

## Bringing meaning to life

Parasha with Rabbi Benji Levy

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# SHOFTIM

## THE FEAR OF FEAR

**Fear** is one of the most powerful emotions in the human experience and presents itself at some of the most critical junctures in our lives. Whether one is on the brink of making an important decision, waiting to hear news of a loved one or embarking on a new professional path, that familiar, **often crippling sentiment courses through a person's veins and preys on the mind, rendering clarity at that moment almost impossible.** The Torah, which speaks 'in the language of mankind',<sup>1</sup> recognises and addresses this.

**When** preparing for war, a carefully selected priest would approach the soldiers and give the following exhortation, 'Listen, O Israel, today you are drawing near to wage war against your enemies - let your heart not be faint, do not be afraid, do not panic, and do not be broken before them.'<sup>2</sup>

**The** children of Israel are not to fear as God is among them. However, the priest who is

responsible for assuaging fears and for building up the nation's bravery and determination then makes a most surprising announcement, exempting three categories of people from military duty: he who is engaged to a woman, but has not yet married her; he who has built a house, but has not yet lived in it; and he who has built a vineyard, but has not yet drunk from its wine.<sup>3</sup> Although they have to contribute to the war effort through supplying food and water,<sup>4</sup> these people are not allowed to serve on the front line. What is it about these three groups that exempts them from battle?

**As** Abraham ibn Ezra points out, the Torah is teaching us a deep lesson about the nature of facing fear, one that applies to our routine lives as much as it does to the soldiers on the battlefield. Wars are waged in our hearts and minds, just as much as on the battlefields. The Torah is showing us the critical role that our emotional psyche can play in impacting our performance on

the battlefield and *whether or not our heart is in it is what makes all the difference.*<sup>5</sup>

**Two** soldiers can be standing next to each other facing their enemy, both feeling the same primordial feelings of physical and psychological terror that accompany mortal danger. The first one is absolutely committed to the mission - he knows that what he is doing at this moment is of cardinal importance to his people, and he is able to confront the fear head-on. Despite his trepidation, he knows that there is nowhere else he should be; and **it is precisely this single-minded devotion that gives him the courage to fight.** The second soldier, standing in exactly the same position, feels the same fear. He is just as aware as his counterpart, on a cognitive level, that his military task is important. But his heart is elsewhere - perhaps he is thinking about his fiancée, or the fine house he has just finished building, or the financial success that he is about to enjoy from his new vineyard. One who is



preoccupied is unable to confront his fear head-on and it is as if he is not truly there. He is constantly seeking comfort through thoughts of his newly acquired life back home. He repeatedly attempts to mentally escape the danger he is facing through letting his mind wander rather than focusing on what is right in front of him. **And a soldier whose heart is not strong and whose mind is not present is a liability not just to himself, but to all those around him.**

In our own lives too, we often attempt to deal with our challenges (especially those that induce tremors of fear) through avoidance - conscious or otherwise - and through escaping into our various constructed realities, online or otherwise. While this may allow us to avoid confrontation in the short term, it dooms us in the long term.

**No soldier can defeat an enemy through retreat and similarly no challenge can be solved through avoidance.** In order to overcome the obstacles

we face in life, we must be bold enough to tackle them head-on with crystal-clear determination.

**'Courage,' as Mark Twain said, 'is the resistance to fear, mastery of fear, not absence of fear.'**<sup>6</sup> Through the section describing the preparations for war, the Torah teaches us that escapism is more dangerous than any mortal enemy. Our diversions will render us incapable of dispelling the fears that threaten to cloud our lives. But in the words of Franklin D. Roosevelt, 'the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.' We must confront our challenges and battles whole-heartedly, secure in the knowledge that this is the only way to grow. Only then, as the priest anointed for warfare reminds us, will God's presence enter our lives and join with us in our battle.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Nedarim 3a.

<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 20:3. <sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 20:5-9.

<sup>4</sup> Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Warfare 7:9.

<sup>5</sup> Ibn Ezra on Deuteronomy 20:5.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Twain, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894), ch. 12.

#### Parasha Fact:

Though other legal systems warn against perjury, the Torah offers a unique deterrent for conspiring witnesses, providing them with the same punishment they sought to have on the innocent person.

*Next week in Ki Teitzei :*

*A quick skim through the Torah can open our eyes to a code that sometimes provides invaluable guidance and insights into the most contemporary of subjects. Pre-dating modern philosophy by millennia, the Torah gave a voice to the voiceless, advocating for animals long before the RSPCA was even conceived.*

שבת שלום