



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

DEVARIM > Ki Teitzei

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

September 6, 2014
Ki Teitzei

Are Jews Warriors?



Meaningful Sermons

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ABSTRACT

Is going to war a Jewish thing?

One would think not. As a famous comedian once put it: "Left to themselves in a world of peace, the worst Jews would ever do to people is debate them to death."

Jews don't do war. Jews do intellectual exercises, academics, accounting, medicine, mergers and acquisitions, real estate, and other such work that won't make their mothers yell at them for getting their hands dirty before dinner.

Nevertheless, though one would think that Jews abhor war and run away from it like from a lobster lunch on Yom Kippur, it seems that we have always been at war. What does this mean? And, if so, how can we ensure victory?

The answer lies in this week's Torah reading which teaches us to go out and fight the good fight. We are guaranteed victory because, even as we fight, we rise above our enemy.

This week, on Thursday, we will mark 13 years since 9/11. So this is a very good week to learn how to obliterate the evils of the world once and for all.

IS EVIL REAL?**1. Politics & Religion (Joke)**

A little, old, fragile fellow finds himself in front of the gates of heaven. An angel greets him and explains that, in order to get in, he is required to have made at least one positive contribution to the world over his lifetime.

"Like what?" asks the old man.

"For example, did you ever go to synagogue?"

"Nope," says he. "I don't even know how to spell 'synagogue'."

"Were you generous? Did you give money to the poor? To charity?"

"Never. I was stingier than the biggest miser you ever met."

"Did you do any good deeds? Maybe help your neighbor?"

"Are you kidding? I was obnoxious to my neighbors. And also to those who weren't my neighbors."

Exasperated, the angel exclaims, "Look, there has to be something. Everybody has at least one nice thing that they did in their time on earth. Work with me, I'm trying to help you. Now think!"

The man says, "Well, there was this old lady. I came out of a store and found her surrounded by a biker gang. They had taken her purse and were shoving her around. I got so mad I threw my bags down, fought them, and got her purse back. I helped her to her feet. I then went up to the biggest, baddest biker and told him how despicable, cowardly and mean he was and punched him in the nose."

"Wow," says the angel. "That's impressive. When did this happen?"

"Oh," replies the man. "About five minutes ago."

2. The Risks of War

One of the risks inherent in every fight is the risk of expiration.

Death and killing is what makes war so painful and dark. It isn't a game. Lives are lost on the battlefield and families are shattered. This is why, if you appreciate life, war is evil.

Jews abhor war. As Larry Miller, an actor and comedian, put it a while ago: "Left to themselves in a world of peace, the worst Jews would ever do to people is debate them to death."

Why do Jews abhor war?

We abhor war precisely because we celebrate life. Why do something that brings about death, the opposite of life?

From day one, the Torah was given to bring peace in the world; it is called the Tree of *Life*, and all its ways are peaceful.

The Jews' mission and purpose is to bring life into this world. Death is the opposite. So Jews don't do war. Jews do intellectual exercises, academics, accounting, medicine, mergers and acquisitions, real estate, and other such work that won't make their mothers yell at them for getting their hands dirty before dinner.

Jews run away from war it like from a lobster lunch on Yom Kippur.

Yet, irony of all ironies: the more we try to teach the world about the sanctity of life, the more the world attacks us and tries to kill us.

But is this our natural state? Do we desire war? Do we desire to be attacked? Do we Jews aspire to do battle? Wouldn't we rather be at peace? If we hate war, why are we always at war?

3. Parshat Ki Teitzei

This week's Torah reading speaks about war. Indeed, the name of the parsha is *Ki Teitzei*, literally meaning, "If you go out..." after its opening phrase:

If you go out to war against your enemy, and the Lord, your God, will deliver him into your hands, and you take his captives...¹

So we see that the Torah, the Tree of Life, undeniably speaks of war, an instrument of death. What is the Torah coming here to teach us here?

It is difficult to understand war when talking about it in an abstract sense. After all, unless you, or a loved one, are actually fighting in the war, it affects you in a very external way.

Now, of course, the Jewish people are one family with one soul - because *kol Yisrael areivim zeh lazeh*, "all of Israel is responsible for one another."² So for us as a people, when a young man we have never met falls on the battlefield thousands of miles away from our home, it's a personal thing - in more ways than one.

To help remind us of the war fought far away from us, its purposes and reasons, it would help to address the personal war that rages on inside of every single one of us. Once we understand the fundamentals and mechanisms of war in a personal way we can extrapolate that understanding to the wars Israel has fought (and fights still!) and to those fought elsewhere (even those in Iraq and Syria).

From the Torah point of view, every cosmic occurrence is reflected in every human being. Whenever there is a war in the macrocosmic world, there is also a war inside of our own microcosmic worlds.

4. The War Within

A few verses from the Book of Ecclesiastes (*Kohelet*) can go a long way in explaining our personal existential battles:

There was a small city with few people in it, and a great king came upon it and surrounded it and built over it great bulwarks. And therein was found a poor wise man, and he liberated the city through his wisdom, but no man remembered that poor man.

¹ Deut. 21:10

² Shavuot 39a; Sanhedrin 27b.

And I said, "Wisdom is better than might, but the wisdom of the poor man is despised, and his words are not heard."

The words of the wise, in softness, are heard, more than the shout of a ruler of fools. Wisdom is better than weapons, and one sinner destroys much good.³

The Talmud and Midrash⁴ explain these verses as an analogy for the battle raging on within each human being:

- *A small city*, this is the body.
- *With few people in it*, these are its limbs.
- *And a great king came upon it*, this is the Negative Inclination.
- *And surrounded it and built over it great bulwarks*, these are the iniquities.
- *And therein was found a poor wise man*, this is the Positive Inclination. And why do we call him poor? For he is rarely found among the creations, and most of the creations do not listen to him.
- *And he liberated the city through his wisdom*, for all those who listen to the Good Inclination are liberated.

5. Animal vs. Divine Soul

The 18th century founder of the Chabad Movement, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, better known as the Alter Rebbe, elaborates in the *Tanya*⁵ on this eternal struggle within the individual, the struggle between doing what is selfish and wrong, and what is selfless and right.

Life is a battle. On one side is the Animal Soul, trying to capture the individual in a carnal hold, so that every limb and body part is used for purely physical and negative ends. On the other side is the Divine Soul, whose goal and mission is to transform the carnal nature of the body's

³ Kohelet 9:14-18.

⁴ Nedarim 32b; Rabbah on verse.

⁵ Ch. 9.

biology into a “chariot” (a *merkava*, which is also the name of an Israeli tank) and vehicle for Godliness.

Every second of every day presents two options: to either do the right thing or not. It’s as simple as that. Should I eat that or not? Should I say this or not say that? Should I work six days a week and rest on the seventh, or should I rest six days a week and work on the seventh? The Animal Soul, the Negative Voice urges you this way; the Divine Soul, the Positive Voice, urges you that way. One tries to pull you down to earth, while the other tries to lift you up to heaven.

In the physical world, the predominant force is that of the Negative Inclination, the selfish voice that says, “Do whatever is best for you, and maybe only after, if you have some leftover time, think about another.” The Negative Inclination is the *great king who came upon [the small city], and surrounded it and built over it great bulwarks*, for it always tries to keep you as Number One as it builds gates to lock every other human being out.

But then there is a poor wise man, the Positive Voice, whose whisper no one heeds. As says Ecclesiastes:

“Wisdom is better than might, but the wisdom of the poor man is despised, and his words are not heard.”

The words of the wise, in softness, are heard, more than the shout of a ruler of fools. Wisdom is better than weapons, and one sinner destroys much good.

But though the Positive Voice is outnumbered, and though he speaks softly, his message of goodness is much more powerful and resonates more deeply than the evil rhetoric, shouts and pontifications of the Negative Voice.

This, my friends, is the battle of life. And we go out to this war every single day.

6. The Ultimate Weapon

If every second of every day is a battle, what weaponry do we have at our disposal to guarantee victory? If the stakes be so high – good versus evil – what ammunition can we use to ensure that the good, the positive, the holy, and the Godly will prevail over evil?

What is the secret weapon that can defeat this *great king* of the Negative Inclination that surrounds our small city?

The answer lies in the opening verse of our portion: *Ki teitzei lamilchama al oivecha*, translated as, *If you go out to war against your enemy*. Let us examine it closely:⁶

- 1) *Ki teitzei, if you go out* – in order to fight a war you must go out of yourself. Your self, your core essence, your intrinsic soul, is way beyond any war. At your personal Holy of Holies, your deepest place, there is no concept of war, for you are completely at peace, you are entirely one, there are no sides and there are no battle lines drawn. But you have to leave this pure place to transform the impure places in this world, for this you have to *go out to...*
- 2) *Lamilchama, to war* – war is the battle between the Animal Soul and the Divine Soul, between matter and spirit, between fragmented negativity and unifying positivity. And to fight it, you must *go out* of your natural self. But even when you do go out and fight a war, where there is real evil, real enemies, darkness and death, you must know that that you will be victorious ...
- 3) *Al oivecha, against your enemy* – even though this phrase *al oivecha* is translated as “*against* your enemy” it literally means “*above* your enemy.” In and during the state of actual war, when you are fighting a filthy force of toxic impurity, even then, you are above it all. Even when you are fighting darkness, you are beyond any darkness. Even as you go out to vanquish all pain and suffering, even then you transcend your enemy.

⁶ See Ohr Hatorah, Ki Teitzei, p. 870ff. Sefer Hasichot 5749, vol. II, p 676ff.

The whole point of existence is to go out of your core essence so that you can transform even the Negative Inclination to goodness and light and to liberate its captives. And to do that, you have to go out of your inner self and fight the war.

But even when you do go out of your core self to fight, know that you are not going to war *against your enemy* but, rather, *al oivecha, above your enemy*. Even when you battle the evil and darkness of this material world, you are *al oivecha*, you are *above and beyond your enemy*.

This also has a very positive effect psychologically. When you wage war and know that, even as you do, the war is still “outside” of your core and that you are above your adversaries, you are infused with confidence to win any battle. That’s why there was a custom in some armies to sing a song of victory as they went out to war. How can they sing a victory sing even before the first battle? Because even from the outset, even before you begin fighting, you are filled with absolute conviction that you will be victorious because you know that you are “going outside” to war and will always remain “above” your enemy.

7. The Global War

Now, after we understand war in the personal battlefield, we can apply the same principles to war on the global front.

The personal micro battle between good and evil, selfishness and selflessness, the divine and the diabolical is reflected in the macro battles of the Middle East, where the descendants of Abraham – Isaac, Ishmael and Esau, the progenitors of Judaism, Islam and Christianity – have been waging war for millennia.

Throughout this ancient conflict the Jew – the “poor wise man,” representing the Positive Inclination – has been spreading the wisdom in the “small city” that is the world. But for a long time his advice has gone unheeded.

Then the United States of America was born, a country built precisely upon the values that the “poor wise man” taught. But then – on 9/11 – the descendants of Ishmael, the Negative Inclination, decided to attack this country by flying airplanes into buildings. Ever since, the world has been like a combustion chamber waiting to explode.

Now, thirteen years later (it will be thirteen years exactly this Thursday), the chickens are coming to roost. The latest eruptions in Gaza, Israel and Iraq – ISIS, Hamas, Boko Haram & Company – are just another version of the same battle that we each fight within ourselves, between good and evil, between the Positive Inclination and the Negative Inclination, between the Divine Soul and the Animal Soul.

The Jew – and Jewish ideals, many of which the West has embraced – represents the Divine Soul transforming the body of the world into a vehicle for the Divine.

The Animal Soul cannot stand that, and in its extreme manifestation, it blows itself up, fires indiscriminate rockets, kidnaps innocents, and slaughters masses in its war against goodness.

And because of this *we go out to war*. We, who represent light and holiness, have a core essence that transcends any war. In our Holy of Holies we are pure light and concentrated divine spiritual goodness. But it is our mission and purpose *to go out* into the physical plane, where the Negative Inclination is king and the Positive Inclination is an unheeded poor wise man, and to change this material world into something that is Godly, holy and sacred.

We *go out* of our natural environment to war. Why? To squash evil and obliterate death forever. There is no other option.

And how do we do this? By living *above* and being beyond any enemy. The world tells a narrative of physicality; we Jews tell one of spirituality. The enemy focuses on its sculpted body; the Jew is details the shining light of the soul.

Jews do not desire war; Jews transcend war. And that is how we fight our battles, and win them too. We enter every battle singing a victory song, for we know that we are above our enemies – the *poor wise man*

knows that *the words of the wise, in softness, are heard, more than the shout of a ruler of fools*, and that no matter what anyone says, *wisdom is better than weapons*.

8. The Cossack's Horse (Inspirational Story)

Rabbi Mendel Futerfas is a man who spent ten years of his life in a Siberian gulag for the high crime of perpetuating Judaism in Stalinist Russia.

The Communists imprisoned everyone who they deemed a threat to their tyranny, which included basically anyone who was accomplished, anyone with a personality, and anyone who was talented. Thus, Reb Mendel spent his time in Siberia interacting with all of the intelligentsia, literati, characters and personalities imprisoned along with him.

One of the prisoners in Reb Mendel's camp was an aging officer of the elite Cossacks, imprisoned because of his loyalty to the Czar. Although the Cossacks were usually rabid anti-Semites, misery loves company, and Siberia was definitely miserable.

One long cold Siberian winter night, when they were sitting in the barracks, the Cossack opened his heart to Reb Mendel and began reminiscing about ... his horse.

When he spoke his eyes became moist and his voice filled with emotion. A Cossack and his horse were one entity, inseparable.

The Cossack began to tell Reb Mendel how a Cossack acquired his horse. For you see, a regular horse in Russia cost one month's wages – five rubles. A workhorse cost up to ten. But a Cossack horse cost five hundred, six hundred rubles.

The Cossack horse was different than all other horses, incomparably different. Not only would it do anything for its master – jump into fire, over trees and even houses, anything – and not only was it stronger, faster, and braver than anything else alive, most of all, the Cossack horse had a different heart.

How did a Cossack acquire his horse? It went like this.

There was an elite unit that would wander the mountain ranges and vast planes on horseback looking for herds of wild horses. The horse had to be wild, without the taming of domestication and with unbridled energy.

When the unit came across one such herd, they would stampede them and get them all running in the forest toward the general direction of the nearest river. This herd would run, gallop for hours until they reached the nearest river. Along the way, many horses would fall from exhaustion. These horses that fell were obviously not the Cossack's horse.

The horses that made it to the river would then wade into the powerful current and swim across to the other side. Most of the horses, exhausted from the all-out stampede in the forest, would begin to falter and be pulled away by the current. These horses were also not the Cossack's horse.

A select few of the horses, with the strength to swim against the tide, would make it to the other side and, though completely spent, they would continue galloping onward.

But even these brave horses were not the Cossack's horse.

Sometimes, not always, but sometimes, there were one horse that made it across to the other side of the river, after stampeding in the forest and swimming against the currents, but this horse, instead of running away once it reached the other side, would turn around, look back to the river which it just crossed, and see that there were still horses left behind who were in trouble, being pulled down by the powerful current and beginning to drown. This horse would turn back around from whence it came and jump back into the river to save its fellow horses.

With tears in his eyes now, the Cossack told Reb Mendel: "That horse, that horse that turned around to save his drowning brethren, that horse would become the Cossack's horse."

When sharing this story, Reb Mendel said: "You know what it means to be a Jew? You know what it means to be a person who fights for what is holy and true, who goes to battle for what is righteous and sacred? It is not a person who stampedes in the forest; it is not the person who wades through the river against the currents of life; it is not even the person who gets to the other side and runs freely away.

"Nope. A Jew, a warrior of goodness, is someone who, once crossing through the challenges and tribulations of life, turns around and pulls his fellow people along with him."

This is a soldier; this is an elite officer in the Army of God!

9. Army of God (Joke)

Rabbi Landau was standing near the synagogue exit shaking hands as his congregation left. But as Max was leaving, Rabbi Landau grabbed his hand, pulled him aside and said, "Max, I think you need to join the Army of God!"

"But I'm already in God's Army, Rabbi," Max replied.

"So how come I don't see you in synagogue, except maybe on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur?" asked the Rabbi.

"Shh, please keep it down," Max whispered as he looked around. "You see, Rabbi, I am in the secret service."

10. Conclusion

Every Jew is a soldier in God's Army. Every Jew is waging war against darkness. It's just that some of us do not like to admit it.

Every Jew's mission down here on this earth is to accomplish one thing - to transform the body into a *merkava*, a chariot, or "tank" if you will, and make of it a conduit for the light of the soul.

We do it by emulating the “poor wise man.”

Sure, it’s a battle. But it is a battle that we will win because it is a battle that we enter victorious.

Every single one of us here today has been drafted by the Commander and Chief, by the Creator Himself, to stand up for what is right and to protect what is sacred.

Our weapons are weapons of mass construction, and our projectiles project the light of God upon all humankind.

We are *above* any enemy, and we are the type of horse that pulls its fellow horses along with it.

This is who we are. And this is our victory.

Shabbat Shalom!