YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA

**Parashat Shoftim**

**Sicha of Rav Yaakov Medan**

**"Let Not Your Heart Faint"**

Translated by David Strauss

**"Fighting for the sake of the unity of God's name"**

At the end of *Parashat Shoftim*, we encounter the words of the priest and the officers to those going out to war:

When you go forth to battle against your enemies, and see horses, and chariots, and a people more than you, you shall not be afraid of them; for the Lord your God is with you, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. And it shall be, when you draw near to the battle, that the priest shall approach and speak to the people, and he shall say to them: Hear, O Israel, you draw near this day to battle against your enemies; let not your heart faint; fear not, nor be alarmed, neither be afraid of them; for the Lord your God is He that goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you… And the officers shall speak further to the people, and they shall say: What man is there that is fearful and faint-hearted? let him go and return to his house, lest his brothers' heart melt as his heart. And it shall be, when the officers have made an end of speaking to the people, that captains of hosts shall be appointed at the head of the people. (*Devarim* 20:1-9)

What is being demanded here of these soldiers; with what mentality are they supposed to go out to battle? Many explain with the words of the Rambam, which some even recite before entering the battlefield:

"What man is there that is fearful and faint-hearted?" (*Devarim* 20:8) – the apparent meaning is that this describes a person whose heart does not have enough strength to stand in the throes of battle. Once a soldier enters the throes of battle, he should rely on the Hope of Israel and his Savior in times of need. He should know that he is fighting for the sake of the unity of God's name, and should place his soul in His hand and not [show] fright or fear. He should not consider his wife or children; rather, he should wipe their memory from his heart and turn [his mind away] from all matters [and instead only] to the war.

Anyone who begins to feel anxious and worry in the midst of battle, such that he frightens himself, violates a negative commandment, as it is written: "Fear not, nor be alarmed, neither be afraid of them." Furthermore, the blood of all of Israel hangs upon his neck. (*Hilkhot Melakhim* 7:15)

The Rambam addresses the Hebrew warrior directly, instructing him to forget everything and fight only for the unity of God's name. Any other consciousness is subject to a negative commandment!

The Rambam adds:

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, as it is stated: "[Let him go and return to his house,] lest his brothers' heart melt as his heart" (*Devarim* 20:8). And it is explicit in the [prophetic]: "Cursed be he who is slack in doing the work of the Lord, and cursed be he who withholds his sword from blood" (*Yirmeyahu* 48:10).

But anyone who fights with all his heart, without fear, and his intent is purely to sanctify God's name, can be assured that he will find no harm, nor will bad overtake him. He will [be able to] build a proper family in Israel and gather merit for himself and his children forever, and he will merit eternal life in the world to come, as it is stated [that Avigayil said to David]: "For the Lord will certainly make my lord a sure house, because my lord fights the battles of the Lord; and evil is not to be found in you all your days… and the soul of my lord shall be bound in the bundle of life with the Lord your God" (I *Shmuel* 25:28-29). (*Hilkhot Melakhim*, ibid.)

Rashi presents this idea, in his brief and concise manner, in his comment on the words, "Hear, O Israel":

“[And he shall say to them:] Hear, O Israel” – Even if you had no other merit than [fulfilment of the mitzva of reciting] the *Shema*, you would deserve for Him to deliver you. (Rashi, *Devarim* 20:3)

The Rambam and Rashi had the same thing in mind – the need to focus on the unity of God's name, for the sake of which the war is being waged, and which of course is the focus of the *Shema*.

**"And fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your houses"**

In contrast to the Rambam and Rashi, there is a less well-known approach expressed by Nechemia. The background is the building of the walls of Jerusalem at the time of the return to Zion, and the attempts by the nations in the land to fight against the returning Jews:

But it came to pass that, when Sanbalat, and Toviya, and the Arabians, and the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites, heard that the repairing of the walls of Jerusalem went forward, and that the breaches began to be stopped, then they were very upset; and they conspired all of them together to come and fight against Jerusalem, and to cause confusion therein. (*Nechemia* 4:1-2)

Nechemia and the people prayed to God and prepared for battle:

Therefore I stationed, in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, in the open places, I stationed the people by families with their swords, their spears, and their bows. And I saw, and I rose, and I said to the nobles, and to the rulers, and to the rest of the people: Be not afraid of them; remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your houses. (*Nechemia* 4:7-8)

Nechemia represents the consciousness with which we are familiar from the security situation in the State of Israel – "the whole country is a front, and all of the people are the army." When even the home front is in danger, the soldiers remember their families and fight fiercely on their behalf.

**The relevance of the command**

The Torah commands us: "Let not your heart faint; fear not, nor be alarmed, neither be afraid of them." The morale of the soldiers has always served as a significant catalyst for military victory – already at the battle of Waterloo, at the battle of Stalingrad, and of course in Operation Tzuk Eitan (Operation Protective Edge, 2014), where Israel's soldiers demonstrated great morale and motivation.

It seems that the recent wars have taught us about a certain expansion of the command, "let not your heart faint." Already in the Second Lebanon War, we learned how important it is to take into account the international arena, and the way in which the conduct of the State of Israel and its army is perceived there. At times these concerns become issues of actual *pikuach nefesh,* "saving lives."

But in Operation Tzuk Eitan, it became clear to us that the internal national arena is also very significant. We already knew this from the Yom Kippur War, which from a military perspective was an overwhelming victory – the encirclement of the third Egyptian army and the Israeli army reaching the outskirts of Damascus – but because of the protests, which began with the commander of the Budapest outpost, it was perceived as Israel's loss, to the point that when the leader of Egypt was asked who won the war, he answered: "Ask in Tel Aviv."

The struggle over our collective consciousness is in our hands. Despite significant challenges, the home front stood firm in Operation Tzuk Eitan almost until the end, when a young boy, Daniel Tragerman *Hy"d*, was murdered by Hamas, who fired mortar shells into Kibbutz Nachal Oz. We will try to explain what we mean when we speak of a struggle over our collective consciousness.

The Chafetz Chaim talks about the need to judge others favorably, and this is a cornerstone in the thought of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev as well. Their approach allows one to turn events around a hundred and eighty degrees. But it seems that in the postmodern era, we can understand this is in another way. Every event is subject to a variety of interpretations and explanations. Each can be perceived from different angles and described in many ways. The Torah commands us to choose an interpretation that sees the person in question in a positive light.

The same applies to Operation Tzuk Eitan. We know about many negative things that took place and they must be corrected, and thank God we heard from the Chief of Staff that the IDF not only scored victories, but is also "learning and improving," and that is very important. But from the perspective of our consciousness, we are obligated to create positive morale, to "let not your heart be faint" on the national level and not only among the soldiers on the ground. The commandment not to be afraid is not only relevant to the soldiers of the IDF; all of the state's citizens must fill themselves with a national consciousness of success and progress.

The commandment is relevant from another point of view as well. Thus far we have talked about its expansion from the soldiers to the nation at large, but the commandment can also be extended in terms of time. We must maintain a positive national consciousness not only in times of war, or when we are on the brink of war, but also when there is quiet. Looking around, one may conclude that extremist Islam is on the rise, and many countries in the world are striving to accommodate it instead of fighting it. The adoration of the strong has existed in the world since time immemorial, already among various idolatrous groups, for whom the worship of the evil god was much more significant than their worship of the good god. Yet cruel organizations such as ISIS and Hamas must be fought, not accepted. Europe especially needs to understand this, and to internalize that the State of Israel is today at the forefront of the struggle against this evil, just like England was decades ago in World War II.

Let us all remember the command in our *parasha*: "Let not your heart faint; fear not, nor be alarmed, neither be afraid of them; for the Lord your God is He that goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you."

[This *sicha* was delivered on Shabbat Parashat Shoftim 5774 (2014).]