

Parashat Bamidbar

The Brotherhood of Physical and Spiritual Warfare

Sacrificing the Safety of Our Sons for the Safety of Our People

This year my second and youngest son Netanel Shalom will turn twenty. He did not, and is not planning to join the army. More than 15 years ago, my oldest son Mordechai Meir served as a tank driver in the IDF as part of a *hesder* yeshiva track. At Yeshivat Kerem b'Yavne where Meir attended, some students choose to continue learning, while the majority choose the *hesder* track, which sandwiches army service between periods of yeshiva study. I understand, connect with and support the decision of both of my sons. When Meir became of army-enrollment age, I was torn. None of my friends from the Chareidi Yeshiva, where I received my initial Torah training, sent their sons to the army. They did not want to pull their sons away from Torah learning and put them in a *hefker* [immoral] environment. In addition, they believed that the mitzvah of learning Torah overrides the mitzvah of defending our country, especially since there are enough guys who want to be soldiers and fight our physical wars. Still, something was bothering me about their attitude. When I envisioned the danger facing the young soldiers, something inside me contracted out of fear. I suddenly felt an invisible bond with all the mothers in the Land of Israel who had to sacrifice the safety of their sons for the safety of our people. I started to question, "Why should other mothers have to go through this frightening ordeal, while I excuse myself? Why am I 'better than thou?' Keenly aware of the split between the *chilonim* (irreligious Jews) and the *dati'im* (religious Jews), I had always wanted to build bridges. However, only when I was facing my own son's potential army recruitment did I truly understand the controversy over yeshiva versus army service. My fear made it clear to me why this issue continues to deepen the split between religious and non-religious Jews in Israel. In the end, however, the decision was not up to me. One day, Meir simply informed my husband and me that he was being drafted into the army in three months.

Would We be Living in Israel Without an Army to Protect Us?

This week's parasha opens by enumerating the young men of each tribe "aged twenty years and over being listed head by head" (*Bamidbar* 1:18). "All of the Israelites aged twenty years and over, enumerated by their ancestral houses, all those in Israel who were able to bear arms..." (*Bamidbar* 1:45). Clearly, the Torah believes in the vital importance of an army. Whenever I see a soldier, I always smile to him thankfully, and recall how as a secular teenager, straight out of high school, I came to Israel and immediately fell in love with the country. It didn't take long before I met my husband and embraced the Torah lifestyle. Would I have returned to Torah in any other place? Would I have come to Israel had it not been in Jewish hands with a Jewish army to protect me? Surely, Israel needs to have an army of trained soldiers to defend us! Doesn't the halacha teach that everyone must go out to fight in case of attack, even a bridegroom from his chamber and bride from under her *chupah* (canopy)? (*Mishnah Sotah* 8:7). Certainly, it should apply to rabbinic students no less! If every Jewish man were learning in yeshiva, and no-one would join the army, would we allow our enemies to ravage our land and kill our people without taking up arms to defend ourselves? How can anyone imagine it is right to let others die for him rather than protect his own life and family? (Rav Zevin, *Tradition*, Fall 1981, p. 53). So how can I accept that my other son, now in his twentieth year, allowed himself to be exempted from the army?

Setting Oneself Apart for Torah and Divine Service

The answer is hinted at in the continuation of our parasha:

פס"ב במדבר פרק א

(מט) אַךְ אֶת מִטָּה לְוִי לֹא תִפְקֹד וְאֶת רֹאשָׁם לֹא תִשָּׂא בְּתוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

"But the tribe of Levi you shall not count [in the military census], nor number their heads" (*Bamidbar* 1:49).

When the young men were drafted into the army in Biblical times, the tribe of Levi was exempted, in order that this tribe could devote itself fully to Divine worship. People understand that not everyone is suited for the battlefield. When America had the draft, clergy were excluded, students in the universities were deferred, and others in sensitive positions excused. There is a famous Rambam explaining that the special status of the Levites does not pertain exclusively to the tribe of Levi:

רמב"ם יד החזקה הלכות שמיטה ויובל פרק יג הלכה יג

ולא שבט לוי בלבד אלא כל איש ואיש מכל באי העולם אשר נדבה רוחו אותו והבינו מדעו להבדל לעמוד לפני יי לשרתו ולעובדו לדעה את יי והלך ישר כמו שעשהו האלהים ופרק מעל צוארו עול החשבונות הרבים אשר בקשו בני האדם הרי זה נתקדש קדש קדשים ויהיה יי חלקו ונחלתו לעולם ולעולמי עולמים ויזכה לו בעה"ז דבר המספיק לו כמו שזכה לכהנים ללוים הרי דוד ע"ה אומר יי מנת חלקי וכוסי אתה תומיך גורלי בריך רחמנא דסייען:

Not only the Tribe of Levi, but any individual whose spirit moves him and whose knowledge gives him understanding to set himself apart in order to stand before Hashem, to serve Him, to worship Him, and to know Him. He walks upright as G-d created him, and removes from his neck the yoke of considerations of most people. Such an individual is as consecrated as the Holy of Holies, and Hashem shall be his portion and inheritance forever and ever. Hashem will grant him adequate sustenance in this world, just as He granted the Kohanim and the Levites... (Rambam, *Hilchot Shemita and Yovel* 13:13).

The Shield and Spiritual Weapons of Torah and Intense Prayer

Many yeshiva students rely on this statement by the Rambam when exempting themselves from the army, although it may be questioned, whether Rambam intended by this statement to sanction yeshiva students exchanging the yoke of the army with the yoke of Torah learning. Still, it makes sense to me that about ten percent of our young men, who have the proper aptitude and attitude should devote themselves entirely to Torah study, at least for a certain part of their lives. Our nation needs a spiritual army of dedicated Torah scholars no less than we need a physical army. Hashem's protective miracles are evident in each and every war that we have won, in spite of being a minute minority against the vast armies of aggressive Arab enemies. Learning Torah and praying with heartfelt intention are spiritual weapons that grant victory for the Jewish people. If every young man were drafted into the army there would be no dedicated yeshiva student engaging in full time Torah learning. We need a *z'chut* (merit) in order to be victorious in war. The yeshiva student, dedicated to Torah, powerful prayer and intense mitzvah observance works as a team with our dedicated soldiers defending our Holy Land. As the Netziv points out (*Devarim* 31:1), the troops used to give a share of the spoils to the Torah scholars, in recognition of the fact that their Torah learning kept the soldiers and the people safe.

Torah Test to Enter the Spiritual Army of Israel

The nation of Israel consists of many different tribes, each adding their unique contributions. Just as in an orchestra, each of the musicians contributes his unique talent, so, too, different people contribute to the welfare and security of Israel in various ways. One of the Sages of Yavneh is quoted as reflecting, "I am a man, and my friend is a man; my work is in the city, and my friend's work is in the field. Each person complements the other, and no one person can do all the jobs." (*Techumin* 7, p. 332). Thus, each of my sons chose the direction where they felt they could contribute most to the Jewish nation, while appreciating the contribution of his brother. Rav Kook, the first Chief Rabbi of Israel, felt strongly that yeshiva students were assuring the spiritual welfare of the nation. Ultimately, we rely on our spiritual superiority to save us, rather than our military might. I agree that the *z'chut* of Torah learning is no less an effective shield for the Jewish community than military service. Nevertheless, I do see a problem in granting blanket permission for all yeshiva students to get exemption from army service, based on Rambam's statement. Those who are equated with the Levites are defined by spiritual qualities of the highest standards. Who can confront a mirror and tell himself that he ought not to go to the army because he is *kodesh kodashim*, sanctum sanctorum, in the Rambam's terms? I believe that instead of parents singling their sons out for saintliness, or the yeshiva students making their own decisions that the level of their Torah learning supersedes army service, there needs to be a proper standard to examine the credentials for aspiring Torah scholars that make them suitable to be selected into the spiritual army of Israel! We need Mashiach to implement this selection!