
Ner Yisrael – 08:30 Minyan – Mattos-Masei 2024

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The representatives of the tribes of *Gad*, *Reuven* and *half-Menashe* have a very clear, cogent and concise argument in this week's parashah to explain to *Moishe Rabbeinu* why they would better serve themselves, their families and *Klal Yisroel* generally by remaining outside the physical fight for the establishment of the first State of Israel.

After listening to their rationale, *Moishe Rabbeinu* punctures it by a single unanswerable challenge: how can it be right that your brethren should go to fight and you should remain behind in safety?

And he equiparates their attitude to that of the *meraglim*, which at first sight is not an entirely apt parallel. The *meraglim* did not choose to dissociate themselves from the rest of the people, indeed they went to extraordinary lengths to bring the whole of the people around to their assessment of the situation. Neither were they refusing to take up, nor encouraging other people to take to refuse to take up, part of a shared burden: indeed, their argument was primarily with God rather than with *Klal Yisrael*.

The true parallel lies in their methodology. Again, they clouded what was simple cowardice and a lack of *bitachon* with spurious arguments that were compelling at a superficial level of ratiocination, but again were vulnerable to being punctured by a simple counter argument: if God says we go into Israel then it is a Divine commandment – we don't argue, we just do.

History repeating itself unfailingly brings us around to finding the same communal dissension in this year's period of the Three Weeks. The State of Israel established for the third time in our history requires military defence as much as ever before. And once again, as in this week's parashah, we have eloquent, detailed and completely spurious arguments being advanced as to why a large portion of the people should exempt themselves from their share in military service.

And once again their reasons are capable of being punctured not even by the words of the *novi*, we being in a generation lacking in global communal leadership, but by simple recourse to the *posuk* itself. The mitzvah of **לֹא תַעֲמֹד לְרַגְלֵי דָם** – not standing idly by the blood of your fellow – applies in an appallingly simple and direct way to considering yourself too holy or too immersed in spiritual matters to take your turn on the front line of battle.

In a few weeks' time we will read the list of exemptions that the *Kohein* is required to recite before the commencement of a military campaign: and it includes an extraordinary self-exemption for anyone who is simply too frightened to take part. Extraordinary in one sense: but from a practical military perspective it is not helpful to have soldiers in the ranks who are in a perpetual state of terror. More importantly, it is embracing an honest self-assessment from someone who is prepared to be open as to their own weaknesses and failings.

Significantly, nowhere in the list does it say anything about people standing back from the ranks because they are too holy or occupied in Torah learning to fight: it simply does not feature on the list of possibilities in God's mind as set out in the Torah – it took man, rather than God, to dream up that spurious and self-serving argument.

In our generation, those who are so immersed in learning Torah that they already know *Shas* by heart and have no room in their mind for anything other than acquiring the same degree of familiarity with the *rishonim*, would likely find themselves turned away from the recruiting offices of *Tzahal* when they reported for duty. But if they were not turned away, they would find themselves in good company on the battlefield among some of the brightest and the best Torah students of our age, young men and young women, whose knowledge and devotion to learning would indeed put theirs to shame; and whose dedication to Torah and mitzvos would put to shame vast numbers of yeshiva students whose actual occupation in learning is part-time, perfunctory and predominantly performative.

The reality is that the study of the Torah is being used as this generation's *Gad, Reuven* and *half-Menashe* argument to mask what is simple cowardice, or idleness, or in some cases both.

Torah study is, of course, a *mitzvah*. But as we say each morning it is expressly one of the *mitzvos* without measurement, in this case because it is only a *mitzvah* at a time when a person's attention is not required for more pressing matters elsewhere. Those who sit in the *beis medrash* when they would be better occupied with their families at home, or in pursuing trades or professions to support themselves and their families and keep them out of idleness and debilitating dependency, or in taking their turn defending our people, are indulging in the same self-delusional thought-games, and as unconvincingly, as the tribes of *Gad, Reuven* and *half-Menashe* in this week's *parashah*.

And to do them credit, those tribes reacted instantly when the moral indefensibility of their position was put to them, and came up with a perfect solution that met their stated aspirations while absolving themselves from cowardice.

Nowadays, perhaps because we lack a *Moishe Rabbeinu* with the authority and credibility to puncture these delusions, those parts of the so-called *chareidi* communities that pursue this cowardly self-delusion simply redouble it when challenged. They present palpably false arguments about Torah learning as an effective protection, while their insistence on being protected by the *hishtadlus* of others shows clearly and shamefully that they have no real illusion as to the hollowness of this argument.

The leaders of the *chareidi* communities today appear for the most part so frightened of the shallowness and fragility of their followers' *bitachon* and *emunah*, and so unsure of the reliability of the education and training of their youngsters, that in this generation they give support to those who shirk responsibility and not to those who accept it.

Of course, as *bnei chutz la'aretz* from our vantage point on the other side of the Jordan we are also open to the charge of being the modern-day *Gad*, *Reuven* and *half-Menashe* voices ourselves. As to that, while each of us must make his or her own decisions as to the right and wrong time and way to join our brethren in Eretz Yisroel, in the meantime we must guard against spurious self-justifications, and do our best to find ways to show real and effective moral and practical support to our brethren there, each of us in accordance with her or his own calculation as to what part we play in the collective effort. And of course this shul has done so much to demonstrate solidarity with the State of Israel and all its residents, in so many ways.

The recounting of the conversation between *Gad*, *Reuven* and *half-Menashe* and *Moishe Rabbeinu* is designed to provide an annual opportunity – at this time of introspection and foreboding – to examine our own motives and justifications carefully, and see how far we conceal our real motivations and concerns beneath a cloak of plausibility.

The human temptation to hypocrisy is not a respecter of persons, and there is not one of us who is likely to emerge from this specific annual *cheshbon hanefesh* entirely unscathed.

Our annual description of ourselves on *Tisha B'Av* as a *dor yosom* feels more accurate with every year that passes. Not only do we lack leaders of the integrity of *Moishe Rabbeinu*, but in this world of social media and deepfake photographs we are even bereft of fact. So each of us is left to be the voice of our own conscience and the yardstick of our own decisions. Inspired by the warning spirit of the Three Weeks, and in preparation for the spiritual renewal of the yomim Noro'im that are not far behind, we owe it to ourselves to examine our own motives and ideals, and ensure that they match each other and are consistent with our public rhetoric. So far as possible we must be satisfied that we are doing what we should and that we are helping other people to do what they should; but where we inevitably fall short, we must never make the Torah an excuse for our own failings.

Our *avoidah* needs to be an *avoidas emes*: and if we can make it so we will *b'ezras Hashem* be *zoicheh* to reawaken the *ruchnius* of our people, and through our people the whole world, *ad she'yovo Melech, Go'el u'Moishia, bimheiro b'yomeinu omein v'omein*.
