

ALL FOR THE ONE

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

All For the One ¹

In just one place, the Torah breaks the mold. In the other sections dealing with the rules of combat, the Torah begins with the same phrase: "When you go out to war...." In the middle of our parshah, however, the Torah tweaks the wording ever so slightly. It becomes "When a camp goes out...." ² One anomaly seems to deserve another. The pasuk in questions ends with an element unique to this pasuk: "You shall guard against anything evil." Are the two anomalies linked?

It would also be good to know what the Torah is telling us by introducing the idea of the "camp." Chazal clearly are sensitive to the problem. They comment, "All your goings out should be with a camp."³ This hardly slakes our thirst for enlightenment, however. What did they mean by this?

We have explained elsewhere that all of the sections about warfare in Devarim are presented on two levels. They deal with the conduct of a Jewish army; they describe as well the mortal combat in which all of us are locked as individuals - with our greatest enemy, the yetzer hora.

The Torah introduced us to the protocols of war in parshas Shoftim. The opening stages of our internal battles with the yetzer hora concern a host of items and issues, including the overtly impermissible. The formula is simple. The yetzer hora encourages transgression; we fight back by resisting.

Parshas Ki-Seitzei begins with a similarly phrased reference to going out to war. This time, Rashi is careful to add that the sub-section, that of the yefas to'ar, only applies to a discretionary war, not to an obligatory war, or mitzvah war. The allusion is unmistakable. The next logical stage concerns a completely different theater of war. It involves reshut, matters that are neither commanded nor proscribed, that are neither mitzvah nor aveirah. In other words, they concern matters and activities that are discretionary. Here we learn the all-important approach of sanctifying ourselves regarding what is permissible to us.

Arriving at our pasuk, we realize that we are looking at yet another, more sophisticated arena of combat. In it we contend with the yetzer hora not over prohibited matters, and not over permissible ones. Like it or not, we are forced by our human limitations to involve ourselves to some extent with mundane, earthly matters, simply to maintain our bodies. We need not indulge in excess, but we need to satisfy our basic needs. No matter how far we have climbed, we are frequently pulled back

to the common and ordinary.

Even when we seek desperately to link ourselves with the holy and dwell in some ethereal, celestial place, our natures will not permit it. Wherever that special holy place is, we are repeatedly forced out of it. In other words, we are compelled to go out from the place of kedushah - the "camp" spoken of in the pasuk - and wage war with the mediocrity imposed by our involvement with the pedestrian and non-holy.

It is in this battle alone that the Torah prescribes a solution. We are not to go out alone, but in the company of a camp. By joining up with a tzibbur of like-minded warriors, by losing some of our own identity by subjecting it to the needs of the collective, we are given the hedge against the yetzer hora. Chazal tell us that the Shechinah dwells in every group of ten.⁴ We are vulnerable to the depredations of the sitra achra, of the forces of evil, when we venture - as we indeed must - away from pure attachment to kedushah. Our winning strategy is to take refuge with the Shechinah that makes itself available to us in the larger group.

We should not be surprised. Subordinating ourselves to the klal yields many dividends. When Chazal tell us that Shabbos was the intended mate of Knesses Yisrael,⁵ they do not merely mean that each of us has a special affinity for Shabbos, finding in it our completion, like in a good marriage. The pairing is not with us as individuals, but with Knesses Yisrael, representing the collective super-neshamah in which we all have a place. The experience of Shabbos at its highest level - access to its most precious supernal lights - avails itself only to the collective, to the group. This is the reason that the great rebbes stressed the importance of coming together with a larger chevra and experiencing Shabbos together.

We pride ourselves in that we are described as Hashem's children. We should stop and reflect that no individual is ever called a child of Hashem. It is only in the plural, in the group that we become His children. Similarly, we call Him our Father only in the plural - Avinu - but not in the singular.

When the Torah underscores the pursuit of kedushah, it prefaces its remarks by commanding "Speak to the entire assembly of Bnei Yisrael."⁶ We are ill-equipped as individuals to achieve kedushah. It is positioned elusively beyond our individual grasps. Only through the klal can we consecrate everything, taking all things to a higher place; only through the tzibbur can we access the lofty levels of true kedushah.

Binding ourselves to a tzibbur of united Jews is a magic bullet in the battle with the yetzer hora. It is the only way to remain sure-footed when we gingerly walk the slippery walk of life. We should realize, however, that Jews can come together in two very different ways. There is an outwardly-connected tzibbur, which can be formed by people who do not even know each other, but come together to serve Hashem. We should not minimize the importance of such banding together. Another tzibbur, however, binds people together who are inwardly connected, joining their internal

cores, their penimiyus, until they become as one person, with one heart.⁷ It is through the latter kind of tzibbur that we enable ourselves to reach levels of understanding and kedushah that are inaccessible to the individual.

Belonging to a tzibbur can be a matter of life and death. This is demonstrated by the role of the city elders in the eglah arufah ceremony. We are familiar with the Gemara's⁸ explanation of why they must declare that their hands were not the ones that shed the blood of the murder victim. The elders are hardly the prime suspects! Rather, they declare, explains the Gemara, that they were not instrumental in the demise of the victim by failing to provide him with food and accompaniment on the way out of the city.

Our minds may be put at ease by this explanation as far as the cloud of suspicion that the Torah hangs over the elders. We are relieved that the elders are not accused of being accomplices to the act itself. But having heard the Gemara's explanation, we are still left dangling. Why is it so important to accompany the stranger out of the city? How would such accompaniment thwart the highwaymen who lie in wait to ambush the traveler? One can accompany a guest only so far before turning back. The criminal who preys on the vulnerable traveler will simply fall upon his victim somewhat beyond that point.

The Maharal⁹ teaches that accompanying the stranger makes him a member of a larger community, ties him in to the tzibbur of the city he is leaving. An individual is sometimes vulnerable to the scrutiny of Judgment and the forces of din that may prevail at a given moment. The klal, the collective, is often beyond the reach of the forces of din. Without a Divine judgment and decree finding the potential victim wanting when an accusatory finger from the Heavenly Court is pointed at him, he cannot die. Thus, if he travels alone, all the dangers of the road can be sources of potential harm to him. When he travels as a member of a larger group, tied in with the rest even when he is geographically distant from them, the collective merit of the group protects him. Membership confers the privilege of protection against the misery brought on by din.

When the great secrets of the Hidden Torah were made available in the time of R. Shimon bar Yochai, we find that he did not reach out to claim them on his own, but accompanied by a group. The Zohar identifies them by name. Moreover, it categorically states that he merited the great insights contained in the Idras¹⁰ only through the collective. What had been kept hidden prior to his day became revealed, says the Zohar,¹¹ only because members of his group loved each other with heart and soul.

These ideas take on new meaning in the month of Elul. In the run-up to the judgment of the Yomim Nora'im, we need to make use of the sanctuary we can find in the embrace of the rabim. We need to make ourselves part of a group. It should be a group that not only takes the judgment of the Yomin Noraim seriously, but deals with the spirit of the season with even greater insight and sophistication.

We should band together in collectives in which people are not only conscious of which transgressions they have or have not committed, but are working on their penimiyus, to reclaim from it all room that has been ceded to the yetzer hora, and restore it to the domain of our Creator.

This may just be our best strategy in the weeks to come.

¹Based on Nesivos Shalom pgs. 146-149

²Devarim 23:10

³Sifrei

⁴Sanhedrin 39A

⁵Bereishis Rabbah 11:9. They observe that each day of the week can be paired with another, as long as the total number of days is even. The seventh day, the odd number, leaves one day unpaired, without a mate. Knesses Yisrael itself is the missing mate.

⁶Vayikra 19:2

⁷Rashi Shemos 19:2

⁸Sotah 38B

⁹Chidushei Aggados, Sotah 46B

¹⁰Two subsections of the Zohar

¹¹Zohar 2:190B

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