

THE SPECIAL ROLE OF THE KOHEN WHO REMINDS US OF THE SOURCE OF SUCCESS AT WAR

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Parshas Shoftim

The Special Role of the Kohen Who Reminds Us of the Source of Success at War

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 822 - Making a Chanukas HaBayis For A New Home. Good Shabbos!

Before the Jewish people go out to war, a specially designated Kohen addresses the nation. He tells them "Hear O' Israel. You are going out today to do battle. You should not be afraid because the Almighty One will help you..." [Devorim 20:3] The Kohen who made this speech was known as the Priest Anointed for War (Kohen Mashuach Milchama). A Kohen was specifically anointed with the sacred anointing oil to have this job and to deliver this charge to the people before they went out to battle.

In several ways, the Kohen Mashuach Milchama is similar to the Kohen Gadol [the High Priest]. Unlike a regular Kohen, but in common with the Kohen Gadol, he is forbidden to marry a widow but must marry a virgin. Likewise he is given the privilege (in common with the High Priest) to pose questions to the Urim v'Tumim. In fact although there was an office called the segan [vice] Kohen Gadol, the Rambam writes [in Hilchos Klei HaMikdash 4:19] that the Kohen anointed for war outranked the segan Kohen Gadol.

It seems strange that the only known duty of the Kohen Mashuach Milchama was to address the people before they went out to battle. A person could perform such a job without working a single day his whole life! Wars are not an everyday occurrence. One can go years or decades without needing to make such a speech. It is conceivable that despite his exalted position such a Kohen never had to carry out the duties of his office.

This anomaly leads us to a simple question: Why not assign this job to the Kohen Gadol himself? Why create a new job title? Why not let the Kohen Gadol, or if not him the segan Kohen Gadol,

perform this job if, and when, it becomes necessary to go to war?

Let us point out something else. The Rambam writes [in Hilchos Melachim 1:7] (regarding a son inheriting the throne from his father the king) "And not only regarding monarchy alone but all position of authority and all appointments in Israel are passed down through inheritance to one's son and one's grandson forever, providing the son is a worthy successor to his father in wisdom and in Fear (of Heaven)". However, the Rambam writes [in Hilchos Klei HaMikdash 4:21] that the position of Mashuach Milchama is an exception to the rule. This job does not pass on through inheritance to one's son, but rather the son of a Kohen Anointed for War is just a regular Kohen. Why does this exception exist?

Let us raise a third difficulty: The pasuk [verse] introducing the job of the Mashuach Milchama states: "And it will be when you draw near to battle the Kohen will approach (v'nigash haKohen) and speak to the people." [Devorim 20:2]. The two words v'nigash haKohen seem superfluous. What do they add? Obviously, the Kohen will not be standing a mile away when he gives the charge to the people. It is understood that he must approach the people before he begins to speak. In addition, usually the verb "hagasha" in Tanach connotes prayer. The Medrash tells us on the words "VaYigash eilav Yehudah" [Bereishis 44:18] that Yehudah approached Yosef with a prayer. Similarly when we find "Vayigash Eliyahu" [Melachim I 18:36] the prophet Elijah offered a prayer. Likewise, the words here "v'nigash haKohen" seem to imply that the Kohen Mashuach Milchama uttered some kind of prayer. The Torah does not tell us what prayer he uttered. What was it?

Finally, the Torah instructs that anyone who was afraid to go to battle was to return home [Devorim 20:8]. The Talmud states [Sotah 44b] that in addition to the simple interpretation of excluding someone who was actually afraid of doing battle on the battle field, this pasuk refers to someone who was afraid of aveiyros [sins] he committed, which might make him undeserving of being saved in a time of danger. The Gemara says this would even include someone who merely violated the prohibition of talking between the time he put on his hand Tefillin and the time he put on his head Tefillin. Why, we ask, did the Talmud cite this specific example of a "small aveiyra"?

To answer all four questions, I would like to quote a very interesting approach from Rav Yitzchak Menachem Weinberg, the Tolner Rebbe, in his Sefer Heimah Yenachamuni. Rav Weinberg suggests that fighting a war presents a person with a very difficult spiritual test. A person needs to go to battle with weapons and with military strategy. A person needs to use the latest technology and to fight the battle the ways battles are fought -- with soldiers, arms, battle plans, etc. We have a strong perception and gut feeling that an army is victorious because of military prowess.

Viewing the matter from a spiritual point of view, we all know that this is not true. We know that the outcome of a battle is determined "Not with valor and not with strength but with My Spirit, says the L-rd of Hosts" [Zecharia 4:6]. We know that to think it is our military might that made us successful is heresy. It is falling into the trap of "My strength and the power of my hand made for me all this valor."

[Devorim 8:17]

Those of us who remember the Six Day War in 1967 remember how the entire world was talking about the brilliant strategy of the Israeli army which defeated armies of tens of millions of Arabs. They decimated the forces of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria in less than a week's time. There was a pervasive feeling of "we are so much smarter than them", "we are so much braver than them", "we are so much more technologically advanced than them". The attitude was indeed "My strength and the power of my hand made for me all this valor." This is a "treife hashkafa" - an improper, mistaken philosophy.

Certainly, we cannot rely on miracles, but we must always keep in the forefront of our minds that "It is He who gives us the strength to have valor" [Devorim 8:18].

How can people avoid the trap? How can those who have to fight that battle and be out there in the foxhole and who are so apt to fall into the trap of "my strength and the power of my hands..." avoid the trap? What can prevent them from making this tragic mistake?

Prevention of this mistaken attitude was the job of the Kohen Mashuach Milchama. The Kohen Mashuach Milchama prevented them from adopting this "treife hashkafa" by telling them "Hear O Israel you are drawing near today towards a war with your enemy. Do not let your hearts become soft; do not fear nor be alarmed; do not be frightened of them..." That was his message. We may have the arms and we may have the most brilliant generals and the best strategy but we must know that in the final analysis it is the Master of the Universe who will help us win this war.

That was his job and that is why it says "v'nigash haKoehn v'Diber el ha'Am" [the Priest drew near to speak to the nation]. This was not just a speech to the people. It was also a prayer to G-d. "Please, G-d, do not let my people fall prey to this foreign philosophy of 'the strength of my arms makes this valor for me'".

That is why the Kohen Gadol was not given this job. The Kohen Gadol spends his entire day and his entire life in the Beis HaMikdash. He is a person who is entirely spiritual. This job description does not require a holy person it requires a person who knows the temptations of what it is to be out there in the "real world" and to deal with these feelings of "it is my strength which accomplished all this". This job requires a unique special person.

That is why the Kohen Mashuach Milchama son does not automatically inherit the position. The position requires rare talents. Every generation needs a new Kohen Mashuach Milchama.

That is also the reason why the Talmud cites a person who spoke between putting on the hand Tefillin and the head Tefillin as the example of one who returns home from battle due to being afraid of his aveiros. The Tefillin shel Yad [Hand Tefillin] represent the attitude of "the strength of my hand". It is the head, the brain, which has to rein in such a philosophy of life. The Head has to rule over the Hand. One who pauses between donning the hand Tefillin and the head Tefillin believes that there

can be a separation between the two. He believes there can be a time when the philosophy of the Hand rules by itself and without being reined in by the philosophy of the Head. Such a person indeed must retreat from the battlefield.

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