

GOING OUT TO WAR AGAINST THE EVIL INCLINATION

There are two parshiot in the holy Torah that speak of going out to war. In fact in the very first verse of this week's parsha we read, "When you go out to war against your enemies, and the L-RD your G-d will deliver him into your hand" (Deuteronomy 21:10). In Parsha Beha'alotcha we also have, "When you go to wage war in your land against an enemy who oppresses you, you shall sound short blasts of the trumpets, and you shall be remembered...you shall be saved from your foes" (Numbers 10:9).

We need to understand why this week's parsha promises us victory from the very outset, immediately upon going out to war ("the L-RD your G-d will deliver him into your hand"), whereas in Parsha Beha'alotcha victory is not promised to the Jewish people at first. It is only after we "sound short blasts of the trumpets," only after we have prayed and cried out to Hashem, that we "shall be saved from [our] foes." As we know, a war can unfold in two ways. When two countries are at war and one has breached the borders of the other and is in its territory, it is easier for it to gain victory. Because its soldiers are already in the land of its enemies, it is easier for the invading force to win. Conversely, from the vantage point of a country that has been invaded by enemy forces, the situation is ominous, and it needs help to defeat its enemy.

The kind of war being discussed in our parsha unfolds in the first way: "When you go out to war against your enemies." That is, it describes a situation in which we have already entered our enemy's land. Thus once there, victory is much easier. In fact "the L-RD your G-d will deliver him into your hand" immediately, and we will conquer them all at once. However in Parsha Beha'alotcha the second kind of war is being described, the one in which the enemy has invaded and penetrated our land: "When you go to wage war in your land." This war is not taking place outside our borders, but within them. Therefore we need heavenly assistance in order to win. Victory is not assured, nor is it promised to us right from the outset. We must sound the trumpets and pray to Hashem in order to defeat our enemy and expel him from our land.

How does this subject relate to us? With regard to our parsha, Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Pshischa said that since today there is no longer the concept of a mitzvah to go out to war, the enemy of our parsha is none other than the evil inclination. Simply put, it is our enemy. This means that everyone finds himself, 24 hours a day, in a state of perpetual warfare against the evil inclination. It is constantly trying to defeat us and make us fall into its trap, and we are obligated to fight it and win.

This war is a stubborn battle. The evil inclination will not allow a person to overcome it, and it never stops trying. As the Sages have said, "Man's evil inclination gathers strength against him daily and seeks to slay him...and were the Holy One, blessed be He, not to help him, he would not be able to prevail against it" (Kiddushin 30b). Each day the evil inclination tries once again to subjugate a person, and each day there are victories as well as defeats. Yet what is the difference?

There is an enormous difference between a person going out to war against his evil inclination on its territory, and fighting it once it has already made its way onto his territory and is fighting him there.

If a person goes out to war against the evil inclination and fights it on its territory, managing to invade its domain, then it is obvious that it will be easier to defeat. Here the Torah promises us, "The L-RD your G-d will deliver him into your hand" (Deuteronomy 21:10). Furthermore, "You will capture its captivity" (ibid.), meaning that a person will be able to seize and retrieve from the evil inclination all the good things it has taken. However if the evil inclination has already managed to infiltrate itself among us, then the situation is far worse. We must work hard to repulse it, sounding trumpets, praying, and crying out to Hashem to save us from our great enemy.

This is why everyone who is Jew has the duty to do everything he can in order for this war to unfold exclusively on enemy territory. If we go out against the evil inclination and fight it within its

borders, we will be victorious. How can we do this? How can a person facing such massive struggles manage to wage this war on enemy territory, not his own? We are offered some good advice on how to achieve this in our parsha, sound counsel that has constantly been put to use by the great figures of Israel, from the era of the Tannaim and Amoraim right up to the time of the previous generation, advice that can serve as a way of life for everyone. The Torah states: "If you build a new house, you shall make a guardrail for your roof so that you will not place blood in your house if anyone falls from it" (Deuteronomy 22:8).

This tells us what a person needs to do when he wants to renew himself, when he wants to take upon himself the yoke of the kingdom of heaven, conquer his evil inclination, and cling solely to his good inclination. He must "make a guardrail for your roof." A guardrail pertains to barriers and fences that we impose on ourselves. We all know that there are things that are forbidden and things that are permitted. However a person must always be augmenting his holiness, meaning that he must add protective barriers and fences even to things that are permitted to him, things that he should consider forbidden. As the Sages have said, "Sanctify yourself by that which is permitted to you" (Yebamot 20a). As such we will increasingly sanctify ourselves in our deeds and way of life.

If a person conducts himself in this way, his home will be tightly sealed against the evil inclination, which will not be able to make its way inside. It will have to remain outside, and therefore the war against it will also be waged outside, on the evil inclination's territory. A person will therefore be assured of victory. This is also why the verse states, "You will not place blood in your house." That is, when you close your home to the evil inclination, a bloody war will not take place on your territory, but on that of the evil inclination. You will therefore defeat it once and for all. In fact we are promised victory over the evil inclination if we act in this way, and therefore we will make tremendous progress in our Torah study, fear of Heaven, and character traits.

MUSSAR FROM THE PARSHA

Until Your Soul Departs

“When you go out to war against your enemies...and you see among its captivity a woman who is beautiful of form” (Deuteronomy 21:10-11).

What kind of war is this? The Sifri states, “Scripture is speaking here of an optional war.” We must understand exactly who went to fight in an optional war. Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian said that it was only the completely faultless tzaddikim who went to fight. A Jew who had spoken in between putting on his head and arm tefillin was ordered to return home, for by doing so he recited a blessing in vain. From this we learn the great degree of holiness of those who fought.

It is with regards to such lofty individuals that Scripture states, “And you see among its captivity a woman who is beautiful of form, and you will desire her.” The Sages said, “The Torah only provided for human passions: It is better for Israel to eat flesh of [animals] about to die, yet [ritually] slaughtered, than flesh of dying animals that have perished” (Kiddushin 21b-22a). The Torah fully understands how people behave, knowing that if this captive woman was not allowed to be taken under certain conditions, she would be taken all the same, even if prohibited. This shows us the great extent of the Sages’ insight. The Sages also said, “Do not be sure of yourself until the day you die” (Perkei Avoth 2:4). Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian explains that we could apparently conclude from the words of this Mishnah that on the day of his death, a person could be sure of himself! However he rejects such a conclusion by explaining that even on his dying day, a person must not trust in himself. Rather, he should ask Hashem for mercy and help in order that he not sin. As Scripture states, “The wicked watches the righteous and seeks to slay him” (Psalms 37:32), the wicked being none other than the evil inclination. It never leaves anyone in peace, nor does it let go of a person, not even the most righteous. It is always laying traps for a person to make him sin. Nothing assures us of victory, for battling the evil inclination is very difficult and only Hashem “will not abandon him to his own hand” (v.33). Not only on the day of one’s death, but also when he is on his deathbed and realizes that in a few moments his soul will depart and leave everything behind to give an accounting before the King of kings, blessed be He. Even then a person needs great mercy from Heaven in order not to fall into the traps of the evil inclination. Rabbeinu Ovadia of Bartenura gives an example of this teaching from the Mishnah by citing the case of Yochanan the High Priest. Yochanan served as a High Priest for 80 years, yet in the end he became a Sadducee. This teaches us that nobody can be certain with respect to his Torah study and mitzvot observance. The story is told of two women, formerly good friends, who became embroiled in a conflict with one another and now despised each other. In fact they couldn’t even exchange a single kind word. The moment came when one of them had to leave this world, and therefore she began to make final arrangements for her death. Suddenly she realized that she still had something to deal with – the dispute with her former friend – and so she asked her to visit. Thinking that the sick woman wanted to make amends before passing away, she agreed to go. As the sick woman lay on her deathbed, she asked her former friend to come closer. The latter thought that she surely wanted to give her an embrace and make amends, when suddenly the woman gathered what little strength she had left and bit her former friend on the face! As blood poured from the wound, she said: “Now I can die in peace. I’ve finally had my revenge!” Pity the person who can’t control his passions, for they influence him until the very end, until his soul departs.

Hashem Does the Fighting

“When you go out to war against your enemies, and the L-RD your G-d will deliver him into your hand” (Deuteronomy 21:10).

The term “enemies” is written in the plural, whereas “deliver him” is in the singular. Why the change? The book Chiddushei Yedidiah Halevi states that

the expression, “When you go out to war against your enemies” refers to a war against the evil inclination. When we fight it, we see that it is not alone! It has many allies and supporters. Who are they? They are those whom the evil inclination has defeated in the past and are now its allies. A great Torah figure recounted that when he served as a Rav in a small European city, he once came across the evil inclination, which was in a vile mood. He asked it the reason for its foul demeanor, and it answered that there, in that town, it had no one to speak to: “No matter how much I work, I’m not making any progress here!” After a time this great Torah figure became the Rav of Berlin, and there he met the evil inclination once again. This time, however, it was sitting in a tavern and completely relaxed. The Rav asked it how things were, and it replied that in Berlin it didn’t need to exert itself at all, since it had a tremendous amount of support, namely the theaters, cinemas, newspapers, and so on. “When you go out to war against your enemies” is not only a reference to the evil inclination itself, but to all its allies. The Torah tells us, however, that if we just go out to war, Hashem will deliver the enemy into our hands, meaning that Hashem will help us in our fight. Not only that, but “you will capture its captivity” – we will succeed in retrieving its prisoners.

Why does Scripture say, “When you go out to war,” instead of “When you fight”? The Zichron Israel said that in the wars of the Jewish people, when Eretz Israel was conquered, its people did not fight! Their primary weapon was the shofar. When Jericho was surrounded, the shofar was sounded and the walls of the city collapsed. This means that all they actually did was to go out to war. Who actually did the fighting? It was Hashem! This is what David said to King Saul when he went out to confront Goliath the Philistine: “Your servant will go and fight with this Philistine” (I Samuel 17:32). He should have simply said, “Your servant will fight this Philistine.” By saying what he did, David meant that he would go, but Hashem would fight. According to this explanation, “When you go out to war against your enemies” means that all we have to do is nothing more than to go out, and Hashem will deliver our enemy into our hands. As the Torah says, “The L-RD is a warrior, the L-RD is his Name” (Exodus 15:3).

Afraid of Being Alone

“If a man will have a son who is sorer u’moreh [wayward and rebellious], who does not hearken to the voice of his father” (Deuteronomy 21:18).

Why is the rebellious son described as being sorer u’moreh? What is the meaning of the word moreh? The Yalkut HaGershoni states, “One who takes to an evil path generally does not want to remain in Gehinnom alone. He always wants more company, which is why he teaches (moreh) his ways to others.”

Fingers and Earlobes

“You shall have a shovel in addition to azenecha [your implements]” (Deuteronomy 23:14).

The Gemara teaches, “Do not read azenecha [your implements], but rather aznecha [your ear]. ...If a man hears something improper, he should plug his finger into his ear. This is the same as Rabbi Eleazar said: ‘Why do the fingers of man resemble pegs?’” (Ketubot 5a-b). The Chatam Sofer asks, “Is it not written, ‘You shall go back and cover your discharge’” (Deuteronomy 23:14)? He notes that the Gemara also states, “Why is the whole ear hard and the lobe soft? [So] that if a man hears something improper he shall bend the lobe into it” (Ketubot 5b). Why are these two things – fingers and earlobes – necessary to avoid listening to Lashon Harah? The answer is that when we are studying Torah and someone speaks Lashon Harah, we cannot place our fingers into our ears because it is forbidden to study Torah if the finger touches any discharge of the ear. What must we do in that case? If we bend the earlobe into the ear, it will immediately pop back out. Therefore we must use our fingers to hold the lobe in place within the ear. It is with respect to this

that it is written: “You shall have a shovel in addition to azenecha... and [you shall] cover your discharge,” meaning the discharge of the ear.

Breaking the Oath?

“That which has gone out of your lips, you shall observe and do according to what you vowed to the L-RD your G-d” (Deuteronomy 23:24).

The story is told of a man who came to spend Rosh Hashanah with the Rav of Viznitz, Rabbi Chaim Meir. After the prayer service ended, the guest realized that people were reciting some verses from LeDavid Mizmor (Psalm 24). The guest also saw that the Rav was weeping when he reached the passage, “Who has not sworn in vain by My soul, and has not sworn deceitfully” (v.4), but he couldn’t understand why. After people finished praying and wished the Rav Chag Samayach, he turned to his guest and explained: “The Gemara states that before a person comes into this world, he is made to take an oath that he will be a tzaddik, never a rasha [Niddah 30b]. That’s why I wept when I read, ‘Who has not sworn in vain by My soul, and has not sworn deceitfully.’”

Judging in Light of Present and Future Deeds

“If a man will have a son who is wayward and rebellious” (Deuteronomy 21:18).

Rashi cites the Sages in saying, “The wayward, rebellious son is executed in consideration of his ignoble end. The Torah penetrates to the logical conclusion of his thoughts: Ultimately, he will squander his father’s fortune, attempt to apply himself to his studies and fail, station himself near an intersection and plunder his fellow creatures. The Torah declares: Let him die in innocence rather than die laden with guilt.” The commentators, however, point out that the Sages have stated, “Man is judged only according to his actions up to the time of judgment, as it says: ‘G-d has heard the voice of the lad [Ishmael] there where he is’ [Genesis 21:17]” (Rosh Hashanah 16b). What’s more is that Rashi himself, in commenting on this verse in Genesis, cites the teaching of the Sages which stresses that a person is judged according to his present deeds, not what he will do in the future! To harmonize these views, we must say that a person is judged in light of his future deeds when he has already, beforehand, demonstrated a tendency to sin and transgress. Thus the rebellious son, who already eats and drinks more than he should, is judged in light of his future deeds. Ishmael, however, was not judged in that way – even though he would sin in the future – because as a lad he showed no indications that he would sin. This is why he was judged according to his actual state of innocence as a lad. That being the case, Heaven judged him according to his deeds at the time, not what he would do in the future.

Hidden Allusions

“A perfect and a just weight” (Deuteronomy 25:15).

The Vilna Gaon once told his students that every name carried by a Jew is alluded to in the Torah. One of his students arose and asked where the name of the Gaon himself appears in the Torah. The Gaon looked at him briefly and said, “My name and my father’s name are alluded to in the words of Parsha Ki Teitzei: ‘A perfect and a just weight.’ This alludes to my complete name, Eliyahu ben Shlomo.” His student continued to press him: “The name of our teacher’s father – is it not Zalman as well?” The Gaon immediately replied, “You will find this name in the remaining letters.” The dozens of individuals who were present to hear this did not understand what he meant. It was only afterwards that one of his students, Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, told them that the name of the Vilna Gaon’s father, Zalman, was alluded to in the words even sheleima (“a perfect weight”). That is, once the first letter of each word is removed, what remains is ben leima, which has exactly the same numerical value as Zalman, namely 127.

A MATTER OF EDUCATION

The Message in the Passage of the Rebellious Son

It is written, “If a man will have a son who is wayward and rebellious” (Deuteronomy 21:18).

The Sages cite a Beraita which states: “Rabbi Yossi the Galilean said: Did the Torah decree that the rebellious son shall be brought before the court and be stoned merely because he ate a tartemar of meat and drank a log of Italian wine? However the Torah foresaw his ultimate destiny, for after eventually dissipating his father’s wealth, he would seek to satisfy his accustomed desires. Yet being unable to do so, he would go forth at the crossroads and rob. Therefore the Torah said, ‘Let him die while yet innocent, and let him not die guilty’” (Sanhedrin 72a). Another Beraita is cited by the Sages: “Rabbi Shimon said: Because one eats a tartemar of meat and drinks half a log of Italian wine, should his father and mother have him stoned? Yet this never happened, and it never will happen. Why then was this law written? In order that you may study it and receive a reward” (Sanhedrin 71a).

We cannot say, “In order that you may study it and receive a reward” concerning a Torah parsha. Therefore at first sight Rabbi Shimon’s words seem ill-founded, for what is there to study here? Hence what Rabbi Shimon meant was that the law is, of course, that the rebellious son should be stoned due to his eventual fate, as Rabbi Yossi the Galilean said. However we cannot actually carry out this sentence because we do not punish people for an uncertain future eventuality, and at present the rebellious son’s only sin was to have eaten meat and consumed wine. The Gemara also tells us that when King Hezekiah wanted to avoid having children because he perceived that his offspring would not be virtuous, the prophet Isaiah told him, “What have you to do with the secrets of the All Merciful? You should have done what you were commanded, and let the Holy One, blessed be He, do that which pleases Him” (Berachot 10a). Be that as it may, from the fact that the law states that a rebellious son must be stoned, we learn that there are circumstances which, from an educational point of view, may seem hopeless. In other words, it may seem that nothing has a positive influence on a student; that he is mired in his destructive ways and no outside force can change him. The masters of Mussar compare this situation to a horse that is running down a hill with such speed that no one can stop it. We have to wait for the end of the descent before a person wakes up and (with or without punishment) changes course. Concerning Acher – who heard a proclamation from Heaven stating, “Repent you backsliding children, except Acher” (Chagigah 15b) – the commentators have said that even if a teacher loses all hope for a student, the latter can still wake up and repent. This can happen in any situation, as was the case with Rabbi Eliyahu ben Durdaya (Avodah Zarah 17a).

GUARD YOUR TONGUE

A Sure Way to Become Impoverished

When the Temple stood, a person who spoke Lashon Hara was struck with leprosy. This punishment served a great purpose, for the leper had to go see the priest in order to be examined, at which point the priest would whisper reprimands into his ear regarding his sin. Since today the Temple no longer exists and there are no priests to purify lepers, one who speaks Lashon Hara is punished with poverty, which is equivalent to leprosy. Poverty removes pride from a person, pride being the main cause of Lashon Hara.

REASONS FOR THE MITZVOT

The Mitzvah of the Ma'akeh

It is written, "If you build a new house, you shall make a ma'akeh [guardrail] for your roof" (Deuteronomy 22:8).

The Sefer HaChinuch states: "This mitzvah deals with ridding ourselves of obstacles and dangers in all our neighborhoods, and to that end it is written: 'You shall make a guardrail for your roof.' This means that we must build barriers around roofs, wells, pits, and similar hazards to ensure that nobody falls and gets injured. This mitzvah includes building or repairing every wall and barrier whose absence or state of disrepair constitutes a danger. The verse states, 'For your roof' because it deals with something that you own. The Holy One, blessed be He, surveys everything that happens to people and is fully aware of everything they do and all that happens to them, both for the good and the bad. Although everything that happens to them occurs by His decree and in function to their merit, people must still prevent accidents from happening, for they tend to frequently occur. Hence the reason for the mitzvah. In fact G-d created His world and established it upon the laws of nature. He decreed that fire burns and water extinguishes. So too does nature dictate that if a stone falls on someone's head, it will injure him, and if a person falls from a roof he will die. This is why the Holy One, blessed be He, commanded us to protect ourselves against accidents."

It follows from these statements of the Sefer HaChinuch that although Heaven decrees everything that happens to a person, the Torah still obligates us to do everything we can to protect ourselves from danger. Hence the reason for the mitzvah of the ma'akeh.

The regulations of the mitzvah are as follows:

1. A person who does not have a guardrail on his roof not only disregards a positive mitzvah, but also transgresses the mitzvah of "you will not place blood in your house."

2. The obligation of erecting a guardrail applies only to a roof over a private domicile, even if people live there sporadically. For a shed, a warehouse, and the like, which are not used on a constant basis, there is no need to have a guardrail on the roof, even if people can climb onto it. However the roof of a commercial building on which people sleep during the summer must have a guardrail.

3. The obligation to make a guardrail falls on the owner. If we are dealing with the roof of a rented domicile, the obligation falls on the tenant. If the tenant refuses to erect a guardrail, the obligation falls on the owner.

4. The obligation to make a guardrail concerns not only a roof, but every place that constitutes a danger to life and limb. Wells are also covered by this obligation, meaning that around a well we must erect a barrier that is at least ten tefachim (handbreadths) high.

5. If there are small children in the home, we must place a screen over windows and balconies (even if there is a barrier ten tefachim high) to protect them from danger.

6. Some people have the custom of reciting the following blessing upon erecting a ma'akeh: "...Who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to build a ma'akeh." If we are unaware of the custom where we live, we should recite the blessing without mentioning G-d's Name. In any case, we do not recite Shecheyanu over the erection of a ma'akeh.

A TRUE STORY

Returning Lost Items in Kelm

It is written, "You shall not see the ox of your brother or his sheep go astray and hide yourself from them. You shall surely return them to your brother" (Deuteronomy 22:1).

In the famous Beit HaTalmud of Kelm, great attention was paid to order. It is said that a visitor once came to the Beit HaTalmud and forgot his cane there. When he returned 13 years later, long after he had given up ever finding his cane, he found it in the exact same place! The story is also told of someone who had left a coin by the edge of a window in the Kelm Beit HaTalmud. That coin remained in the same spot for years, and nobody ever took it!

EISHET CHAYIL

Which Sin Seals the Decree?

The Sages say, "Although they transgressed all the commandments and denied the Holy One, blessed be He...He shows patience. For adultery, however, their doom was sealed.... The Holy One, blessed be He, says in effect: 'For everything I will control Myself, but for lewdness I shall display anger! Behold, I shall give them up to foreign governments'" (Bamidbar Rabba 9:7). In addition, "Wherever you find lust, an epidemic visits the world that slays both good and bad" (Bereshith Rabba 26:6). We also find that Moses said, "When you go out to war, take heed that there be not the iniquity of adultery among you, for if there be any iniquity of lewdness in your midst, the Holy One, blessed be He, Who fights for you, will turn back from you and you shall be delivered into the hand of your enemies" (Bamidbar Rabba 9:7). "The Holy One, blessed be He, said to them, in effect: "For other sins I showed you patience, but seeing that you have stretched forth your hand to commit adultery, 'Arise and leave [for exile]' " (ibid.).

We see this from the history of the ten tribes of Israel, whose decree was sealed on account of the sin of indecency. The prophet Isaiah rails against the sins of the daughters of Zion, for the Temple was destroyed on account of forbidden relations, as it is written: "The daughters of Zion are haughty, walking with outstretched necks and winking eyes" (Isaiah 3: 16). Rashi states that they used red makeup and filled their eyes with kohl, shocking all who saw them. The verse does not say that the daughters of Zion were uncovered, for in fact they were dressed. However they adorned themselves and wore tight-fitting clothes that drew people's attention and brought about the destruction of the Temple.

YOUR EYES SHALL BEHOLD YOUR TEACHER

Rabbi Yosef Haim of Baghdad – The Ben Ish Hai

Rabbi Yosef Haim was born in Baghdad on Av 23, 5593 (some say 5595). In his youth he was raised by his uncle Rabbi David Hai, and in 5608 he became the main student of the gaon Rabbi Abdallah Somech of the famous Beit Zilkha yeshiva. At first he was very discreet and concealed himself. However following legal decisions that he issued, his name began to be known throughout the country. He once sent a responsum to a letter that the Torah scholars of Jerusalem had sent his father, Rabbi Eliyahu, a responsum that stunned the scholars of Jerusalem. From then on they paid him great respect. After the passing of his father in 5619, Rabbi Yosef Haim took his place and began issuing important and practical decrees for the entire community. He traveled to Jerusalem in 5629, but did not remain there long. He returned to Baghdad and served as its Rav for many years. Despite his immense intelligence and knowledge that spanned every field of Torah, and in spite of his noble character, he conducted himself simply and received everyone warmly. He left us several books, the most important of which is Ben Ish Hai. It consists of his Torah interpretations along with Halachah and Aggadah, and it is widely read throughout the Jewish world. He also wrote Benayahu, Ben Yehoyada, and other books. On Elul 13, 5669, at the dawn of his seventy-seventh year, Rabbi Yosef Haim departed for the celestial academy. His soul ascended to Heaven from the city of Baghdad, where he is buried. May his merit protect us all.