
SHOFTIM (DEUTERONOMY 15:18 21:9)

War, Torah-Style

2006 · 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 (today, August 25), 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”.)

SHOFTIM -- “War, Torah-Style”

We’ve all been frustrated and disgusted by the one-sided media reporting on the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah. Our enemies have grabbed every opportunity to present Israel as an evil aggressor who indiscriminately fires upon hospitals and ambulances. (By the way, speaking of ambulances, check out this video of a supposedly neutral U.N. ambulance providing a getaway for terrorists in Gaza.)

CNN et al go to great lengths to catalog the wanton destruction the Israelis have unleashed upon the “innocent civilians” of Lebanon. (Who, by the way, overwhelmingly supported the Hezbollah’s abduction of Israeli soldiers and refusal to return them.) Yet, the merciless raining down of rockets on non-military, non-threatening targets throughout Northern Israel is largely ignored.

Yes, the Israelis are terrible people. That’s why they risk their own lives by not firing upon terrorists using human shields until AFTER they have begun to fire their deadly rockets.

A few thoughts about the Jewish mode of warfare:ritten by the Daas Zekainim:

“... Because great is peace, for G-d changed the story when Sarah said ‘*My husband is old.*’ (G-d told Abraham that Sarah had said that SHE was too old to have children, even though she had actually said that HE, Abraham was too old, so that Abraham wouldn’t be offended by his wife’s words) ... for the sake of peace. Also, the Priestly Blessing ends with the word “Peace,” as does the Shemoneh Esrei (the central prayer of each Service, recited three times a day.) ... and our Sages have taught that we are to greet idol worshipers for the sake of peace ... and we support poor idol worshipers together with the poor of Israel for the sake of peace, and therefore, G-d blesses his nation with peace, as it is written, ‘*G-d will bless His nation with peace*’ ” (Psalms, 29:11)

Our nation CRAVES peace. We are ADDICTED to peace. We abhor war. Contrast this with the religion of our enemies, who revel in the murder of non-believers, who promise eternal rewards to those who kill innocent Jews and Christians.

When you besiege a city for many days to wage war against it or to seize it, do not destroy its trees ... Is a tree of the field a man who will come against you in the siege?...Only a tree that you know is not a food tree, it you may destroy and cut down... (Ibid, verses 19-20)

See how concerned the Torah is about life! Even in the heat of battle, one must show deference to the fact that a fruit tree is a source of human sustenance. This verse is the source for “Jewish ecology.” We are not permitted to be wasteful. We may not waste food or any other commodity. It is a sin to destroy for no reason. I question, “*Is a tree of the field a man who will come against you in the siege?..*” The fruit tree is not your enemy; why destroy it for no reason?

G-d gave us a planet and told us to cultivate it and care for it. The State of Israel was established, and they made the desert bloom. One of my earliest memories as a child is that of my mother selling Trees for Israel. We don’t destroy things for no reason, and we certainly don’t attack people for no reason. (By the way, speaking of trees, where is the liberal, Greenpeace, tree-hugging, spotted-owl-protecting, ANWR-blocking outrage over the million-plus trees in Northern Israel that were destroyed by Hezbollah rockets?!)

No, we don’t like to wage war, and we don’t like to destroy. But some times we have to. Let’s look at the verses about trees again:

When you besiege a city for many days to wage war against it or to seize it, do not destroy its trees ... Is a tree of the field a man who will come against you in the siege?...

Daas Zakainim translates the verse a little differently than some of the other commentaries:

...do not destroy its trees UNLESS the tree of the field IS BEING USED BY a man who will come against you in the siege...

Daas Zekainim understands this verse as saying that although we are normally averse to destroying useful things such as fruit trees, if an enemy is hiding in an apple orchard waiting to ambush you, you must destroy the trees to protect yourself.

Sound familiar? Think of human shields. Israel had no interest in destroying residential neighborhoods. But when an enemy hides among the fruit trees, the Torah is clear as to the necessary evil that must be done...

One last thought. Let's look again at the Mitzvah to seek peace with an enemy:

When you approach a city to wage war against it, you must propose a peaceful settlement...

Israel has peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan. Is it a perfect situation? No, of course not. But they're not shooting at each other either. Peace is good. But, ...

If they reject your peace offer and declare war, you shall lay siege to the city (Ibid, verse 12)

Rashi explains this verse with an observation that says it all: "Scripture is proclaiming to you that if they don't make peace with you, they will eventually wage war against you, if you leave them and walk away."

Don't leave a difficult job unfinished. Israel walked away from a non-disarmed Hezbollah six years ago, and learned a painful lesson. They have now once again walked away from a non-disarmed Hezbollah.

May G-d protect us all from the results of that mistake.

Is it time, perhaps, for a Torah class at the U.N.?

Have a great Shabbos.

Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz