

# I TOLD YOU SO

*by Rabbi Pinchas Winston*

In this week's parshah, the Jewish people go to war against Midian, to avenge against Midianite involvement in the Shittim fiasco. As the Torah reports, each tribe contributed 1,000 soldiers to the cause, for a total army of 12,000 soldiers to be led into battle by Pinchas, the newly appointed Kohen Moshiah.

Hence, only two percent of Jewish males between the age of 20 and 60 went to war while the remainder stayed in the camp with the rest of the Jewish nation. What did they do in the meantime? What they had been doing everyday until that time: learn Torah. Obviously this was before the Tal and Plesnar Committees had their say.

Of course, in those days, there would have been no need for such committees or their reports. In those days, Absolute Truth ruled the day, not secular human opinion. At that time, every Jew believed in God and Torah from Sinai, and they knew that without Torah, the world loses its value and God returns it to null and void (Shabbos 88a). In Biblical times, the nation knew that success in the battlefield depended upon success in the Bais Midrash, to such an extent that a small percentage of the nation could bring about military victory far beyond their numbers if the driving force of the nation was Torah and mitzvos.

In the good old days, it was known that tipping the scale in the wrong spiritual direction was more dangerous for the Jewish nation than maintaining a small army. In fact, it was only after the Jewish people began to turn their backs on Torah and resort to more material and conventional means for protection that they were finally defeated and exiled. As the Torah warns, unlike with respect to the other nations, Jewish military strength depends upon closeness to God, not artillery or nuclear deterrents.

Apparently, though, this is true not just of Biblical times, but recently as well, though it depends upon whom you ask and what they believe.

Everyone has to agree that modern Israeli survival until this point has been disproportionate to its military might. The fact that the country possesses nuclear capability has not deterred the Arabs from attacking the country or from daily planning its extinction. They preach that it is better to die destroying the Zionist enemy than it is to live with it peacefully, and they have shown, on numerous occasions, and in countless ways, how far they are prepared to go to uphold such a principle. They certainly have the mentality and the numbers to do so.

So why has the State of Israel survived so well until now, and even thrived in such perilous conditions? "Because the Israeli soldier is more disciplined than his Arab counterpart . . ." a secular Israeli might tell you. Or, he might claim that the Israeli military "is more capable, cleverer." However, some, being a little more realistic cite Arab incompetency as another reason for the IDF's good fortune until today, even adding: "If we had to fight against the Americans or the Russians, we'd be history. Again."

However, if you ask the average Torah Jew the same question, the answer is sure to be, "Miracles! Nothing but great miracles!" Press him further by asking, "Does God perform such great miracles for Jews who constantly break the Torah?" (even though historically, we see that He has on many occasions), he will probably answer, "Not necessarily FOR them, but THROUGH them, since they are also protecting all of those who are learning Torah. In the merit of those learning Torah, the miracles have occurred for the rest of the country."

Tell THAT to a secular Jew, especially if he has fought in any of Israel's many wars, and how much more so if he or she has lost relatives or friends in battle, and more than eyes will roll. And that is when it becomes clear that at issue here is not merely army service, and that the struggle to conscript what the secular Israeli world calls "Ultra-Orthodox" Jews is just a means to deal with an even bigger issue that goes back to the very founding of the modern State of Israel. In fact, though the Israeli papers failed to pick this up, The New York Times (which I'm not one to quote very often) did, stating that the "debate over these details masks a more fundamental and fractious one about evolving identity in this still-young state, where a 'people's army' has long been a defining principle, and about the growing cleavage among its tribes" (Israeli Identity At the Heat of the Debate on Service, July 5, 2012).

It is ironic that The New York Times used the word "tribes" to refer to the Jewish people, almost throwing a Biblical light on the entire confrontation. The author of the article may have had his or her own reason for invoking the term, but the larger question in all of this is: Why did Divine Providence choose it? And, not just the usage of such a word, but what is Hashgochah Pratis bringing about through all of this, and at this stage of history, and specifically in 5772, of all years?

That is the bigger question, after all, since nothing happens by accident, and certainly nothing as big as this issue with so many major consequences. In the bigger picture, it is not Israeli Prime Minister Binyomin Netanyahu and all of his political allies and rivals (only in Israeli politics can they all work against each other and together at the same time) who are engineering the attack on the foundation of the Israeli yeshivah world, but God Himself, and the question is why? As the Talmud makes clear (Chullin 7b), and Kabbalah explains how, no one is affected by anything by accident.

(This does not mean that the Prime Minister and all who join with him are not answerable for their role in the entire episode. They will be. It just means that they wouldn't have thought to do what they are doing, or have the means to be carry it out, if God wasn't involved in some way, and on some

level.)

Maybe it's because the time has come. With Iran about to become nuclear and the Israeli government confident about its ability to defend against any kind of attack, perhaps God is preparing to humble the Jewish people in advance of the Final Redemption. Perhaps God is allowing the Israelis themselves to sleep in the bed they have been making for years, or to hang from the noose they have been tying for so long now. "Fine," God might be saying, "You want to attribute your safety and success to yourselves, and feel confident enough to interfere with Torah learning? Go ahead, and let's see where that leads you!"

However, though God might be saying that to the secular community, what is He telling us, if a.) Torah Jews leave the country to continue studying in the Diaspora at this late stage of history, b.) many are actually drafted into military service, or c.) many run to enlist in community service to avoid the army? Either way, the heydays of uninterrupted Torah learning in Eretz Yisroel for many young up and coming Torah scholars may be at an end, God forbid, and that is as much our problem as theirs. Of course, for some religious Jews, especially those for whom this is not an issue for them or their children, these are welcomed results. After all, the rabbis have taught about the importance of working as well as learning, and clearly some people ought to be doing both. Furthermore, some who do learn full-time have fallen into situations that have increased the financial burden of the Torah community, something that is not necessarily sanctioned by Torah tradition. Indeed, if it wasn't for the army issue, they might have gone into the business sector on their own.

The only problem is that if the Israeli government carries through with its plans to draft all Torah students in one manner or another, then many of the up and coming Torah scholars will be yanked from learning, though their learning is crucial for the future of the Jewish people and the security of the country, perhaps even the rest of the world. After all, secular leaders see Torah study as superfluous anyhow, and therefore feel no pressing need to distinguish between one yeshivah student and another, and no one can tell them otherwise.

It reminds me of the joke about the Orthodox rabbi who, one early and fine Shabbos morning, could not control himself as he walked past the golf course on the way to shul, and decided to quietly and secretly hit one hole. As the angels watched in horror from above, especially since, after teeing off, the rabbi's ball sailed towards an extremely unlikely hole-in-one, they fiercely questioned the Divine Providence. However, God put them all at ease when he answered, "Who's he going to tell?"

As an Israeli Orthodox Jew, I feel very much the same way. Who can we talk to? To whom can we explain the dangers of disrupting Torah study in a country surrounded by mortal enemies, which are surrounded by additional mortal enemies of the Jewish people, some of whom may already have destructive nuclear capability? Who, with any power to change the situation, will listen and take the threat seriously enough to stay the decree and avoid disaster? No one anymore. Likewise with respect to the Torah community as well. Who is there to explain that living off to the side and

rejecting the growing secular Israeli community for so many decades, as if doing so would make them go away, may not have been the best approach to our future as a nation? To whom can we explain among our own that just waiting for the Final Redemption may not have been enough, and that a greater appreciation of the gift of Eretz Yisroel might have been in order all these years?

Furthermore, it might be asked, why didn't we ferret out on our own those who should have been working or performing civil service instead of learning, either part time or full time? The reality of the situation is that living in Eretz Yisroel involves some physical risk, and for some, given their approach to learning and the ability to do so, the bigger mitzvah may have been to be involved, on some level, in some way, in the physical defense of the country. By hiding such people we have now endangered the entire Israeli yeshivah world.

What were we thinking? We had so many warnings of the direction the country was going, so why didn't we anticipate the problems that would eventually arise and plan for them? Was there even a way to do this, or did the time for solutions come and go years ago, virtually unnoticed, and now, like people on a plane about to crash, all we can do is brace ourselves for the inevitable and potentially destructive impact? Now, all of us may be forced to pay a price for the turn of events. Thinking about the situation as it stands right now, I am also reminded of a movie I saw decades ago as a young boy. Ironically, it was called, of all things, "Tora, Tora, Tora," which in Japanese means, "Attack, Attack, Attack." For those who do not recall, the movie was about the incredibly successful Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor back in 1941.

I don't remember many details from the movie (I was a young boy at the time), but I do remember the ominous statement of the Japanese Admiral who, when proudly told by his officer of the success of the returning bombers, said, "We have just awoken a sleeping giant . . ." For him, unlike for the rest of his countrymen, Japanese success had just become a harbinger for eventual Japanese defeat.

History shows just how correct the Admiral had been, since it was the attack on Pearl Harbor that woke the Americans out of their pacifist slumber and forced them to enter the war. More importantly, the attack on Pearl Harbor eventually resulted in the Americans dropping two nuclear bombs on Japan, forcing the Japanese people into a total and humiliating surrender.

Thus, as Defense Minister Ehud Barak, who initiated the Tal Commission when he had been Prime Ministers, and his cohorts, return to base, so-to-speak, to celebrate their victory over the Torah world, they do so without an appreciation of how the sleeping giant they are awakening. As a political party, the Charedi world may lack bite, but as representatives of God and Torah in this world, their welfare should be more of a concern than Iran and its push for a nuclear bomb, since they are what stands between mankind and the null and void to which Creation can't wait to return.

In the movie, the wise Japanese Admiral had previously expressed his concerns about attacking the American's Pacific Fleet back in Japan, during the planning stages. However, at that time, no one

listened to him, and only four years later did his words finally appear prophetic. But, of course, by that time, the destruction of the Japanese nation was so massive that "I told you so" could no longer provide any meaningful satisfaction. The Admiral would rather have been wrong.

Here too. The time will come when the folly of the secular world, and the ambivalence of the religious world, will become evident to all. At some point, after the fact, it will become clear that there was a lot of truth to the idea that many of those who were learning in yeshivah could contribute more to the defense of the Jewish nation with their heads in the Talmuds than with guns (or potatoes) in their hands. But, it will also become clear that the yeshivish approach to the rest of the nation and its role in the Final Redemption also fell short of Divine expectations.

Let us just pray, especially during these three weeks when we mourn past destructions and our lack of Temple and national unity, that when that time does come, there will still be enough of us around to appreciate these truths. Chazak!

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