

SHOFTIM (DEUTERONOMY 17:18-21:9)

Onward Jewish Soldiers

2001 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

THE MONTH OF ELUL

The Month of Elul is upon us once again. On the first day of the month of Elul, Moses climbed Mount Sinai to beg G-d to forgive the People of Israel for the sin of the Golden Calf. Forty days later, on the first Yom Kippur, Moses returned with a second set of Tablets, and forgiveness for the Israelites.

This final month before Rosh Hashanah is a time for introspection and preparation for the High Holidays. It is a time to ask G-d to grant us a year of peace, security, health, and prosperity. It is a time for getting our spiritual house in order. It is the time for us to make sure we are doing what's right. (See the suggestions at the end of "Advice for the Foxholes of Life".)

"Onward Jewish Soldiers"

Everything in life requires the help of the Almighty. To be sure, we are not allowed to sit back and expect G-d to shower upon us the blessings of health, safety, and livelihood without an appropriate measure of effort on our parts. (We all know the famous story of the poor man who prayed to G-d to let him win a million dollars in the lottery. He was met with a booming voice from Heaven that inquired, "Don't you think you should at least buy a lottery ticket?")

We are supposed to go to work, watch our nutrition and wear seatbelts. However, we do so with the recognition that the seatbelt is only as effective as our Creator allows it to be. The Mishnah (Kiddushin 4:14) tells us that there is no profession that guarantees financial success. There are rich garbage collectors and poor microsurgeons. A person can eat high fiber, low fat, cholesterol free, organic super-enriched tofu and R"L develop terrible diseases or get hit by a falling meteor. We make the effort, and we pray to G-d that He allow our efforts to achieve the outcome we anticipate.

The same is true in military matters. With all the tragedies that have occurred in the Middle East lately, there have been many times that by pure "coincidence," the efforts of a terrorist were foiled. (Even the apprehension of the American terrorist Timothy McVeigh happened only because he was stopped for a missing taillight on his car, and the ticketing police officer "happened" to notice a gun sticking out of his pocket.) Military success is determined not by the number of soldiers you have, but rather by the watchful eye of the Master of the World.

When you go into battle against your enemies, and see horses, chariots, and an army larger than yours, don't be afraid of them, since G-d, who brought you out of Egypt, is with you . . . The officers will address the people, and say, "Is there anyone among you who has built a new house and has not begun to live in it? Let him go home, so that he will not die in war and have another man live in it." (Deuteronomy 20:1, 5)

How's that for a draft deferment? The Torah continues: *"Is there anyone among you who has planted a vineyard and has not redeemed its first crop? Let him go home, so that he will not die in war and have another man redeem its crop . . . Is there anyone among you who has betrothed a woman and not married her? . . . Go home . . . Is there anyone among you who is afraid or faint-hearted? . . . Go home."* (Verses 6-8)

What a way to run an army! The Torah almost seems to be providing a plan for anyone looking to avoid the draft without having to run to Canada! (In fact, some commentaries say that the reason the Torah provides new house, vineyard, and engagement deferments is so that those who are afraid will have a face-saving excuse to go home.)

There are many explanations given for these particular exemptions from military service. That is not the point of this week's discussion. The point I would like to emphasize here is that we see that the Torah is not at all concerned with filling an army with as many people as possible. After all, as the Torah tells us, it is G-d, who took us out of Egypt, who is actually doing the fighting.

One of the great controversies in Israel today is the issue of military service for Yeshiva students. Many secular Israelis resent the fact that if an able-bodied young man of draft age is studying in a Yeshiva, he is exempt from entering the army. There are many soldier/students who participate in a combined army/yeshiva program. Others study full-time without serving in the army at all. Personally, I see value to both systems.

At the time of the establishment of the State of Israel, Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, who was not, to say the least, a proponent of Torah values, recognized the importance of Torah study. He understood that the State of Israel was not just another country with its own language and culture. He understood that there is an eternal sacred value to the study of Torah. He saw that there are soldiers who serve the nation on the front lines of the battlefield, and that there are soldiers who raise the spiritual level of our People on the front lines of *Bais Medrash*, the Yeshiva study hall.

This is not a uniquely Israeli concept. During the Vietnam War, religious seminaries of all denominations were filled with divinity students whose "higher calling" freed them from a tour of the rice paddies. How many of them were sincere is a different question. The point is, though, that this country and many other

countries recognize that someone who is pursuing religious studies should be exempt from military service.

Let there be no mistake. A person who lives in a particular country has certain obligations to that country. When my wife and I were expecting our first child, I was studying at a Yeshiva in Israel. A “friend” of the family advised us to leave Israel before the birth. The feeling was that if the child would be a boy, he would be automatically declared an Israeli citizen and subject to the draft. “No problem,” I said. “If he is studying in a Yeshiva, he’ll have the option of postponing his army service until he finishes – should he so desire – and if he’s not in Yeshiva, he SHOULD serve in the army.”

The question of whether Yeshiva students should serve in the Israeli army is a very volatile topic. There are secular Jews on both sides of the issue, and there are orthodox Jews on both sides of the issue. (I anticipate angry mail from ALL sides!) Personally, I feel that for those of us living in the relative security of the United States, it is highly questionable as to whether we are even entitled to an opinion! I can walk into a Kosher pizza shop in New York without fear that a suicide bomber will destroy the place along with as many Jews as possible. **[Editorial note: This article was written in August, 2001. My, how the world has changed!]** Do I have a right to pass judgment on the policy decisions of Israelis who have to live with these frightening realities? Before we choose to criticize policies of the Israeli government, we should pack our bags and move there so we can complain with credibility!

About 25 years ago, Rabbi Yaakov Haber told me a story that sheds some light on this matter. The story involved the students of Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik of Brisk, Lithuania.

Many of the early secular Zionists were virulently anti-religious. They would lose no opportunity to ridicule the “antiquated” Torah and its old-fashioned adherents. To this end, the Yiddish theater often represented religious Jews in a very negative light. One evening, some Yeshiva students attended one of these plays, and left with a dilemma.

In the play, the students saw the enactment of a Kibbutz scenario. (Many early Zionists settled in Palestine long before the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. The threats of Arab belligerence were already well known.) The “*Chalutzim*,” Kibbutz settlers, were arming themselves to protect their settlement from local marauders. Suddenly, some rabbis with long beards began to quote the announcement from this week’s Torah Reading: “*Who has built a new house?*” A few people left. “*...a new vineyard?*” A few more left. “*...any newlyweds here?*” A few more left. “*...any COWARDS?*” A few more left. Then, to the total shock of the Yeshiva students and to the guffaws of the audience, the rabbis remained alone on the stage to face the Arab enemy!

The next day, the upset and disillusioned students came to their teacher. “Rebbe,” they said, “we made a mistake. We attended an anti-religious play. We realize that such gatherings are not conducive to strengthening one’s faith in G-d. However, they have a good point!”

