

Parashat Ki Tetze, 5781, 2021:

When You Go Out to War

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, Shayndel bat Mordechai Yehudah, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Chodesh Elul is the preeminent period of the year to properly prepare ourselves to encounter Hashem during the upcoming *Yamim Noraim*. Since this is the case, with what thoughts should we be occupied at this time? The great Chasidic master, Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Halevi Epstein *zatzal*, (1751-1823) suggests the following:

In these holy days from Rosh Chodesh Elul and onward, when the gates of *teshuvah* are open more than any other time of the year ... it is fitting for all thinking people to bestir (*l'hitorare*) themselves from the stupor of a year of [spiritual] laziness. Moreover, they should open their “blind eyes,” and prepare themselves to encounter the Almighty. (*Sefer Maor v'Shemesh*, Parashat Ki Tetze, translation and brackets my own)

Elul has a two-fold purpose for Rav Epstein: to awaken us from our spiritual lethargy and to prepare us to meet Hashem on the *Yamim Noraim*. His thoughts are reminiscent of the Rambam's (Maimonides, 1135-1204) famous words describing the power and purpose of the *mitzvah* of *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah:

Wake up you sleepy ones from your sleep and you who slumber, arise. Inspect your deeds, repent (*v'chizru bi'teshuvah*), remember your Creator. Those who forget the truth in the vanities of time and throughout the entire year, [and who] devote their energies to vanity and emptiness which will not benefit or save: Look to your souls. Improve your ways and your deeds and let every one of you abandon his evil path and thoughts. (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah* 3:4, translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger, brackets my own)

At first glance, it may seem difficult to see a connection between our *parasha* and the concepts presented by Rav Epstein and the Rambam. Our first *pasuk*, however, has captured the attention of a number of Torah sages in this regard: “If you go out to war against your enemies, and the L-rd, your G-d, will deliver him into your hands, and you take his captives.” (*Sefer Devarim* 21:10, translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) One of the first expositors to demonstrate such a link was the Shelah HaKadosh (Rabbi Yeshayahu ben Avraham Ha-Levi Horowitz, 1555-1630):

[On a certain level,] this verse is speaking about the war against the *yetzer hara*, in consonance with the statement of Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish, *Talmud Bavli, Berachot* 5a]: “A person should always incite the *yetzer tov* to fight against the *yetzer hara*.” [Therefore,] the phrase, “if you go out to war against your enemies,” is referring to the time an individual chooses to go to battle against their *yetzer hara*. Moreover, the next section of the *pasuk*, “and the L-rd, your G-d, will deliver him into your hands,” [is teaching us that such a person will be successful, as our Sages state in *Talmud Bavli, Yoma* 38b] “if one comes to purify himself [from sin,] they will assist him.” (*Sefer Itturei Torah*, vol. V, page 129, translation and brackets my own)

Approximately 200 years later, the renowned rebbe, Rav Simcha Bunim of Peshischa, (1765-1827) scaled these ideas into a direct promise that Hashem will guarantee success to anyone who truly fights their *yetzer hara*:

Chazal state: “If it was not for the Holy One blessed be He’s help, no one would be able to stand against it [the *yetzer hara*].” (*Talmud Bavli, Kiddushin* 30b) We find, therefore, that essence of the outcome [in the battle against the evil inclination,] is from the Holy One blessed be He. [Crucially,] a person needs only to fortify himself and go to war with him [that is, the *yetzer hara*]. This, then, is the meaning of “if you go” (*ki tetze*), namely, it is a promise that when you go to war against the *yetzer hara*, then you can be certain (*muvtach*) that Hashem will place him into your hand, for He will surely help you...” (*Sefer Siach Sarfei Kodesh*, Parashat Ki Tetze, translation and brackets my own)

The Chatam Sofer (Rabbi Moshe Schreiber, 1762-1839) lived at approximately the same time as Rav Simcha Bunim, and was widely considered to be the *gadol hador*, the Rabbinic leader of his generation. In his Torah commentary on our *parasha*, *Torat Moshe*, he quotes the same two Talmudic statements as the Shelah HaKadosh and Rav

Simcha Bunim and conceptualizes our *pasuk* as referring to the war against the *yetzer hara*. Moreover, he stresses that Hashem's help in this endeavor is contingent upon our taking an active role in achieving victory over this powerful and perpetual enemy:

The Sages said: "If it was not for the Holy One blessed be He's help, no one would be able to stand against it [the *yetzer hara*]." Based upon this statement, one might think that he need not go out to war against the *yetzer hara* in order to conquer his inclination, as this entails the necessity of power and heroism...As such, he might think, as well, that he does not to perform any action whatsoever to achieve this outcome, and that it is sufficient to passively sit back and trust that Hashem will help him and fight this great war on his behalf. The truth, however, is not like this, for one who thinks in this manner will never be able to conquer their enemy. Instead, a person must ceaselessly be at war with their evil inclination with all their strength in order to conquer it in accord with their limits and nature — and the rest they will achieve through the help of Heaven. As our Sages have already stated, "if one comes to purify himself [from sin,] they will assist him." At first, however, a person must begin the purification process, and only then will they be supported [in their task]. (Translation and brackets my own)

The words of the Shelah HaKadosh, Rav Simcha Bunim and the Chatam Sofer are comforting indeed. They teach us that we must never give up hope in our battle against the *yetzer hara*, regardless of how low we may have fallen, or the seemingly insurmountable challenges we face in our desire to reconcile with Hashem. As Yirmiyahu promised us so long ago in the penultimate verse of *Megillat Eicha*: "Cause us to return to You, Hashem, and we will return! Renew our days as of old." *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom and may Hashem in His infinite mercy remove the pandemic from *klal Yisrael* and all the nations of the world.

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*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinivurl.com/8hsdpvd>

*** I have posted 164 of Rabbi Soloveitchik's English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link: [The Rav zatzal](#)