



Parashat Lech Lecha - #302

Ask Rav Aviner: toratravaviner@yahoo.com

Prepared by Rabbi Mordechai Tzion

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On the Parashah... The Circumcision and Binding of Yitzchak Trials [Tal Chermon]

One of Avraham's tests was the command to circumcise himself and all his household, including eight-day old babies. After the circumcisions, Hashem appeared to Avraham in the field of Mamre in order to visit the sick. Of Avraham's three friends, Aner, Eshkol and Mamre, Hashem chose Mamre's field in which to appear to Avraham. Our Sages relate that Avraham consulted with these friends on whether to perform the circumcisions or not. Only Mamre advised him to go ahead and circumcise, which he indeed did (Bereshit Rabbah 42:8). As a reward Hashem appeared to Avraham specifically in the field of Mamre. The whole situation is rather puzzling. Did Avraham really waver about fulfilling G-d's command to circumcise? Was it the advice of some guy that finally convinced him? The Vilna Gaon answers these questions with deep insight. He explains that Avraham's *raison d'etre* was to redeem the world of its spiritual misery. He spread monotheism, teaching mankind to desist from their barbaric and idolatrous ways and instead to serve G-d with refined morality and virtuous qualities. And, suddenly, Hashem commands him to perform circumcisions! This was very disconcerting. How could he take a knife, cut into himself, and then take all of the babies of his household and mercilessly cut their flesh amid the screeching of hapless infants? Avraham was convinced that this would appear to be the height of barbarity. If he acted this way he would lose all of his influence over people. They would say that he had become as insane as the barbaric idolaters and would therefore refuse to accept any further spiritual guidance from him. True, Hashem had commanded him to circumcise himself in order to achieve personal perfection, but Avraham was willing to concede all this in order to be able to continue uplifting mankind out of its moral turpitude. He was willing to sacrifice his own soul

for the sake of the universal ideal. So Avraham went to ask his gentile friends if in fact he would lose their respect if he went ahead with the circumcisions. Eshkol and Aner advised him not to perform the circumcisions. Mamre, however, a true idealist, convinced Avraham not to violate the Divine command. So Avraham passed this test too and circumcised himself and all of his household.

According to this explanation of the Vilna Gaon, the Akeidah constitutes a far harsher and more demanding trial. Avraham throughout his lifetime had tirelessly toiled to wean mankind away from its barbaric idolatry. In the name of Hashem, he had travelled around calling upon them to cease the madness of burning their children in their idolatrous "Molech" worship. And now suddenly, G-d commands him to slaughter his own son. Perhaps people would be able to swallow circumcision, since no serious damage had been done. But now he had been ordered to kill his son in the name of G-d. If he performed this act, it was absolutely certain that this "hypocritical preacher" would be utterly rejected and would no longer have even the slightest spiritual influence on any of the non-Jews. These were the thoughts that flashed through his mind on his way to Mt. Moriah. But Avraham Avinu even triumphed in this trial and proceeded to perform Hashem's will out of implicit faith in Him.

A trial is a struggle against opposing forces. The adversary is not always selfish, base and vulgar tendencies. Sometimes, as in our case, one has to overcome aspiration that are idealistic, spiritual and lofty, but nonetheless misguided. Avraham Avinu had shown that he was willing to sacrifice the ideals he believed in by performing the circumcisions. This reached a peak when he agreed to the virtual annihilation of the Jewish Nation who were to come from his sacrificed son, Yitzchak, and to the resultant loss to the world of all the ideals that it was to bear. His love of Hashem and implicit obedience to His commands overcame his personal aspirations – both material and spiritual.

Rav Aviner on...

Is Unity in the Army a Halachic Consideration?

[Talk in the Yeshiva during Lunch]

In light of several recent incidents in which people have attacked the Israeli army, we have to clarify and make known a major principle of Jewish law as it relates to the army: unity. This critical idea is discussed by the Netziv's (Ha-Rav Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin) in his commentary on Rav Achai Gaon's She'eltot 142 (siman #143). Regarding Yoav, who waged war on Edom for half a year and exterminated all of their males (Melachim 1 11:16), the Talmud (Bava Batra 21a-b) relates that David asked him, "Why just every male? What about the females?" Yoav responded, "The Torah states, 'You shall blot out the males (Zachar) of Amalek'" (Devarim 25:19), which he saw as a precedent for dealing with Edom. David responded, "The Torah does not say Zachar (males) but Zecher (memory)."

Yoav then said, "I was taught to read 'Zachar' and not 'Zecher'." Yoav then went back to his teacher and said, "You taught me 'Zachar', and he pulled out a sword to kill the teacher, in accordance with 'Cursed be he who is slack in doing Hashem's work' (Yirmiyahu 48:10). The teacher replied, "True, I am cursed, but that is no reason to kill me." Yoav then said, "That same verse continues, 'And cursed be he who withholds his sword from blood'."

In the Talmud two opinions are expressed – he killed his teacher or he didn't. The Netziv on She'eltot says that he did in fact kill him. So one might ask: The verse, "Cursed be he who withholds his sword from blood" is not from the Torah but from Yirmiyahu. How could someone base Jewish law on it?

To this the Netziv responds: Certainly one does not normally kill a teacher who made a mistake. Here, however, the laws of war are at issue. It may well be that if someone sows confusion regarding the laws of war he should be killed, because regarding those laws, we do not know what the results of an error will be.

Our Torah source for this principle is taken from the laws of a soldier who flees the battlefield. The law is that the military police, positioned in the rear, are allowed to kill that soldier because he weakens morale. The Netziv says that that soldier is classified as a Rodef Klal Yisrael, one who pursues Jews to kill them. Whoever weakens the army, the fighting, the Chief-of-Staff, is the worst Rodef there could be.

Applying this principle, the Netziv explains many perplexing stories from the Tanach: 1. As is well-known, Achan stole spoils of war and was killed for it (Yehoshua 7). We might wonder whether such a soldier should really be killed. The Netziv answers that a military order had been issued not to take booty, and Achan had violated it. He was weakening the army, so he could be killed.

True, stealing booty does not constitute a clear-cut military debacle, but if there is an order not to take it, then one should not take it, and if one takes it, the army's authority is weakened.

2. In the episode involving the murder of the concubine at Gibeah [Judges 19-21], the Jewish People demanded of the Tribe of Binyamin that they hand over the murderers. They refused, so the Jewish People killed the entire tribe of Binyamin. Our medieval rabbinical authorities deliberated on whether or not they were justified in doing so. The Netziv holds that they were right, because the tribe of Binyamin had rebelled against the Jewish People. The Jewish People had asked Binyamin to hand them over, so they should have done it. Otherwise, every tribe would become its own country, and that would be the end of the Jewish People.

Likewise, before the battle against Binyamin, the Jewish People swore that whoever did not go to war would be killed. Yavesh Gilead did not go, so all of Yavesh Gilead was killed for draft evasion during a civil war. They refused the Jewish People's call, weakening the army, and so they were killed (Shoftim 21:10).

3. King Shaul gave orders not to eat on the day of a battle (Shmuel 1 14). Yonatan consumed honey, and Shaul sentenced him to death. Was that a clear-cut military offence?! It makes no difference. He violated military orders. In the end, the people saved Yonatan, but Shaul had been ready to execute his son for violating a military order.

4. Gideon harshly punished the people of Succot for not wanting to provide food to soldiers during the battle against Midian (Shoftim 8). That punishment was unavoidable. If every tribe had its own militia, the enemy would destroy us! The Netziv warns how much worse this would be: If there were individual militias, this tribe would forge a covenant with this enemy and that tribe would forge a covenant with that enemy, as in the times of Aristobulos and Hyrkanus. One forged a covenant

with the Greeks and the other forged a covenant with the Romans, and we were left high and dry.

All of these examples, states the Netziv, involve rebellion against the Chief-of-Staff. Rambam writes in Hilchot Melachim 3:8: “The king has authority to kill whomever rebels against him. Even if the king decreed that someone must go to a particular place and that person did not go, or he decreed that someone must not leave his home and he left it, that person incurs a death penalty, and if the king wishes to kill him, he can, as it says, 'Any man who flouts your commands' (Yehoshua 1:18).”

Rambam explains that this verse is referring to the king. The Netziv explains otherwise, that the verse is referring to the Chief-of-Staff of the army, for the verse was addressed to Yehoshua bin Nun, who was not a king. True, the Rabbis argue over whether or not the laws of kingship apply to him, but the Netziv holds like the opinion that he was not a king.

We rule that if the king issues a decree that goes against Jewish law, we don't heed it (Rambam, Hilchot Melachim 3:9), as it says, “Any man who flouts your commands and does not obey every order you give him shall be put to death” (Yehoshua 1:18), and that verse concludes, “Only be strong and resolute!” which the Rabbis knew to be referring to adherence to the Torah. In other words, the verse is saying: Obey the king only if he issues orders according to the Torah.”

Yet Yoav ben Tzruya did not hold to this view. He held that whoever violates a military order, whether justly or not, incurs a death penalty. He therefore killed Amasa ben Yeter who justly violated David's order to him (Shmuel 1 20:8-10). Yoav himself was later sentenced to death for this by King Shlomo (Melachim 1 2:32). Yoav held that one must obey the king even if he says one must do something forbidden, because it is a matter of life and death. Otherwise, that person weakens the king's authority.

We, however, do not rule that way. A military order that involves a sin is patently illegal, and there is no obligation to obey it (see Sanhedrin 49a).

In conclusion, writes the Netziv, our Nation's unity is a matter of life and death. Whoever violates that unity – no matter what the background – is classified as a Rodef. I'm not saying that anyone who violates it has to be killed.

Even the Rodef is not always killed.

In our country there are all kinds of people with all kinds of outlooks and ideas. They are confused. They are not bad people. Yet one cannot begin to divide up the Nation into two armies or more – one army to evict Arabs, another army to evict Charedim, a third army to evict leftists, a fourth army to evict rightists. That's a lot of armies. Every army would have its own insignia and we would have to ask each soldier, “Are you willing to carry out this mission?” That's impossible. When there's an order, you fulfill it and that's it.

We must not inject political arguments into the army. It's busy with life or death issues involving the entire nation. There are three hundred million Arabs around us, and another billion and a half Muslims who support them, and another billion Christians. Please leave the army out of it.

Shut She'eilat Shlomo - Questions of Jewish Law

Showering after immersion in a Mikveh

Q: Is a woman obligated to shower after immersion in a Mikveh?

A: No, just the opposite. Our Sages decreed that a woman should not bathe after immersion in the Mikveh. Women used to bathe after immersing in a Mikveh since they did not immerse in clean mikvaot as we have today. They immersed in pits of water which were filled with mud and they emerged filthy, so they bathed afterwards. As a result, people began to believe that both the Mikveh and the bathing were required for purification. The Rabbis therefore decreed that it is forbidden to bathe after immersing in the Mikveh (Shabbat 14a and Rama to Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 201:75). We have similar problems in our time. Although our mikvaot are extremely clean, there are women who are sensitive and feel that they need to bathe after the Mikveh. Even though a man's immersion in the Mikveh is less strict than a woman's immersion (since in the majority of cases he is not obligated to immerse), there is a story in the name of Ha-Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach that he would bathe before and after immersion in the Mikveh. The students asked why he acted this way. Ha-Rav Shlomo Zalman said: I shower beforehand to fulfill "Love your fellow as yourself" – so I do not make the Mikveh dirty and I shower afterwards because of those who do not fulfill "Love your fellow as yourself" (Ve-Aleihu Lo Yibol vol. 2, p. 286). Regarding women who want to bathe after the Mikveh, it is permissible to wash the body one part at a time: the hands, then the feet, then the head, then the back, et Ha-Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv created a "Chidush" (innovative ruling) that a shower does not wash the entire body all at one time but part by part. And even if the shower covers the entire body, each drop of water is still separate and touches a different part of the body. This "Chidush" allows women to shower after immersion in the Mikveh if she wishes, but she is certainly not obligated to do so.

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Yeshivat Ateret Yerushalayim P.O.B. 1076 Jerusalem 91009 Tel.02-6284101 Fax.02-6261528
www.ateret.org.il To subscribe, send e-mail to: mororly@bezeqint.net

