

CURRENT EVENTS AND THE PARSHA

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

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

There is a lot of irony in the recent parshios. For example, last week's parshah, Parashas Shoftim, ended off with the mitzvah of Eglah Arufah, the procedure to follow when a person is found murdered outside of a city and the killer is unknown. This was in the same week that the body of Aaron Soffer, a 23-year old from Lakewood who had come to Eretz Yisroel to learn Torah, was finally found in the Jerusalem Forest.

Rav Aaron, a"h, had survived the war but died accidentally shortly after it. Though foul play is not suspected at all, there are similarities to the circumstances of the Eglah Arufah, perhaps even lessons to learn. And, so close to Yom Kippur when the goat was pushed off a precipice as an atonement for the Jewish people, perhaps, like the three teenage boys before him who were kidnapped and murdered, he too is an atonement for the Jewish nation and an important merit for the Final Redemption. It should come quickly in our time without any more suffering, and the families of these tzaddikim should be comforted among the mourners of Tzion and Yerushalayim.

This week's parshah talks about war, on the heels of one that we have just finished, at least for now, thank God. Ironical? Perhaps, but not as ironical as that it is a parshah that not only discusses war, but the Jewish way of waging one, at the same time that Israel is being investigated for war crimes.

"Terms of Engagement" does not refer to a couple serious enough to get married. It usually refers to the rules that stipulate when soldiers of a particular army are justified in engaging an enemy, and on what level. It is a way of trying to maintain some order in an area of life that can easily become extremely chaotic.

However, if you peruse such rulebooks, at least in the countries where they exist, I do not believe you will find some of the rules that you find in this week's parshah. Beginning with the laws of the Yafas Toar, the female captive, at the start of the parshah, to later laws regarding personal hygiene and which trees can be used for a siege, it is clear that the Torah not only wants to retain order even in war, but Godliness as well. We were made in the image of God and we have to live up to that image, as much as is humanly possible, even when it is difficult to do so.

Granted that the modern Israeli army did not base its "Terms of Engagement" on the Torah, it parallels it somewhat in theme and tone. In fact, it even goes further than the Torah does sometimes, which is why some Israeli soldiers get either injured or killed by the enemy, and

sometimes even by "friendly fire." Trying to maintain a high standard of civility, Jewish soldiers often go to battle against the fiercest of enemies with one hand tied behind their backs, so-to-speak.

This is why it is so ironic that the U.N. has even considered investigating Israel for war crimes, especially while Hamas, guilty of the most severe war crimes like using human shields and public executions of suspected traitors, are barely a blip on the U.N. radar. Who goes to war against an avowed enemy that would do everything it could to torture its citizens while still providing that enemy with things like electricity and water, as the Israelis did?

It is also interesting how the Palestinian people, at least the non-militant ones, would rather get rid of Hamas and get on with their lives. As CNN reported, many would like Hamas to leave, or to get out themselves, but either way, they want to distance themselves from the Jihad extremists. Many know I suspect that they could have easily prospered and perhaps gained more independence, had they worked with the Israelis as opposed to against them. What they had built is now lost, thanks to Hamas.

On the other side of the border, the Israeli military was doing everything it could to keep the war away from its citizens. And yet, many of those citizens chose to drive close to the battle front to bring their soldiers whatever they could to make their being at war a little less difficult. If they didn't drive down there themselves, they sent food, clothing, or whatever they heard was missing with those who did make the trip. And Israel is guilty of improper wartime behavior?

It is true that many non-Israeli military personnel and experts in different countries, not blinded by the hype and falsifying of the media or the ridiculous political posturing of Western leaders before the Arab world, criticized Israel as well. Their criticism, however, was not for being harsh on the Palestinian people, but for not being harsh enough, complaining that Israel failed to finish the job they started. Any realistic government in the Western world, they claimed, would have done the same thing.

So the Lord said, "Let there be ISIS!" and a darkness, like the one in Gaza, spread throughout the countries of Syria and Iraq that put dread in the hearts of the leaders of the Western world.

But the President said, "It is not the same. ISIS are extremist Muslims who do not follow the Koran, for no where does it have say that infidels can be raped, pillaged, and beheaded at will." Confidently, the leader went off to play golf.

But ISIS replied, "Sure it does," and they have quoted the actual verses to support their actions, before concluding, "We are now off to help our brothers in Gaza against the Zionist monster."

So the United Nations said, "We are indeed concerned and appalled by the actions of these Hamas-like warriors, but we are too busy trying to prove that the Israelis are guilty of heinous war crimes to respond to the problem."

So the Lord looked down from Heaven and relented, saying, "Did I really make all of this? Did I not

make man in My image? Why am I more impressed with the vegetation and animals kingdoms? So, the Lord doth brought the war of Gog and Magog to clean house and reset the historical clock, and to get on with the Messianic Era.

It reminds me of a joke I heard recently that goes like this:

The rabbi had wanted to address the issue of death and dying before his congregation for some time now, but could not find the appropriate occasion. However, when the month of Elul began and there was a sense that the Day of Judgment was fast approaching, he felt it was as good a time as any.

"You're all going to die," he told his congregants. "At some point in time," he emphasized, "each and every one of you from this congregation is going to die and there is nothing you can do about it. It is the way of the world!"

As he paused to see how his normally dreamy-eyed congregants were taking to his message, he was pleased to see that this time he had hit his mark. Most looked concerned, and some began to cry. Only one person, an elderly gentleman sitting in the front row whom he did not quite recognize, had a smile on his face. The rabbi, curious, decided to go over after he was finished speaking and to ask the man why he was unaffected by his harsh words.

"Tell me," he later asked the man, "I noticed that you were smiling throughout my entire drash while everyone else was either crying or almost in tears. Why were you so happy?"

The man said, "Because I'm not from this congregation. I'm only here visiting my sister!"

I've often compared the coming of Moshiach to the landing of a large plane in turbulent weather. You can almost feel the captain struggling with the controls to keep the plane level as it goes up and down, or from side to side. There is a certain amount of give and take in the battle against the weather on the outside while trying to maintain the comfort and safety of the passengers on the inside. This is true, not just for the Jewish people, but for the world in general. We are far from perfect, but our imperfections are God's business, not that of the leaders of the world. True, they are His instruments of justice against the Jewish people in the meantime, but only to a certain extent. The Original Snake, many say, was not punished because he did his "job," but because he did it too well.

Likewise, if the world chooses to make Hamas only a Jewish problem, and to go out of their way to make Jewish survival more difficult than God wants it to be, they too will be pulled into that struggle. If they believe that they are not part of the "congregation" against whom evil has declared Jihad, then it will pursue them in ways of which they have not yet dreamed.

The same thing is true for Jews who live distant from the hot spots of war. It may look to them as if the situation is only dangerous for Israeli Jews, that they too are only "visiting" and therefore not subject to the perils of the "host" community. Nothing could be farther from the truth, first of all

because ISIS terrorists are sneaking into the U.S. through Mexican tunnels (how ironic), and secondly, if the Twin Towers taught us anything at all, it is that when God wants to export danger to far away lands, He does it just as easily as keeping it local.

Since we are still officially in the "Seven Shabboses of Consolation" between Tisha B'Av and Rosh Hashanah, I will end off on a more positive note. Just like there is a calm before the storm, there is also a storm before the calm. Everything happening today, as confusing and even as evil as things seem to get, and as rampant as falsehood seems to be, is just part of the final steps in advance of Moshiach's arrival.

In spite of the fact that so many Jews are not Torah observant today, and that so many who are have the wrong idea about what to be focusing on now at this late stage of history, we have witnessed tremendous mercy from God. There are countless examples, but one of the most recent is the discovery of the tunnels that were meant to be used this Rosh Hashanah for a deadly surprise attack on Israelis. It could have even created an existential threat to Jewish survival, here and abroad.

As one person has told me on many occasions, he is thankful that he's not in charge of history. If he was, he said, he probably would have done away with the Jewish people a long time ago, given how far we are from our intended purpose and direction. He has difficulty understanding God's patience, but like the rest of us, is eternally grateful for it. He usually ends off by saying, half-jokingly, "No wonder we're such spoiled brats."

It's true. We really do get away with so much, both as individuals and as a nation. That's because God loves us so much, and though we may not believe in ourselves, He still believes in us. The least we can do is believe in Him, and more importantly, trust in Him exclusively. It's not simple to do, given our Western orientation and false sources of security. But it is essential, and it really is the right of passage through these turbulent waters of Chevlei Moshiach—the birth pangs of Moshiach.

Text

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