

PRIMED WARRIORS

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Primed Warriors ¹

Twice, the Torah surprises us with its description of the battle.

The Torah always insists on economy of expression. It does not squander words, especially when a briefer expression makes the point more directly. Why, then, does the Torah speak of "going out" to war rather than "waging" war?² The phrase "when you go out to battle against your enemy" ³ is followed in next week's parshah by the same expression, again employing the verb for "going out."

These are not the only surprises, when the comments of Chazal are factored in. They find ⁴ in the verse "when a camp goes out against your enemy"⁵ a directive that those who set out for battle should do so as part of a camp. If the Torah wishes to underscore the importance of the group, why does it use the single tense - *ki setzei* - in our parshah? Chazal ⁶ note the words "Shema Yisrael" in the Kohen's exhortation of the people. ⁷ They see this usage as deliberate - they merit Divine protection if they have no merits to speak of beyond the recitation of the Shema. How consistent is this with Chazal's understanding of the "fearful and fainthearted"⁸ as referring to those concerned about their transgressions? Do the fearful and fainthearted not recite the Shema regularly?

All the difficulties are answered if we assume a double entendre in this parshah. The primary meaning of the text deals with a large theater of war. But the words were chosen to allude to a secondary meaning: the quintessential battle each person must wage with his mortal enemy, his own yetzer hora.

There is no way to avoid the battle. Each individual (hence, the use of the single tense) finds himself locked in combat. Moreover, on the individual level the battle is mostly lost if one waits for the enemy to begin hostilities. By the time a person has been drawn into unexpected conflict with his yetzer hora, he is usually no longer fully in control of the battle. His movements, options, and even resolve have been limited, leaving him at a disadvantage. He no longer sees the consequences for what they are. As Chazal say, ⁹ "No person sins without having succumbed to a spirit of folly." The wise defense, in this case, is a good offense. You must "go out," i.e. go after the yetzer hora and reduce its influence before it seizes the advantage by attacking first. The "horse and chariot"¹⁰

demoralize the viewer, because they are a great host of hostile forces that he created himself! As taught by the Rebbe of Kobrin, they refer to the forces of tumah created by kedushah that has not been used appropriately, and therefore fallen to the kelipah.¹¹ The sinner therefore must deal not only with the knowledge of his own shortcomings and failures, but is weighed down by negative forces of his own manufacture! (The word mimcha used to describe the horses and chariots is usually translated as the comparative, i.e. there are more from their camp than from you. However, it can also be taken to mean the ones that issue from you.) Nonetheless, the Torah adjures us not to be overcome by panic. We were more seriously disadvantaged in our earlier days, and we triumphed. We must remember that Hashem once took us out of Egypt, raising us up from a deeper spiritual nadir. He will always be there, ready to assist us in successfully pursuing our battle objectives.

Two elements are essential in waging war against an enemy. One is the mindset of the soldiers. They must be prepared to fight fearlessly, and to push aside all competing interests that might gnaw away at their focus. They cannot afford to think of their wives or children, but devote themselves with heart and soul to the battle. A second element is confidence in the outcome. They must believe that they will triumph. If they believe that their chances of victory are limited, they should not fight.

The development of the parashah recognizes the importance of these factors. The Kohen announces the statutory exemptions from service. "Who has built a new house, and not inaugurated it? Let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the war."¹² To be sure, individuals die in battle. But those who have built a new house, or planted a new vineyard, etc. certainly are in the minority. Why go off to battle with a pessimistic attitude that calls for anticipating from the beginning that these special minorities will likely be among the casualties?

We could suggest that this is a misreading. The community does not concern itself with the remote possibility that the casualties will include those who have not yet fully enjoyed what they strived for and in which they invested themselves. The exemptions speak to the needs of the would-be soldiers, not the community. Those soldiers whom we would tear away from their new wives, houses, and vineyards would not be effective warriors. They lack the first element we discussed above. It is not reasonable to expect them to push aside all awareness of what they have looked forward to with so much expectation. Because they cannot remove these other concerns from their consciousness, they cannot focus on their task with intrepid resoluteness. Because of this, they cannot escape thoughts of - and concerns about - their own deaths. Not being able to transcend such concerns, they make ineffective soldiers.

The Kohen announces the final exemption: those who are afraid because of their sins. This group is deficient in the second area we discussed above. Feeling vulnerable because of their transgressions, they cannot sense that they are assured of victory. Lacking this self-assuredness, they should not be drafted, lest they infect their comrades with their concerns and doubts.

We read this parshah during Elul. This is no accident. Knowing that we must make our way to the front lines of the battle against the yetzer hora, we must learn from this parshah how to be good soldiers. We must take cues from the exempted soldiers, and learn how not to face the coming month. We will only achieve our teshuvah goals if we free ourselves of concerns that hold us back, and possess utter confidence that Hashem cherishes our efforts, and will actively assist our efforts.

Yet how realistic can this be? Can we fail but to be terrified by the consequences of our misdeeds, particularly after taking to heart the teaching of the Rebbe of Kobrin about the forces of tumah we ourselves created that now peer at us across the lines of battle? In an army of pure souls, who will not be fearful of their own sins?

Toras Avos finds a secondary meaning in Gemara in Menachos¹³ that holds an answer for us. Reacting to the pasuk "They shall take for you pure, pressed olive oil for illumination,"¹⁴ Chazal teach: "Pressed for illumination, but not pressed for Menachos."¹⁵ Yirah can be healthy and positive, or it can be counterproductive. It can come from a constructive place, or from a negative, destructive one. When fear of Hashem and fear of our transgressions is illuminating like the Menorah, it inspires us to put aside all our failures completely; we can become new beings in the process. When it comes from the other place, it cripples and breaks us.¹⁶ Especially in the forty days of teshuvah between Rosh Chodesh Elul and Yom Kippur, we must learn to recognize the difference between the two kinds of yirah. When we are stunned and paralyzed by contemplating the devastation we have wrought, rather than moved to a complete turnabout in our lives, we must realize that we are in the grips of a yirah that is pasul.

The story of Adam HaRishon alludes to this. He and Chava are described as "[hearing] the sound of Hashem Elokim manifesting itself in the garden in the direction of the day."¹⁷ The "day" alludes to that very special day of Rosh Hashanah. Hashem calls to Man and asks him, "Where are you?" To what lowly level have you fallen, if you respond to the sound of My voice by trembling and hiding? The sound you should hear on this day of Rosh Hashanah is a loving call to My wayward children to return! Adam responds that he realized that he was naked, stripped of all merit, and unable to return. Hashem clarifies to him that this realization of vulnerability itself can and should inspire him to return. If it doesn't, it is an unhealthy state of mind, a product of the faulty thinking introduced by eating from the Tree of Knowledge that had been forbidden to him.

A Jew must discern where his recognition of chet will lead him. If it will keep him from his role as warrior against the yetzer hora, it must be distanced and rejected. This is what Chazal meant when they said that even the single merit of the recitation of the Shema is sufficient for victory. Shema speaks of the constancy of our recognition of Hashem and our personal relationship with Him. There is no difference in that recognition, whether before a chet or even afterwards. Neither is there an essential change on His part. He does not wish to see the loss of any individual, and allows us the

way back. From that comes our hope for Elul.

¹ Based on Nesivos Shalom pgs.118-122

² The verb for waging war is in fact used in Devarim 20:10

³ Devarim 20:1

⁴ Sifrei 119

⁵ Devarim 23:10

⁶ Sotah 42A

⁷ Devarim 20:3

⁸ Devarim 20:8

⁹ Sotah 3A

¹⁰ Devarim 20:1

¹¹ In other words, kedushah, if not properly actualized, ironically becomes instead the sustaining force of evil created by its misuse. Thus, the kedushah a person could have applied to good effect becomes the source of many monsters of his own creation.

¹² Devarim 20:5

¹³ Menachos 86B

¹⁴ Vayikra 27:20

¹⁵ The primary meaning of the Gemara is that first-pressed oil is required for the Menorah, but not for the oil used in the flour-offerings ¹⁶ Menachos are always broken. They come either in the form of flour, which is already reduced to particles, or loaves which are broken as part of the avodah. See Rashi Vayikra 2:6

¹⁷ Bereishis 3:8. Rashi takes the last phrase to mean evening, the direction in which the day fades away in the west. The Rebbe sees another allusion

Text Copyright © 2008 by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein and **Torah.org**