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THE SPIRITUAL DANGERS OF IDEOLOGICAL CAMPING

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Parshat Ki Teitzei opens with a famous dispensation for soldiers: "The Law of the Beautiful Captive". This law can reasonably be understood as a bulwark against the use of rape as a military tactic, as is prevalent in many modern conflicts. Nonetheless, the clear overall impression is that soldiers in the field are given more license than civilians.

A quite different impression emerges from a verse later in the parshah. Devarim 23:10 reads:

כִּי־תֵצֵא מִחֵיָּהּ עַל־אֲבִיבֶיךָ
וְנִשְׁמַרְתָּ מִכָּל דְּבַר רָע:

*When you go out as a camp against your enemies
You must be guarded against any evil davar*

Here the sense is that soldiers must be especially vigilant, spiritually and morally. Nachmanides explains that

והנכון בעיני בעיני המצוה הזאת,
כי הכתוב יזהיר בעת אשר החטא מצוי בו.
והידוע במנהגי המחנות היוצאות למלחמה,
כי יאכלו כל תועבה,
יגזלו ויחמסו ולא יתבוששו אפילו בניאוף וכל נבלה,
הישר בבני אדם בטבעו
יתלבש אכזריות וחמה כצאת מחנה על אויב.
ועל כן הזהיר בו הכתוב "ונשמרת מכל דבר רע"
ועל דרך הפשט היא אזהרה מכל הנאסר:

*What is correct in my eyes regarding this mitzvah
is that Scripture cautions in the time that sin is commonly found
and it is known regarding the practice of camps that go out to war
that they eat all abominations
they rob and plunder without shame
even with regard to married women and all disgraces.
The straightest of human beings by nature
will put on cruelty and rage when the camp goes out against the enemy
Therefore Scripture cautions regarding it "You must be guarded against
any evil davar"*

*and using the approach of pshat this is a caution against all (already)
forbidden things*

So which is it? Is war a time for accommodationist leniency, or rather for countercultural stringency?

Most likely both. We can easily explain that soldiers need to be especially vigilant, and yet that we need to make allowances for their inevitable failures, and provide queasifying outlets to prevent even worse transgressions.

Rabbinic literature tends to build up the spiritual risks. "Any evil davar" becomes a specific warning against the Big 3 sins that a Jew must die rather than commit. There is no point fighting a war if one becomes the enemy in the process. So we must be sure that there are monotheists in foxholes, despite the prevalence of superstition and the human tendency to worship all conceivable higher powers in times of great danger; again, that we avoid rape; and that we shed no innocent blood unnecessarily, even as we shed blood necessarily.

The need for this reminder emphasizes Ramban's notion that war desperately tries men's souls, so that even our deepest inhibitions come under fire.

But the Sifri adds a disconcerting anticlimax:

כשהוא אומר "דבר" - אף על לשון הרע

By saying "davar" - it includes lashon hora as well

Textually, it is easy to understand where Sifri is coming from. The word *davar*, translated as "thing" or "matter", could be removed without changing the verse's meaning. Therefore, it should be translated as "word".

But what is the point of mentioning *lashon hora* in the

aftermath of the Big 3 sins? And why is lashon hora especially relevant in the context of war-camps?

An approach may emerge from comparing our parshah's opening formula

כי תצא למלחמה על אויבך

to the one that opens 23:10.

כי תצא מחנה על אויבך.

What is the difference between “going out to war” and “going out as a camp”?

I suggest that the simplest explanation is that in the first verse, the war precedes the camp; if there is a camp, it is only because we are already at war. By contrast, in 23:10 the camp precedes the war. There is an enemy, and in response to the enemy we create an armed camp - but there is as yet no war.

This distinction may be implied in Ramban. Ramban is careful not to say that the verse seeks to prevent depraved wartime behavior; rather, it seeks to guard against the depraved behavior of war-camps.

In war, we sometimes have to compromise, and let things go in the hope of preventing greater transgressions. But in the run-up or prelude to war, this may not be the case. During such times, our goals must be to

- A. Prevent the war if possible
- B. Strengthen our inhibitions so as to prepare ourselves to withstand the trials of war

Controlling our speech is crucial for both these efforts.

The mere existence of a war-camp creates enormous pressure for war. The financial and social burden of the camp is enormous, and often not sustainable, so that war must be fought soon if at all. Simply being in a camp creates pressure towards ideological homogeneity. Internal conflict within a camp is dangerous and intolerable, so all aggressions are deliberately redirected toward the enemy. Language is therefore used to exacerbate the conflict rather than to create space for nonviolent resolution.

Moreover, war-preparation *davka* often involves breaking down moral intuitions by dehumanizing the other side.

Into this breach the Torah steps. These are temptations of ordinary strength, and there is no need for special understanding or dispensations. You must be especially careful to guard yourself against “evil speech”.

Now Ramban, and the Torah, are talking about physical, armed conflict. But it seems to me that the lessons apply equally to conflicts within or between Jewish denominations.

Here are some such applications:

1) Camps naturally tend to self-justify and self-perpetuate. Once a group identity has developed – especially if that identity is largely defined by your exclusion or rejection of specified others – reintegrating with “outsiders” is extraordinarily difficult. Even if we maintain an overall shared identity, the other side will soon form their own war-camp in response to ours! So we should think twice or three times before developing exclusive self-definitions (even or especially if that self-definition is about being less exclusive than the group you are excluding.)

2) War-camps naturally tend toward diminishing the value and humanity of their enemies. A genuinely “these and those” outlook rarely survives in such circumstances; “pluralism” becomes a buzzword whose major purpose is to tar those outside one’s camp as intolerant fanatic extremists.

3) The morality of language is often the first casualty of devolution into camps, the canary in the communal coal mine. When attack essayists are among the most prominent participants in public halakhic discourse, and crude insults become the stock in trade of serious talmidei chakhamim, our spiritual atmosphere has clearly become toxic.

These points will not make any impression on those who genuinely want ideological war within Orthodoxy, or Modern Orthodoxy, whether their desires arise out of admirable religious sincerity or are rather the manifestation of deep character flaws. But the rest of us can and should use this Elul to consciously diminish their influence.