

The Kosher Army

Category: Holidays, Shavuot

Should we separate from the irreligious? Isn't that what our forefathers all chose to do?

The Army Crisis

Good Yom Tov!

In the new army set up in Israel at the War of Independence, there was a division of religious soldiers. One Shabbos, towards the end of the year 1948, the division's cooks were ordered to prepare food for the soldiers before they went out to fight.

The cooks, two religious boys from Bnei Brak, refused to violate Shabbos, and didn't agree in any way to cook, despite all the threats from their commanding officer.

Finally, the commanding officer brought in cooks from another unit, and they cooked the food. To his amazement, the soldiers in that division, who were all religious, refused to eat the food that had been cooked for them on Shabbos. Those two cooks were put on trial in military court and were sentenced to one week in military prison, and in addition, to put them down, they shaved their heads. (This was a repulsive custom from the British Empire in which soldiers put in military prison had to shave their heads.)

The two cooks appealed their sentence, lodging a complaint with a higher military court. But that court not only upheld their sentence, but imposed a stiffer sentence on them, sentencing them to three months in military prison. So, the entire division of religious soldiers took on a hunger strike in protest against the fact that their religious friends were in prison.

The story got out and stirred up a public storm that got all the way to the government. The Minister of Religious Affairs at the time protested that how can it be that in a Jewish state and in a Jewish army, two Jewish soldiers who wanted to keep Shabbos get punished for it! He threatened to resign from the government—and to his surprise, it was specifically the left-wing members of the

government who supported him, joining him in his protest to David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first Prime Minister who was also the Minister of Defense.

They said to Ben-Gurion: Just like we demand that no one should force us to do things against our conscience, so too they have the right to demand not to be forced to do things against their conscience and religious beliefs. And so Ben Gurion caved in, and promised that he would issue an order to free the religious soldiers.

Immediately afterward, there was a Officers' Committee meeting whose purpose it was to define the religious rules for the military. At that meeting, there were representatives of all the different factions in the government, from the most religious to the left wing and the Communists.

The religious representatives claimed that from this point onward, every religious soldier needs to be assigned to a religious division, and that every religious division must be given its every religious need. They argued that if a religious soldier is assigned to a standard division, he will be influenced by his comrades and abandon his religion.

Even the representatives of the left supported this claim. However, they came from the opposite direction. They said, take the religious soldiers and do whatever you want with them. Let them pray and study Torah all day and eat cholent all week—just leave us alone. Let all the other soldiers live as they wish, and don't impose any religious stuff on us.

Opposing them, however, were those who said that you can't create exclusively religious units because by doing so, you're compromising the religion of the bulk of the soldiers. They argued, how can it be that in a Jewish military, the majority of the soldiers won't eat kosher and not keep Shabbos? By saving the religious soldiers, we're abandoning the rest of the military! On the contrary—we need see to it that every soldier in the army, regardless of which division or unit, can keep the Jewish faith if he wants to.

After all sides made their arguments heard, Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion summarized the debate by saying as follows: The military is the military of all the people; we will not split the military into regiments of religious and non-religious. We will not create a ghetto within the military. The religious soldier, he said, is personally forbidden from eating non-kosher food; on the other hand, the non-

religious soldier can eat anything, including kosher food. And so the entire military will eat only kosher food. What's more, a religious soldier is forbidden from violating the Shabbos; on the other hand, the non-Shabbos-observant soldier can also rest on the Shabbos. And so the entire military will keep Shabbos (except for security needs).

And so, ever since, the Israeli military keeps kosher. There are kosher inspectors and military rabbis who take care not only to provide all the religious soldiers' needs but that the entire military have a Jewish identity to it.

The Cause for Separation

This debate over what was the best way to proceed—whether to build tall fences behind which everyone could live their lives, or to have everyone learn to live together—is a very old debate.

Seemingly, one could bring proofs from the Torah itself that the best way to go is to isolate one's self from everyone else, and that everyone tend to their own needs. After all, in the beginning of the Torah portion of Lech Lecha, we read about the first Jew, Avraham, and how he had conflicts on religious issues with nephew Lot. "And there was a fight between the shepherds of Avraham's flock and the shepherds of Lot's flock," on which Rashi explains, "Because Lot's shepherds were sinners and would graze their sheep in others' fields, and Avraham's shepherds would rebuke them for stealing" (Bereishis 13:7).

So here you had a religious dispute. They didn't get along. One group observed the prohibition against stealing and the other did not. So Avraham turned to Lot and said to him: "Please let there not be a dispute between me and you and between my shepherds and your shepherds, for we are brotherly men... please separate from me"—for the sake of peace, let's separate. But what came of that? Lot chose to go live in Sodom—the same Sodom and Gomorrah of ill repute.

In the generation following that, we read about Yishmael and Yitzchak. Sarah noticed that Yishmael was having a bad influence on Yitzchak. So she immediately told Avraham: "Banish this maidservant and her son."

Avraham did not like that idea, but G-d told him to listen to Sarah, and indeed, Yishmael and Yitzchak went their separate ways. What came of Yishmael? Rashi

says, ““He would live in the desert and rob passersby” (Bereishis 21:20).

In the following generation of Yaakov and Eisav, we also read about a similar situation. After 22 years of malice between Yaakov and Eisav, they finally meet and kiss. And then Eisav suggests to Yaakov (Bereishis 33:12), “Travel and we will go, and I will go alongside you”— which, as Rashi explains, means, “Even with you. I will do you a favor and I will lengthen my traveling time to go as slowly as you require. That is the meaning of ‘alongside you’—even with you.” So Eisav suggests that they live together as brothers, but Yaakov graciously turned down the offer.

And we find the same thing with Yetzias Mitzrayim, the Exodus from Egypt. There were Jews who didn’t want to leave Egypt; it was good for them there. Moshe Rabbeinu didn’t argue with them but simply left without them. As Rashi says, “For there were evil people among Israel in that generation, and they didn’t want to leave” (Shmos 10:22). And so, Rashi informs us, “[Only] one in five left” (Shmos 13:18).

So here we see the philosophy that dictates that if someone doesn’t want to conform with the line that Judaism demands of him, we simply separate from him and go further.

The Cause to Unite

But, ladies and gentlemen, if you look closer, you’ll discover that the sources we just mentioned all occurred before Matan Torah, the Giving of the Torah. After the giving of the Torah, however, we don’t find any such encounters. In the disputes and complaints in the desert against Moshe Rabbeinu, Moshe never suggests to those complaining that it was better in Egypt something like, “On the contrary! Anyone who wants to can go back to Egypt!” Rather, Moshe always tried to draw them close and convince them to make peace, etc. Even in the dispute with Korach, Moshe went to Dasan and Aviram and tried to appease them. But why? What happened that the policy changed?

The Rebbe says that the answer is as follows: Mt. Sinai introduced a new approach to the entire subject. At the Giving of the Torah, you didn’t have the participation of only the religious Jews, or of those who attended of their own free choice. G-d revealed Himself at Mt. Sinai to the entire nation, men, women and

children. All of them. There was not a single human being who was not part of that experience. And to every individual who was present there, to every Jew, G-d addressed him or her in the singular tense, saying to him or her, "I am the L-rd *Your* G-d."

From that moment onward, the Jewish Nation became responsible for itself—no more "Please separate from me." No more kicking the bad kid out of school like they kicked Yishmael out. No more giving up on 80 percent of the nation. From the Giving of the Torah on, we have all been dependent on one another and responsible for one another. We do not have the luxury to give up on someone who doesn't want to do mitzvos. We cannot allow ourselves to lose even one Jew—we have to be concerned for each of them. It is forbidden to put up barriers so as to stop fights—it's better that everyone be together, even with fighting, than a peace in which we lose the majority of the people.

My friends: We must find the way to live together, because ever since the first Shavuos, over 3,325 years ago, "All of Israel is responsible for one another."

Good Yom Tov!

(See Likutei Sichos Vol. I, pg. 252 and Vol. XI pg. 2.)