

CHALLENGED IN THE HEAT OF BATTLE

by Rabbi Pinchas Avruch

The profundity of the Torah is articulated in its addressing the minutiae of everyday life in all the different potential paths of the human experience. This week's Torah portion deals with a plethora of diverse topics: establishing a just court system, blemished sacrifices, the monarchy, priestly gifts, cities of refuge for the unintentional murderer, the axed heifer for an unsolved murder, and war. Within the focus on war (Devarim/Deuteronomy 20), the Torah deals with all the relevant details: anointing of leadership, choosing appropriate warriors, offering peace before attacking a city, and being nice to the trees. Being nice to the trees? The Torah is giving the guidelines to a successful military campaign and it discusses being nice to trees!?!

Actually, the Torah is addressing the unnecessary destruction of fruit bearing trees. "When you besiege a city for many days to wage war against it to seize it, do not destroy its trees by swinging an ax against them, for from it you will eat and you shall not cut it down, for is a tree of the field a man that it should enter the siege before you? Only a tree you know is not food bearing, it you may cut down and destroy and build a bulwark against the city with which you battle..." (20:19-20).

Sforno (classic commentary on the Pentateuch by Rabbi Ovadiah Sforno of Rome and Bologna, Italy, 1470-1550) explains the sequence in a vein similar to many of the other commentaries of his era: When you besiege a city, do not demolish the trees for the purpose of senseless destruction, with no strategic objective other than harming the local population, because this type of wanton devastation is representative of an army that is not sure of victory and eventual population of the captured territory, but you, who are sure of success in your mission, will inhabit the land. Therefore, do not obliterate the fruit bearing trees from which you will need to eat. As long as there are non-fruit bearing trees that will facilitate your military objectives, it is improper to destroy the fruit bearing trees, unless they are old and damaged and are no longer useful for that purpose. Sforno is teaching that G-d has promised success in these military efforts, so the Jewish armies must not employ a "scorched earth" policy in lands it will eventually occupy. A very practical approach.

Sefer HaChinuch (the classic work on the 613 Torah commandments, their rationale and their regulations, assumed to be authored by Rabbi Aharon HeLevi of thirteenth century Spain) finds in this chapter a much deeper meaning. The greater purpose of this commandment is to instill in the human heart an endearment to all that is good and helpful; the outgrowth will be that good will cling to us while we distance ourselves from all that is bad and destructive. This is the way of the pious ones, those of great deeds who love peace, rejoice in the good of mankind and bring them close to

Torah; those who will not ruin the smallest seed, are pained by any needless devastation and will exert all their strength to save anything from useless ruin.

Who are we discussing and in what venue? These are soldiers waging war! Yes, they are engaged in the divine charge of capturing the Land of Israel, but they are engaged in mortal combat! How can this experience possibly lead to "endearment to all that is good and helpful"? Is this really the opportunity to follow the "way of the pious ones...who love peace, rejoice in the good of the creations...who will not destroy the smallest seed"?

Sefer HaChinuch is giving us an acute insight into the incredible self mastery and control with which we are all divinely endowed. Despite all the legitimate, practical, and purposeful acts of destruction a warrior must execute, he is able, in the heat of battle, to pause and focus, "That tree does not need to be felled: it would be detrimental to our society, it would be detrimental to my sensitivities." This absolute self-regulation is the breeding ground for the appreciation of those countless kernels of good that surround him in those nightmarish conditions.

Our day-in, day-out routine is filled with challenges to our character. Trying to finish a report that was due an hour ago, juggling two phone calls that got past the secretary who was supposed to hold all calls, and someone walks into your office with a new crisis...How do you react? Do we "cling to the good", appreciating our station in life and the successes G-d has given us, loving peace and rejoicing in the good of the creations OR do we turn that poor innocent messenger into the latest specimen of "wanton devastation"? We have that self mastery...let us pause and contemplate our reaction: Will it be detrimental to our relationship? Will it be detrimental to my sensitivities?

Have a Good Shabbos!

Copyright © 2001 by [Rabbi Pinchas Avruch](#) and Project Genesis, Inc.

Kol HaKollel is a publication of the Milwaukee Kollel Center for Jewish Studies 5007 West Keefe Avenue; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; 414-447-7999