

Many of the halachos we read about in these parshiyos are not necessarily relevant today on a practical level, but they still contain very valuable lessons and insights.

There is a prevalent misconception around today that since we now have a Jewish army with Jewish soldiers and commanders, the laws of war and conquest in this week's parsha are applicable to our current situation. This is simply not true. The specific halachos of how to conduct warfare found in these parshiyos are applicable to a specific social structure that we unfortunately don't have today. The way soldiers were drafted to fight and the way battles and wars were fought in the ancient world is very different then the democratic way in which our governments govern and enlist soldiers.

In the society described in the Torah, there is a king who is an absolute monarch and there is a Sanhedrin. The king ran many aspects of the political, military, and civil administration of the country—building roads, raising an army and foreign affairs. But he was not an independent person. Many major decisions were dependent on the Sanhedrin's approval. As Shmuel Hanovi told Shaul Hamalech, you are the king of Klal Yisroel and Hashem appointed you to guide His People. The halachoh says that real malchus belongs to Hashem and the king represents Hashem in this world. The Torah tells us that the king must be in constant contact with limud haTorah which will give him yiras shomayim and keep his middos at check.

The process of choosing an army in this society was based on non-military considerations. Only someone whose keeping of Torah and mitzvos was flawless was allowed on the battlefield. The victory on the battlefield is in the hands of Hashem and only tzaddikim can represent Him. War is a very dehumanizing activity. The Torah was very aware that even the greatest tzaddikim will be subject to spiritual dangers while fighting in the battlefield and the various halachos reflect that reality. For each person fighting, there was a person on the home front davening for his victory. The Kohen Mashuach Milchomo warned the soldiers that you may not be afraid because it would betray a lack of confidence that Hashem is fighting the war for you. The military camp must be kept kodosh. No exposed feces were allowed and not a hint of indecency or immorality was tolerated.

But despite all the precautions the Torah takes, war is still a dehumanizing activity. It turns moral, gentle, sensitive human beings into killing machines. You have to forget all the normal moral restraints a person has. The Torah instructed Klal Yisroel to kill and wipe out entire groups of people deemed by Hashem to be irredeemably evil. We find this in three cases—the seven nations who occupied Eretz Canaan, the nation of Amoleik, and a Jewish city that became thoroughly corrupted by avodo zoro—the ir hanidachas. The common denominator is that whenever you find a society that has become corrupted to its core, where the very fabric of that society has become irredeemably evil, the only thing to do is destroy it utterly. Otherwise it will re-emerge and infect the rest of humanity. So although it involves an act of cruelty to kill men women and children, it is ultimately a chessed to the world to rid it from a source of moral corruption.

The Torah tells us that our middos—even our good ones—should not be absolute. Each middah has to be tempered by the priorities of the Torah. Middos of compassion need to be balanced with gevuroh. Shaul Hamelech failed in his mission to wipe out Amoleik because his instinct for compassion and mercy took over and he wasn't capable of being cruel in order to carry out the will of Hashem.

Even the middas ho'emmes which we spoke of last week has to be weighed against other values which the Torah has—like sholom bayis. We see Hashem Himself, whose seal is truth, lied for the sake of sholom bayis. At our core, Jews are rachmonim – merciful beings. We need to instill that middah as a core value. But we have to know that biur ho'ra—eliminating evil—is also part of the essence of being a Jew. When we unfortunately have to employ these darker aspects of the human personality to fulfil the will of Hashem, we have to be very careful not to let them take control and spill over to our normal mode of behavior and thinking. We should never become insensitive to human life—even though we are sometimes commanded to take it. We go through an entire ritual and elaborate ceremony of eglah arufah to make sure Jewish society remains sensitive to the loss of a single Jewish life. After we have a parsha of warfare and battle, we are told about eglah arufah to emphasize that war and killing is an aberration—not the norm. When you have to destroy property in order to wage war, we still have to be conscious of it and try to minimize any waste of natural resources. We have to live with a balance between the ideals that we strive for and the reality that we live with. Liberals like to live in a fantasy world where everything is utopian and conflict-free. The Torah acknowledges the grim realities of life and teaches us how to deal with it and remain human.

This week's parsha starts with Yefas Toar. There is a simple reality the Torah is addressing. In times of war, the soldiers are killing machines and lose their identity of human beings. There is a danger of losing one's self to the passions of arayos. As Rashi explains—the Torah is taking the yetzer horo into account. If there is no way to permit it, the soldiers will violate an aveiroh. The Torah never denied there is a baser side to human nature. This was the very argument Moshe raised against the angels when he wanted to bring the Torah down to earth. The Torah says murder and theft are forbidden because there are people who are tempted to do so! The Torah is talking to a person who has a yetzer horo. Hashem created us with a physical body with physical desires and He gave us a structure and a regimen in order to deal with it and elevate our animal elements. We cannot function and survive without cravings to eat and start families. But it has to be tamed and controlled and directed properly.

The Torah also recognizes situations where the yetzer horo is overwhelming. In a situation of war, the tendency is to dehumanize one's self and the enemy population. So the Torah takes measures to moralize it and elevate it. You can take female captives but there will be so many hurdles and requirements beforehand that by the time the act is permitted, she will become distasteful to you. Chances are, you won't be so infatuated and controlled by your passions.

The Torah has a whole system of how to deal with dehumanizing and debasing situations, and how to control them.

But let's say all these protections and precautions don't do the job. Then come two more parshiyos. If you persevere and marry this captive, first of all, you are going to wind up hating her and her children. And then, the children you have from her will become benei sorer umoreh—no nachas from them. Realize that when you decide to pursue your passions till the end, nothing good will come of it.

Sometimes the Torah helps us deal with specific situations. Other times, the Torah gives us general guidelines and deep wisdom for successful living. There is a limit to how much physical pleasure and comfort that a person can actually enjoy in this world. But, human nature is such

that we want more. We are never satisfied. On the posuk "ohev kesef lo yisbah kesef" we learn if someone has a hundred, he automatically wants two hundred. Rashi comments that it refers to mitzvos. We are never satisfied with the mitzvos we've already performed—we always want to do more. But why does Rashi re-interpret the posuk this way? The truth of the posuk is self-evident—we all know that this is the reality regarding the blind pursuit of material possessions. Why does Rashi have to add that it refers to mitzvos?

The answer is that there is something deeply irrational about the blind pursuit of material wealth. If Hashem implanted the human personality with such an irrational drive, there must be a deeper reason and constructive purpose for it. Rashi is telling us that the drive of the neshama to do more and more mitzvos and achieve infinite value is sometimes misconstrued by the human being as a drive for money. If someone has the drive for money and wealth, he should know that this is his neshomo's way of telling him that it wants to acquire assets of infinite value.

People have different tendencies and personality traits. The gemara in Shabbos tells us how a Jew can take even murderous tendencies and channel them to more spiritual and positive expressions for everyone's benefit.

We are now in the month of Elul. We are preparing for the Yom Hadin. As we do so, we have to look at ourselves in a realistic and honest way.

When someone goes to court, there is a basic rule. You may lie all you want to the judge and the jury, but you have to let your lawyer know the truth. Because otherwise, he won't be able to prepare for the trial and defend you properly. When we come before Hashem, we have to be honest about what we want out of life and what is motivating us. If there are negative forces—either internal or external—pulling us in the wrong direction, we have to identify them and ask ourselves what's more important in life—following my whims and desires which lead nowhere, or doing something meaningful and lasting and making something of myself.

Sefer Koheles is a very interesting sefer. Shlomo Hamelech spends the entire sefer searching and experimenting—trying to identify what is worthwhile in life and what should be pursued. He had unlimited wealth and resources—which gave him unlimited possibilities to explore all the physical pleasures and luxurious living of his time. But he examined it all and found all of it wanting—lacking any substance. The only thing in the entire world that he found worthwhile pursuing was yiras shomayim and mitzvos. That's it. Everything else in the world was fleeting—insubstantial level.

Shlomo Hamelech says he tried pursuing the pleasure of music! Half the world goes crazy over music and over the low-class people who produce the music they love. The other half goes crazy over food and drink. But it is insanity. This is not what the human being is all about. Not music, not food, not money.

We have to be honest with ourselves. What is pushing me externally? What is motivating me internally? If I find something I'm doing consistently that is not worth pursuing, I should ask myself what aspect of my personality is pushing me in that direction and try to use it in a more positive direction. That is a more mature approach to life. Looking ahead to see what I can achieve and make of myself with my limited time here on Earth.

The Torah understands there is a yetzer horo and gives us the tools to use it properly.

The gemara in Chullin quotes Yalta the wife of Rav Nachman who said for every forbidden pleasure that exists, there is a kosher equivalent. The message Chazal are conveying is that Hashem isn't cruel—he doesn't want us to suffer deprivations for no reason. You can enjoy everything. But there is a way to enjoy the world without letting it

take over and destroy our lives. Discipline yourself. Some people let themselves go berserk and they have to ask themselves why they are having trouble in this area of life.

The Torah is a system which helps us deal with our darker demons and channel them in positive directions. Chodesh Elul ends with a difficult court case and the only way to win it is by being brutally honest at the outset. We have to be frank with ourselves about our issues and our taivos. And during the month of Elul we need to focus on what the Torah demands and how we are supposed to balance all the various aspects of our personality. We are given the tools to harmonize them in a way that elevates us and brings us closer to the ideal life that the Torah envisions.

Part Two

Parshas Shoftim 5778

The posuk in this week's parsha says that all of one's business dealings should be done honestly. One's word must be kept under all circumstances.

Last week we read tzedek tzedek tirdof.

It is a very peculiar phrase. Why the double-language?

First of all it is an admonition to judges. Moshe Rabbeinu tells Klal Yisroel that justice really belongs to Hashem. When you have a disagreement in monetary matters, you naturally want to win the case! But the Torah says which money belongs to you and which doesn't. The judge isn't deciding who the money belongs to. He is merely determining to whom the Torah says the money belongs.

Justice is a very elusive concept. There are a lot of grey areas. You have to chase after tzedek.

Rashi explains, if you have a din Torah, you must choose a trustworthy beis din to render the correct psak din. What is your attitude? That I have to win at all costs and I will pick a beis din that I know will favor me because I can manipulate them? Or is your attitude that Hashem gives everyone parnosoh and I want the greatest talmidei Chachomim with the most yiras shomayim and yashrus to find out who Hashem wants to give the money to.

Many people have an agenda in life and don't care what the Torah says in order to get a certain outcome. They interview rabbis before they choose them to see if they will follow the will of the people. They will do everything they can to manipulate rabbonim and the court system to achieve the outcome they want. But psak halacha is a pursuit of emmes. You can't use sheker as a tool to accomplish the things what you want in life. Targum Yonassan says you have to pursue truth with the truth.

Yashrus and emmes are a very fundamental part of Torah and what it means to be a frum Jew. Sheker is so prevalent in our society with cheating and swindling—even in personal relationships—that we start to view emmes and yashrus as a middas chassidus.

Emmes is a character trait. We have an obligation to imitate the middos of Hashem, and one of His middos is emmes.

The Rambam says aside from the mitzvah of doing chessed and tzedaka, you have an obligation to acquire a middah of chessed and tzedaka. So too, we not only have to say the truth, but we have to inculcate the middah of emmes into our personalities. We not only have to give tzedaka. We have to empathize with people and feel their pain. We have to become baalay chessed.

This is true in financial dealings, personal dealings with others, and to be honest with one's self. We lie so much about ourselves to others and to ourselves that we don't have an honest picture of who we are. We need to recognize who we are and where we stand honestly in our avodas Hashem.

Having an honest relationship with a person means we establish certain ground rules by which we function together in harmony. Honesty is the basis for all relationships. When people are dishonest in certain relationships, they eventually become dishonest with everyone—because honesty is a middah. You can't be a true friend and you can't have a genuine relationship with a spouse and children. You can't truly serve Hashem either.

Part of the middas emmes is to be a genuine person—not to be two-faced and mislead people about how you feel about them. You deal straightly and honestly with everyone. It is the only way to lead a healthy personal life and a Torah life.

The defining characteristic of gedolei Yisroel is how people recognize that their Torah is emmes. Their whole life is a striving for emmes—to find the truth in the Torah. People realize that the Torah is emmes and the Torah which they are making a part of who they are has to make them seek emmes in the process.

One of the biggest nisyonos in the world today is standing by the middah of emmes. It doesn't matter that your goal is emmes if you employ sheker to achieve it. The lofty goal doesn't justify the means in any area—including your relationships.

The years in Yeshivah will hopefully teach you the value of emmes.

One of the talmidim had a shailoh this week about employing a certain strategy. I advised against it because even though it was technically muttar, it smelled of corruption and it's better to stay away. Make sure your life is straight and emmes in dealing with everyone—your rabbeim and your chavieirim.

In today's world of sheker, we have to teach ourselves to be repelled by sheker.

Although there are countless subjects to talk about in this week's parsha, the most difficult middah to acquire today is the middah of emmes. We conclude Kriyas Shema by saying Hashem Himself is emmes. Chazal say Hashem's seal is emmes. Not just His signature is emmes. What is the difference? My Rebbe explained that a signature can have slight variations from one to the next. A seal is the exact same every time you apply it. There are no variations. No twists and turns.

There is no such thing as 99% emmes. It's either total emmes or it's not.

Your end goals have to be emmes and your means have to be emmes, and we have to work to make our whole metzius into one that is emmes.