

WAR ON THREE FRONTS

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

This week's PERCEPTIONS is dedicated on behalf of Rafael Binyamin Elimelech ben Shoshana Raizel Sarah. May the learning of it act as merit for him to have a refuah shlaimah immediately.

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)*

So begins the mitzvah regarding the Yafes Toar, the woman captive for whom the Jewish soldier falls for and wishes to marry. Much has been written about this entire concept since it is controversial from so many sides, seemingly contradicting so much of what the Torah has taught us until now about ourselves and our obligation as a Kingdom of Priests.

However, the Talmud comes and puts all matters into perspective, providing an insight that seems to brush away all the questions and make the Torah seem consistent once again:

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

In other words, the Torah, at the beginning of this week's parshah, was not talking about ideal behavior, but about how to deal with less-than-ideal behavior in an ideal way. Just as we spoke about in last week's parshah, war is a reality we have to contend with as a result of the sin of the golden calf and Moshe's subsequent breaking of the Luchos Rishonos, and so are unfortunately, the many side effects of war as well.

That is the beginning of the parshah that contains the most amount of mitzvos in any other parshah in the Torah. However, the end of the Torah speaks about a different aspect of war, and a different mitzvah regarding it.

Remember what Amalek did to you along your way when you left Egypt. He confronted you on your way, and attacked the feeble stragglers who trailed behind you, while you were tired and exhausted. He did not fear G-d. Therefore, when G-d your G-d has given you rest from all your enemies around you in the land which G-d, your G-d gives to you as an inheritance, annihilate every trace of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget this. (Devarim 25:17-19)

Seemingly, they are unconnected, at least in any obvious way. However, thanks to an insight from the Vilna Gaon, we can see that this parshah in the Torah is also about battling the yetzer hara, and the real war of a Jew.

Indeed, last night as we drove home from a family simchah in Ma'alei Adumim and our taxi made its way back to Jerusalem, we inched our way for about 20 minutes as we approached the upcoming army road block. It is standard fare on that road that enters Jerusalem, except that Motzei Shabbos means far more people are using the same road at the same time, and slowing down the car-by-car spot check.

"Do you see what the gentile nations do to us?" A frustrated cab driver said to me.

He was talking about the way we have to tighten security around our tiny little country to weed out terrorists trying to make their way into the cities to cause death and serious harm. Of the many results of such security needs, one is long and frustrating line-ups at places around the world, of people who should just be able to come and go as they please.

However, he was only right on a superficial level, of course. "They" are certainly causing us to have take precautions all around the world, and are certainly making the lives of hundreds of millions of innocents more inconvenient. Nevertheless, I had just driven through the streets of Ma'alei Adumim and saw life there on a Motzei Shabbos, and what I saw broke my heart and made me wonder how great a miracle it would take to bring Jews from such low spiritual depths to even a basic level of Torah observance - if that is even possible in this generation.

As the Vilna Gaon points out, it is no coincidence that settling Eretz Yisroel at the beginning of next week's parshah follows on the heels of the battle against Amalek at the end of this week's parshah.

Shabbos Day:

Your people will all be righteous; they will inherit the land forever; a shoot of My planting, My handiwork, in which to glory. (Yeshayahu 60:21)

The war against the yetzer hara has always been a psychological one. Ever since the Original Snake first cajoled Chava into going against the commandment of G-d not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, it has been an intellectual battle the whole time throughout history. Action is a matter of perception and perspective, and the yetzer hara knows this better than anyone else.

Know thine enemy, they say. Can there be any better or wiser advice than this during a time of war? Constant vigilance, they say. How else can one increase the chances of surviving the war?

It's like raising children, who may exist at that stage of their lives only to teach us how to deal with our own yetzer haras, for the two - children and the yetzer hara - work very much in the same way. Each are driven towards physical pleasure, and each is prepared to sacrifice their futures for that immediate pleasure. And, each is quite innocent, for that matter, because both were created to be that way.

This is why the Torah does not punish a child below the age of 13 for a boy and 12 for a girl. And, they are not even fully punishable until the age of 20. On the other hand, their parents are punishable already, and dealing with children can often resemble battling the trickiest enemy possible.

The reason is very simple. The goal is not to overthrow children, or even just to capture them. The goal is to channel their strengths into worthy goals while at the same time protecting that which we value most, particularly our sanity.

It can also be compared to the taming of a beautiful stallion that wants to preserve its freedom while we want to channel its power. It is not merely a question of overpowering the horse and breaking its will, for that will not result in a very cooperative horse. It is a question of allowing the horse to feel meaningful even in its position of subservience.

Of course, children are far different than horses (hopefully), but the strategy is very similar. We are interested in harnessing children, but not for our benefit, but for their own. We must channel the energies of children while they're young, so that we can hand them the reins of control once they become adults.

The yetzer hara, however, is more like that wild stallion needing to be harnessed. Unharnessed, it is the most dangerous enemy a person can face, because the Talmud says that it gets up every day to kill us (Kiddushin 30b). Harnessed, it is a tremendous force to ride upon to personal greatness.

Thus, the rabbis taught:

Rebi Chananya ben Akasha said: The Holy One, Blessed is He, wanted to give merit to Israel. Therefore, He increased Torah and mitzvos for them, as it says, "Your people will all be righteous; they will inherit the land forever; a shoot of My planting, My handiwork, in which to glory" (Yeshayahu 60:21). (Sanhedrin 90a)

Torah and mitzvos are the process of harnessing the yetzer hara, because they represent a commitment to a higher truth. And, the stronger the commitment, the less the yetzer hara can convince a person to do the wrong thing. Torah and mitzvos are axioms of truth, which are the reins for the yetzer hara. It can only run free where doubt lingers about the truth of Torah and the immediacy of performing its commandments.

Thus, this parshah about the yetzer hara is flooded with all kinds of mitzvos, which brings us to the final mitzvah of this week's parshah, what it has to do with Eretz Yisroel, and the comment by our cab driver Motzei Shabbos.

SEUDOS SHLISHIS:

Remember what Amalek did to you along your way when you left Egypt. He confronted you on your way, and attacked the feeble stragglers who trailed behind you, while you were tired and exhausted. He did not fear G-d. Therefore, when G-d your G-d has given you rest from all your enemies around you in the land which G-d, your G-d gives to you as an inheritance, annihilate every trace of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget this. (Devarim 25:17-19)

The Vilna Gaon taught:

The principles that are the basis of the deeds to be performed at the beginning of the Redemption, and the circumstances and manners of these deeds are similar to those prevalent during the period leading to the construction of the Second Temple, consistent with the mission of Moshiach Ben Yosef. The beginning of the Redemption is the time of the Revealed End, when the following seven pillars are hewn: 1) gathering in the exiles; 2) building Jerusalem; 3) eradicating the impure spirit from Eretz Israel by planting the Holy Land and fulfilling the commandments related to it; 4) setting up people of truth in order to redeem the truth and sanctify the name of God; 5) promoting the spread of Torah from Tzion; 6) waging war against Amalek; and 7) healing Tzion. We, the emissaries of the Almighty, are obligated to do our utmost to carry out these goals . . . (Kol HaTor, Chapter 6)

Thus, there is no way around it: the path to the Final Redemption cuts across the formidable doorstep of Amalek, and the Vilna Gaon explains how in more detail:

The war against Amalek is in each generation, against three types of enemies: Amalek of the heart, that is, the evil inclination and vices; the spirit of Amalek, that is, the general one - the Satan, the adversary of Israel, who destroys. This is Samael and his hosts. His main power is in the gates of Jerusalem when its lands are desolate; the material Amalek, that comprises Eisav, Yishmael, and the Erev Rav . . . The strength and rulership of Amalek's spirit is in the gates of Jerusalem, as mentioned above, but only when there is destruction and desolation near the gates and in the unwalled areas of Jerusalem. As long as the spirit of impurity rules there, the feet of the cypress tree cannot stand there. This delays the connection between the Jerusalem of below and the Jerusalem of above - the connection between the Shechinah and Knesses Yisroel on which the entire Redemption depends. (Kol HaTor, Chapter 6)

Thus, there are three facets to the battle against Amalek. The first one is the yetzer hara. Amalek was not merely a people who once attacked us in the desert, in order to reduce our sense of spiritual invincibility. Amalek is a conceptual reality, and anything that cools down the heart of a Jew and takes advantage of his spiritual doubt is considered to be Amaleki in nature. This is why the numerical value of the word "Amalek" is doubt, because he causes it and takes advantage of it.

Then there is the aspect of Amalek that occupies the minds of men around the world, leading them to do that which destroys good in the world. This is a familiar concept and the topic of many a scary movie, but a real concept nevertheless. He is most powerful, in this aspect, when Eretz Yisroel

remains uninhabited by Jews and undeveloped, particularly spiritual undeveloped. Thus, he is very much opposed, to say the least, to the giving of Eretz Yisroel to the Jews, and their development of it.

The third aspect of the battle against Amalek is the alliance that develops between the descendants of Edom, Yishmael, and the Erev Rav, which compromises just about the entire world. They are his tools to stop the return to Tzion, at least as long as he can, for he (they) cannot do so forever.

They have many weapons at their disposal, some physical, some spiritual, and we are witnessing them all today. Whether it is a suicide bomber, a political attack, or an overwhelming onslaught of Western materialism, the result is all the same. Tzion remains in ruins, with no real scheduled date of completion in the minds of Jews, at least while Amalek occupies the very hearts of the Jewish people.

Melave Malkah:

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 21:13)

The Talmud says an interesting thing. What if a G-d fearing person is overwhelmed by a desire to sin that is so intense that he cannot help himself? The Talmud suggests that he dress himself in black, go to a town where he will not be recognized, and do what he feels he must.

Tosfos quickly explains that the Talmud is not saying that one can actually do this, that is sin, black clothing and a different city or not. Rather, the Tosfos explains, the Talmud is suggesting a way for dealing with the yetzer hara, because sometimes we go past the stage where nothing is going to work to deter one from sinning.

Perhaps the Talmud was basing itself upon this week's parshah, which cleverly provides away to get the yetzer hara itself to lose interest in its project of desire. "You can have her," says the Talmud. One can almost hear the soldier's yetzer hara saying, "Really? You mean it? You mean I can take her home and . . . and marry her?"

"Yes, you may," says the Torah.

The soldier's yetzer hara throws a celebration, which is interrupted by the second half of the lesson.

"But first," says the Torah, "you must give her a month to mourn the loss of her former gentile family . . ."

"Ah, right. I do? Mourn? She has to mourn? My taking her requires her to mourn?"

"Sure, it's the humanitarian thing to do, isn't it?"

"I . . . I guess so."

"Oh, and," continues to the Torah, "mourners have to be able to mourn properly, right?"

"I guess. What does that mean?"

"Well, it means that she has to be able to cry, and not be concerned about her appearance for about a month. You know, not do her hair or her nails, etc."

"Augh, but she'll be so uggly."

"Probably. But, it's just for a month you know."

"Hmm. I guess it's a small price to pay to have my yetzer hara fulfilled?"

"I guess," says the Torah, playing along with the whole thing.

At that point, a person is supposed to say to himself, What am I doing here? What have I caused, to myself and to this gentile lady? Is this normal behavior? Why am I prepared to dress up like someone else, steal away to another city, just to fulfill my yetzer hara? I mean, am I THAT desperate? If yes, then who am I really?

Sobering, is it not? It is not a smack, which is definite and immediate, which may have its place in the educational process, though this is controversial. It is a process of waking a person up and bringing him from his spiritual slumber, from a dream that he mistook for reality, like a drunk returning from the effects of too much alcohol.

And that is the best defense against the yetzer hara and Amalek, who is called by the Talmud "a punishing strap in the hand of G-d." You see, the physical enemy we battle is just the outer manifestation of the inner one that we harbor, to whom we give safe haven, under whose intoxicating influence we act out our lives.

The Torah is telling us that the process of getting back on our own spiritual feet often has to be a clever one. It was one of waking up to reality, and sobering up to what really counts in life, what is simply the result of over-active imaginations. When we remove the roadblocks from our hearts, Heaven will remove the roadblocks from our roads.

Have a great Shabbos,

PW