YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Student summaries of sichot of the Roshei Yeshiva**

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IN LOVING MEMORY OF

Jeffrey Paul Friedman

August 15, 1968 – July 29, 2012

לע"נ

יהודה פנחס בן הרב שרגא פייוועל

כ"ב אב תשכ"ח – י' אב תשע"ב

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**Parashat Shofetim**

**Sicha of HarAV Yaakov Medan**

**War and Trust in God**

Summarized by Hadar Horowitz

Translated by David Strauss

The *parasha* lists the people who do not go out to war:

And the officers shall speak to the people, saying: What man is there that has built a new house, and has not dedicated it? Let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the battle, and another man dedicate it. And what man is there that has planted a vineyard and has not used the fruit thereof? Let him go and return unto his house, lest he die in the battle, and another man use the fruit thereof. And what man is there that has betrothed a wife, and has not taken her? Let him go and return unto his house, lest he die in the battle, and another man take her.  (*Devarim* 20:5-7)

The man who has built a new house and has not yet dedicated it is exempt from going out to war, for fear that he will die in battle and another man will dedicate it and live in his house in his place. What is this great concern? Jealousy is indeed a strong element in man's personality, and the Torah is well aware of this, but is this reason to exempt a person from mandatory military service?

It seems to me that it would be far more appropriate to exempt other people from such service: a person with ten children, whose wife is chronically ill, or whose child is disabled and is in need of his help. If such a person were to die in battle, it is liable to be an even greater tragedy, but nevertheless he is not exempt from going out to war.

Why, then, did the Torah exempt people who invested in some matter but have not yet benefitted from their efforts? What is the basis for this concern that some other person will use that same thing?

The prophet Yeshayahu prophesied about God's blessing for Jerusalem and its inhabitants:

And they shall build houses and inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards and eat the fruit of them. **They shall not build and another inhabit, they shall not plant and another eat;** for as the days of a tree shall be the days of My people, and My elect shall long enjoy the work of their hands. (*Yeshayahu* 65:21-22)

Once again, we see that great value is attached to people who build houses and live in them and who plant vineyards and eat the fruit – they themselves and not others.

According to Josephus Flavius, the 10th of Av was the day of the destruction of the Temple,[[1]](#footnote-1) and to the 8th of Elul was the day of the destruction of Jerusalem:

And thus was Jerusalem taken, in the second year of the reign of Vespasian, **on the eighth day of the month Gorpeius [Elul]**. It had been taken five times before, though this was the second time of its desolation. (*The Jewish War*, Book VI, chapter 10)

Perhaps it is not a coincidence that the disengagement from the Gaza Strip began on the 10th of Av[[2]](#footnote-2) and that on the 8th of Elul the strip was completely abandoned and handed over to our enemies.

I saw people in the Gaza Strip building their houses and planting their fields, overcoming many difficulties. In the beginning, the farmers asked the Ministry of Agriculture for guidance and financial assistance, but they encountered resistance based on the claim that nothing could be grown on these dunes. But the settlers overpowered the dunes and turned them into a flourishing garden that yielded about a quarter of the country's agricultural exports.

The Ramban saw the desolate land with his own eyes and understood it as a fulfillment of the verse: "And I will bring the land into desolation; and your enemies that dwell therein shall be astonished at it" (*Vayikra* 26:32). Mark Twain in his book, *Innocents Abroad*, describes the land 150 years ago as barren and desolate.

Indeed, this was the case for two thousand years, until the people of Israel returned to their land and succeeded in restoring its agricultural yields. The Arab workers asked the Jewish farmers how they managed to do this, but were unable to replicate their success after the Jews were expelled from there.

I once attended a conference dealing with the disengagement. The Chief Rabbi, R. Yisrael Meir Lau, related that he had three times been invited to participate in a Siyum Shas in Gush Katif. Farmers who started their work days early in the morning studied *Daf Yomi* between 5 and 6 in the morning for twenty-one years. R. Lau wept over the seats in the Beit Midrash that would soon be destroyed.

The destruction of the Gaza Strip led to many crises, and there are many people who have not found alternative employment until this very day. In addition, the idea that others would reap the crops that had been planted with great effort was very difficult.

But I wish to relate to the destruction of this precious area from a different angle that may be reason for soul-searching precisely on the part of our community. To this end, let us consider the Torah section dealing with the appointment of a king:

You shall surely set him king over you, whom the Lord your God shall choose; one from among your brothers shall you set king over you; you may not put a foreigner over you, who is not your brother. (*Devarim* 17:15)

Anyone who is sensitive to the plain meaning of Scripture understands that the Torah views the king in a negative light: "I will set a king over me **like all the nations that are round about me**" (v. 14). This is evident also from a verse in *Parashat Ki-Tavo*:

The Lord will bring you and your king whom you shall set over you to a nation that you have not known, you nor your fathers; and there shall you serve other gods, wood and stone. (*Devarim* 28:36)

But there are also many verses in Scripture that support the establishment of a monarchy in Israel:

None has beheld iniquity in Yaakov, neither has one seen perverseness in Israel; the Lord his God is with him, and the shouting for the King is among them. (*Bemidbar* 23:31)

And I will make you exceeding fruitful, and I will make nations of you, **and kings shall come out of you.** (*Bereishit* 17:6)

We find different approaches in the books of the Prophets as well. We will discuss here only that of Shemuel:

But they forgot the Lord their God, and He gave them over into the hand of Sisera, captain of the host of Chatzor, and into the hand of the Pelishtim, and into the hand of the king of Moav, and they fought against them. And they cried to the Lord, and said: We have sinned… And the Lord sent Yerubaal, and Bedan, and Yiftach, and Shemuel, and delivered you out of the hand of your enemies on every side, and you dwelt in safety. And when you saw that Nachash the king of the children of Amon came against you, you said to me: Nay, but a king shall reign over us; when the Lord your God was your king. (I *Shemuel* 12:9-12)

Does Shemuel think that the people can survive without a king, a man with the authority to recruit a large army? After all, in the days of the Judges, the largest armies numbered ten thousand men, whereas King Shaul recruited a force of three hundred and thirty thousand in the war against Amon.

The question of trust in God as opposed to human effort is reflected in the disagreement between the Rambam and the Ramban regarding medicine. In his commentary to the Mishna, the Rambam explains the Tosefta that states that the book of medicines was hidden away because people began to rely on that book in order to heal instead of putting their trust in God. The Rambam defines this view as folly:

I heard and it was also explained to me that Shelomo authored a book of medicines so that if someone took ill with some illness, he would turn to it and do as it says, and he would be healed. When Chizkiyahu saw that people were placing their trust with respect to their illnesses, not in God, but on the book of medicines, he arose and stored it away. Apart from the nullity of these words and the delusions in them, they attribute to Chizkiyahu and the company that agreed with him folly, the likes of which should not be attributed but to the lowest of the masses. (Rambam, *Commentary to the Mishna*, *Pesachim* 4:10)

According to the Rambam, illness is a natural matter. Everything in the world is subject to natural wear and tear, which must be fought; just as a person eats when he is hungry, so must he take steps to ensure his recovery when he becomes sick. One must always place his trust in God, as it is impossible to succeed without God's help, but still one must strive and make efforts to the best of his ability.

In contrast, the Ramban at the end of *Parashat Bechukotai* argues that a God-fearing person need not turn to medicine:

But one who seeks God by way of a prophet will not consult doctors. **What place is there for doctors in the house of those who do the will of God,** after He promised them: "And He will bless your bread, and your water; and I will take sickness away from the midst of you" (*Shemot* 23:25). And the actions of doctors relate only to food and drink, to warn against them and to command about them. (Ramban, *Vayikra* 26:11)

According to the Ramban, medicine is permitted only as a last resort:

When a patient takes ill, and comes to be healed because he makes use of medicines, and he is not of the congregation of God whose lot is life, the doctor should not bar himself from healing him…. (ibid.)

The Ramban understands that disease is not part of nature, but rather part of the discourse between man and God. When a person is sick, he must make a reckoning with himself, pray to God, and repent. He must fully trust that God will save and heal him.

These two approaches also exist with respect to war. War can be seen as a natural element in the history of nations, and therefore we must prepare for it accordingly and make human plans, which includes the crowning of a king who can muster a large army. Yechezkel, however, prophesied that one who hears the alarms of approaching battle and fails to take the necessary precautions will bear the guilt if he is killed, and so too the watchmen who sees the enemy armies approaching and does not warn the people:

If, when he sees the sword come upon the land, he blows the horn and warns the people; then whoever hears the sound of the horn and takes not warning, if the sword comes and take him away, his blood shall be upon his own head; he heard the sound of the horn and took not warning, his blood shall be upon him; whereas if he had taken warning, he would have delivered his soul. But if the watchman sees the sword come and does not blow the horn, and the people be not warned, and the sword does come and takes any person from among them, he is taken away in his iniquity, but his blood will I require at the watchman's hand. (*Yechezkel* 33:3-6)

This is similar to the view of the Ramban concerning medicine. These are the words of Shemuel who see war and peace, calamity and deliverance, as dependent on the people's dialogue with God, and not on the king's preparing them for war. The Rambam, however, rules:

Israel was commanded to fulfill three *mitzvot* upon entering the Promised Land: To choose a king, as it is stated: "Appoint a king over yourselves" (*Devarim* 17:15)…. (*Hilkhot Melakhim* 1:1)

That is to say, we must prepare ourselves for war and only as a result will we merit God's help, just as it is only the owner of a donkey who himself tries to stabilize his animal that is struggling with its burden who is entitled to the help of another person.

Returning to what happened in the Gaza Strip, the prevailing belief in our community was that all of our actions to prevent the calamity should be taken with trust in God and prayer. We took few actions before the calamity, when it was perhaps possible to save the situation. We made many efforts that expressed our trust in God, even when it looked as if all was lost. But we should not have done those things on the assumption that God would miraculously save Gush Katif after the axman had already lifted up his tool.

I do not regret our efforts at that time or the money that was invested in them. We expressed thereby our faith that God would do what is right in His eyes. Unfortunately, the only thing that we have to pass on to the next generation is our belief that we must do our part and God will do as He sees fit, but in my opinion, this belief is well worth the effort.

(This *sicha* was delivered on Shabbat *Parashat Shofetim* 5778 [2018].)

1. This is contrary to the view of *Chazal* that the Temple was destroyed on the 9th of Av. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The disengagement was originally scheduled to begin on Tisha Be-Av, because they first looked only at the non-Jewish calendar, but once they realized this, it was pushed off to the next day. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)