

Parashat Ki Tetze 5782, 2022:

Ki Tetze l'Milchamah

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, Shayndel bat Mordechai Yehudah, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parasha* begins with the well-known verse: “When you go out to war against your enemies (*oivecha*), and Hashem, your G-d, delivers him into your hands, and you take his captives.” (*Sefer Devarim* 21:10, this and all Tanach translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, with my emendations) In his *Commentary on the Torah* on our *pasuk*, Rashi *zatzal* (1040-1105) presents the position of the *Midrash Sifrei* (*Sefer Devarim* 21:1) noting that it is referring to a volitional war (*milchemet reshut*), rather than an obligatory war (*milchemet mitzvah*), in which one is proscribed from taking captives. As is often the case, Rashi’s gloss sets the stage for our verse’s interpretation by many other exegetes.

An alternate mode of analysis focuses on the spiritual ramifications of our *pasuk* that are particularly apropos during Chodesh Elul, the month dedicated to *teshuvah* (returning to Hashem). One of the champions of this approach is the Katav Sofer *zatzal* (Rabbi Avraham Shmuel Binyamin Sofer, 1815-1871), who, like others in this school of thought, identifies the term “*oivecha*” in our verse with the *yetzer harah* (evil inclination). He cites a statement from *Talmud Bavli*, *Kiddushin* 30b that depicts the power of the *yetzer harah*: “Rabbi Shimon ben Levi says: ‘... And if not for the fact that the Holy One, Blessed be He, assists each person in battling his evil inclination, he could not overcome it.’” (Translation, *The William Davidson Talmud*, Rabbi Adin

Steinsaltz *zatzal*, editor) The Katav Sofer suggests that a person might easily misconstrue the intent of this epigrammatic phrase and think: “He should not go out to war against the *yetzer harah*. Moreover, he should not undertake any actions to conquer him; instead, he should trust in Hashem, Who will help him by waging His great war [against the evil inclination] on his behalf.” (*Sefer Katav Sofer*, Parashat Ki Tetze, this and the following translations and brackets my own) The Katav Sofer immediately dismisses such a passive strategy to conquering the *yetzer harah*:

Aval haemet lo kane hu—But the truth is not like this at all, for one who thinks like this will never conquer the *yetzer harah* from controlling him. Rather, a person must ever be at war with his evil inclination according to the limits of his power, and engage in every possible tactic, for then, he will be helped *min hashamayim* (from Heaven). As our Sages state (*Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 104a*): “One who comes to purify himself [from their sins] will be helped [from Heaven in so doing].”

In sum, according to the Katav Sofer, a person must begin the process to purify himself from sin and then and, only then, Heaven will help him. In his estimation, there are two partners in the war against the *yetzer harah*, and by extension, the *teshuvah* process, namely, Hashem and the Jewish people. Crucially, however, while we are confident that Hashem will come to our aid, we must be the ones to initiate this spiritual transformation.

I believe we can apply the Katav Sofer’s mode of thought to the concluding *mishnah* of *Masechet Yoma*:

Rabbi Akiva said: “How fortunate are you, Israel; before Whom are you purified, and Who purifies you? It is your Father in Heaven,” as it is stated: ‘And I will sprinkle purifying water upon you, and you shall be purified.’ (*Sefer Yechezkel 36:25*). And it says: ‘The hope (*mikvei*) of Israel is Hashem.’ (*Sefer Yirmiyahu 17:13*). Just as a *mikvah* purifies the impure, so too, the Holy One, Blessed be He, purifies Israel. (Translation, *The William Davidson Talmud*, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz *zatzal*, editor, with my emendations)

Rabbi Akiva teaching that, “just as a *mikvah* purifies the impure, so too, the Holy One, Blessed be He, purifies Israel,” is parallel to our earlier citation from *Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 104a*: “One who comes to purify himself [from their sins] will be helped [from Heaven in so doing].” Just as we

must first immerse ourselves in the *mikvah* so that Hashem will remove our spiritual impurity, so, too, must we begin the *teshuvah* process so that Hashem will join and aid us in returning unto Him. This idea is reminiscent of two *pasukim* in *parashat teshuvah*: “And from there you will seek Hashem your G-d, and you will find Him, if you seek Him with all your heart and with all your soul... For Hashem your G-d is a merciful G-d; He will not shun you or destroy you; neither will He forget the covenant of your fathers (*brit avotecha*), which He swore to them.” (*Sefer Devarim* 4:29 and 31)

May the time come soon and, in our days, when the entire Jewish people will return to Hashem, so that we may witness the complete fulfillment of *brit avotecha*. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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