

There

Two ribs too many

By Robby Berman

The rabbi buried my ribs in the Jewish cemetery in Muncey, NY, between his father-in-law's kneecap and a woman's elbow. Rumors circulated that I spoke at the ceremony because I knew my ribs intimately and that I spent the next few months studying Kabbala trying to create two women.

The story starts in the IDF where, as a young recruit, I was ingloriously injured while shouldering a stretcher for too long a period of time. I suffered from nerve and arterial damage in both shoulders; whenever I turned my head – which I tended to do – blood stopped flowing to both my arms. In addition, I experienced excruciating nerve pain. My diagnosis, the doctors told me, was Thoracic Outlet Syndrome (TOS).

At the army hospital a medical technician performed a nerve-conduction test on my arms. He frugally taped an electrode to the palm of my hand. He then took a metal rod, which looked much like a cattle prod, and placed it on my shoulder. With a flick of a switch he sent a series of electric shocks through my arm in order to measure the speed it travelled. The test sounds as pleasant as it felt.

My hand began to sweat from the multiple electric shocks; and without warning, the two small pieces of scotch tape fell to the floor – along with the electrode. My arm began to smoke, the technician began to scream, and I lurched forward, using my non-smoking hand, and yanked the electrical chord out of the socket. Not surprisingly, the test results were positive uh... I mean negative, uh... I mean I had nerve damage.

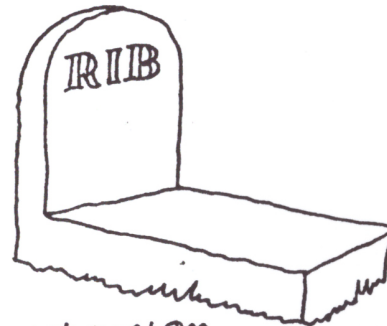
An army doctor X-rayed my chest, looked at the film, and exonerated the army by claiming that my TOS was not trauma-induced, but rather, congenital. He pointed to the cloudy film and told me I was in possession of two "extra ribs" left over from when my ancestors were monkeys. These atavistic ribs, he claimed, were putting pressure on the nerves and the arteries, causing my TOS.

I went looking for a second opinion. There is no such thing in Israel as a "thoracic surgeon" and therefore I couldn't find a TOS expert. A civilian surgeon examined me and told me I did not possess extra ribs but insisted, however, that the remedy for my trauma-induced TOS was to remove both of my first ribs. He opened a dusty medical manual and enthusiastically explained how he planned to cut me open – along the dotted line – and remove them, making me his first rib resection.

AT THIS point I was confused, in pain, and – after all this talk about ribs – hungry. I flew to the U.S., found a TOS expert in Dallas who had performed over 2000 rib

removals, and underwent a bilateral rib resection. The operation was a success and should be the end of the story. It isn't.

Back in Israel, serving in a reserve combat unit, I am experiencing TOS pain. I searched the Internet medical literature and found that even following rib removal, TOS can recur. A recent nerve-conduction test found I had no quantifiable nerve damage, but the latest literature states that 80 percent of TOS sufferers show no nerve or arterial damage during clinical tests.



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It seems my flak jacket, ammunition vest, and rifle strap are putting enough pressure on my shoulders to reactivate my previous medical condition. Logic would dictate that I simply stop wearing army accoutrements. Logic would dictate, but the army didn't.

Last month, a military medical committee rejected my request to lower my health profile because of my TOS pain. The fact that I already had two ribs removed because

of army service didn't seem to interest them. They sent me to an orthopedic physician. He examined me and wrote; "Although the patient suffers from TOS pain, he nevertheless retains full range of motion and therefore is fit for military duty."

Nerve pain, for those who are fortunate enough never to have experienced it, is unlike any other corporeal pain. It is similar to a bright white searing light that enters your optic nerves and consumes your brain. It is not something you want to mess with.

The army decided I should continue combat duty and bear the pain until I have measurable nerve damage. Now, let's assume I was stupid enough to abide by their decision and I continued in the army until I got a full-blown case of TOS. The only surgical relief left for those who have already undergone a rib resection is to undergo a scalenectomy – the removal of neck muscles.

I happen to be quite attached to my neck muscles, both physically and emotionally. And besides the issue of esthetics, if I were to undergo a scalenectomy, how could I be expected to keep my head up during movies?

I would like to know how 30,000 haredim manage to skip the army, Aviv Gefen and his ilk ignore the army, and I can't seem to switch to a desk job. I've given the army my ribs and now they want my neck, the ghoulish sons of bitches.

I reject the army's decision. Although I am a Zionist, I am not afraid to say: "I regret not that I have given but two ribs to my country, and I plan to give no more!"

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