



The Only Wartime Insurance

Many of us would have been kicked out of the ancient Jewish army. Why? And what can we do instead?

The Draft

Who should go to war and who should be exempt?

In Biblical times, when the Jewish nation went to war, four categories of soldiers were exempt from fighting on the battlefield. This week's parsha describes the scene.

The kohen speaks to the reserves and says, "What man is there who has built a new house and has not [yet] inaugurated it? Let him go and return to his house." Imagine if this rule were in effect today when every second person is either buying or building a new home. Half of the army would be sent home!

The kohen continues:

"And what man is there who has planted a vineyard, and has not yet benefited from it? Let him go and return to his house." It is a little strange, though. Those who are just beginning to build their businesses are sent home to work while those who have big successful vineyards are sent to die in battle? It would suit us better to send our *shlomazals* to fight and let the businessmen stay home.

Still, the Kohen continues:

"And what man is there who has betrothed a woman and has not [yet] taken her? Let him go and return to his house."

This is the strangest of all three rules. a) An army is made of strong young fighting men. If we're going to send all the unmarried young men home who will fight? b) We send the engaged man home because there is a little girl waiting to marry him. But what about the men with

three or four children at home waiting for him to raise them. Why is he more dispensable than the former?

There is yet a fourth group of men who can't fight with the armies of Israel:

"What man is there who is fearful and fainthearted? Let him go and return to his house."

Rashi explains that this refers to one who "cannot stand in the closed ranks of battle and look upon a drawn sword." Not even his sword. Such men are sent home. These four groups were sent away from the battlefield. They wouldn't actually go home. Instead they'd arrange camp and run the mess hall.

Those Who Are Distracted

Why did the Torah choose these groups of people to be exempt from fighting a war?

Commentaries explain that the reason these four groups are not allowed to fight is because their hearts are elsewhere. They are not concerned with the war. They are only interested in their homes, brides and vineyards.

The Even Ezra points out that when a man is building a house he throws his heart and soul into the project. And we all know what he means. A friend of mine told me that every time he visited the building site of his new home it cost him \$5000.

The same is true about an engaged man. A short conversation with him and you can tell that he's "not entirely with us." He is in a different world, a world of flowers, photographers and dresses. He's preoccupied with the next time they're getting together.

And a guy who starts a new business isn't any more focused than the others. The owner of a successful business is confident that even in his absence his business will operate smoothly. A new business, as many of you know, generates no revenue, only worries.

And a wimp; enough said.

Can you see any of these men to be productive in the line of duty? If the war gets rough you can expect each of these men to tuck tail and run, probably taking tens of soldiers with them.

Our Reality

This categorization of “anyone occupied and otherwise distracted” really accounts for all of us. When Israel fights a war, we don’t see masses of Americans lining up to join the IDF. And in truth, we are not actually wanted there.

So what can we do? How can we contribute to the safety and security of the People of Israel?

We read in our parsha that the Kohen tells the soldiers “Shma Yisroel (Hear, O Israel), today you are approaching the battle against your enemies.” Why must the Kohen begin with the words “Shema Yisroel” instead of getting straight to the point, “You are approaching battle”?

Rashi explains that with these words the Kohen insinuates that, even if you have no merit other than the reading of the *Shema*, you are worthy that God should save you.

Reciting Shema has tremendous power. Shema protects us on both the spiritual level, from the evil inclination, as well as on the physical level. The Talmud says that one who recites the Shema at night protects himself from all kinds of harm.

We find the Shema prayer also used as a protection in another instance. Tradition tells us that on that night before a baby’s bris, the Satan tries to harm the baby, to prevent us from fulfilling this most important mitzvah of Bris Milah. To counter this, there is a beautiful custom where children are invited to come to the baby’s bedside and recite the Shema.

So, what does this mean for us? We are not soldiers and can’t help protect the Land of Israel physically but we can help in a spiritual way. By reciting the Shema twice daily, morning and night, we help protect the Israeli soldier, the defenders of the holy land. We can also recite it with our children until they learn to say it on their own.

In the Merit of “Shema Yisroel” even as we approach the battles against our enemies we shall feel no fear for G-d fights for us.