for "Tikkun Olam" -- action to help heal this long suffering corner of the globe, for Palestinians and Israelis alike. If it troubles you, as it does me, that our

Jewish sisters and brothers in Israel continue to suffer what they do suffer -- and that they continue to inflict what they do inflict -- in dealing with their Palestinian cousins; if it disturbs you -- and me! -- that our American political leadership has for decades shown a consistently anti-Palestinian bias and over the past 8 years especially an almost complete neglect of the need to push for a truly just peace -- then here's the occasion (the start of this New Year) for us to "do it while we're here": informing ourselves; finding companions -- for starters, perhaps, in our own Middle East Working Group; or writing letters; or sending contributions; or joining a protest demo; or even traveling to Israel and Palestine, to see with our own eyes, and maybe lend a hand. As we embark upon New Year's Resolutions, let's hope for -- but even better, we can work for -- a renewed and much happier land of Israel and Palestine by the start of the next Rosh Hashonah!

L'shanah tova, a very GUT YOR to you all!