

WARNING

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

FRIDAY NIGHT:

When you will go out to war against your enemies (Devarim 21:10)

On a Pshat-level, the parshah is talking about going to war. However, many see this opening as story about human beings and their real enemy, the yetzer hara. That is, the major battle that people must fight, upon which all other battles in life are based. In other words, if the Jewish people would fight their yetzer haras and live by Torah and mitzvos, then their borders would be protected.

This message is in so many parshios, especially throughout Devarim in which Moshe Rabbeinu gives his parting words of wisdom. Indeed, we are told, even if the nations around us are at war with each other, their war will not spill into our land if we are walking the path of Torah and mitzvos. They won't even ask to cross into our land on their way to conquer other lands.

The only problem with this analogy is that the parshah begins, "when you go out to war," implying that there are times that we won't be at war. However, according to Derech Hashem:

G-d's purpose in Creation was to bestow of His good to another. Since G-d desired to bestow good, a partial good would not be sufficient. The good that He bestows would have to be the ultimate good that His handiwork could accept. G-d alone, however, is the only true good, and therefore His beneficent desire would not be satisfied unless it could bestow that very good, namely, the true perfect good that exists in His intrinsic nature. His wisdom therefore decreed that the nature of His true benefaction be His giving created things the opportunity to attach themselves to Him to the greatest degree possible. For the intended purpose to be successfully achieved, means must exist through which this creature can earn perfection. Man was therefore created with both a yetzer tov and a yetzer hara. He has the power to incline himself in whichever direction he desires. The Highest Wisdom decreed that man should consist of two opposites. These are his pure spiritual soul and his unenlightened physical body. Each one is drawn toward its nature, so that the body inclines toward the material, while the soul leans toward the spiritual. The two are then in a CONSTANT state of battle (Derech Hashem 1:2:1-1:3:2)

That's correct; we are in a constant state of battle with the yetzer hara. Indeed, the only time that we are not is after we die, and as the Talmud points out:

Rav Yitzchak said: Every day the yetzer hara renews itself. Rebi Shimon, son of Levi said: A person's

yetzer tries to overcome him and everyday wishes to kill him And were it not that The Holy One, Blessed is He, helps him [man against it], he would not prevail. (Kiddushin 30b)

Thus, there are no time-outs when it comes to the personal battle for control over one's life. Either you are winning the battle or losing it, but if you are alive and conscious, you are ALWAYS fighting it on some level. If so, is this parshah really about the personal battle against the real enemy of life, the yetzer hara?

Secondly, if this is a story about conquering the yetzer hara, and the enemy (i.e., the yetzer hara) is subdued and handed over to us in victory by G-d Himself, why would a person then go and do the most yetzer hara thing possible? The yetzer hara is a stranger, an enemy to be attacked; falling for it and wanting to convert it for purposes of marriage seems like a losing battle, not a winning situation!

Furthermore, the continuation of the parshah discusses the hated wife and the rebellious son, which is also supposed to be the result of converting and marrying the captive woman. The Torah warns that marriage to such a woman will result in a bad relationship, and will ultimately result in children who reject Judaism and their parents. How does that fit into the comparison between the war against a human enemy and a war against the yetzer hara?

When does one ever defeat the yetzer hara during his lifetime? And what does it mean that G-d gives it over to us, captured and under our control?

SHABBOS DAY:

"And Hashem, your G-d, will deliver him into your hand, and you will capture his captivity" (Devarim 21:10)

To be sure, every aspect of life is a test. We don't like it, but that is the way it is because that is the way it was meant to be, summed up in this short but telling phrase:

According to the effort [in this world] is the reward [in the World-to-Come]. (Pirkei Avos 5:22)

As we learned from Derech Hashem, we are here to receive reward in the World-to-Come, which means we are here to make efforts, and indeed to struggle. Our bodies may want to lie around and enjoy the "good life," but our souls want to move around and perform mitzvos in order to truly enjoy the good life in the World-to-Come.

Hence, there is something about us that inspires us not to be lazy, and there is something about us that drives us to simply hang out. And, for the record, laziness does not simply mean not wanting to accomplish physical objectives; one who is unmotivated to pursue ultimate truth is intellectually and spiritually lazy, even though they may be physically active on an ongoing basis.

Therefore, life is a test. It is a test of spiritual resolve, to show us how much we are committed to spiritual growth, and how much more resolve we may require to adequately grow from level to level. Even the most innocent situation, say a conversation between two close friends, contains

some element of a test, that when properly dealt with and understood clearly, provides some measure of spiritual growth. How much more so the difficult moments in life?

The confusing thing about life is that so many people around us don't seem to be in the middle of a test. Many people around us seem quite content, as if they have everything already worked out. If you ask them, some might reveal what is really going on in their private lives, and you can end up being sorry you asked. On the other hand, others truly seem to have nothing to hide, being quite pleased with the way their lives are working out, which only makes the rest of us even more self-conscious about the pitfalls we are undergoing.

There can be a number of reasons for this discrepancy. For example, G-d can test us just as easily through success as he can through failure. And, a person may say, "Well, then, let Him test me through success instead of through failure! If I have to go through a Divine test, let me at least enjoy myself!"

It sounds right in theory. However, in practice it may be a much harder test than the test through adversity, and may result in far more Gihennom later on had the person been tested through a series of setbacks. A person who suffers, feels that life is a test and often rises to the occasion. A person who sits on top of the world often overlooks his test, assuming that his success is specifically because G-d likes his approach to life - even though his private life is spiritually offensive!

Sometimes, as the Leshem explains, Heaven knows that the person is so spiritually detached that a test will only push him further away. So, they let him off the hook for the time being. They let him live his life as if there is no such thing as Divine retribution until he dies, that is, and goes to Gihennom to face the "seven furnaces of Gihennom" burning, all of them ignited by his past sins. While those who were tested in this world ascend in purity and joy to higher spiritual planes, those facing the "furnaces" of Gihennom scream to be tested for their past lives instead, somewhat late.

Thus, to be tested in this world, explains the Leshem, is a sign from Heaven that we are in the picture. Any misfortune we may suffer in this world is actually a sign that we are open to spiritual growth, that we are sensitive enough to be affected and "inspired" to improve, however reluctant we may feel at the time. And, realizing this and accepting it removes much of the resistance that is often the source of much of the suffering, and it clears the path to spiritual growth that is open to us.

But, how does all of this answer the questions with which we started?

SEUDOS SHLISHIS:

Whatever you are able to do, do with all your might, for there is neither deed nor planning, nor knowledge nor wisdom in the grave toward which you are heading. (Koheles 9:10)

If all of this is true, and it is, then it stands to reason that one should love tests. After all, it is our tests in life that show our true worth and which maximize our reward in the World-to-Come. So why not maximize our tests? Why wait for Heaven to put us in situations of test? Why not simply go out and

create our own tests?

As simple and perhaps as silly as this sounds, it is the basis of so much that has gone wrong in Jewish history by some of our greatest leaders, such as Dovid HaMelech, Shlomo HaMelech, and Nadav and Avihu. Indeed, it was the basis of Adam HaRishon's sin, and Noach's sin. In each case, and others like them, they put themselves into situations that were spiritually challenging specifically for the sake of causing tikun for themselves, to the world, or both, and each time they failed.

Each time, though they approached their situations with the best of intentions, the results were less than desirable, to say the least, and these are all recorded in Tanach and the Talmud.

The moral of the story: don't test yourself. Life is a difficult test in itself, so why go and create additional challenges that do not necessarily have to be a part of your life? Do you know yourself so well as to accurately predict your potential to rise to the occasion in a spiritually challenging dilemma? Do you know life so well as to be able to predict the full potential of a spiritually difficult situation? Can you control the players who will be part of your test, to make sure that they do not unduly test you? The answer to all of these questions is, of course not.

Only G-d can test a person. Only G-d can custom-design a test to have the exact predicted impact on the person being tested, allowing for both success and failure, and thus free-will choice. Only G-d can create a test that we can certainly pass, if we so desire, and all we have to do is to be open to the idea of being tested, and on guard (to use the language of Mesillas Yesharim) to the reality of the test, so that a lot of growth can be achieved.

However, this does not mean that even if we do try to test ourselves in order to prove our loyalty to G-d, that He won't help us. Sure He will. The only problem is that, in such cases where we design our own tests, we may overestimate our spiritual capabilities and success may become dependent upon Divine mercy, that is, a miracle. And, as the Talmud warns, miracles for which we create the demand come off of our merits stored up for the World-to-Come (Shabbos 32a).

However, according to this week's parshah, which may be addressing this issue, there may be additional results of "going out to war" all on our own.

MELAVE MALKAH:

And you will see among its captivity a woman who is beautiful of form and you will desire her. (Devarim 21:11)

G-d's ability to custom-design our tests in such a way that if we pass them, all the results will be positive. He can take into account everything, down to the most minute detail. When it comes to G-d's tests, success can be 100 percent.

However, this is not necessarily the case when it comes to the tests we design for ourselves. We may pass the test, (Hashem, your G-d, will deliver him into your hand), and even experience a new

level of self- control, (and you will capture his captivity), but the success may be short-lived. On the contrary, since our success is somewhat artificial having come about through a miracle from Heaven, we may become even more spiritually vulnerable than we were before. We may fall for the very same yetzer hara we captured, becoming seduced even more by it than we were prior to the test.

And then the real fun begins. Justification. Rationalization. In the process of trying to become the master of the yetzer hara, the person becomes the victim of it, and the yetzer hara becomes the master. Unlike the person who does not create tests for himself, suggesting a certain reverence for the yetzer hara and its power to overcome it, the person who goes out to war against the yetzer hara may lack sufficient fear of it to remain on guard against it, and before he knows it, he may become its servant.

This can only lead to bad. True, great is the man who harnesses the power of the yetzer hara for good. But, wise is the man who does it with G-d's permission, with G-d's guidance, and with G-d's help because He wishes to provide it, not because it is in response to a spiritual 911 call. It is Heaven's job to invite us to a test, not our job to invite Heaven to a test that we embarked on all by ourselves, no matter what the intention may be.

Then, even we eventually become aware of the results we have created, and come to hate them and all that is associated with them, with all their by- products. Once we see how the negative results impact our lives for that which we bear the responsibility for, it doesn't do us much good. Long after we have celebrated the success of our initial defeat of the yetzer hara we may find ourselves, G-d forbid, mourning his follow-up defeat over us.

Therefore, at the beginning of this week's parshah, the Torah may be talking about the personal battle a person fights against his own yetzer hara, but not the constant tests of everyday life for which we do not need to go out to battle. Rather, it is warning us about the tests we create for ourselves, not the tests Heaven sends us, but those we go out to fight on our own, even for the right reasons. Noble intentions aside, we have to know that there is an inherent danger in walking into potentially damaging situations that we do not need to enter, and that even though our efforts may meet with initial success, the long term results may be, and often are, disastrous.

Have a great Shabbos,
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