

GOING IN TO WAR

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

When you go out to war against your enemies, and G-d, your G-d gives them over to you and you take captives, and you see among the captives a desirable, beautiful woman who you want to marry (Devarim 21:10-11)

Of all the mitzvos in the Torah, this one about the "Yafes Toar" (literally, "beautiful form") is both the most difficult to understand and yet, the easiest to understand. That a man who goes to war develops uncontrollable urges for things that are really off-limits to him is not only NOT surprising, but evident throughout the entire history of mankind. War brings out the best and worst in mankind.

However, that the Torah can sanction such behavior, even unwillingly, is not only surprising, but baffling. The language of the Talmud is:

The Torah is only speaking against the yetzer hara. (Kiddushin 21b)

True, but usually that means keeping our desires in check, not feeding them. However, as the rabbis explain, the Torah is dealing with a far-gone situation, and, is giving us rare advice about how to extricate ourselves from a situation before it gets any worse than it has to be.

This is like what the Talmud says elsewhere about a Jew who is so overwhelmed by a forbidden desire that he has lost self-control. There, the Talmud advises the inevitable sinner to go to another city where he is not recognized, and then "do what his heart desires," so that he not ALSO profane the Name of G-d by deliberately and publicly breaking a commandment of the Torah (Kiddushin 40a).

However, as Tosfos explains:

G-d forbid [that he should think that] it is permissible for him to perform a sin! Rather, as Rebi Illai said: travelling, being a guest, and wearing black clothing breaks the yetzer hara and prevents him from sinning. (q.v. Vaya'aseh mah)

In other words, the Talmud is telling us in each case, when the fires of passion burneth, an outright "no" only fanneth them. However, an outright yes is impossible, because the Torah will only permit that which is forbidden when a mitzvah is involved, like eating treif to avoid starving to death. What is

necessary is the impression that the desire will be satisfied in the near future just long enough for those fires of passion to lose their steam, and for sanity to return to the person.

That was the simple explanation; this is the deeper one.

Everyone knows that there are forces of good in the world, and, forces of evil, and, that they are at battle with each other throughout history, until Moshiach comes and puts an end to evil for good (Succah 52a). Kabbalistically, the forces of good emanate from the realm of holiness in creation, and, the forces of evil, from the realm of spiritual impurity. Because they both exist, mankind has free-will, and, can use that free-will to get to the World-to-Come "straight," or, only after sufficient time in Gehinnom.

Ultimately, G-d controls the whole show. Ain ode Milvado -- there are none other than Him. However, for the sake of free-will, creation has been fashioned in such a way as to give the impression that this is not the case, when, in fact, it is ALWAYS so. To believe otherwise is to believe in idol worship, a cardinal sin of the Torah, tantamount to breaking the entire Torah (Nedarim 25a).

Free-will requires challenge. It requires a situation where our instincts are aroused in an immoral direction. What good is a test where the right way is the easy way? What reward can there be at the end of days for doing that which came instinctually? None. That is why, in the time of Moshiach earning reward for the World-to-Come will be history. It's now or never. If only people understood this.

Now, ever notice how doing mitzvos can invite all kinds of trouble. Ever notice, how, while doing good deeds, the "red carpet" seems to go in the opposite direction? Ever notice how great people make simple but terrible mistakes that simpler people can see right through? Ever notice how Jewish history is riddled with situations that seem to run contrary to Torah objectives, yet, in the end, result in those very goals?

The key to understanding this, the logic behind the mitzvah of Yafes Toar -- and all of history for that matter -- lies in understanding this concept, which, is the subject of the next d'var Torah, b"H.

Shabbos Day:

Then bring her into your house; she must shave her head and remove her nails. She must change the clothes she previously wore, and remain at home mourning the separation from her father and her mother for an entire month. After that time, you may marry her and she can become your wife. (Devarim 21:12-13)

A principle of creation is that evil has no inherent existence of its own, which is why it will not, and

cannot exist forever. The days of evil are limited, while good has always existed and will always exist. The time is coming when darkness will yield to light, forever!

If you look at the world, you will notice that good and honest work is usually rewarded, in such a way as both the giver and recipient are happy and feel that justice has been done. Evil, on the other hand, can never enjoy such reward, because it has been arrived at dishonestly. On the outside, the criminal will laugh at how he has stolen from another person, but, on the inside, his soul only knows pain and discontent. That is why he must "harden" himself, so as to not capitulate to his heart and mind, and give himself up to the side of good.

Rarely, if ever at all, does good ever victimize evil. On the other hand, rarely does evil NOT victimize good, always reaping the benefits of some honest person's hard work. In fact, evil hovers and circles around good like vultures do potential prey in the desert, anxiously awaiting the death of their next meal. Their lives depend upon it.

So it is with the forces of spiritual impurity. Lacking any independent source of life force, they turn to the lowest side of holiness to derive light and life, "latching" on for dear life, drawn in like magnets. And, while there, they bring with them all the spiritual negativity attached to them, resulting in added challenges for the person and the need for greater spiritual defense. In other words, greater free-will.

It is the way of the world because free-will is the way of the world. It is such a deep concept that I cannot explain it here, in "Perceptions" (but you can find it at, "Even DEEPER Perceptions," Parashas Noach: Humble Beginnings, at <http://www.thirtysix.org>).

This is why a "tzaddik" can go to war on behalf of the Jewish people, be it in the physical battle-field, or, in the spiritual battle-field, and fall prey to the Yafes-Toar -- the symbol of unbridled and illicit desires. This is also why, in the course of doing an important mitzvah, which draws down all kinds of holy emanations, the impure forces will all of a sudden show up like spiritual vultures, and imperil the mitzvah-doer.

In fact, as a general rule in this world, if a mitzvah goes smoothly, one has to wonder about what went wrong, not what went right! This does not mean that mitzvos that go without a hitch are not mitzvos, G-d forbid, or, that we should look to add "challenge" to our lives that G-d doesn't Himself set before us. It does mean, however, that, at the height of spiritual success one has to gird himself against spiritual backlash, and that, spiritual obstacles in the wake of a mitzvah does not mean rejection by G-d (if the mitzvah was done properly).

And, how do we do this?

The parshah (and Talmud) answers this question with the very process it is coming to teach: then bring her into your house; she must shave her head and remove her nails. She must change the clothes she previously wore, and remain at home mourning the separation from her father and her

mother for an entire month. After that time, you may marry her and she can become your wife.
(Devarim 21:12-13)

The Talmud refers to this as "bread in the basket." The fact that the captor believes that, after thirty days, he will have the wife of his passion -- with the permission of the Torah yet -- permits him to undergo this waiting period. His passion will be temporarily assuaged, as he watches his Yafes Toar undergo a de-beautification procedure.

However, as the captive woman loses her beauty, what the man is actually doing is watching the unveiling of his own yetzer hara. It is like traveling to a strange city, being a guest among strangers, and then, cloaking oneself in black and playing the "bad guy."

"This is ME?" the person is supposed to say looking into this spiritual mirror. "I am sinking this low? How can I live with myself after?!"

Symbolically, taking off the black clothing, checking out of the motel, and returning back home -- WITHOUT having committed the sin -- represents going home to be himself again. The tzaddik has returned; the forces of spiritual impurity have been banished, hungry. The spiritual vultures will have to go elsewhere for their "meal" this time, and, the person's stock in the World-to-Come has just jumped countless index points.

This is known in Kabbalah as "mirmos" and "tachboles" -- "trickery" and "scheming," or, better yet, beating the forces of spiritual impurity at their own game. It is a spiritual survivalist tactic, one that G-d has used on many occasions throughout Jewish history, one which we have seen work in the most uncanny ways, going back to the birth of Avraham and the ancestors of Dovid HaMelech.

G-d can do whatever He wants, whenever He wants to do it, any way He wants to. Man cannot. Free-will is the name of the game, and that game has strict rules by which we must abide, for our own good. We are here to overcome our yetzer hara, and the more sophisticated we become, the more sophisticated the yetzer hara needs to be. After all, the yetzer hara was born yesterday, you know.

In general, in Torah, when it comes to man-made decisions, the ends do not justify the means. But that's only when those "ends" result in sin, not when they result in a clever and successful ruse of the yetzer hara. It is the difference between being the victim of and the victor over the yetzer hara. So many people over the history of mankind, tragically, have, by default, too often been the former.

Too many people have fallen prey to their own "yafes toar," and have even married them in the end. At this late stage of history, while the forces of spiritual impurity fight with their spiritual backs against the wall, it would be exceedingly prudent to know the laws of creation, and to work with them. So much depends upon it -- more than we know; more than we can appreciate.

SEUDAH SHLISHI:

When a man takes a wife (Devarim 24:1)

Some mitzvos are easier to fulfill than others, like this one to get married with "kiddushin." This is the Torah version of "engagement," at which time a man and woman become committed to one another for the sake of marriage. However, unlike the secular approach, "breaking off" this form of engagement requires a "get" and a Torah-sanctioned divorce. Likewise, unfaithfulness after this stage of marriage constitutes adultery.

The actual mitzvah to get married in the first place emerges from the verse:

G-d said to them (Adam and Chava): Be fruitful and multiply (Bereishis 1:28)

-- which is why it is a mitzvah that is incumbent upon men and not women. According to the verse, one is supposed to get married with procreation in mind, and, since bearing children can endanger the woman's life, she is not commanded to enter into such a danger. If she does so, it is because she wants to of her own volition and for her benefit, though, she is rewarded for her self-sacrifice and for making the mitzvah possible for the man.

This is not a rule that applies only to women and childbirth. In general, G-d rarely, if ever, commands us to perform a mitzvah with risk to our lives. Usually if our lives are at stake, then, the mitzvah is usually pushed off, even in the case of Shabbos. The only time we are expected to actually sacrifice our lives is to sanctify the Name of G-d and to uphold Torah at a time that others are trying to extinguish its light, G-d forbid.

This concept can also be used to explain another question from an earlier parshah. The rabbis teach that G-d never commanded the spies to go out and spy the land of Eretz Yisroel; they did so at their own behest. Why? Because, as we are told, G-d didn't feel it was necessary to do so, though, he permitted them to go on their own if they insisted.

However, the actual date the spies left was the twenty-ninth day of Sivan. According to Kabbalah, the period between the seventh of Sivan and the ninth of Av -- 63 days in total -- is considered to be a time of lessened Divine light, and therefore, increased spiritual danger. This has been true ever since before creation even came into being, a situation rooted in the way the light came down from "Ain Sof" to create the world.

This is why specifically, it was during this period that the Jewish people allowed the golden calf to be built, the first set of Tablets were broken, and, the Three Weeks and Tisha B'Av -- when both Temples were destroyed, Beitar was razed, the Jews were exiled from Spain, and World War One began. It is the period on our calendar during which we lay low and try to spiritually fortify ourselves. Talk about starting off "behind the eight ball."

Hence, the spies went off on a dangerous mission at a time when it was best to sit still and lessen risk. Perhaps this is why G-d did not command it of them (we see that Yehoshua also sent spies, and, successfully). At another, safer time of year, maybe "shlach lechah" would have been a command

from G-d as well, and, it would have succeeded and the Final Redemption would have come and there would be no need for this d'var Torah.

MELAVE MALKAH:

A Song to the Ascents. I lift up my eyes to the mountains; from where will my help come? (Tehillim 121:1)

This is the second of the fifteen psalms that were said by the Levi'im on the steps leading up to the Temple Courtyard, and which, customarily, are said each Shabbos afternoon after Minchah. However, unique about this one is that tehillah says "to the Ascents" as opposed to "of Ascents."

There are various reasons given for this distinction. Rashi says that it alludes to the reward for the righteous in the Time-to-Come, when they make the ascents to the World-to-Come, level-by-level. The Midrash says that it is an allusion to the victory of the Jewish people in Messianic times over Eisav and partners, after which we will ascend Mount Zion, heights from which we will never descend again.

The words "from where" in Hebrew is the word "mei-ayin." According to pshat, Dovid HaMelech is asking a question to set up his answer in the next verse: My help comes from G-d, Maker of Heaven and Earth. However, according to Kabbalah, "Ayin" is the Name of G-d that corresponds to the level of the Sefiros called "Keser"; you can't get much higher than that. This transforms Dovid HaMelech's question into a bold statement: From Ayin will my help come.

The significance of this statement is that when redemption comes from the level of "Ayin," you can expect the phenomenal. Dovid HaMelech is commenting on the special relationship the Jewish people enjoy with G-d, Who is willing to turn nature upside down to free His people.

Behold, the Guardian of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps. (4)

In spite of how it appears, His watchful eye is always upon the Jewish people. This is what fooled Haman, who convinced Achashveros that the Jewish G-d was "sleeping," so that the latter would not be afraid to try and destroy his Jewish constituents. It took seventy days for Haman to find out what Dovid HaMelech wrote here, that G-d is the Guardian of the Jewish people -- always.

G-d is your shadow at your right hand. (5)

The Nefesh HaChaim explains at great length that this verse sums up the everyday relationship between G-d and creation. Like a shadow only moves in response to the creator of the shadow, likewise, G-d acts in response to our actions, words, and thoughts; He "shadows" our every move, so-to-speak. This places man in the driver seat of creation, and makes us responsible for existing spiritual state of creation.

G-d will protect your departure and your arrival, from this time onward. (8)

Many people actually say this verse upon leaving the house each time (as they kiss the Mezuzah on the way out), invoking the blessing of Divine protection in the world beyond their door. As it says in Derech Hashem, it's war out "there," in the world beyond our homes (assuming that they are spiritually uplifting places to begin with).

Out "there" is where the yetzer hara goes window shopping, and "buys" whatever it can. All other enemies pale compared to this one, for, their ability to affect us is completely contingent upon how we fare with our yetzer hara. The "yafes toars" of creation are what the yetzer hara specifically goes in search of, and, the spiritually astute individual knows this, and invokes Divine protection before entering the war zone.

Have a great Shabbos,
Pinchas Winston
