

Democracy vs. Dictatorship

Category: Devarim, Shoftim

What is the difference between democracy and dictatorship? And which side is the Torah on?

The Act of Kindness

Last week, a group of “Metzuyanei Tzahal,” injured IDF soldiers, visited Alaska and spent Shabbos at the Chabad center in Anchorage, with my brother, Rabbi Yosef Greenberg.

At the Shabbos table, Rabbi Greenberg asked one of the fellows to share his story, and he related the following:

In 2014, Israel launched a campaign against Hamas dubbed “Operation Protective Edge,” in response to the kidnapping and murder of three Israeli teenagers. The war lasted fifty days.

This soldier was traveling in a military jeep with several soldiers when they drove over a mine. The bomb that detonated had 150kg of explosives, but thank G-d, all the soldiers survived. However, one hundred shards entered his body, ten of them in each eye.

The doctors were convinced that he would be blind forever, but with G-d’s help, they were able to preserve his sight in one eye - with which he now sees perfectly - while the other eye is almost completely blind.

In an emotional voice, he said that he wanted to share something special:

He got married two years before the war, in 2012. Before his wedding, he traveled with his brother to pray at the Kotel, as many Israelis do on their wedding day. As the afternoon approached and the time for the wedding drew closer, his brother urged him to hurry up and get into the car to head back.

As he began to drive out, they saw an old man unsuccessfully chasing a city-bus that had just left the Kotel station. (Those of you who have visited Israel may recognize the very common ‘*rega, rega*’ call to the driver - which isn’t necessarily

effective). He said to his brother, "Let's find out where he needs to go and take him home."

His brother protested, "You are the groom and everyone is waiting for you! If we take him, we'll be late to the wedding!"

He disregarded his brother's protests, opened the door and invited the man inside. The elderly individual explained that he lived in the Old City right near the Kotel, but he didn't have the energy to climb the many steps to his home. Instead, he rides the bus for forty-five minutes until it reaches his home.

They began driving towards his house, but the traffic was moving very slowly. . . Meanwhile, the elderly man discovered that he was being driven by a groom who was going to be late to his own wedding! When they finally arrived, he turned to the groom and said, "I am genuinely grateful for the mitzvah that you did, and I want to give you a gift. I am an old man and I don't know how many years I have left. I have a dollar from the Rebbe, and I would like to give it to you in honor of your wedding."

Two years later, on a Friday afternoon during Operation Protective Edge, he received word that his unit would be entering Gaza. He called his wife to inform her, and she said, "Don't enter Gaza without the Rebbe's dollar with you!"

"But its muktze," he reminded her. "I can't take money with me on Shabbos!"

"It's not muktze," she argued. "It's not something that you hold as currency; you would never buy anything with it. You keep it with you as a segula, as a protection. Take it with you!"

That was enough to convince him, and he took it along.

Finishing his story, he said with tears in his eyes that he was convinced that the Rebbe's dollar protected him and all his friends in the Jeep.

Who Gets Exemptions?

This week, in Parshas Shoftim, we read about the "Laws of War." In the beginning of Chapter 20, the Torah says, "When you go to battle against your enemies...do not be afraid of them, since G-d your L-rd is with you."

Before the battle, the Torah tells us, the priests make the following announcement:

“Has anyone built a new house and not begun to live in it? Let him go home... Has anyone planted a vineyard and not redeemed its first crop? Let him go home... Has anyone betrothed a woman and not married her? Let him go home...”

Afterwards, one more announcement is made: “Is anyone afraid or faint-hearted? Let him go home...”

Our sages ask: Why, indeed, does the Torah free those who have a new home, vineyard, or wife?

The last exemption — for those who are afraid and fainthearted — is given with an explanation: “So that he will not demoralize his brethren.” But why are the others exempt? True, it’s not pleasant to go to war when you are about to get married, but what about the soldier that has a wife and children waiting at home? Is war pleasant for him?

The Midrash says the following: “Why was all this stated? Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai said: Come and see how G-d cares for human dignity. All these exemptions were said to preserve the dignity of the fearful and fainthearted. Now, when a soldier leaves the battlefield, the others will say ‘maybe he has just built a house’ or ‘maybe he just planted a vineyard,’ ‘maybe he has betrothed a woman.’” (Sifri Devarim 192).

Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakai says something amazing: in truth, the Torah has no reason to absolve the individual who has a new home, vineyard, or wife. He is sent home for the sole purpose of shielding the fearful and fainthearted from shame.

The fact that the fearful and fainthearted should be sent home is self-understood. Soldiers who are fearful could demoralize the entire army. They need to go home. But they might be embarrassed to leave!

Therefore, the Torah added three new criteria for exemptions, all to allow the fearful soldier to leave with dignity. This way, when we see someone leaving the battlefield, we will not assume that he is afraid. We will assume that he is about to get married, or, if he’s a bit older, we will assume that he just built the house of

his dreams, or, if he's a bit older, we will assume that his hobby is to plant vineyards or grow vegetables and he has yet to enjoy the fruits of his labor.

This raises a question: why is the Torah so persistent to preserve his dignity?

Democracy vs. Dictatorship

In a talk, the Rebbe once spoke about the difference between democracy and dictatorship:

Often, the good of the individual clashes with the good of the community or country. The question then arises: who is more important? Do we sacrifice the good of the individual for the good of the many, or does one's personal needs come first?

This, the Rebbe explained, is where the difference between dictatorship and democracy comes to fore. In a dictatorship, the nation swallows the individual. Every person is just a little screw in the big machine known as the nation; there is no regard for individuality and personal worth - you are seen solely as a part of the nation and as someone who could contribute to the benefit for the greater good. In democracy however, personal rights are preserved.

What is Torah's opinion of the matter?

The Rebbe cited the teaching of the Sages, "Why was man created alone?" Our sages teach that Adam, the first man, was created as a lone individual to teach us that every soul is an entire world.

This is expressed in Jewish law as well: if an enemy demands one individual from a city, and threatens to destroy the entire city if he is not handed over, Jewish law forbids us to give him over. This is because each person is a world unto itself, and in some cases it can change the course of the whole community. (11 Nissan 5737. Sichos Kodosh vol. 1 pg. 579).

This is the message of this week's Parsha: The dignity of the individual is so important that we are ready to absolve three other categories of people from battle.

Why is it so?

In order to be victorious in battle, we need G-d's help, and He grants us His help when we are sensitive to others. When we protect the dignity of others, when we help an elderly person get to his home — we earn G-d's help to be victorious. This is true in the war to protect the land of Israel, and in the war against COVID. When we care for each individual, and treat each individual like an entire world, G-d grants us the greatest miracles.