

In Appreciation of Tzahal – the Soldiers of the Jewish People

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shmuel David ben Moshe Halevy, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, and the refuah shlaimah of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and to the safety of the soldiers of Tzahal in their holy mission to protect the Jewish people.

Our *parasha* contains a passage regarding the nature of a Jewish army that is as relevant today as when it was given to Moshe on Mount Sinai:

When you go out to war against your enemies, and you see horse and chariot, a people more numerous than you, you shall not be afraid of them, for the L-rd, your G-d is with you Who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. And it will be, when you approach the battle that the Kohen shall come near, and speak to the people. And he shall say to them, “Hear, O Israel, today you are approaching the battle against your enemies. Let your hearts not be faint; you shall not be afraid, and you shall not be alarmed, and you shall not be terrified because of them. For the L-rd, your G-d, is the One Who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you.” (*Sefer Devarim* 20:1-4, this and all Bible translations, the *Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

In sum, this section contains five expressions that focus upon the emotion of fear prior to going to battle:

1. “You shall not be afraid of them” (“*Lo tira*”)
2. “Let your hearts not be faint” (“*Al yarach l’vavchem*”)
3. “You shall not be afraid” (“*Al ti’rau*”)
4. “You shall not be alarmed” (“*Al tachpezu*”)
5. “You shall not be terrified because of them” (“*Al ta’artzu*”)

Some of the greatest halachic thinkers of our tradition debated the status of our phrases. The dispute hinges on whether these statements are prescriptive or descriptive in nature. If they are prescriptive, then the Torah is teaching us an actual *mitzvah*, whereas if they are descriptive, then we are met with a narrative passage rather than with a commandment per se.

The Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) maintained that our verses constitute a Torah prohibition (*lo ta'aseh*). Therefore, in his Arabic work, *Sefer Hamitzvot*, written between 1168-1170, we find the following:

The 58th commandment that we are urged to fulfill is to refrain from being afraid of disbelievers (alternate translation – “enemies”) at the time of war. Moreover, we may not flee from before them. In contrast, there is an obligation upon us to strengthen ourselves in order to be stand and be resolute before the other nation [with whom we are at war]. And anyone who turns away and flees from the battle scene has already violated this negative prohibition. As the Torah states: “You should not be terrified from before them.” (*Sefer Devarim 7:20*)

In addition, Maimonides championed this approach in three different places in his *magnum opus*, and sole major Hebrew work, *Mishneh Torah*, written between 1168-1177:

Minyan Hamitzvot, Commandment 58

Jewish warriors (*anshei milchamah*) are obligated not to be afraid and not to be terrified from before their enemies at the time of war. As the Torah states: “You should not be terrified from before them” (*Sefer Devarim 7:20*) which means you should not fear them.

Hakdamah l’Hilchot Melachim, Mitzvah 20

One should not be terrified and turn away and flee to the back of the battle lines at the time of war.

Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Melachim 7:15 (Translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger)

Anyone who begins to feel anxious and worried in the midst of battle to the point where he frightens himself violates a negative commandment, as it is written: “Let your hearts not be faint; you shall not be afraid, and you shall not be alarmed, and you shall not be terrified because of them.” (*Sefer Devarim 20:3*) Furthermore, he is responsible for the blood of the entire Jewish nation. If he is not valiant, if he does not wage war with all his heart and soul, it is considered as if he shed the blood of the entire people...

In summary, the Rambam ruled that our five above-mentioned phrases (*Sefer Devarim 20:1-4*) constitute a *mitzvat lo ta'aseh* (a Torah prohibition) that has wide-ranging implications for the entire Jewish people.

The first halachic authority to reject the Rambam’s position was the great Provencal scholar, Rabbi Avraham ben David (c. 1125-1198, known as the “Ra’avad” after the initials of his name).

His repudiation of the Rambam's view was terse and direct: "This is [merely] a promise and not a negative prohibition." (Comments on Commandment 58 of *Minyan Hamitzvot*) In other words, the Ra'avad opines that *Sefer Devarim* 20:1-4, as well as other parallel Torah portions, is solely descriptive in nature, i.e., a narrative passage. Significantly, the Ramban (Nachmanides, 1194-1270) followed this approach, as well, in his glosses on the Rambam's *Sefer Hamitzvot*, Commandment 58, wherein he stated: "This is a promise and not a commandment."

The work, *Megillat Esther* (ascribed to various authors), was a response to the Ramban's criticisms of the Rambam's rulings in the *Sefer Hamitzvot*. Therein, the author states:

It appears to me that the truth lies with the Rambam and that there, indeed, exists a negative prohibition (i.e. *mitzvah*) to be afraid of one's enemies at the time of war. Moreover it is virtually impossible that this is a mere promise – along the lines that the Ramban suggests. Therefore, [the relevant Torah verses] were unquestionably stated as a commandment "to refrain from being afraid before them" for in this manner they [the Jewish soldiers] will be able to overpower their enemies and be victorious.

The Rambam's position was powerfully defended, as well, by the author of the *Shulchan Aruch*, Rabbi Yosef Karo (1488-1575), in his commentary on the Rambam's *Mishneh Torah* entitled, "*Kesef Mishneh*":

Our teacher [i.e. the Rambam] explained the text according to its direct meaning, namely, that it is a negative prohibition. Therefore, the question is not upon him, but rather, one can only be amazed with the Ra'avad as to why he explained the verse in a counter-intuitive fashion, rather than in accordance with its direct meaning – seemingly solely to criticize our teacher. (Commentary on the Rambam's *Minyan Hamitzvot* in *Sefer Mishneh Torah*, Commandment number 58)

At this juncture in our journey of understanding our original verses, we can take a step back and return to their broader implications. After all, whether or not we are studying a covenantal imperative (i.e. a *mitzvah*) or a narrative passage, what ultimately matters is the message that Hashem delivered through the medium of the Torah. As such, I believe the Rambam captured the essence of our *pasukim* (verses) in an unequalled fashion:

... Anyone who fights with his entire heart, without fear, with the intention of sanctifying G-d's name alone, can be assured that he will find no harm, nor will bad overtake him. He will be granted a proper family in Israel and gather merit for himself and his children forever. He will also merit eternal life in the world to come as *Sefer Shmuel* I:25:28-29 states: “for the L-rd shall make for my lord [King David] a sure house, for my lord fights the wars of the L-rd. ... But my lord's soul shall be bound in the bundle of life with the L-rd your G-d.” (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Melachim* 7:15, translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger)

I believe that the Rambam's message is one of the most important ones we need to share with our brave soldiers who defend not only our holy country of Israel, but the entire Jewish people as well. Like King David of old, they are fighting “the wars of the L-rd.” With Hashem's help, may they be “bound in the bundle of life” and be guided by His holy light. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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