

Parashat Ki Tetze, 5778, 2018:

Elul: Finding Our Path

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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 Yechiel, 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, and Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, the *refuah shlaimah* of Yakir Ephraim ben Rachel Devorah, Eliezer ben Sarah, Anshul Pinchas ben Chaya and Tzvi Yoel ben Yocheved and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parasha* begins with the following *pasuk* (verse): “If you go out to war against your enemies, and the L-rd, your G-d, will deliver him into your hands, and you take his captives. (*Sefer Devarim* 21:10, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) Basing himself upon the *Midrash Sifrei* on our *pasuk*, Rashi (1040-1105) notes that our verse refers to the common practice of taking captives during the course of a standard war scenario.

Most of the classic *meforshim* (commentators) follow Rashi’s lead and employ it as the basis of their analyses. A very different approach, however, is offered by the kabbalistic work, *Zohar Chadash*, in its commentary on our verse which emphasizes our ability to conquer the *yetzer harah* (the evil inclination) in spiritual battle:

And regarding the matter, “if you go forth against your enemies,” – this refers to none other than the *yetzer harah* [whose power] we are obligated to remove [from ruling over us]. [The most efficacious manner of so doing] is through acceptance of the Torah’s words, in order to fight against it. [If we are successful in this endeavor, then] he [i.e. the *yetzer harah*] will [finally be] under the hegemony of mankind. As the text states: “...and the L-rd, your G-d, will deliver him into your hands, and you take his captives.” (*Parashat Ki Tetze*, 96a, translation and brackets my own)

In many ways, the *Zohar Chadash*'s ethically-infused explication of our *pasuk* is precisely what we need during this period of the year. After all, we are in the middle of *Chodesh Elul*, the Hebrew month that preeminently represents our desire to draw closer to Hashem and reinvigorate our relationship with Him. Once again, we are preparing ourselves for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur when we will stand before the Master of the Universe and beg Him for long and healthy lives, successful and honest livelihoods, and the overall happiness of our families, friends, and entire nation. As our passage notes, laser-sharp focus upon the Torah and its *mitzvot* will enable us to overcome the *yetzer harah* and its beguiling temptations, and bring us closer to achieving the physical and spiritual outcomes that are first and foremost on our minds during this time of *teshuvah* (repentance).

In a complementary presentation, the *Talmud Bavli, Berachot* presents the practical steps that an individual must undertake in order to win the spiritual and ethical war against the *yetzer harah*:

Rabbi Levi bar Chama said in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish (Reish Lakish): At all times an individual must rouse the *yetzer tov* (positive inclination) [to do battle against] the *yetzer harah*. As the text states: "Bestir yourselves and do not sin..." (This and the following Bible quotations, *Sefer Tehillim* 4:5) If one is successful [by following this approach], then all is good. If not, one must occupy oneself with Torah study. As the text states: "say in your hearts [i.e. your minds]." If one is successful [by following this approach,] then all is good. If not, one must occupy oneself with the recitation of *Kriat Sh'ma* (*Sh'ma Yisrael*). As the text states: "upon your beds" [– similar to the wording of *Kriat Sh'ma*]. If one is successful [by following this approach,] then all is good. If not, one must remember that someday in the future one will ultimately encounter one's day of death. As the text states: "and be silent forever." (5a, translation and brackets my own)

In Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish's estimation, the steps for achieving complete victory over the *yetzer harah* are quite clear:

- Rousing the *yetzer tov* over the *yetzer harah*
- Torah study (re-establish correct priorities)
- *Kriat Sh'ma* (refocus upon Hashem's presence and existence)

- Reflecting upon the notion that one day we will pass from this world to the next (and stand in judgment before the Almighty)

Fascinatingly, Reish Lakish provides us with four different modalities for going to war against the *yetzer harah*. With deep psychological and spiritual insight, he recognizes that *teshuvah* is not a “one size fits all experience.” Instead, each step and its successor is designed to reach the heart, mind and soul of a particular group of people and encourage them to re-examine and re-fortify their relationship with the Almighty. Perhaps, this is the underlying rationale as to why the celebrated *pasuk*, “Restore us to You, O L-rd, that we may be restored! Renew our days as of old,” (*Megillat Eichah* 5:21) is stated in the plural – to teach us that there are many different paths to bring us closer to our Creator. With Hashem’s help and our fervent desire, may we each find our own. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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They may also be found on <http://www.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 *Tanach* 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.