



Eiykev: Taming the Wild Beast

Rabbi Shmuel Silber

“And it will be, because you will heed these ordinances and keep them and perform, that the Lord, your God, will keep for you the covenant and the kindness that He swore to your forefathers (Devorim 7:12).”

In the opening verse of this week’s Parsha, Moshe creates a simple paradigm – if we live up to the word of God, God will deliver on the promises He made to the Patriarchs. But for the fledging Jewish nation, more important than the promises of livestock and produce, was the promise of protection and victory in the wars against the kingdoms of Canaan. Moshe reminds us that in the same way that God brought Pharaoh to his knees, He can and will do the same with Canaanite kingdoms.

Moshe continues and says, *“And the Lord, your God, will drive out those nations from before you, little by little. You will not be able to destroy them quickly, lest the beasts of the field outnumber you (7:22).”* The battle for Canaan will not be quick. Not because our enemies are too fierce, but rather, out of concern that if we conquer more land than we can settle, wild animals will overrun these conquered areas and pose a threat to the nearby inhabitants. What a strange statement? Moshe has just told the people that there is going to be Divine protection and intervention, and yet, now we are worried about the beasts of the field? The same God who can bend and manipulate the laws of nature can certainly keep the animals at bay. The same God who will instill fear into the hearts of the Canaanite soldiers could also instill fear within the animals causing them to retreat from before the Jewish people. How are we to understand this statement of Moshe?

The Modgitzer Rebbe (Rav Shaul Yedidyah Elazar of Modgitz) provides an amazing insight. When forced to fight, man must draw on his animalistic instincts. When forced to kill, man gives up (loses) some part of his humanity. Life often calls for such drastic measures. Wars must be waged for the needs of the nation and for the actualization of Jewish destiny. The soldier must be prepared to take the life of another if this is what the mission calls for. However, there is a reality that must be acknowledged. There is collateral damage on a personal level. After fighting a war, after taking a life – the soldier is no longer the same. Once those feelings and instincts that allowed one to kill have been unleashed it is not easy to simply bottle them up. This, explains the Rebbe, is the meaning of the pasuk. Why not just go to war with all of the Canaanite nations at once? Why will God drive them out ‘*little by little*’? To which God answers, *“Pen tirbeh lecha chayas haSadeh (Llest the beasts of the field become too much upon you).”* The beasts to which the Torah refers are not the animals that inhabit the land of Israel – but rather, the animal that dwells within. God explains, *“If I have you engage in constant fighting, constant bloodshed, constant war – the animal within will overwhelm you and can extinguish your humanity. Therefore, I will clear out the nations slowly - you will have to fight – but you will also have time to heal. The mission will be accomplished but at a slower pace to allow for the preservation of the Tzelem Elokim (the Divine Image) within each and every soldier.”*

The Rebbe’s insight teaches us a valuable lesson. What we do, determines who we are. The actions we engage in – shape and mold our very character and essence. If we want to become good and holy people we must engage in good and holy behaviors. At times, we engage in certain activities that we know are detrimental (to our body or soul) but we convince ourselves that this action will not color who we are. *“Pen tirbeh alecha chayas haSadeh”* - if we act like an animal, our inner animal will dominate and eclipse the beauty and holiness we possess within. There are times when we must unleash the animal within, but we must have a plan to rein it in, assess the damage and create a space in which to repair and heal.

Our actions define us; our actions solidify our identity. Let us find the strength to make the right decisions and choices, but when we fall and when we fail, let us find the courage to rein in the beasts of the field.