

Parashat Shoftim, 5777, 2017:

“When You Go Forth to War Against Your Enemy”

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 Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, Shayna Yehudit bat Avraham Manes and Rivka, the *refuah shelaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, Shoshana Elka bat Etel Dina and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The Torah employs the phrase, “*Ki tetze l’milchamah al oivecha*” (“When you go forth to war against your enemy”) two times in *Sefer Devarim*. The first instance appears in our *parasha* (20:1), and the second in Parashat Ki Tetze (21:10). Rashi (1040-1105), on our *parasha*, has a very thought-provoking comment on the words “*al oivecha*:” “Let them be in your eyes as enemies; have no pity on them, for they will have no pity upon you.” This gloss is midrashically-inspired, and its roots are specifically found in *Midrash Tanchuma*, *Sefer Devarim* 15. Yet, the original language of the Midrashic passage does not contain Rashi’s formulation, “Let them be in your eyes as enemies,” and writes, instead, “Go forth against them as if they are your enemies” (“*Tz’u aleihem k’oiveim*”). Why does Rashi change the Midrash’s language, adding the words, “in your eyes?” After all, it seems that whenever soldiers go to war, they definitionally view the combatants of the opposing army as their enemies. What, then, is Rashi subtly teaching us?

I believe we can answer our questions on Rashi’s elucidation of “*al oivecha*” in *Sefer Devarim* by viewing it in the light of another one of his glosses, this time from *Sefer Shemot*. In the course of his analysis of the *pasuk* (verse) from the *Shirah* (the Song of Praise), “The L-rd (Hashem) is a Master of war; the L-rd (Hashem) is His Name” (15:3),

Rashi bases himself upon the *Mechilta* and suggests the following explanation of the latter half of the *pasuk*:

The L-rd (Hashem), [denoting the Divine Standard of Mercy,] is His Name - Even when He wages war and takes vengeance upon His enemies, He maintains His behavior of having mercy on His creatures and nourishing all those who enter the world... (Translation with my emendations)

G-d is ever merciful – even when He wages war against His enemies. As His uniquely chosen people, we in turn, through the *mitzvah* of *imitatio Dei*, have the obligation to model ourselves, both in our essence and actions, after Hashem's ways. This principle is powerfully presented in a celebrated passage in *Talmud Bavli* that highlights the Almighty's acts of *rachmanut* (mercy) that we are obligated to make our own:

Just as Hashem clothed the naked [in the case of Adam and Chava]... so, too, should you clothe the naked. Just as Hashem visited the sick [in the case of Avraham after his *brit milah*]... so, too, should you visit the sick. Just as the Holy One Blessed be He comforted the mourners [in the case of Yitzhak after Avraham's passing]... so, too, should you comfort the mourners. Just as the Holy One Blessed be He buried the dead [in the case of Moshe]... so, too, should you bury the dead. (*Sotah* 14a, translation and brackets my own)

This Talmudic section is the basis of one of the Rambam's (Maimonides, 1135-1204) famous halachic rulings that helps establish the fundamental parameters of Jewish communal living:

It is a positive commandment of Rabbinic origin to visit the sick, comfort mourners, to prepare for a funeral, prepare a bride, accompany guests, attend to all the needs of a burial, carry a corpse on one's shoulders, walk before the bier, mourn, dig a grave, and bury the dead, and also to bring joy to a bride and groom and help them in all their needs. These are deeds of kindness that one carries out with his person that have no limit. (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Avel* 14:1, translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger)

Rachmanut thereby emerges as a quintessential aspect of the Jewish persona, since in acting mercifully we are imitating our Creator's actions. This idea is so pronounced that the *Talmud Bavli* in *Yevamot* 79a states that there are three markers for someone who claims to be a member of our people, namely, “*harachamim, v'habyeshanin, v'gomlai*

chasadim” (“they are the merciful, modest ones and practitioners of loving-kindness”).

As such, it is literally Jewish nature to act in a merciful manner toward all whom we encounter.

In my estimation, we can now readily understand Rashi’s earlier comment, “in your eyes.” He forcefully emphasized that those with whom we go to war must be viewed as absolute enemies, even though this very notion is antithetical to our very being and our humanitarian approach to the people of the world. In modern times, Prime Minister Golda Meir (1898-1978) gave this idea strong voice when she declared in her oral autobiography: “When peace comes we will perhaps in time be able to forgive the Arabs for killing our sons, but it will be harder for us to forgive them for having forced us to kill their sons.” (*A Land of Our Own: An Oral Autobiography*, 1973, edited by Marie Syrkin, p. 242)

May we be *zocheh* (merit) to witness the imminent coming of the *Mashiach* (Messiah) and the ultimate fulfillment of Isaiah’s vision: “And he shall judge between the nations and reprove many peoples, and they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift the sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.” (II:4, translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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