

EVERY SOLDIER HAS HIS OWN JOB

by Rabbi Pinchas Avruch

Anyone who has suffered the loss of a dear friend or relative understands the need to cry, to have an avenue of expressing the anguish of that tragic moment. This reality is addressed by the Jewish rites of mourning, which start with the most intense expressions of sorrow during seven day period of "shiva" and are followed by a graduated system which relax the observances over the course of the first year. Nevertheless, just as we are mandated to observe particular rites of mourning, the Torah forbids others. This week's Torah portion dictates (Devarim/Deuteronomy 14:1) "You are children to Hashem your G-d, you shall not cut yourself...for a dead person," prohibiting certain forms of grief induced self-mutilation, a practice common amongst the Amorites. Nachmanides (R' Moshe ben Nachman, 1194-1270, of Gerona, Spain, one of the leading Torah scholars of the Middle Ages; successfully defended Judaism at the dramatic debate in Barcelona in 1263) explains that nature compels us to cry at these times, but the Torah enjoins us to remember that all that our Father in heaven does is for the greater good, and just as a young child does not understand the deeds of his father, so, too, we do not understand the rationale of all of G-d's decisions, but in our appreciation of His great love for us and our understanding of our holy status as His children, we do not allow ourselves such drastic expressions of our pain.

But the word for self inflicted mutilation, "sisgodedu", is written in a way that allows for two interpretations, a sign that it is one of the keys to the Oral Torah which was concurrently presented to Moshe at Sinai 3313 years ago. The Talmud in Yevamos (14a) explains the second understanding of the word "sisgodedu" is factions; the Torah is warning us not to allow the Jewish nation to develop numerous factions within a community in its understanding of Torah law, lest it appear that there are two versions of the Torah. This concept is carefully balanced with the Talmudic principle of "ailu v'ailu divrei Elokim chayim", this (Torah opinion) and this (Torah opinion) are both the sentiment of the living G-d. The Torah understands that different Rabbinical courts may offer different rulings on the same issue; as long as both are well legally grounded in Torah law, then this result is acceptable (not uncommon to what frequently happens in our own secular system of jurisprudence). But to have contradictory practices within one community, as legitimate as the two rulings may be, diminishes the glory of the Torah, and that is unacceptable.

The Chofetz Chaim (Rabbi Yisrael Mayer Kagan; 1838-1933; author of basic works in Jewish law, philosophy and ethics, and acknowledged as the foremost leader of Torah Jewry at the turn of the last century) was asked, "Why is the Jewish community of Europe divided into so many different factions, some are misnagdim (followers of the Lithuanian Yeshiva movement) while others are

chassidim (followers of the Ba'al Shem Tov's movement of the late 18th century to reinvigorate the spirituality of Judaism to counter the assimilation brought on by the "Age of Enlightenment"), and even amongst the chassidim there are those who give priority to Torah study over prayer, there are others who are more dedicated to prayer than Torah study, there are yet others who toil in music and song while still others are involved in festive dance. Would the world be lacking if there were only one Torah lifestyle, a people who all share the same liturgy and the same traditions down to the smallest detail, all "carrying one banner"? The saintly Chofetz Chaim elucidated, "Before you ask me about the Jewish people, please approach the Czar and ask him why he has so many different forces within the army: infantry, cavalry, artillery, air force and navy. Would the world really be lacking if there were only one fighting force with only one weapons system with one general leading them all? Rather, the purpose of an army is to defeat the enemy; therefore, numerous tactics and resources must be available, since each one has strengths the other does not. Infantry excels at hand to hand combat while the cavalry has speed and induces fear and the artillery can accomplish its goals from a distance. Even the military musicians inspire the troops and lift morale so they can fight on. Similarly in our fight against the yetzer hara, our evil inclination, every group of misnagdim and chassidim are soldiers in G-d's corps, each group using it's own "weapon system" to fight the enemy, this one with Torah study and this one with prayer, this one with song and this with the blast of the shofar, as long as they are focused on fortifying the system of Torah."

With next week's start of the Jewish month of Elul, we start the countdown toward Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. We start the process of introspection, taking personal inventory of which "weapon systems" are operational and which need repair or replacement. Let us be inspired and invigorated to appreciate our wealth of assets, including our own personal strengths, the inspiration we can draw from our peers with different but complimentary strengths, and the leadership of our mentors who guide us in our growth in Torah.

Have a Good Shabbos!

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