

PARSHAT SHOFTIM

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Last Sunday night at a wedding reception a congregant asked me whether my children and grandchildren in Israel had their gas masks ready at hand. I told her that I hadn't really thought about it, nor had I asked them that question. Frankly, I said, I am not sure that I really wanted to ask them. Obviously, she was concerned for the welfare of my family in Israel as the Middle East seems to be a tinder box at this particular time in history.

Syria is currently involved in a civil war and for the first time the use of chemical weapons in the Syrian stockpile is being discussed. The Muslim Brotherhood has taken over Egypt and with the recent attack in the Sinai desert the Egyptian border is no longer totally quiet. The future of Israel-Egyptian relations, even the cold peace, is no longer being taken for granted. Hamas on the south and Hezbollah in the north continue to arm themselves and are ready to attack at any moment. And, of course, there is Iran. Iran is not merely a problem for Israel, it is not merely a problem for the West, it is a problem for the entire world. Despite increased sanctions, Iran continues to advance its nuclear program, including its military-related aspects, thereby shortening the timeframe for a breakout in making potential preventive action more difficult. In particular, Israeli decision makers cite unabated uranium enrichment to 3.5 and 20%, a hardened and dispersed program that is becoming less vulnerable to attack, continued development of delivery systems and, at least according to some, weaponization efforts focused on nuclear warheads. The Israeli political and military establishment is monitoring the situation extremely closely and, from what we hear in public, is very concerned with possible outcomes.

It does not help matters that in the last few days we have heard again from the President of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. In his Quds (Jerusalem) address on August 17th he is reported to have said: "You want a new Middle East? We do, too, but in the new Middle East... there will be no trace of the American presence and the Zionists." He further stated that "the International Quds Day is the day of unity among all human beings to remove the Zionist black stain from the human society." Shame on the Secretary-General of the UN Ban Ki-moon who this week will visit Iran. One can only hope he will speak truth to power. We have learned, only too well, from history that a tyrant's words must be taken seriously and, thus, the Iranian threat must concern not only the State of Israel but the entire world and, it is hoped, with the leadership of the United States of America, a solution to that threat will be found.

War and peace is not only part of our history books, it is part of the present human drama. Our Torah reading this morning outlines for the Israelite people their responsibilities when it comes to war. The general rule seems to be, although there are exceptions especially during the conquest of Canaan by Joshua, that cities attacked by the Israelites may be offered the opportunity to surrender: “When you approach a town to attack it, you shall offer it terms of peace.” If they agree, their populations are not to be harmed. If they insist on battle and are defeated, only their men are to be killed. Women, children and property are to be spared and taken captive.

Later Jewish law defined different kinds of wars: the discretionary war and the obligatory war. The distinction between them has to do with the Halakhic responsibility to participate. There can be different kinds of exemptions from service in the case of discretionary wars, but a war that is deemed obligatory requires the participation of all. Maimonides legislates what is to happen in times of warfare, even though during his period of history this was theoretical only. There was no Jewish kingdom, there was no Jewish army, there was no Jewish self-government. Yet, Maimonides and other Halakhic authorities felt it necessary to outline Jewish responsibilities concerning the morality of warfare for the time period when there would be a Jewish state and a Jewish army. Since 1948, we are fortunate to live at a time when there is a strong Jewish state with a strong Jewish army. And, therefore, issues related to the morality of warfare are significant ones for the State of Israel, for its soldiers, for the entire military establishment and for the society at-large.

This past year, many of us in our congregation were part of a program established by the Shalom Hartman Institute. It was entitled “i Engage-Engaging Israel: Foundations for a New Relationship.” Once a month we studied sources and then watched a DVD of a Hartman scholar lecturing on different aspects of Israel and its challenges – social, economic, religious, and military. Our evening concluded with a lively discussion. By the way, we will begin a new Hartman series this fall on the concept of Jewish peoplehood following the same format. I encourage your participation.

Three of our lectures dealt with the issues uplifted by our Torah portion. The sessions were: Power and Powerlessness; War and Occupation; and Morality on the Battlefield. These were challenging issues and we examined Jewish sources, biblical, rabbinic and modern, and attempted to struggle with the relevant geopolitical, social, and security issues confronting the modern State of Israel. It is important to note that for us, sitting in the Grossinger-Brickman Activity Center, this was merely an academic study. For the military establishment and for the soldiers of the Israel Defense Forces, while theory is important, activities on the battlefield are real life situations.

We found that Israeli soldiers are held to a high degree of professionalism and morality. We read, for instance, from the code of the Israel Defense Forces, in particular, of the concept known as Tohar HaNeshek, the purity of arms. The code states: “The IDF servicemen and women will use their weapons and force only for the purpose of their mission, only to the necessary extent and will maintain their humanity even during combat. IDF soldiers will not use their weapons and force to harm human beings who are not combatants or prisoners of war, and will do all in their power to avoid causing harm to their lives, bodies, dignity and property.” This is a high moral standard, but it is based on biblical and rabbinic tradition and the values that must be present in the Jewish state even under the most extraordinary of experiences – the battlefield.

Needless to say, many of our enemies do not abide by these values. Hamas in Gaza launches rockets to kill civilians; Hezbollah claims to have rockets trained on Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Haifa and even Beer Sheva, and threaten the civilian populations in all those cities. In that same address Ahmadinejad stated: “The Zionist regime and the Zionists are a cancerous tumor. The nations of the region will soon finish off the usurper Zionists in the Palestinian land.” The plan is very simple, wipe out all Jews in the area we now call the State of Israel.

We have seen the same callousness in Iraq and Afghanistan as suicide bombers and IEDs are used to kill, injure and maim. Sometimes it is in restaurants, other times even in mosques at Ramadan feasts. Sometimes it is at funerals for individuals who have already been killed, and other times in crowded marketplaces in order to create the worst havoc possible. All of these efforts are against basic moral values, against any sense of decency and cannot be legitimated whatsoever.

At the same time, we must decry, as well, what occurred in Israel this past week. A group of Jewish youth surrounded and beat a 17-year old Arab in Zion Square in Jerusalem. He is now recovering in Hadassah Hospital. A few days earlier a firebomb was thrown at a Palestinian taxi in the Gush Etzion region. Six passengers were wounded. We must condemn these acts of wanton violence against the civilian population. There is no room for condoning this type of activity under any possible circumstance and Prime Minister Netanyahu has spoken out saying: “This is something we cannot accept – not as Jews, not as Israelis. This is not our way; and we condemn it in word and deed.”

It is clear that we don’t want to go back to the time of Maimonides when we were powerless. We have learned what powerlessness means. Yet, with power comes many challenges, not only political and military, but moral as well. Rabbi Donniel Hartman, in one of the essays that we read in preparation for our lectures, wrote that “To be a Jew and a moral human being is to be fearful for one’s own life and never to become callous at the taking of another.” He attempts to make a case for moral conduct in war as being founded

on the distinction between combatants and non-combatants. He writes: “As the moral justification for war is self-defense, the only individuals against whom life-threatening force may be used are those who are directly endangering the lives of others. This distinction between combatants and non-combatants is morally intuitive and serves as the basis of the moral condemnation of terrorists, who are classified as such by virtue of their targeting civilian populations. It also lies at the foundation of Judaism’s moral justification for self-defense. It is only against the individual who arises to kill you that one is allowed to use violent means, and even then, the level of the violence allowed is only that which is necessary to remove the threat.”

This is a high moral standard, but it is the standard of the Israel Defense Forces and it must remain the standard of the modern State of Israel. Being surrounded by enemies who care little for civilian casualties does not give us the right to behave like them. The basis of our tradition teaches us that war is sometimes necessary. However, that does not allow for immoral actions to take place even in the defense of your own safety and security.

Rabbi Michael Graetz in an essay in the back of our Etz Hayim writes: “War is part of the biblical conception of God’s power. It is fair to say that peace is also part of that same conception. Although later Jewish sources did not directly deal with such matters, it seems clear that the tendency was to interpret war as a part of the relational view of God’s power and to praise peace as the goal of God’s plan of salvation.” Peace is the ultimate goal.

If war is necessary, we pray for the security and safety of the soldiers and the civilians who will be in harm’s way. This is an anxious time in the Middle East and throughout the world. However, we should be uplifted by words of our Prophet Isaiah this morning in our Haftorah who told the exiles in Babylonia: “Awake, awake, O Zion! Clothe yourself in splendor; put on your robes of majesty, Jerusalem, holy city! For the uncircumcised and the impure shall never enter you again.”

We pray that Isaiah’s words may come to pass and that Jerusalem will be safe and secure; that the State of Israel shall one day live in a region of mutual respect on all sides and that populations will not attempt to annihilate one another and instead work together for the cause of their civilian populations. That day is not at-hand and, therefore, we must be ready for all eventualities. The challenges are great and the outcomes are crucial. Let us continue to hope and pray that the day will come as Isaiah prophesizes: “They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not pick up sword against nation; they shall never again know war.” May that day speedily come in our day.