

Shoftim: Two Songs, Two Battles

- Nisson Shulman.

Rules of war in this week's parsha. Though we are a people who deeply desires peace. The contradiction is resolved through lessons derived from two great warriors, David and Devorah. Each gives an insight into when we must teach war and when we may seek the luxury of peace. "If you desire peace, prepare for war".

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The rules of war for the Jew are found in this week's Torah portion. The requirement to offer peace sincerely and only to engage in war as a last resort; the humaneness in battle, even extending to the trees in the countryside where we are encamped; the declaration of the priest and leaders before the engagement exempting those who had just built homes, planted vineyards, become betrothed, as well as all who were faint of heart.

In the prophetic writings we find two Jewish songs, which sing of great battles: David's eulogy of Saul who fell in battle against the Philistines on Mount Gilboa not far from Jerusalem; and Devorah's song of triumph when she sings of the Jewish general Barak and of herself, as together they defeated Sisera the leader of the hosts of Yavin King of Canaan.

Each of these songs contains one verse that at first glance makes no sense. David begins his song about Saul and Jonathan, their heroism and their battles, with the words, *Lelamed liBney Yehuda Keshet, hine ketuva al Sefer HaYashar* (Shmuel II, 21), "To teach the children of Judah warfare – is written in the Book of Yashar". What did he mean by that?

And when Devorah sings of her great triumph, she suddenly changes the subject and recites the following strange, even cryptic verse: *Yivchar E-him hadashim: az lechem shearim, magen im yeraeh varomach bearbaim elef beYisrael*: "When new judges are chosen and war will be waged in the gates; then not one shield or spear shall be seen amongst 40,000 Jews."

I suggest that in the light of the current tensions, "Road Map" discussions, and particularly the withdrawal from Gaza and its aftermath, and if we bear in mind our relationships to our foes and our friends, we can begin to understand these verses.

In the halls of the United Nations are inscribed Yeshayahu's words, *Vekitsu charbotam leitim vahanitoteyhem lemazmerot*; "They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore."

This is a prayer, a hope, a dream that we have given the world. Not one nation on earth has yet realized that dream.

Over the doors of the Ministry of War of the Austro-Hungarian Hapsburg Empire which was broken up into fragments after the First World War, there were engraved these words: *Si vis*

pacem, para bellum”: “If you desire peace, prepare for war”. That is the spirit that motivates the policy of every nation on earth. That is the rule they all follow today. They must, or they would be swallowed alive by wolves around them.

Yet nations of the world would like Israel to act differently. They want us to allow an enemy state next door, giving up our security while remaining vulnerable to the enemy around us. They want us to disregard their threats, their terror, their proximity, their power and their influence, naively giving up, unilaterally, all that would help make us secure.

Against this background the words of David and of Devorah become clear.

David sings of Jewish heroism in battle and asks: “Is this the spirit of our heritage?” Doesn’t the Torah prefer peace? Even the Midrash on this week’s portion which teaches the rules of war, finds many proof-texts in our very portion to show that gadol hashalom, peace is far greater. “Yes”, said David: “If they would only let us have peace.”

Do you know why we have to teach warfare to the children of Judah? It is written in the Book of Yashar.” What is this Book of Yashar? Amar Raban Shimon ben Gameliel, ze sefer Shoftim, diktiv bei, ish kol hayashar beynav yaase”. It is the book of Shoftim which describes how every one of our neighbors did yashar beynav, “Whatever he liked to do”. He robbed, pillaged, murdered. Judah can’t abide this in peace. We must respond to Sefer HaYashar, to this condition of anarchy by teaching war to the citizens of Judah.

Deborah, too, addressed the same problem in another dimension. “We went to war”, she said. “But should disputes not be settled in peace? Yes, they should. We should indeed beat swords into plowshares. but only when both sides do the same. It would be suicide for us to do it alone!” Yivchar E-him chadashim, “Let there but be new judges amongst our foes, new leaders who sincerely seek peace and have the power to implement their desire, az lechem shearim, “leaders who will take war out of the battlefield and fight it out over the negotiating table, shearim, in the gateway of the city where always sat its judges and leaders. Let them but abandon the battlefield and seek only the conference table, and they you will see if magen im yeraeh varomach bearbaim elef miYisrael, “Not one spear or shield will be found amongst forty thousand Israelites. But now, the enemy comes against us with sword and spear, and therefore we must answer in kind.”