



The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

Shoftim: A Different Army

Should a Jewish army be different than any other army?

Chapter 20 of our Parsha outlines some of the procedures and norms of the Israelite army. At this historical juncture, the Jewish people are poised to launch an invasion of Canaan. How will their military function? In many ways, these verses are a study of how an army might incorporate ethical concerns.

The first topic addressed here is the draft, the decision on who will be mobilized. After a rousing address by the priest, we read about several exemptions:

Is there anyone who has built a new house but has not dedicated it? Let him go back to his home, lest he die in battle and another dedicate it.

Is there anyone who has planted a vineyard but has never harvested it? Let him go back to his home, lest he die in battle and another harvest it.

Is there anyone who has betrothed a wife, but who has not yet married her? Let him go back to his home, lest he die in battle and another marry her.

...Is there anyone afraid and disheartened? Let him go back to his home, lest the courage of his comrades' flag like his.

When the officials have finished addressing the troops, army commanders shall assume command of the troops. (20:5-9)

Please discuss:

- Who is sent back from the war front?
- What is the rationale to send these people home in particular?
- Will anyone be left in the attack force after all these exemptions?

The commentaries debate this:

Ibn Ezra

The reason is that his heart and all his desire is upon the dedication of his home. His focus is the home front and not war. He will take flight and cause others to flee.

Rashi

[Lest he die in battle] and someone else dedicate it (the house) – this is a matter of anguish.

- In respect to Rashi, we might note the depiction of exile and national ruin:
If a man will betroth a wife, another man shall enjoy her. If you build a house, but you shall not live in it. If you plant a vineyard, you shall not harvest it.
(Devarim 28:30)
- What is the difference between Ibn Ezra and Rashi?

We might say that Ibn Ezra's concern is tactical. A man who is thinking about his beloved, about his half-built home, has too much to lose. He will feel a lack of motivation, reluctant to endanger himself, to lead the charge against the enemy. When he feels his life is imperiled he might prefer to take flight, and even before the encounter with the enemy his misgivings might discourage his fellow soldiers.

With these concerns, this man is more of a liability than an asset; better to discharge him.

Rashi's view represents a very different concern. A woman who is betrothed but whose beloved fell in war, a half-finished house, a withered untended vineyard – all these are a "matter of anguish" as if life itself has been disrupted in too deep a way. There is a balance to be made between the battle field and the home front. War is important, but when the cannons will stop firing, life needs to go on. And so, let young man and women continue to wed, houses to be built and agriculture blossom. Let this planting counterbalance the inevitable carnage of war.

Another fascinating debate relates to the person who is discharged because he is "afraid and disheartened." The Mishna in Sota chapter 8 relates two views:

Rabbi Akiva says: "afraid and disheartened" is to be understood literally, that he cannot stand in the battle lines and see a drawn sword.

Rabbi Yose the Galilean says: "afraid and disheartened"—this is the one who is afraid because of the transgressions he has committed

Rabbi Akiva is looking for a brave army, a fierce and determined army.

Rabbi Yose is looking for a righteous army, filled with God-fearing people, because, as the priest said: “For it is the Lord your God who marches with you to do battle for you against your enemy, to bring you victory.” (20:4)

- In today’s army, which view is more important, that of Rabbi Akiva or Rabbi Yose? Or possibly both?

Gadi Eisenstock, Israel’s current Chief of Staff expressed the IDF’s aspiration to become a different type of military.

The IDF’s mission is to ensure the safety of Israel’s civilians and residents on the homefront and in the battlefield.

David Ben-Gurion said that “the fate of Israel depends on two things: its strength and its righteousness.”

From the day of its establishment, the IDF has championed the values of devotion to the mission and striving for victory. It has also sanctified the important values of human dignity and purity of arms. These values reflect an ancient Jewish tradition and a nation that desires life. (March 30, 2016)

So please discuss:

- How does a modern army assure the correct balance between “strength and righteousness”?

Shabbat Shalom!