

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Shoftim
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Shoftim – The Kohen anointed for battle

In this week's Parasha of Shoftim we learn about the special Kohen who was anointed for battle. This Kohen was anointed in the same way as the Kohen Gadol was anointed. However, his job was to speak to the army before they went off to battle, encouraging them to have faith in Hashem and giving them chizuk.

“And he [the anointed Kohen] shall say to them [the soldiers], “Hear O Israel, today you are approaching the battle against your enemies. Do not let your hearts be faint, do not be afraid, do not panic and do not be terrified because of them. For Hashem, your G-d, is the One Who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you.” (Devarim 20:3-4)

After hearing this stirring speech, certain categories of soldiers who were not qualified to fight were instructed to return home rather than join the battle. An announcement was made to the troops, listing four categories of people who should return home:

- One who had built a new house and had not yet begun to live in it;
- One who had planted a vineyard and had not yet redeemed the grapes;¹
- One who was betrothed to a woman but had not yet married her;²
- One who was fearful and fainthearted.

We can learn some important lessons from this procedure that took place before battles.

Lesson 1: be careful not to embarrass others

According to Rebbi Yose Haglili,³ the fourth category includes those who are afraid that they will not merit Divine protection in the battle due to their sins. It may embarrass such a person to return home in full view of his fellow soldiers because they would see that he was a sinner. Therefore, the announcement regarding exemption from the battle includes all four categories together. In this way it will be unclear to others as to the true reason this 'sinner' is leaving.

This teaches us the importance of ensuring that others do not feel embarrassed.

The story is told of a yeshiva student who was undergoing a dangerous operation. The entire yeshiva was very concerned, especially the Rosh Yeshiva.⁴ The Rosh Yeshiva was in an important meeting with the trustees of the board. Normally no-one would dare interrupt him. However this was different. A young yeshiva student burst in to the Rosh Yeshiva's office unannounced and blurted out the good news. The operation had been a total success! The Rosh Yeshiva was overjoyed. He hugged the yeshiva student and told him how grateful he was for the good tidings. He blessed the yeshiva student generously and warmly. “One who brings such good news should

¹ This refers to the fourth year after planting when the grapes must be taken to Jerusalem and eaten there or alternatively they can be redeemed for money that must be spent in Jerusalem. This is the first opportunity that one has to eat the grapes. The grapes that grow in the first three years are 'orlah' and are forbidden to eat.

² 'Betrothal' (kiddushin) is not the same as 'engagement' as we use that term today. Betrothal would traditionally take place about a year before the marriage. However, these days the formal betrothal takes place under the chupah immediately before the actual marriage.

³ Gemara, Sotah 44a.

⁴ This is based on a true story however I cannot locate the source so some details may be inaccurate. However, the underlying idea is clear.

also be blessed!" The young student left with a huge smile on his face, he was so proud that he was the one who passed on the good news. The Rosh Yeshiva returned to the meeting. Two minutes later another young student burst into the office, unaware that the Rosh Yeshiva had already been informed of the good news. The trustees of the board expected the Rosh Yeshiva to tell the second student that he had already heard the news. However, the Rosh Yeshiva acted equally as excited as the first time he was told. He also thanked and blessed this student warmly. This scene repeated itself ten times during the meeting. Each time the Rosh Yeshiva's reaction was identical. He acted in this manner to ensure that each student would not feel embarrassed for barging in to the office unannounced.

Lesson 2: The success of the battle is due solely to Hashem

Offering these categories of soldiers the opportunity to leave before the battle would obviously reduce the number of troops. However, this reduction in man power would have no bearing on the outcome of the battle. Only Hashem determined the outcome. As it says:

"Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we mention the name of Hashem our G-d".⁵

This lesson is exemplified by Gideon's battle against the Midianites⁶. The Midianite army was as "numerous as locusts".⁷ Originally, Gideon's army numbered 32,000 men. However, after instructing those who were fearful to return home, Gideon's army was reduced to 10,000 men. But Hashem was concerned that having an army of 10,000 men would mislead the soldiers into thinking that their own strength had led to the victory. So Hashem instructed Gideon to perform a test to weed out additional inappropriate soldiers, resulting in an army of a mere 300 men! Ultimately, Gideon's tiny army of 300 was victorious against the enormous Midianite forces. It seems that we are governed by the laws of nature, however Hashem is outside of nature and the outcome is entirely up to Him.

Lesson 3: the importance of finishing the job

The first three categories of people exempted from the army all have something in common. Some commentators point out that they all have unfinished business to attend to. Remarkably, having unfinished business is so important that it exempts one from the army! This highlights the importance of finishing off what we start.

When we first start a new project, it can be easy to get excited by the newness.⁸ However, the freshness inevitably wears off over time and it is often replaced with a feeling of drudgery and boredom. We might become distracted by other projects and newer ideas. It is important to push through the boredom and continue tenaciously in order to complete one's task. There are many daily learning programs that bear testament to this idea. For example, by learning the Daf Yomi program, one can finish the entire Gemara in just over 7 years by learning one page per day. If that is too onerous there are many other programs, such as Mishnah Yomit, Halacha Yomit or daily Rambam. Or you can make up your own program. Whatever program you choose, consistency and regularity are the key to achieving Torah and mitzvot.

Let's try something this week:

1. Try to make an extra effort not to cause even the slightest embarrassment to another person.
2. Remember the lesson of Gideon and his tiny army. The results of anything that we do are not governed by the laws of nature but rather all results are up to Hashem.
3. Make an extra effort to push through the drudgery and boredom of old jobs and try to complete them to the best of our ability.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁵ Tehillim 20:8, recited after Ashrei every morning in Shacharit, see page 152 of the standard Artscroll Ashkenaz siddur.

⁶ See Shoftim (Judges) chapter 7.

⁷ Shoftim 7:12.

⁸ On the other hand, some people find beginnings to be the most difficult part of a project.