

Parashat Shoftim 5783, 2023:

Of War and Peace

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon HaKohane, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechezkel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Gittel Malka bat Moshe, Alexander Leib ben Benyamin Yosef, 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.

The Torah employs the phrase, “*Ki tetze l’milchamah al oivecha*—When you go forth to war against your enemy,” twice in *Sefer Devarim*. The first instance appears in our *parasha* (20:1), and the second in Parashat Ki Tetze (21:10). In his *Commentary on the Torah*, Rashi (1040-1105) presents a thought-provoking comment on the phrase, “*al oivecha*:” “Let them be in your eyes as enemies; have no pity on them, for they will have no pity upon you.” This gloss is midrashically-suffused, and is based upon *Midrash Tanchuma, Sefer Devarim* 15. Yet, the original language of this passage does not contain Rashi’s formulation, “Let them be in your eyes as enemies,” and states, instead: “Go forth against them as if they are your enemies—*tz’u aleihem k’oiveim*.” Why does Rashi change the midrash’s language with the additional words, “in your eyes?” After all, it seems that whenever soldiers go to war, they view the opposing army as their mortal adversaries. What, then, is Rashi teaching us?

I believe we can answer this question by focusing on another of Rashi’s comments. In the course of his analysis of the *pasuk* in the *Shirah* “Hashem is a Master of war; Hashem is His Name,” (15:3) Rashi suggests this explanation of the latter half of the *pasuk*:

Hashem, [denoting the Divine Standard of Mercy,] is His Name - Even when He wages war and takes vengeance upon His enemies, He maintains His behavior of having mercy on His creatures and nourishing all those who enter the world... (This and all Tanach translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach* with my emendations).

This means that Hashem is ever merciful, even when He wages war against His enemies. As His uniquely chosen people, we in turn, through the *mitzvah* of *imitatio Dei*, have the obligation to model ourselves, both in our being and actions, after Hashem's ways. This principle is powerfully presented in a celebrated passage in *Talmud Bavli* that highlights the Almighty's acts of *rachmanut* (mercy) that we are obligated to make our own:

Just as Hashem clothed the naked [in the case of Adam and Chava] ... so, too, should you clothe the naked. Just as Hashem visited the sick [in the case of Avraham after his *brit milah*] ... so, too, should you visit the sick. Just as the Holy One Blessed be He comforted the mourners [in the case of Yitzhak after Avraham's passing] ... so, too, should you comfort the mourners. Just as the Holy One Blessed be He buried the dead [in the case of Moshe] ... so, too, should you bury the dead. (*Sotah* 14a, translation and brackets my own)

This passage is the basis for one of the Rambam's (Maimonides, 1135-1204) famous halachic rulings that helps establish the fundamental parameters of Jewish communal living:

It is a positive commandment of Rabbinic origin to visit the sick, comfort mourners, to prepare for a funeral, prepare a bride, accompany guests, attend to all the needs of a burial, carry a corpse on one's shoulders, walk before the bier, mourn, dig a grave, and bury the dead, and also to bring joy to a bride and groom and help them in all their needs. These are deeds of kindness that one carries out with his person that have no limit. (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Avel* 14:1, translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger)

Rachmanut emerges as a quintessential aspect of the Jewish persona, since in acting mercifully, we emulate our Creator's actions. This idea is so pronounced that the *Talmud Bavli* in *Yevamot* 79a states that there are three markers for someone who claims to be a member of our people, namely, "*harachamim, v'habyeshanin, v'gomlai chasadim*—they are the merciful, modest ones

and practitioners of loving-kindness.” As such, it is literally Jewish nature to act in a merciful manner toward all whom we encounter.

I believe we can now understand Rashi’s earlier addition, “in your eyes.” He is teaching us that those with whom we go to war must be viewed as absolute enemies, even though this very notion is antithetical to who we really are, and our humanitarian approach to the nations of the world. Closer to our own time, Prime Minister Golda Meir (1898-1978) gave voice to this idea in her oral autobiography: “When peace comes, we will perhaps, in time, be able to forgive the Arabs for killing our sons, but it will be harder for us to forgive them for having forced us to kill their sons.” (*A Land of Our Own: An Oral Autobiography*, 1973, edited by Marie Syrkin, p. 242)

May we be *zocheh* to witness the coming of the *Mashiach* and the fulfillment of Yeshayahu’s vision: “And He shall judge between the nations and reprove many peoples, and they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift the sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.” (2:4) *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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