

Echoes of Eden

Rabbi Ari Kahn

“Shall Your Brothers Go To War While You Sit Here?”

“Shall your brothers go to war while you sit here?” With these words Moshe hurls a devastating moral attack against the tribes of Reuven (Reuben) and Gad, an attack that reverberates until this very day, and is used as ammunition against those who live in the modern state of Israel yet choose to take advantage of the service deferments.

As the Jews drew nearer to the Promised Land, they came into possession of lush grazing land, and two tribes expressed a desire to make their homestead east of Israel. In short, they sought to trade their future portion in the land of their forefathers for the green pastures across the border. For them, the Promised Land would remain an unfulfilled promise - not because God did not want to keep His promise, but because they were less interested in what the Land of Israel had to offer than they were in the lucrative opportunity they saw on the outside.

Their request was met with a rhetorical question, a response so full of moral outrage that its critical tone was unmistakable: “Shall your brothers go to war while you sit here?” The historic moment in time should not be overlooked: the conquest of the Land of Israel and the very existence of a Jewish national entity in the Land of the Patriarchs hung in the balance.

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Upon closer inspection, their wish not to be a part of the “Zionist” enterprise is not really analogous to those who live in Israel today and choose not to fight. We have become so accustomed to hearing these words used out of context that we fail to take note of the differences: Those who live in Israel, regardless of their political orientation or the degree to which they take part in national or military institutions, do not fit squarely into the moral attack hurled by Moshe against the two tribes who sought to remain outside the land. When considered in context, Moshe’s charge against those who would choose the lush fields over the Land of Israel would be more appropriately directed at modern-era Jews who choose to remain in the diaspora rather than taking part in the rebuilding of the Land.

Moshe’s response to the two tribes’ request goes one step further, lending context and depth to his critique: “And why do you discourage the heart of the people of Israel from going over to the land which God has given them? This is what your fathers did, when I sent them from Kadesh-Barnea to see the land.” (Bamidbar 32:7-8)

Moshe compares their request to the sin of the spies, perhaps the most nefarious episode endured during his tenure. He identifies the crux of the spies’ perfidy not simply in the rejection of the Land of Israel, but in the fear they instilled in the hearts of the nation. This fear escalated into panic and led to a massive breakdown of faith and purpose. The spies’ insidious report caused the nation to doubt their leaders, to lose sight of their goals. The entire community of Israel began to have second thoughts about the Land and their collective destiny. Can a similar charge be made against those who live in Israel today, even if they do not share the burden of protecting the Land and the People of Israel? I think not.

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With this in mind I wish to put forth a few suggestions:

First, to those living in Israel who do not serve: By any moral and religious logic, those who live in Israel must offer their full support to our soldiers and their sacred mission. Too often, demagogues get caught up in their self-serving ideology and attack the State, the government, and the I.D.F. as if they are all part of an elaborate plot designed to uproot Jewish values. The role of the army is far more prosaic; they are indeed involved in elaborate plot - to protect the lives and freedoms of as many Jews as possible. This is a responsibility that must be shared by each and every one of us. Often old skirmishes and battles are conjured up, and present day reality is ignored, rather than focusing on old internal battles, they should treat themselves to a healthy dose of present-day reality.

The same rabbis who attack the army and proscribe military service often hand down halakhic rulings that permit soldiers to break Shabbat laws when lives are in danger. It is a strange sort of cognitive dissonance that allows them to understand that our soldiers' efforts are sacred acts, while at the same time labeling those who perform this life-saving labor as impure. Is a soldier who risks his own life for the protection of his brethren no more than a "shabbos goy"? In point of fact, today's I.D.F may have more religiously observant officers than secular ones. The iconic brave kibbutznik of the past has been eclipsed by the brave *kippa*-clad young man.

Among the rabbis who saw things differently, two come to mind: one was my revered teacher, Rabbi Yisrael Gustman, who, upon seeing the graves in the military cemetery on Mount Herzl, declared, "*Kulam kedoshim*", "They are all holy martyrs." Another is Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach. When a student asked the Rabbi's permission to take a short leave from the yeshiva in Jerusalem to travel to pray at the "graves of the righteous," Rabbi Auerbach told him that he need go no further than Mount Herzl, to the military cemetery.

These great rabbis recognized that our brothers who went to war and did not return were holy. It behooves all those who remain in yeshiva and devote themselves to learning Torah, to bolster the spirit of those around them and

aid in the national effort in any way they can. First and foremost, they must recognize the sanctity of the sacrifice others are making on their behalf, and the holiness of our brothers who have fought to secure their freedom to build and populate great centers of Torah learning in Israel - especially those who paid for these blessings with their lives.

As for those who have chosen the diaspora as home: Make sure that your choices do not instill fear in the hearts of those who dwell in Zion. Be active in your support: Send your children to Israel. Allow them to serve in the army if they express the desire to do so. Remember that this moral fortitude and bravery is the culmination of a proper education.

Consider the Israelis who give three years of their lives to military service, and then continue to disrupt their normal routine for a month or more each year for decades thereafter. Keeping that time-frame in mind, create a structure for donating resources or time to Jewish causes, and strengthen the spirit of those who live in Israel. Israel should be more than just a destination for vacations. It is the inheritance of all Jews, and a part of our personal and collective destiny.

For a more in-depth analysis see <http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2012/07/parshiot-matot-masai-audioessays.html>