

WAR AND LEADERSHIP

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Today's Learning:
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Zevachim 4:1-2
Daf Yomi (Bavli): Bava Batra 143
Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Shabbat 18

This parashah deals with the appointment of judges, kings, and prophets, all of whom are charged with enforcing the mitzvot and rebuking Bnei Yisrael for their failings. Additionally, the parashah discusses many of the laws that come into play when the nation goes out to war. All of these may be interpreted not only on a straightforward halachic level, but also on the level of "drush" / allegory. Specifically, they relate to the month of Elul, in which this parashah is always read. This is because, given the fact that the Torah is eternal, the Torah's laws of war must be interpreted primarily in

regard to spiritual battles in generations in which there is no Jewish state governed by the Torah's laws. (Ohr Gedalyahu: Elul 4)

Besides the many physical wars which the Jewish people have been forced to wage, every Jew wages a constant spiritual war against the yetzer hara / evil inclination. Never is this war more heated than during Elul, when, in preparation for the Day of Judgement on Rosh Hashanah, each person takes stock of his actions and looks for ways in which to improve himself. These spiritual wars share strategy with our physical battles. For example, just as the Torah commands that in time of war we should blow the shofar to awaken us to pray for G-d's mercy (see Bemidbar 10:9 and Ibn Ezra there), so, too, during Elul we blow the shofar to awaken ourselves from our spiritual slumber.

R' Yechezkel Levenstein z"l (Mashgiach in the Mir and Ponovezh Yeshivot; died 1974) states (based on a Midrash) that just as a person can sleep so deeply that he would not feel a surgeon's blade, so the soul's sleep can be so complete that one does not notice that the yetzer hara is destroying it. How can such a person be awakened? For precisely this purpose Hashem gave us prophets and spiritual leaders, whose rebuke can direct us on the correct path. (Ohr Yechezkel)

"Judges and officers you shall appoint in all your cities." (16:18)

The Midrash Yalkut Shimoni comments: "'You' and not the nations of the world." What is this teaching?

R' Yehuda Modern z"l (see page 4) explains that this Midrash alludes to the decree that would be enacted by the sages of 12th century Europe (in the generation of Rashi's grandsons Rabbenu Tam and Rashbam). Specifically, those sages decreed that no Jew may lord over his brethren in any capacity, even if appointed by a king, without the consent of those brethren. "Judges and officers you shall appoint in all your cities." Rabbenu Tam and his colleagues went so far as to decree excommunication and even death on anyone who violated this ban. Why?

The answer, writes R' Modern, is that a leader capable of winning the consensus of his Jewish brethren would presumably be steeped in Torah learning and fear of Heaven and would lead with the best interests of his brethren at heart. Not so a self-appointed leader or one appointed by a gentile king. [Even if such a leader did mean well, without Torah learning and fear of Heaven, he would not know what the Jews' best interests are.]

We read later in the parashah (17:15), "You (singular) shall surely set a king over yourself." Why is the singular form used here? R' Modern explains that when people get together to choose a leader, each has his own interests in mind. What should be on a person's mind, however, is the Torah. Chazal teach that when the Jews camped at Sinai, they were united "as one man with one heart." So, too, "You - singular, as one man with one heart, united for the sake of the Torah - shall surely set a king over yourself."

In Eichah (2:9) we read, "Her king and officers are among the nations, there is no Torah." Rashi comments: "There are no teachers of Torah." Writes R' Modern: The verse, as understood by Rashi, is complaining about the very problem noted above - the prophet is mourning the fact that the Jewish people's king and officers are chosen by the nations, and not through a process that places emphasis on the Torah's teachings. (Pri Ha'etz)

"They shall judge the people with righteous judgment." (16:18)

Who will they judge if not "the people"? Those two words appear to be superfluous.

R' Yehuda Gruenwald z"l (rabbi of Satu Mare, Romania; died 1921) explains: The Hebrew article before the word "people" - "ett" - can also mean "with." The judges must judge "with" the people, i.e., they must have people behind them who will enforce their judgments. Similarly, regarding any community matter, the leader must be able to count on members of the community to support him, or he will accomplish nothing.

(She'eirit Yehuda)

"Tzeddek, tzeddek / Righteousness, righteousness shall you pursue, so that you will live." (16:20)

R' Chaim Yosef David Azulai z"l ("Chida"; 1724-1806) quotes R' S. Primo z"l as follows: The Gemara teaches that a person who gives charity with ulterior motives, for example, in order that his sick child will be cured, is nevertheless considered to be a perfect tzaddik. How, ask the commentaries, can this be reconciled with our Sages statement that one should not perform mitzvot in the hope of being rewarded (although he, of course, will be)? Says R' Primo: The Gemara is referring to a case where one has already fulfilled his obligation to give charity and now he gives additional charity with an ulterior motive. Such a person is not considered to be violating the Sages' teaching about performing mitzvot with pure intentions.

This is alluded to in our verse: "Tzeddek, tzeddek / Righteousness, righteousness shall you pursue, so that you will live." If you give tzedakah twice, then you may do it with the intention that you (or someone else) will live.

(Nachal Kedumin)

Toward the end of this parashah we find some of the laws of war, one of which is the prohibition against needlessly destroying the environment. Beyond the plain meaning of those verses (20:19-20), R' Eliyahu z"l (1720-1797; the "Vilna Gaon") finds the following allegorical interpretation:

"When you will besiege a city for many days in order to fight it" -- these are G-d's words to the yetzer

hara (in its role as Heavenly prosecutor). "[M]any days" refers to the days of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. Although they are only three days, they seem like many because they are so difficult. On these days, the prosecutor's attack on Bnei Yisrael is the strongest.

"Do not destroy its trees by raising an ax against them" -- the trees, i.e. those who support Torah scholars (see Mishlei 3:18) are to be protected from the attribute of strict justice.

"For you will eat from it" -- the entire world including you, the Heavenly prosecutor, exists only through the merit of the Torah scholar, and in turn--

"Man is but a tree of the field" -- "Man", i.e. the Torah scholar, is able to exist only because of the trees, i.e. those who support Torah.

"Only that which you are certain is not a fruit tree" -- i.e. one who does not support Torah study,

"That one you may destroy and cut off" -- "destroy" in This World, and "cut off" from the Next World (G-d forbid).

The sacrifice, and consequently, the reward, of one who supports Torah is so great that the Talmudic sage, Rav Pappa, could not believe it possible, says the Gemara (Baba Batra 73b, as explained by the Vilna Gaon). For this reason, we find that when the tribes of Yissachar and Zevulun are mentioned in the Torah, Zevulun usually comes first. While Yissachar produced many Torah scholars, Zevulun was completely devoted to supporting those sages. For that support, he is entitled to much of the credit for the scholars' accomplishments. About people like Zevulun the Mishnah says, "Who is brave? One who reins in his desires." The people of Zevulun could have pursued many luxuries, but they chose instead to support Torah.

(Be'ur Al Kamah Aggadot)

R' Yehuda Modern z"l

R' Yehuda Modern was among the most distinguished and respected Hungarian rabbis of the nineteenth century, despite the fact that he never held any rabbinic position. He was born in Pressburg (today Bratislava, Slovakia) on 8 Tevet 5580 / 1819, and was circumcised by that city's rabbi, the famed Chatam Sofer. Young Yehuda was a child prodigy, and by the age of eight was attending the Chatam Sofer's lectures - sitting on the great master's lap, so beloved he was. As a teenager, his knowledge of the Gemara was so thorough that he could state how many times the name of the sage Rava appeared on each page of Tractate Bava Batra (the longest Talmudic tractate).

At the age of 18, R' Modern decided to travel to a yeshiva where he was not known, and he set out for Ungvar (today Uzhgorod, Ukraine) to study in the yeshiva of R' Meir Asch. Arriving there, and finding that R' Asch was not at home, R' Modern decided to visit the great chassidic rebbe, R' Moshe

Teitelbaum (the "Yismach Moshe") in nearby Uhel (Satoraljaughely, Hungary). The Yismach Moshe was very impressed with the young scholar and proposed him as a match for Chaya Rachel, the daughter of R' Shmuel Kahana, one of the leading citizens of the town of Sighet. R' Yehuda and Chaya Rachel were married that year (1837), and R' Yehuda lived the rest of his life in Sighet devoted entirely to Torah study and the performance of chessed. In particular, he excelled in the mitzvah of visiting the sick, often spending entire nights by their bedsides. At the same time, he declined all offers of rabbinic positions and all other honors, even the task of calling out the shofar sounds for the person blowing the shofar on Rosh Hashanah.

R' Modern published several works, including a Torah commentary, Pri Ha'etz, and a commentary on Tractate Gittin entitled Zichron Shmuel in memory of his father-in-law. These works were well received and revealed their author's greatness in both the revealed and esoteric branches of the Torah, but R' Modern later said that he regretted publishing them in his lifetime. He believed that all of the suffering that he experienced in his later life (whose nature is not recorded) was as a punishment for publicizing his knowledge.

R' Modern passed away on Friday night, 4 Marcheshvan 5654 / 1893, and was buried in the Kahana family ohel in Sighet. (This structure still exists. It is built into the cemetery wall and has a window to the outside so that kohanim can pray at the graves of those buried inside.) (Intro. to Pri Ha'eitz)

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