

Ki Tetzei: Holy Encampment

- Nisson Shulman.

Our camp must be holy. We may not show our weakness or shame to the enemy or outside world.

Ki Tetzei; Be Holy

My text is a passage in today's Torah reading. It teaches that G-d commands us to be holy in our army camps when we go out to war. It teaches this in a positive and a negative way.

1. Your camp shall be holy, and G-d shall be in your midst.
2. You shall have no evil things in your camp. Literally, no immoral matters shall appear there, lest G-d forsake you.

Of course, it isn't only an army camp that we must keep holy. Many times, and in many ways the Torah commands us to be holy. Be holy in your personal lives.... Let your society be holy....

Why then is an army camp singled out? Ramban, Nahmanides, explains that the battlefield is the place where we are most tempted to excess. So the Torah emphasized that even in battle we must be holy. Even in war we must be moral and righteous. When the temptation is strongest, we must resist the hardest. Then G-d will be in our midst. Otherwise G-d will forsake us.

This is particularly pertinent in recent months, when many of us, in our anguish at the human cost of Jewish lives that we pay because of the humane way Israel's army seeks to wage war, might grow impatient, and say, the world doesn't recognize our sacrifices for the sake of morality even in war, anyway. So why don't we forget about humaneness and teach the enemy lessons they will not soon forget! But we read the sidrah, and realize that Hashem recognized that we might feel this way, and warned us about it.

This commandment requiring holy conduct even in battle must be seen as part of the general rule in Judaism that honorable conduct will cause G-d's presence to be with us. Dishonorable conduct will cause G-d to forsake us.

Therefore each Jew must always bear himself so as to bring honor to G-d's Name and must avoid doing whatever might dishonor G-d's Name.

This is a fundamental principle in Judaism. Maimonides formulates it in his chapters devoted to the "Fundamentals of Torah". Yalkut Shimoni Midrash states that the Torah was given for its sake, and that Israel is sacred only if it fulfills the requirements of this commandment.

This commandment, to invoke G-d's presence through honorable conduct, takes many forms. Martyrs are called Kedoshim because of it. A Jew who does a deed that brings credit to himself and to our people sanctifies G-d's Name, is mekadesh Hashem. And if he does the reverse, he is mehalel Hashem, he desecrates G-d's Name. And of course, whole communities sometimes were

forced to sacrifice themselves to carry out this commandment.

Rabbi Menahem Ziembe of Prague based his 1943 decision in the Warsaw Ghetto to resist to the last man and not to go passively to the slaughter, on this commandment. He cited an earlier ruling by RAMBAM of the year 1161, where he wrote that the requirement to give up one's life for this commandment applies not only to individuals, but to whole communities as well.

In his decision, Rabbi Ziembe called upon our people's wisdom, saying: "We are an am chacham venavon, but we haven't shown that wisdom in recent years. If we are indeed an am chacham venavon, then we would understand that the Umschlag Platz is nothing more than a trap, and that it is Hitler's intention to annihilate all Jews. And if we had been wise in earlier years, we would have crushed Hitler when we could have still aroused the moral conscience of the world against his poison. Now wisdom requires that we, as a community, resist to our last breath of life so that all our people and all people on earth will know the truth about Hitler, and so that we shall bring honor to G-d's Name by acting in the only honorable way left to us."

Yes, to bring honor to ourselves is to bring honor to Hashem and to cause Him to be in our midst. But to dishonor ourselves; for instance, to behave immorally, is to cause G-d to forsake us because when peoples scorn Jews, they scorn Hashem as well.

There is room in Judaism for honest disagreement; but within our own people! There is no room for ervat davar, to reveal our nakedness, our naked moral wounds, to others!

The Mishna tells us that King Hezekiah, of Isaiah's time, did three things of which the Rabbis disapproved. The Mishna records their disapproval, but does not mention any public outcry, any public demonstration or denunciation. We must learn to express ourselves in this way. Internal disagreements are to be kept in the family. On the other hand, when there is a protest against outside tyranny, against oppression, against the terror that the enemy seeks to bring to Israel daily, then we must raise our voices with all our might and power, and even with soul's dedication, as Rabbi Ziemba required in those terrible times from the Warsaw Ghetto.

Our Torah portion opens with the following words: Ki Tetzei lamilchama al oyvecha; "When you go out to war against your enemies". "When you go out to war..." isn't that enough? Why does the Torah add the words "against the enemy"?

Because above things we must learn who our enemies really are! Not other Jews, but those who would destroy our fellow Jews; the enemies from without, who would destroy Judaism. Not any segment of our people, but Hamas and Fatah and Arafat and Sadam Hussein, yimach shemam. One and all our Jewish people today must join in a prayer for the continuance of G-d's providence. And that providence will continue to guard us and guide us, only if our encampment is holy. If we are one camp and if we conduct ourselves honorably, then G-d's Name will come to be honored by all men and He will always be in our midst. So may it be, AMEN VEAMEN.