

PARSHAS KI SEITZEI

תשפ"ו

This week we read Parshas Ki Seitzei. It's a very complex parsha, involving many fundamental ideas of the Torah.

The Torah talks about milchomo – war. That means the Torah recognizes that there's such a thing as a justified milchomo. The Torah is very different than the whole philosophy of what I would call the idiotic intellectual world today. The Torah begins with a basic recognition: there is good and there is bad. There is evil in this world. There is a Yetzer Hara in this world, and people go after the Yetzer Hara and they are deeply corrupted and become evil. That's why we continually have the idea of הרע מקרקר – evil has to be eliminated.

That's also the idea behind milchomo. When Klal Yisroel went into Eretz Yisroel they were commanded concerning the seven nations that occupied Eretz Yisroel. The Torah says לא תחיה כל נשמה – Do not leave anyone alive. Why? Because there are situations where an entire culture is evil, and evil has to be destroyed.

At the end of the parsha we talk about Amalek: תמחה את זכר עמלק. Wipe them out. There are times when evil becomes a cultural norm, when the whole society revolves around it. When the national culture itself is evil, the Torah says: eliminate it.

It is not only among the goyim. There is the halacha of עיר הנידחת – a city in Klal Yisroel where the entire culture has become avodo zoro. The mitzvah is to destroy the city because when evil becomes the cultural norm, it has to be eliminated in its entirety.

That was also the דור המבול. Hakodosh Boruch Hu destroyed the entire generation. Chazal tell us, אפילו כלי מחרישה, There wasn't a plow left, there wasn't anything left – nothing was left from that generation.

Evil sometimes has a certain fascination for people. You have people today who remember Nazism, who grab onto certain memorabilia, things associated with evil. Evil has to be destroyed; we don't leave a remnant of it to survive and inspire other people to follow it.

Sdom was the same thing. Hakodosh Boruch Hu destroyed the entire society.

But when we talk about milchomo, there is a very dangerous side to it. Milchomo is a two-edged sword. On the one hand, there are halachos of milchomo. Milchomo is permitted. And what is milchomo? It means killing and pillaging. When Klal Yisroel fought Midyan, they didn't merely kill them; they took their belongings. The Torah permits in milchomo things that would normally be absolutely forbidden – murder and stealing.

The Torah has a totally different ethos concerning what milchomo is about. It does not necessarily distinguish between an armed population and a civilian population in the way people speak today. When the war is against a nation whose culture is evil, it is a war against the nation.

But this is precisely why the Torah is so careful about how war is conducted. Every frum Jew normally has basic inhibitions against murder and stealing. When he goes to war and begins killing, looting, and taking property, those inhibitions can break down. Then another yetzer hara becomes very powerful: znus.

That's why the Torah says, וְהָיָה מִחֲנִיף, אֵלֶיךָ מִתְּהַלֵּךְ בְּקֶרֶב מִחֲנִיף, קְדוֹשׁ. You have to be particularly careful about znus in a military environment. Normally a person has certain built-in guides. In war, those guides are being torn down, and therefore the Torah demands

extra guidelines.

This is not merely about war. It applies to any situation in life where a person enters an environment in which the normal moral inhibitions are weakened.

The Rambam is very clear that the classical halachos of milchomo do not apply today. People who try to apply them today should read the Rambam. He says that when Yehoshua is told to fight the wars, there is a Kohen Gadol and an Urim V'Tumim. Without a Kohen Gadol, an Urim V'Tumim, and a Sanhedrin, there is no such thing as the halachos of milchomo. There can be self-defense, but that is not the same thing as halachos of milchomo.

And there is another fundamental point. How do you view a war? Do you view it as a fight between human beings with powerful ammunition and weaponry? No.

אין המלחמה נמשכת בין צבאות אלא בין אדם לאדם. שומר חיים ונפש הוא חייב להילחם.

Milchomo is fought with the recognition that Hakodosh Boruch Hu is fighting the battle. That has to be kept in mind at all times. We are fighting Hakodosh Boruch Hu's war against evil.

The Gemara in Avodo Zoro says, מלחמות אני עשיתי – Hakodosh Boruch Hu runs the wars. If there is a war between Russia and Ukraine, or between the United States and Iran, the nations may think that they arranged the war, but that's not the Torah view. Hakodosh Boruch Hu arranged it.

And when Klal Yisroel fights a war, they have to remember: the war is between Hakodosh Boruch Hu and the forces of evil, and we represent Hakodosh Boruch Hu in fighting that war. That is how Chazal viewed what war is about.

This is also what we see by Dovid Hamelech. People talk about Dovid Hamelech as a mighty warrior, but they never read Tanach carefully. When Dovid Hamelech went out to fight Goliyas, Goliyas was a mighty warrior, covered in metal armor, with only a small part of his forehead exposed. Dovid went out without armor. They asked him why he was going without armor. He said, I'm fighting Hakodosh Boruch Hu's battle. It's up to Hakodosh Boruch Hu. All he had was a slingshot and a stone.

Because of this, the Torah is very careful about znus in times of war. The Torah begins the parsha with the case of יפת תואר. You're killing, you're doing terrible things, you're violating all the normal moral things built into you – and then you see this beautiful woman. She wants to be saved, and she has dressed herself in a way that attracts you so you won't kill her.

The Torah recognizes the danger. Human beings are human beings. So the Torah gives a process that is basically designed to turn him off. It recognizes that when a person is in an environment where his normal inhibitions are being destroyed, he is vulnerable.

So there is a fundamental difference between seeing war as a contest of human power and seeing it as Hakodosh Boruch Hu's battle.

There are also different levels of evil. The Torah tells us about Amon and Moav: a ger from Amon and Moav cannot marry into Klal Yisroel. Why? The Torah gives two reasons. First, they should have come running out with bread and water when Klal Yisroel left Egypt. And

second, they hired Bilaam to curse us.

Why is that so severe? Because they lacked hakoras hatov.

Stop and understand what the Torah is saying. Amon and Moav owed their entire existence to Avrohom Ovinu. Lot was saved from Sdom because of Avrohom Ovinu. Their national existence came from Klal Yisroel's ancestor. They owed them everything. And yet they showed no hakoras hatov.

From the time Lot was saved until this point was four hundred and forty years. The Torah is telling us an incredible idea: national culture matters. If your national existence comes from somebody, and you show no hakoras hatov whatsoever, that tells us something fundamental about the culture.

They were not like Amalek. They were not the seven nations of Canaan. They were not an evil nation that had to be destroyed. But they lacked basic middos. They did not understand hakoras hatov.

An individual Amoni or Moavi can convert and become a ger. But he cannot marry into Klal Yisroel. If that is the national culture you come from, we don't want that culture mixing into Klal Yisroel.

Imagine the message. Look at the importance of hakoras hatov. It is so fundamental, so basic. The Chovos Halevavos tells us that our entire relationship with Hakodosh Boruch Hu is built on hakoras hatov, and what we owe every other human being also creates a serious chiyuv of hakoras hatov. It is one of the most fundamental middos of being Jewish.

The Torah therefore recognizes such a thing as national culture. If the national culture is evil, eliminate the nation. If the national culture is built around bad middos, don't mix with it. Hakodosh Boruch Hu makes absolute demands of us.

And that brings us back to another major lesson of the parsha: setting bounds.

If you enter a situation where the normal moral guidelines are being broken down, you have to make extra, extra careful bounds.

Take a person in yeshiva. There is a certain culture that supports his values and his spiritual goals. There are certain clear moral guidelines. Now put the same person into the business world, where everything goes – geneivah, sheker, no moral guidelines. What happens?

I know that very well from my talmidim who are in the business world. I had a talmid who became a very successful businessman. Before he moved into major business success, he made a geder. Even though there are twenty-five different heterim for shaking hands with a

woman in a business situation, he never does. Why? Because unless you establish a very strict geder at the beginning, it's a slippery slope.

He saw what happened to him, and he saw what happened to many other frum people. You sit across the table from somebody, there's a deal, she wants the deal, and she'll do anything for the deal. If you don't have very strict gedolim – one, two, three – you're finished.

And I remember another story. I finished high school. I had a friend of mine who came from a frum home, a very frum boy. For three-plus years I didn't see him. One day I'm on a bus coming home and I bump into him. By that time he wasn't keeping Shabbos or anything else.

And he looked at me and said, "You know the difference between the two of us? When you went out and had to deal with non-frum society, you kept wearing your yarmulke. You made a geder. You were telling yourself: I'm different than you. I didn't wear my yarmulke. I started just like you, but then it was easy just to slip away."

That is exactly what the Torah is telling us about war, and it is true about many different situations in life. When you become part of a culture that does not uphold your normal inhibitions, you have to make an extra effort. Otherwise you fall to pieces.

That's why, in milchomo, there is the whole chiyuv of extra gedolim concerning arayos: וְהָיָה מִמִּנִּיךָ קְדוֹשׁ וְלֹא יִרְאֶה כָּךְ עַרְוֹת דָּבָר. An army fighting a Jewish war has to know: yes, I am losing some of my normal inhibitions; yes, my success depends on Hakodosh Boruch Hu; but my guidelines and gidrei tzniyus have to be superior – superb.

And it's not only there. Anytime you are in a situation where the normal culture is breaking down, you have to set strong gedolim. Otherwise you fall apart.

So, number one: you have to understand that there is such a thing as good and evil. Evil has to be destroyed. Unlike the stupid liberal world today, where there's no such thing as evil – defund the police, accept everything and everyone with love, and there will be peace and harmony. No police, no military, everybody loves each other, wonderful. That's not the way the world is. There is good and evil. Evil has to be destroyed. And there are different levels of evil.

Number two: superior middos are tremendously important. If a nation, as a nation, demonstrates that it lacks basic middos – and the most basic middoh of all is hakoras hatov – have nothing to do with them.

There are a lot of important lessons here. These are not merely the specific halachos of the parsha. They are fundamental principles how we deal with the world and how we deal with ourselves.