

My friends, those of you who heard me eulogize my cousin Lola, may she rest in peace, or heard me chant a haftarah in memory of my beloved rabbi, Rabbi Howard Kahn, *alav hashalom*, know that I can be moved to the point of being visibly emotional. Tonight, I will begin my talk by telling you about two incidents in which I went from feeling absolutely even emotionally to experiencing great a level of emotion.

The first involves a public figure some of you will admire and some of you will not. If you are in the latter group, please don't let that get in the way of your appreciating my story. The identity of the subject is irrelevant. It could have been any member of the United States Marine Corps. In this case, it happened to be Col. Oliver North.

Col. North was the keynote speaker one year at the Fort Myers Community Prayer Breakfast, an event attended by over 1,300 people every year. I was privileged to serve on the Prayer Breakfast Committee for many years, and share the dais with some incredible speakers. The Southwest Florida Symphony Chorus was always part of the event, and on this particular year,

after singing the national anthem and the crowd being seated, they announced that they had prepared a special surprise for our speaker. I was seated immediately to the right of Col. North. The Chorus broke into the Marine's Hymn. As quick as a pouncing cat, Col. North leapt to his feet and stood, ramrod straight, at attention for the duration of the hymn. I had a lump in my throat as big as a grapefruit. By the way, Col. North's talk that day appropriately eschewed all partisan conflicts and focused solely on the character of the men and women who serve their country, here and overseas, in the various branches of the military. That only served to keep the grapefruit lodged solidly in my throat.

In the second story, I was even more emotional. I was walking through the Atlanta airport to a connecting flight. At the end of a concourse, an organized long line of soldiers marched past on their way to another concourse. My friends, I will never forget this. Every single person in that area, and there were a great many of us, put down our bags and coats and began to applaud. We applauded until the very last soldier in line had marched out of sight. Then people slowly began to pick up their things and continue on. I literally had tears running down my face. Yes, I

am one of those people who go up to men and women in uniform and thank them, or if I am in line at a concession stand with one, I'll pay his or her tab. I think it is the least I can do.

One of the regrets of my life is I could not serve my country. I wanted to. I admit that the way I wanted to serve was not by jumping out of an airplane, but by playing euphonium in the Air Force band. I visited a recruiter who was very interested until he found out that thanks to my football career, I had a steel screw in my shoulder. That screw prevented me from enlisting in any branch of the service.

Today is Veterans Day, formerly known as Armistice Day. It is fitting on this Shabbat, we honor and thank those who served America.

Although on Shabbat we do not eulogize, I do want to share some excerpts from an article I read about Major Dick Winters, the subject of an HBO special I have not seen. I do now hope to see Band of Brothers.

Here are some excerpts from the article:

When the war broke out in Europe, Dick Winters did what millions of young men did — he enlisted in the Army. He was selected to attend Officer Candidate School, earned a commission in the summer of 1942, and then — drawn by the promise of extra pay for hazardous duty — volunteered to join a newly formed paratrooper unit.

Nearly 500 officers volunteered to join the elite unit of daredevils for which Winters auditioned back in 1941. He was one of 148 who made the cut.

On D-Day, Winters was able to gather twelve men, and he was ordered to destroy a German artillery battery that was firing on Utah Beach, one of the two American beaches. It was a 50-man German battery and he had 12 men, and by fire and maneuver, by leading his men from the front, he was able to knock out each of those guns on Utah Beach. By silencing those guns, the American Army suffered 192 dead on Utah Beach, in sharp contrast to Omaha Beach, where the Americans suffered over

2,500 casualties. Winters was awarded the military's second-highest decoration for valor, the Distinguished Service Cross, for his heroism on D-Day.

One of the most harrowing experiences of his service came in late April 1945. While on patrol, his men discovered a German slave-labor camp near Landsberg. It was a part of Dachau concentration camp. It was a ghastly scene, and Major Winters found wheels of cheese stacked in a cellar near the camp and distributed it to the emaciated prisoners.

“The memory of starved, dazed men who dropped their eyes and heads when we looked at them through the chain-link fence, in the same manner that a beaten, mistreated dog would cringe, leaves feelings that cannot be described and will not be forgotten,” Major Winters wrote of the experience. “The impact of seeing those people behind that fence left me saying, only to myself, ‘Now I know why I am here.’”

Late in the war, one of his soldiers, Floyd Talbert, wrote him a letter from an Indiana hospital, thanking him for his loyalty and leadership. “You are loved and will never be forgotten by any

soldier that ever served under you,” Talbert wrote. “I would follow you into hell.”

Dick Williams later had a conversation with his grandson, who asked if his Grandpa had been a hero in the war. Williams said, “No, but I served with a company of heros.”

Dick Williams died last January. I did not hear about it when he died. I never even heard of him at the time of his death. But today I have to wonder why we, as a society, pay more attention to the death of a Michael Jackson than we do to a Dick Williams.

My friends, the title of this sermon is America's Veterans and Father Abraham. I have not yet made the connection to our veterans and Abraham. I will do so now. In tomorrow's Torah reading, God calls upon Abraham to make a huge personal sacrifice. Abraham's answer is one Hebrew word, *hineini*, which literally means “here I am,” and carries the connotation of “I am at your service.”

All veterans, whether by enlistment or through the draft, said *hineini* to their nation. And now, I would like to conclude my talk by having you all join me in A Veterans Day Prayer. And I would ask that all who served in the Armed Forces of the United States of America, please rise.

A Veterans Day Prayer

We ask for blessings on all those who have served their country in the armed forces.

We ask for healing for all our veterans who have been wounded in body and soul, in conflicts all over the globe. Have mercy on all our veterans from World War II, Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Bring peace to their hearts and peace to the regions in which they fought. Bless all the soldiers who served in non-combatative posts. God, please bless all their families and their loved ones who supported them with courage and strength.

We especially ask your blessings upon the current members of our American military forces, those brave men and women with courage and commitment who are protecting the values that make our country great. Whether by air, land or sea, wherever their orders take them, we ask, that they be protected within your sheltering presence. Shield them from harm and from pain, assuage their loneliness, and sustain their faith in the face of the formidable enemies that they confront on a daily basis. Bring

them home safely to the loving arms of their families and a grateful country, speedily and in good health.

Most of all, we pray for a world where war and bloodshed cease, and a where a great peace will embrace the whole world. Where nation will not threaten nation and humanity will not again know war. Lord of Peace, bless us all with שלום.

אמן.