

WAR OF WARS

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

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

IT'S REALLY QUITE amazing when you think about it, how the idea of war is such an ACCEPTED part of mankind's history. Not always a WANTED part of history, but accepted, yes.

What can we do? It has just happened so many times in so many ways and in so many places. And the energy that fuels them doesn't seem to be dying down either at this late stage of history. If anything, many are "suiting up" for the greatest and latest of all time, the War of Gog and Magog.

War started early with man, right after expulsion from the Garden of Eden. It was a small war, but a deadly one. There was only one casualty, Hevel, but as Rashi points out, generations of descendants also died that day, when Hevel left this world childless. When a man is killed, all his potential progeny dies with him, and God takes note of that.

Think of all the blood that had been needlessly shed over thousands of years, all the times families have had to deal with the loss of loved ones who only died because of war. It would be one thing if people died immediately. The pain would only be momentary. But so often people don't, and they have had to suffer terribly for extended periods of time.

The suffering is not only on one side of the gun either. Killing people, as quickly and easily as it happens on movie screens, is rarely as easy in real life. Even taking the life of an enemy is still taking a life. It is a very HEAVY thing to take life away from a creation of God. A lot of first-time killers in the army end up needing some kind of therapy.

But even that is not as bad as when a person gets used to killing another living being. I was recently told a story of the Alter of Slobodka, who witnessed a beating up of Jews through the window of his office. He could hear the anti-Semitic slurs being hurled, as the perpetrators beat their victims close-to-death.

"Where do you see Godliness in these bullies?" the Alter asked his student, who saw nothing of the sort.

"By the way they have to first dehumanize a Jew to inflict the damage. Otherwise, they would have a difficult time hurting another human being."

But humans have the capacity to go beyond this point and become so callous that some can even kill for hire. Even animals don't do that, meaning that, if they're not hungry, then prey can walk right

in front of them and they won't attack.

And then there is genocide, when some try to obliterate the reality of masses of people. It's one thing if it is commanded DIRECTLY by God, but something else altogether when it is a decision men have made. If God didn't call Amalek the sum total of all evil, and commanded their annihilation, we wouldn't have been able to do it on our own, no matter how much we hate them.

Ironically, the one kind of war that we fight every day and which has the greatest potential to destroy a person, we don't pay attention to, or notice at all. It's actually alluded to in the very word for "war," which is "milchamah." Looking closely at the word, it becomes clear that the root of it is another word, "lechem," which means nothing more than "bread."

What does bread have to do with war? That's an easy one. It has to do with survival, which all of us are obsessed with, because we're programmed to survive. Food is a central part of our survival program, and when that is perceived to be at risk, we fight to protect it.

But there is another level to this discussion as well. It has to do with what we call "survival," that technically can go WELL beyond what it really is. Though our yetzer haras may convince us, with the help of Marketing and Advertising, that we can't survive without all that extra materialism, the truth may be, and usually is, VERY different.

As the Talmud warns, it is very hard to eat at two "tables" at the same time. Simply put, spirituality comes at the cost of materialism, and vice-versa. You can have BOTH, but whenever you increase one you simultaneously, and not necessarily proportionally, reduce the other. As much as it seems to the contrary, Jews do not get to have their "cake" and eat it too.

Well, not in THIS world at least. This is the world in which we BAKE our cake, and the next one is when we EAT it. And it's a much better cake than any we could ever find in this world. This makes it tragic that people are so willing to "eat" in this world and sacrifice part of their "cake" in the next one.

It's a battle to be sure, now more than ever before. It's like being famished, and then forced to sit in a restaurant of fine food and not being able to eat anything. How hard is that? EXCRUCIATINGLY. This used to be a form of torture in the old days (and kind of is today every time a poor person walks by the window of a restaurant with an empty stomach he has never filled).

It all comes down to how much a person is willing to compromise, how much cake they want to eat in this world versus how much they want to eat in the next one. But that depends upon how much one really believes that the one in the world to come is so much greater than the one they can find in this world. Most people don't even think about it from day to day, let alone feel as if they are at war with their yetzer hara.

This week's parsha, and Elul for that matter, says, "Think about it." Especially in today's world that is so materialistic and immersed in physical pleasures. As if to make matters a lot more complicated, even religious Jews today enjoy financial equality, and can afford many luxuries that once were only

available to wealthy gentiles.

It's not about sinning, per se. It's not about eating treif meat to have a better steak, or going places Jews should not because of modesty issues. Countless material pleasures can easily be enjoyed within a halachic framework. It's not even about being a "menuvel b'reshus haTorah," as the Ramban speaks about at the beginning of Parashas Kedoshim.

Rather, it is about doing with less in this world to have a LOT more in the next one, where God REALLY wants us to enjoy ourselves. If it was about sinning, it would be less of a battle even for the average religious Jew. It's about having less of what is permissible, just to avoid using up merit meant for the World-to-Come. And THAT is the biggest battle we have to fight.