

PARSHAS MATTOS

תשע"ט

At the beginning of the parsha Moshe Rabbeinu is informed that he must take revenge on the Midianim, and afterwards he will die. This war will be the last thing Moshe Rabbeinu will do in his lifetime. What would someone in this position do? Delay the war for as long as possible, of course! Every day, every second of life is precious beyond description.

When the Vilna Gaon was on his deathbed, he was profoundly sad. His talmidim asked him—"but you've lived an entire lifetime devoted to Torah and avodas Hashem! You have so much to look forward to in the olam ho'emes!" But the Gra disagreed. He clutched his tzitzis and said only in this world can one spend a few pennies and perform a mitzvah whose reward is eternal. Every mitzvah is an unbelievable achievement. After I pass away, all these opportunities will be gone forever. Death is tragic because it is final—it is the end of growth—a static existence. And of course Moshe Rabbeinu was aware of this.

One would have expected Moshe to hesitate.

But Moshe makes no cheshbonos—he starts to make preparations for war immediately. He is an eved Hashem and does not hesitate to fulfill the will of Hashem—even at great personal cost.

Chazal say the danger which Midian posed to Klal Yisroel is that of a rodef. Normally, the din of a rodef against someone only begins when someone is actively trying to kill another. Sitting at home and planning in his head is not actionable. But here, even though Midian was no longer active, Hashem commands Klal Yisroel to eliminate them. Why? Because in ruchniyus, they still presented a danger. The Rambam in Peirush Mishnayos in Chullin says threats to one's ruchniyus need to be treated more severely than threats to one's physical survival. This is why they had to wage war against Midian.

The conscription for the war was for each shevet to supply one thousand soldiers. Why so few? In reality, the Midrash tells us each shevet supplied three thousand men. One thousand were on the battlefield, one thousand were preparing the supply line, and one thousand were davening for success in battle. We consistently find that Klal Yisroel wage their wars on multiple fronts. There is a physical battle with the enemy on Earth, and simultaneously there is a spiritual battle with the maloch of the enemy nation in Heaven. The outcome of the physical battle depends on the outcome of the spiritual battle.

The first battle in Klal Yisroel's history—with Amoleik right after Kriyas Yam Suf—set the pattern for all future battles. Yehoshua was selected to lead the physical battle and Moshe, Aharon, and Chur were engaged in tefilah to increase the merit needed for Klal Yisroel's victory. But it wasn't a clear division of tasks—even those who fought on the battlefield were expected to see Moshe's raised hands and be reminded that their victory only comes when their hearts are directed to Hashem in shomayim—even in the midst of fighting! Everyone must realize that we are in Hashem's hands and that is what determines victory.

In this battle with Midian, Pinchas was chosen to lead the soldiers—the kohen mashuach milchomo was given the task to prepare the Jewish soldiers before fighting. The military camp must be pure and kodosh—it is where the Shechinoh must be in order to ensure victory. Even sinful thoughts are to be avoided at all costs since they will drive away the Shechinoh and make the soldiers vulnerable to danger. As we learned last week, Hashem despises immorality and will not bring His Divine Presence to provide protection when Klal Yisroel are involved in

arayos. An army base is a place where protection is needed more than anywhere else—the dangers are clear and present. War is a debasing and dehumanizing activity and one must keep his spiritual focus within this debasing and dehumanizing atmosphere.

The Kohen commands the Jewish soldiers not to be afraid—even though there may be casualties, they need to know that no-one dies without a cheshbon and dikduk hadin. They have nothing to fear but their own aveiros.

These instructions for war are in the Torah for all future generations. The Rambam cites these halachos in Mishnah Torah because they apply whenever there is a halachic mandated war. The real war is happening in Heaven with the various heavenly forces involved. So, although the physical battle needs to be fought, the ultimate success of anything has nothing to do with our efforts. This is the reality we live in at all times.

A battlefield is a dangerous place and we need extra protection. Some primitive people tried to argue in the last Gaza war that those davening and gaining zechuyos for the Jewish victory should be out there on the battlefield instead of remaining in the interior of the country. This is ridiculous—in every war situation we are obligated to take all the necessary precautions and fight battles in a normal manner. We are supposed to use trained soldiers and weapons and military strategy—without relying on open miracles. But at the same time, one has to recognize that the outcome of the battle is not due to superior training, advanced weaponry, or better intelligence. It is won or lost by our mitzvos or aveiros.

Wars are not only between soldiers wearing different uniforms—it is between entire nations. This is why there is no distinction made between military personnel and civilian populations in the Torah. The soldiers represent the entire nation in battle and the entire population at home is fully behind the war effort. Klal Yisroel even killed the chiefs of Midian—who were not fighting on the front—they were in their palaces. The entire nation is at war.

So just because modern warfare is supposed to be dictated by idiotic rules which distinguish between combatants and non-combatants, it doesn't mean the civilian population is innocent of any bloodshed. Just the opposite. For instance, the civilian population in the Gaza Strip voted the Hamas terrorist-government into power; they openly cheer and support every terrorist bombing and murder. They clearly see these terrorists as their personal representatives in their mission to kill as many Jews as possible. It makes no sense to claim they are innocent bystanders to the bloodshed and therefore should be spared any violence. There should be no distinction between military targets and civilian targets when you see the situation clearly.

This is why Klal Yisroel were instructed to eliminate anyone who presented a danger—which included the women—especially since they were ready and willing to cause Klal Yisroel to stumble in zhus and avodo zoro. They all had a din rodef.

There is a clear principle which emerges from this parsha—spiritual dangers are more serious than a physical danger. The Rambam in Moreh Nevuchim explains why this is so. One needs to understand deeply that it is spiritual values and achievements in our service of Hashem which gives our lives any lasting meaning. A life devoid of spirituality is a worthless, empty existence—it will end with death. It should be eminently clear that our efforts to preserve our spiritual

well-being should be greater than those which preserve our physical well-being. The dangers to our spiritual existence should be treated much more seriously than dangers to our physical existence.

In times of economic depression and recession, there were people who jumped off rooftops after the stock market collapsed, and they showed the rest of us what gave their lives value and meaning. They thought their entire reason for existence was to make money and live in luxury—to live on the very top of physical existence. When faced with a sudden loss of wealth and power, they saw no reason to go on living. Without financial success, they could find no meaning in their lives.

When a Jew is faced with a choice of life and death, as Yitzchak Ovinu did at the akeidoh, he sees it as another opportunity to fulfill the will of Hashem. He is aware that what gives his life meaning is living a life of Torah and mitzvos. When the Torah demands forfeiting one's life, it is inconceivable that he should violate Hashem's demands in order to keep on living. Living for what? Just to exist? There is more meaning in giving up one's life for the will of Hashem than to live in contradiction to the will of Hashem.

Avrohom spent his entire adult life showing the world that Hashem stands for chessed and tzedek in this world. Just imagine the humiliation he would have to face when coming back from the akeidoh without his son—telling people that the same G-d who he has been saying is full of chessed and tzedek, had asked him to kill his son for no reason other than to test his obedience!

Most people would think that after a lifetime of work in spreading the idea of a loving, just G-d, it would be all over after the akeidoh—why would Avrohom go through with it? But Avrohom realized what gives his life meaning: the empire of kiruv that he built, or carrying out the will of Hashem and maintaining the keshet to Hashem. The truth is obvious, but not everyone can take the truth.

For many people, money, power and fame give meaning to their lives. Take them away and they become depressed and suicidal. But for a Jew, his connection to Hashem gives him meaning. So someone who poses a spiritual danger to that connection is a more serious rodef than an assailant and needs to be killed first—even when he is not actively involved in creating the danger. It is a statement about what gives meaning to our lives as Jews—even in matters not as grave as life and death. Anyone who is planning his next move in his life needs to ask himself: is this a path which will make my life ultimately worth living?

Our success in battle and in life generally has nothing to do with our efforts—it is due to our connection with Hashem and our balance of mitzvos and aveiros.

The lessons of this parsha are not only relevant to the halachos of rodef and milchomo. Everyone has something which gives value and meaning to his life—the Chumash is telling us to stop and consider what should give our life meaning and what makes our lives worth living.