

Parashat Ki Tetze 5777, 2017:

Elul, Shofar and the Yetzer Hara

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, Shayna Yehudit bat Avraham Manes and Rivka, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

One of the major shul-based practices of the month of Elul is listening to the clarion call of the shofar following the recitation of Psalm 27, “*L’David Hashem ori v’yeshi*” (“A psalm of David: the L-rd is my light and my salvation”). The Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) notes a number of actions that the sounding of the shofar should ideally engender:

Wake up you sleepy ones from your sleep and you who slumber, arise. Inspect your deeds, repent, remember your Creator. Those who forget the truth in the vanities of time and throughout the entire year, and devote their energies to vanity and emptiness which will not benefit or save: Look to your souls. Improve your ways and your deeds, and let every one of you abandon his evil path and thoughts. (*Mishneh Torah, Sefer Maada, Hilchot Teshuvah III:4*, translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger)

For the Rambam, the shofar’s blast is multidimensional in nature. Moreover, it existentially challenges us to remember the eternal truths of the Torah, in order that we may devote our energies to meaningful behaviors and eschew “vanity and emptiness which will neither benefit nor save.”

The Rambam wrote in the 12th century, and decried those “who forget the truth in the vanities of time and throughout the entire year...” If this was a common problem during his historical period, it is exponentially the case in our pleasure-seeking, digitally-focused culture that caters to a public with an unquenchable thirst for that which is scandalous

and demeaning. What accounts for this endless attraction to the forbidden? I believe the Torah provides us with a strong foundation for answering this question.

The first phrase in our Torah portion, “*Ki tetze l’milchamah al oivecha*” (“When you go to war against your enemy”), precedes the concluding words: “the L-rd, your G-d, will deliver him [your enemy] into your hands, and you [will] take his captives.” (Translation, with my emendations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach, Sefer Devarim 21:10*) The Chasidic Masters universally understand the expression, “your enemy,” as referring to the *yetzer hara* (the evil inclination). Not too surprisingly, the first rebbe to suggest this interpretation was none other than the founder of Chassidism, the holy Rabbi Yisrael ben Eliezer (1698-1760), known to the world as the Baal Shem Tov.

The Baal Shem Tov notes that even though the verse is speaking about going to war, which definitionally necessitates a massive public undertaking, it is nonetheless written in the singular construct (*lashon yachid*). He suggests that this is the case, since “every member of the Jewish people has no greater enemy than the evil inclination.” (This, and the following quotations, are found in Rabbi Aharon Yaakov Greenberg’s *Itturei Torah*, volume VI, page 129; translations my own). The Baal Shem Tov continues his analysis and states, “If you go to war against him (i.e. the *yetzer hara*),” then the Torah promises, and well nigh guarantees, that “the L-rd, your G-d, will deliver him into your hands.” Perhaps most powerfully, he interprets the expression, “and you take his captives,” as a further assurance that “even the powers of the evil inclination will be able to be harnessed in the service of Hashem.”

Without a doubt, the *yetzer hara* is the most cunning and corrupting influence in our lives. It intuitively knows “what buttons to push” to lead us away from the Torah and Hashem, and coerce us into doing its bidding. Clearly, we must wage an unceasing war against it, for as the Baal Shem Tov said, we have “no greater enemy...”

The Mishnaic sage Ben Zoma taught us that it is possible to be a spiritual hero and overcome even our strongest *yetzer hara*-infused desires, as is cited in *Pirkei Avot* IV:1:

Who is strong? One who overpowers his [evil] inclination. As is it is stated: “One who is slow to anger is better than a mighty man, and one who rules over his spirit [is better] than one who conquers a city.” (*Sefer Mishle* 16:32, translation, Chabad.org)

With the Almighty’s help, and our most fervent desires, may we hearken to the shofar’s call and soundly reject the negative influences of our time. In this way, may we harness “even the powers of the evil inclination...in the service of Hashem.” *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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They may also be found on YUTorah.org using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha’s name.

The email list, *b’chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Megillat Esther* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik’s](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.