

KI SEITZEI (DEUTERONOMY 21:10-25:18)

Captivating Beauty

2004 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplovitz

It's not easy to be G-d's P.R. man. It's a good thing He doesn't need one.

I was an eighteen-year old Yeshiva high school graduate. He was a twenty-or-so-year old Brandeis dropout/survivor. He had left Brandeis because he admired the religious commitment of his cousins. He felt he could no longer reconcile the immorality of his co-ed college dorm with his new-found Torah values.

I was now a full-time student in a Yeshiva in Jerusalem. He, too, was a full-time student. He was attending Ohr Somayach, a Yeshiva for late-starters. He came by one Shabbos afternoon to visit. "Let's study Torah," he said to me enthusiastically. "Let's study the Torah Portion."

That visit took place exactly 30 years ago. We opened up to Ki Seitzei, this week's Torah Portion. I was soon sorry we hadn't selected another topic:

When you wage war against your enemies, G-d will give you victory over them, and you will take prisoners. If you see a beautiful woman among the prisoners, and desire her, you may take her as a wife. (Deuteronomy, 21:10-11)

"What?" asked my friend. "How can this be? How can the Torah allow a soldier to force a captive woman to be his wife?"

He couldn't believe it. This fellow had adopted a Torah lifestyle because he saw a system of ethics and morality. He just didn't see the ethics in allowing marauding Jewish soldiers to have their way with defenseless prisoners of war!

I told him that "*Its (the Torah's) ways are ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peace,*" (Proverbs, 3:17) and that we have to sometimes struggle to find the pleasantness and fairness of Torah Law. It is not always clear at first glance. Sometimes it is not even clear at fiftieth glance! But the fairness is there. The wisdom is there. We just have to try hard enough to find it. G-d doesn't need better P.R. It is OUR job to strive to learn the lessons He wants to teach us.

He wasn't impressed. New to Torah Judaism, he was very disillusioned by the fact that the Torah would condone such primitive behavior.

I was concerned that this fellow had been turned off to Torah Judaism.

I needn't have worried. Last I heard, he married the daughter of a famous Rosh Yeshiva (Yeshiva dean) and, in typical Jewish fashion, went into his father-in-law's "business" as a teacher.

But what about his question? Where **is** the fairness? How does the Torah allow this man to take a defenseless woman away from her family and force her to be his wife?

The Talmud's explanation (Kiddushin, 21b-22a) is difficult to understand. "*Lo dib**rah Torah elah k'neged Yeitzer Hara – the Torah is merely addressing the Evil Inclination.*" The Torah accommodates human passions.

The Talmud seems to be telling us that Torah recognizes that a person is inclined to sin. Therefore the Torah provides a more acceptable way to do it! Since the soldier is going to force himself on the woman anyway, he may as well do so in the context of marriage.

This is very difficult. Is the Torah's lesson that we accept unacceptable behavior, as long as we pretend that it is something that it isn't? Does calling this molestation marriage make it any less despicable?!

Let us read the rest of the Torah passage:

When you bring her home, she must shave her head and let her nails grow. She must remove her garments of captivity (seductive clothing, worn for the express purpose of making her attractive -- Rashi's commentary) and remain in your house for a full month, crying for her father and mother. Only then may you come to her and live with her, making her your wife. If you do not desire her, however, you must send her away free... (Ibid. Verses 12-14)

This seems to make the situation even worse! Not only is the soldier permitted to intimately violate his prisoner. He degrades her in other ways as well! She can't wear her own clothes; he forces her to shave her head. She sits in his home and cries. WHAT'S GOING ON?!

I believe that this Mitzvah was never meant to be carried out.

Rashi, in his commentary on the Talmud, explains that the soldier is not permitted to be intimate with his captive until the end of her first month of captivity. In his commentary on the Torah, he explains the shaving and clothes change.

In the heat of battle, the soldier came across a beautiful, attractively dressed woman. He may be tempted to sin. The Torah says, "No! Keep your hands to yourself! Do you find her attractive? Are you sure? O.K., if you REALLY want her, you can have her. But let's first make sure you want her.

“Take her home. Get rid of the fancy clothes. Say good-bye to the alluring hair-do. When the make-up is gone and her nails look like witch claws and her eyes are red from tears, take a good look! Is THIS what you want?”

Rashi points out that this section comes right before the section dealing with a person who has two wives, one whom he loves, and the other whom he despises. The next section deals with the rebellious son. The Torah’s message is clear: Think very clearly about what you are doing. If you marry a woman because you found her attractive on the battlefield, you will eventually hate her. If you have children with a woman whom you hate, don’t expect them to be wonderful and well-adjusted. In other words, think very carefully before you act.

I quoted above from the Talmud that “*the Torah is merely addressing the Evil Inclination.*” Perhaps a better translation of “*kneged Yeitzer Hara*” is that “*the Torah is speaking AGAINST the evil inclination.*” The Torah is teaching a soldier how to fight against his natural inclinations.

The soldier has come into town, having just defeated the enemy. He is intoxicated by the thrill of victory. He has showed the enemy how powerful he is; he can do anything! He sees a beautiful woman among the captives.

The real problem is not that she is his captive. The problem is that HE is HER captive! She has captivated him with her beauty. He is tempted to sin.

The Torah provides a means of dealing with his passion. The Torah tells him to wait. If he can just get past this momentary attraction, he’ll think things through logically.

There are no statistics on the frequency of captive wives in Jewish history. I don’t know how many women were taken home from battle to be married. I doubt that there were many. And further, among those who were brought home, I doubt that many of them ended up being married after the month-long cooling-off period.

The month allowed times for cooler heads to prevail. You see, a person can’t always make a logical decision when he’s in the middle of a battle. Whether one lusts after a woman he shouldn’t marry or a fourth slice of cheesecake, he is usually sorry later on. The Torah is telling him not to jump into a situation he’s going to regret later. Think before you act.

Do you remember that insult you hurled at a co-worker in anger last year? Of course you do; he certainly does! Don't you wish you had taken a minute to think things through before you flew off the handle?

I used to be a pretty good writer; that talent has helped me on occasion. It has also gotten me into trouble. As a teenager, I once wrote a highly critical letter to a particular fellow. In the course of that letter, I insulted him and his wife. He wrote back that I owed him an apology. I apologized in my follow-up letter. A friend of mine spent Rosh Hashanah with him several years later; I asked him to send my best wishes and my apologies. Several years later, I saw him at a funeral. After the funeral, I said, "You know, I still cringe every time I think about that horrible letter I wrote to you about twenty years ago."

His response blew me away: "Don't worry about that letter. *I don't think I even have it anymore.*"

Wow.

How I wish I had never written that letter. How I wish I hadn't been so caught up in the passion of my anger that I sent that nasty letter without thinking about the consequences. If only I had stepped back and taken a few minutes to think about it.

The Torah addresses human nature. The soldier was not told how to accommodate his potential moral weakness. He was told how to OVERCOME it.

In the heat of battle, in the heat of an argument, in the pressured situation of having to make quick business decisions, we sometime act quickly. Too quickly!

Stop! Think it through. Step away from the situation and consider the long-term results that sometimes come from not-well-thought-out decisions. As we see from the soldier and his "war bride," allowing oneself the time to think things through logically allows one to see that a situation that he thought was beautiful is, in reality, rather ugly.

Don't be rash; think long and hard before making acting. The mistake we make today may haunt us for the rest of our lives. The right decisions, made with careful thought and introspection, can bring untold blessings that will last forever.

TORAH TALKKI SEITZEI (Deuteronomy 21:10-25:18)

Have a great Shabbos.

Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

