



Ki Teitzei: Waging the Ultimate Battle

"כי תצא למלחמה על אויבך"

"When you go out to war against your enemy"

War - it is something we try our best to avoid yet, we know it to be a reality of our national existence. We understand the difficult truth that national survival often entails difficult battles. Still, the Torah also understands that not everyone is fit for battle. As the Jewish army prepares to meet its enemy, the *Kohen* stands before the assembled troops and announces those who are exempt and ordered to return home.

"And the officers shall speak to the people, saying, what man is there who has built a new house and has not [yet] inaugurated it? Let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the war, and another man inaugurate it. And what man is there who has planted a vineyard, and has not [yet] redeemed it? Let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the war, and another man redeem it. And what man is there who has betrothed a woman and has not [yet] taken her? Let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the war, and another man take her." (Devorim 20:5-7)

What is the common denominator between these exempted individuals? Each of these men will be focused on something other than the battle. For the soldier to be effective he must think of nothing other than subduing the enemy. If his thoughts are diverted to home or family, or if he longs to enjoy the literal fruits of his labor, he becomes a liability and puts his fellow soldiers in danger. The *Kohen* orders these individuals to leave the front and serve the war effort from home.

However, there is one additional exemption that is particularly intriguing; *"And the officers shall continue to speak to the people and say, "What man is there who is fearful and fainthearted? Let him go and return to his house, that he should not cause the heart of his brothers to melt, as his hear." (Devorim 20:8)*

The Talmud (Sotah 44a) quotes two opinions as to the meaning of *"fearful and fainthearted."* Rabbi Akiva explains that it literally refers to one who is scared of the *"drawn sword."* This individual is simply too scared to fight. Rabbi Yossi HaGlili explains that it refers to someone who is fearful of the sins he has committed. The soldier is concerned that as a result of his sinful behavior he may not deserve spiritual protection during battle. What types of sin are we discussing? The *Talmud Bavli* (Babylonian Talmud) answers that we are referring to one who speaks between putting on the Tefillin of the arm and the Tefillin of the head. Such an individual has committed a sin that excuses him from going to battle. The *Talmud Yerushalmi* (Jerusalem Talmud) explains that it refers to one who speaks between *Yishtabach*, the concluding blessing of *Psukei D'Zimra*, (introductory psalms in the morning service) and *Yotzer Or*, the opening blessing of the blessings of Shema. An individual who spoke during these prohibited times during prayer would not go to battle.

How are we to understand these two views? Although neither of these behaviors is praiseworthy they hardly seem to represent the type of sinful behavior for which one would worry about losing Divine protection during battle.

Rav Gershon Stern (1861-1936) in his *sefer Yalkut Gershuni* explains that there are two components to waging a successful war: skilled officers to plan strategy and brave soldiers who are physically capable of executing the commands. If everyone is an officer then there may be detailed plans and incredible strategy but there is no one to carry out the orders. However, if everyone is a soldier there will be a flurry of chaotic activity but no strategic framework. The synergistic relationship and partnership between leadership and the men on the ground is required in order to be successful.

It is the same in life. We each possess a particular life *hashkafa* (outlook) and have a picture in our mind's eye as to how these values should inform the way we live. However, sometimes there is a disconnect between what we believe and what we do. Our most important task is to make sure that what we believe is clearly mirrored in how we live. Values and beliefs are hollow if they are not expressed in the way one behaves, and conducts oneself.

This idea is symbolized in the Tefillin. The *Shel Yad* (Tefillin of the arm) represents action, while the *Shel Rosh* (Tefillin of the head) represents thought. If a person speaks between putting on the *Shel Yad* and the *Shel Rosh*, he is interrupting the connection between belief and action.

In the same vein, the blessing of *Yishtabach* is a beautiful praise to God, in which we recognize the multi-faceted dimensions of God's splendor in the world. Following this blessing we recite *"Yotzer or u'borei choshech, He who fashions light and creates darkness"*, which discusses the fact that God created the world and has given us a mandate to build beautiful and meaningful lives. If we sing God's praises but fail to build a life where He is a dominant fixture, then our praise is empty.



Both the Talmud Bavli and Yerushalmi are echoing the same sentiment. God accepts the fact that we have and will sin. He understands that we are frail and subject to temptation and as a result He does not ask us to be perfect. What God does ask is for us to demonstrate sincerity. If we “believe” in something we must be ready to act on it as well. If we commit ourselves to a certain set of values and ideals we must make sure that we are ready to live them.

If there is a disconnect between what we believe and what we do, God asks us not to fight His battles. It is only those who do not speak between the *Shel Yad* and the *Shel Rosh*, only those who do not converse between *Yishtabach* and *Yotzer* who have earned the right to defend the honor of God.

This message resonates with acute importance during this month of introspection. As we continue to take a spiritual accounting of what we have accomplished and in which areas we must improve, we must take the time to analyze and review our beliefs. What do we each stand for? What is important to us? What are our priorities? After answering these questions, we must make sure that these answers are not just contained in the words we use but must also be apparent in the things we do and the lives we lead.