

WHO ISN'T AFRAID?

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

Who Isn't Afraid?

Let's study a verse together.

(20:1) "When you go to war against your enemy and you see a force greater than your own do not fear them because the G-d who took you from Egypt G-d is with you?"

By what scale do we decide who is and is not an enemy?

How can G-d command us "not to be afraid?"

Why does the Pasuk need to identify G-d as "the G-d who took you from Egypt?"

There are two basic reasons for fear: 1. Fear of the known; 2. Fear of the unknown. Fear of the known includes: pains, discovery (getting caught), presentation (e.g. public speaking), and the myriad of fears associated with a lack of self-confidence. Fear of the unknown includes all situations involving the unknown.

The way to differentiate between the two types of fears is to see whether or not removing the unknown dissipates the fear. For example: Many people fear the start of a new job or situation. Students, young and old, fear the start of a new year, semester, or assignment. New employees are often nervous the first few days on the job. However, once the students have met the teachers and assessed their levels of expectation, and once the new employee has had a chance to adjust and learn the office's social protocols and politics, the nervousness and fear recedes along with the degree of unknown. On the other hand, if the fear does not begin to dissipate, the fear is not the fear of the unknown. Instead, the fear is more likely the result of a lack of confidence or fear of success. Undoubtedly, the two fears are related and often overlap. I am also not discounting the fears that might be symptomatic of deeper concerns, both organic and psychological. However, the normal gamut of fears should fall between the two categories of fear of the known and fear of the unknown.

What about the fear of the inevitable? G-d-forbid someone is diagnosed with a terminal disease. The understandable reaction is fear. For the patient it is the fear of pain, dying, or both. For the family and friends it is the fear of loss and the unknown manner in which both the illness and or the death will impact their lives. As you can see, knowing the inevitable does not dissipate all fears. It may have

dissipated the fear of not knowing what was wrong; however, it is replaced with a greater fear of the unknown as it pertains to the future in many different arenas. A family might decide that it is better for their loved one to remain with the first level fear of the unknown rather than replace it with the secondary and possibly more profound fear of knowing the terminal diagnosis but fearing its impact on self and others.

War is certainly a fear filled time for every intelligent person. Granted, there are those who are so blissfully ignorant that they are unaware of the meaning or potential consequences of warfare and therefore appear to be fearless in the face of danger. Occasionally they may prove to be the stuff of heroes and legends but for the most part they are the stuff of derisive comments, humor, and cannon fodder. They are certainly not the ones we would include in strategizing for the upcoming battles. At best they personify the verse, "G-d watches over fools."

The nation about to enter the Promised Land was not ignorant of the meaning or consequences of warfare. Starting with the war against Amalek and culminating with the wars against Canaan, Og, Sichon, and Midian the Jews were well aware of the consequences of war. Yet, G-d commanded them not to be afraid. More so is the fact that the commandment is directed to us as well. We too are enjoined by G-d not to be afraid when going to battle against our enemies. It was one thing for the generation of the Exodus that was incubated within the embrace of miracles to be fearless in the face of warfare but for us to be fearless would be tantamount to reckless abandon and irresponsibility. How can G-d command us to be fearless?

As the Bnai Yisroel stood with their feet to the Yam Suf (Red Sea) and their backs to the Egyptian army, Moshe said to the nation, "Do not be afraid. G-d will wage the war for you while you remain silent!" In Az Yashir (Song at the Sea) Moshe and the Bnai Yisroel proclaimed G-d as the "Man of War." By the war against Amalek Moshe stood above the warring sides with his hands raised toward heaven so that they would know that victory was G-d's doing and not their own doing. However, in the war against Amalek the Bnai Yisroel were not told, "not to be afraid." They were told to have Emunah (faith) and trust in the inevitability of G-d's invincibility.

At the end of the 40 years, after the death of Aharon, the Canaanites attacked the nation and took hostages. The nation recommitted themselves to G-d and were victorious. In the war against Sichon, the Bnai Yisroel were told to engage him in battle. They did so victoriously, despite the fact that he and his armies were considered nearly invincible. Before going to battle they were not enjoined to be fearless; however, before going to battle against Og G-d told Moshe, "do not fear him, I have given him over into your hands just as I did with Sichon?"

The Talmud related that when the young David went to battle against Goliath, he was struck by fear at the sight of the towering warrior. Comparing himself to the legendary Goliath he recognized the potential consequences of combat and battle and was understandably afraid. Yet, when he heard Goliath's derisive denial of G-d's dominion over the world the lad who would one day be king looked

up at the looming mountain of death and said, "If that be the case you are nothing. If you deny G-d then your legendary invincibility are nothing more than the illusions of your own delusions. Therefore, I have nothing to fear. Unadorned by the protection of armor, unschooled in the skills of battle, unarmed except with my sling, I will be victorious because I come to do battle in the name of G-d, the invincible G-d of the Jews!"

The most important question a soldier had to answer before going to battle was, "Why are you going to battle?" If the answer was anything other than, "I was told by my King, I was told by the Kohain Gadol (High Priest), and I was told by the Sanhedrin (supreme court) to do so, that soldier would not be allowed to go to war.

The Torah details a series of questions that the Kohanim and officers asked the troops before going into a "Milchemes Rishus - an elective war. (Wars that were Michemes Mitzvah - wars commanded by G-d, were not optional; everyone had to participate). "Has anyone just built a new home for his family? Has anyone just planted a vineyard? Has anyone just married but not yet consummated the marriage? If yes, return to your homes. You are not to go to war!" Lastly, "Is there anyone who is fearful of going to battle? Are you afraid that you have sinned (see Rashi 20:8) and do not deserve G-d's protection? If so, return home!"

The Torah did not assume that a normal person could go to war and not be afraid. For a soldier not to be afraid would rightfully make us question his suitability for battle. We are not invested in providing cannon fodder for the war effort. However, the Torah wanted us to look at the fear and decide whether or not we had reason to remain afraid.

In the aftermath of the Exodus the Jews were afraid as they viewed the might of Egypt bearing down on them. The fear was both primal as well as intellectual. From the primal position it was the first time the collective might of Egypt was being directed against the whole of the gathered Jewish nation. It was a situation that did not have a precedent. (Except with Lavan and Yakov ? which is why we mention it in the Hag >From the intellectual point of view, the Bnai Yisroel were not convinced that the time of the redemption had arrived. Maybe they were supposed to wait for the end of the 400 years. 210 years was 190 years too early and could have spelled inevitable disaster and destruction. "Better to return to Mitzrayim than to die in the desert". At least in Mitzrayim the nation had the chance of surviving even if it meant another 190 years of slavery and persecution! Therefore, Moshe told them, "Do not be afraid! The redemption is now for that is G-d's will!"

Soon after Kriyas Yam Suf (Parting of the Sea), Amalek attacked them. For the Jews it was their first confrontation with unadulterated hatred. Moshe did not have to tell them not to be afraid. They remembered G-d's might and majesty at Kriyas Yam Suf. To be fearless they only had to remain focused on G-d as the cause of victory. So long as they saw Moshe's arms raised toward heaven they knew that victory was inevitable because G-d was truly the Man of War.

At the end of the 40 years, before the battle with Canaan to free the hostages, the nation was not

told to be fearless. On their own they realized that victory could only come from G-d and they accepted that in some small measure they had failed in their Emunah (faith). Therefore, they recommitted themselves to G-d and were victorious in battle. Flush with that victory, they went to war against Sichon and did not have to be commanded to be fearless. The Jews went to war certain of victory.

Before the battle against Og, G-d told Moshe not to be afraid. I believe that the injunction was directed specifically to Moshe. His concern was for the unique "survival" quality that Og had exhibited. (According to tradition, Og was a survivor of the Great Flood. The G-dless reality of that world was alive and well in the being of Og. He believed himself invincible, and divine.) His concern was not whether or not they could be victorious. If G-d decreed that they would be victorious, of course they would be victorious! Moshe's concern was whether or not it was time for Og's demise. Maybe his merits, whatever they may have been to guarantee his survival until that time in history, were still in effect. G-d's ways are a mystery and even Moshe did not know how G-d calibrated the scales of justice. Therefore, G-d reassured Moshe that Og's time had come. "Into your hands have I given Og." G-d had waited for Moshe to arrive on the scene so that the world would understand that the pre-diluvian ways of Og were finished and the new era of Torah and the Jewish people had arrived.

The final battle against Midian was a direct retribution for sending their daughters to seduce the Bnai Yisroel. The Jews understood that the war was to punish the Midianites. Led by Pinchas, they did not fear the outcome. They knew that they waged a war on behalf of G-d. They were the instrument of His will. They did not have to be told not to be afraid.

However, as Moshe prepared the Jews for his death and their entry into the Promised Land it was clear that they were afraid. It would be the first time that they would go to battle without him and Moshe had to address their fear. He had to remind them that he, like them, was inconsequential to the outcome. Only their Emunah in G-d would sustain them in battle and assure victory. The confidence of Am Yisroel that they will be victorious is because they know that they are inconsequential. Like Dovid, they are nothing more than G-d's tools at a given moment in time, and G-d does not fail. So long as the Jewish warrior is certain that he wages a war on G-d's behalf there is no reason to be afraid. In fact, fear reveals an inner doubt that renders the warrior unfit for battle.

What kind of person becomes a warrior for the sake of G-d? Considering the horror of terrorism and the perverted beliefs of those who claim that they are warriors for the sake of G-d as they mercilessly maim and kill, how can we be certain who is and who isn't a true warrior? I would like to suggest that a true warrior must be like Dovid. He must live to emulate G-d and believe that he has been chosen by Him. However, most important he must be a Mirachem? someone who is compassionate and merciful. He must be a warrior who is first and foremost merciful.

Understandably, compassion and warring may make for a schizophrenic soldier; so, when does a warrior know when to be compassionate and when not to be?

First, Moshe had to clarify for them the definition of an "enemy". An enemy is not just an adversary. Rashi explains that the difference between warring brothers and warring enemies is that a brother will have compassion on his vanquished brother whereas an enemy will not have mercy on the one he vanquishes. Furthermore, because mercy is a Jewish trait we assume that others will also be merciful. Moshe informed his warriors that the enemy will not be the same. They will not be merciful. They are the enemy.

Rashi is not defining an enemy in general. Rashi is defining who the Jewish people should consider an enemy. Someone who will not have mercy on a captive is someone with whom the Bnai Yisroel cannot co-exist. They are enemies with whom we do not share a common language or purpose. They are the enemy that King David described as "When we speak peace they speak of war."

The bottom line for the Jewish warrior is that so long as he remembers that he goes to battle because it was decreed by G-d, or confirmed by G-d, there is no cause for fear. However, he must be confident that he is worthy of being G-d's instrument. If he is confident, he is commanded not to be afraid; if not, he must not go to war.

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