

SHOFTIM (DEUTERONOMY 15:18-21:9)

Advice for the Foxholes of Life

2000 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

They say that there are no atheists in the foxholes. When the chips are down in time of need, and we have no other place to turn, we always remember G-d and ask Him for His protection. But will He answer our prayers? Will He say, "Of course My child, I've been waiting for you to call upon Me"? Or will He ask, "Now you call Me?! Where were you all the time that you thought you didn't need Me?!"

The Torah describes the scene: The army of Israel is preparing for battle against their enemies. There are, perhaps, among the troops, people who would rather be elsewhere. They see themselves outnumbered by a well-armed fighting force, and they are, to say the least, concerned.

It's time for a pep talk. A specially designated *Kohain*, one of the descendants of Aaron the High Priest, addresses the troops with words of encouragement:

*"SHEMA YISRAEL, listen Israel, today you are ab**out to wage war against your enemies. Do not be fainthearted, do not be afraid, do not panic, and do not break ranks before them. G-d is the One who is going with you. He will fight for you against your enemies. And He will deliver you."* (Deuteronomy, 20:3-4)

"Shema Yisrael -- listen Israel." An interesting choice of words. Anyone familiar with Jewish prayer would recognize these words as being identical with the beginning of the Shema -- a prayer that is recited daily. Even people who are very removed from Jewish observance know of this simple prayer that acknowledges G-d as our Master.

The Talmud (Sotah, 41B) wonders why the *Kohain* would use this particular phrase. Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai answers that the *Kohain* was telling the military not to be nervous over their previous laxity in the service of G-d. "Even if the only Mitzvah you ever fulfilled was reciting the '*Shema*' evening and morning," said the *Kohain*, "G-d will not forsake you."

This is rather curious. One of the first prayers a small child learns to recite is the *Shema*. I used to sing it to my children at bedtime when they were too young to say it themselves. What is so special and dynamic about *Shema Yisrael* that the merit of its recital will protect a soldier in time of war, EVEN IF THAT'S THE ONLY MITZVAH HE'S EVER DONE?!? And why is this fundamental prayer linked with a soldier going to war?

The answer, I believe, is found in the soldier's attitude toward waging war. The Torah teaches us that when a soldier goes to war, although he may be aiming the gun and pulling the trigger, it is actually G-d who is doing the fighting. The Kohain tells the soldier that "*G-d is the One who is going with you. He will fight for you against your enemies. And He will deliver you.*" And what Mitzvah does a soldier need to do in order to deserve this miraculous protection?

Very simply -- say the *Shema*. If you show your belief that it is G-d who is in charge, then G-d will TAKE charge and fight your battles for you.

In life, there are many wars that we are forced to wage. We "fight" our competitors in business and struggle to make ends meet. We try our best to defend our children (and ourselves!) from the onslaught of the culture war that modern society often wages against standards of decency and morality. And sometimes, we have to battle our own negative natures of laziness, spitefulness, and the like.

Where does a Jew go to find the ammunition to get him through the struggles of life?

He recites *Shema Yisrael*. When a Jew says "*Shema Yisrael*", he is confirming his belief that *the Lord is our G-d, that the Lord is One*. (Ibid, 6:4) The message of Rosh Hashanah, a mere month away, is that G-d is in the Driver's Seat. We go to work, we do our exercises, and eat right, we engage in the battles of day to day living. But we do so with the knowledge that it is our Creator to whom we must turn, and pray that He bless our efforts with success.

We have just begun the Jewish month of Elul. The month of Elul is traditionally a time of introspection and preparation for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Our prayers get a little longer and become a little more sincere. We use this time to get our spiritual act together in time for the New Year when G-d will decide our fates for the coming year.

How should we prepare for Rosh Hashanah? What can we do to shore up our relationship with the Master of the World?

Shema Yisrael. Our Sages tell us that during the month of Elul, G-d is especially receptive of our prayers and is hoping and waiting for us to realign our priorities. What He really wants is for us to reestablish our relationship with Him. He doesn't expect us to be perfect. He expects us to try our best and to recognize that *Shema Yisrael* -- it is our Creator, not we, who is in control of our destiny.

It has been observed that the days of Elul provide us with a month-long opportunity to prepare for Rosh Hashanah by "repairing" all of the days of the previous year. Do a Mitzvah on the first of the month. Any Mitzvah . . . Give some *Tzedakah* (charity). Say a prayer. (*Shema Yisrael*, for example.) Refrain from *Lashon Hara* (gossip). Be a better and kinder person on the first of Elul than you were on the first of any other month of the past year. Do the same thing on the second of the month, and then again on the third.

You don't have to become a Moses or an Abraham. G-d was prepared to do miracles for soldiers whose only Mitzvah was saying the *Shema*. Let us make the pre-High Holiday gesture to become better people; we'll be pleasantly surprised by the miracles that we ourselves can do.

Have a great Shabbos.

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