

Derashah: Vayikra/Zachor 5784: Zachor: The Virtues of A Forever War?

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The only winning move?

Children of the 1970's and 1980's will remember the movie *Wargames*, in which a teenage Matthew Broderick hacks into the Pentagon's central computer system – the WOPR – and accidentally starts playing a real-world version of a strategy game called Global Thermonuclear War. At the end of the movie, the WOPR computer observes that war is, “A strange game. The only winning move is not to play.”

At first, Tanach and Chazal seem to come to the same negative conclusion:

- Look at our earliest biblical battles:
 - Avraham fights an alliance of four kings to save Lot, and a gemara¹ says that Avraham is punished for drafting his students to fight.
 - Yaakov prepares to fight against Esav, and we are told, ויירא יעקב מאד ויצר לו, Yaakov was afraid, and he was troubled. Midrashim² explain: Yaakov was afraid lest he be killed, but he was also disturbed by the possibility of killing others, apparently even in self-defense.
- Fast-forward to Dovid haMelech, who is told that he cannot build the Beit haMikdash because דמים רבים שפכת ארצה לפני Hashem! You have spilled much blood – and Ramban³ says that this blood was spilled in wars ordered by Hashem!
- Or how about Megillat Esther – the Jews didn't want to go to war, even in self-defense! Esther and Mordechai pleaded with Achashverosh to rescind the decree against them, and only when he refused did they resort to battle.⁴
- In this light, it's no wonder that we are prohibited from using iron to shape the stones of the mizbeiach; כי הרבך הונפת עליה, your sword is an unwanted, unrighteous weapon of death.

The WOPR seems to be correct – the only way to win is not to play!

The problem: Zachor

But then we arrive at the mitzvah of remembering Amalek.

Rav Ovadia Hedaya,⁵ Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Petah Tikva and the featured Chief Rabbi in this week's Torat Chayim, pointed out that many mitzvot mandate memory, but they are generally about remembering Hashem's miracles. We remember leaving Mitzrayim miraculously. We remember Hashem's protection in our succot in the midbar. We remember receiving the Torah. We remember Creation. All of these involve remembering miracles Hashem performed for us. Regarding Amalek, I would expect to have to remember how Hashem miraculously saved us in the war – but that's not what the Torah says. Instead, Hashem tells us to remember what Amalek did, their cruel sneak attack on a nation that wasn't even a threat to them.

Why is this “memory mitzvah” different? Why does Hashem want us to remember not His miracle but our enemy?

The Rambam, in his Sefer haMitzvot,⁶ says the point is to ensure that we continue to fight: “So that we will perpetually recount this, stirring our souls verbally, to fight against Amalek. And to energize the nation to hate Amalek, such that the mitzvah will never be forgotten and the enmity will not be weakened and lost from our souls over time.”

Apparently, Hashem desires an ongoing state of war against Amalek. But if the only way to win is not to play, why does Hashem want us to play?

You might argue that Amalek is special; as I'll note in the shiur after minchah this evening, Rav Kook talked about Amalek as a uniquely necessary evil. But beyond Amalek, the Torah still presents war as a mitzvah imperative!

- Hashem says כי תצא למלחמה על אויבך, וכי תבאו מלחמה בארצכם – When you go to war, not if you go to war

¹ Nedarim 32a

² See Rashi Bereishis 32:8, and Sifsei Chachamim there

³ Ramban Bamidbar 16:21

⁴ Esther 8

⁵ Vayikach Ovadyahu II Derush 12

⁶ Sefer haMitzvot, Aseh 189. See, too, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Melachim 5:7.

- In the classic catalog of 613 biblical mitzvot, Sefer haChinuch records four separate mitzvot related to war (394, 525, 526, 527)⁷

So how do we reconcile biblical and rabbinic negativity toward war with the idea that war is a great mitzvah, and a command to remember Amalek so that we will maintain an ongoing enmity?⁸

War as Lechatchilah

Perhaps the anti-war sources are speaking specifically to a negative aspect of war: the need to bludgeon an enemy. That part is horrific. That part is what got Avraham and Shimon and Levi and Dovid in trouble, and it's what Yaakov feared doing. For that, the only way to win is not to play.

But war also means putting our own lives on the line to protect our families and defend our ideals. War means seeing ourselves as part of a community, and recognizing that the part must sacrifice on behalf of the whole. War means selflessness.

- Selflessly, Avraham goes to war not to demonstrate power or gain spoils, but to save his brother-in-law;
- Selflessly, Shimon and Levi went to war to save their sister;
- Selflessly, Dovid haMelech fought the Plishtim to save his nation.
- Or again, look at Megillat Esther. Achashverosh licensed the Jews to take spoils. But the megillah stresses that they took no spoils. They acted only selflessly, to save our nation.⁹

⁷ And not only is war a mitzvah, but our Sages teach that **war is a religious act pursued by righteous figures, specifically:**

- According to a mishnah, the Sanhedrin approves all wars;
- Midrashim describe Shaul's general Doeg, **and** Shlomo's general Benayahu ben Yehoyada, as both warriors and Torah scholars;
- In a mishnah (Sotah 8:5), Rabbi Yosi HaGlili teaches that Jewish soldiers were given the opportunity to retreat from the battlefield if they had any sin on their records, however minor, **leaving an army of soldiers who would be ideal tzaddikim.**

We did not go as far as the Greeks, with Plato's declaration that one **must** engage in military service in order to be a complete person – but we seem to have come pretty close!

⁸ We could argue that war is simply a **בדיעבד**, a necessary evil; other mitzvot are necessary evils, too, like returning stolen goods and punishing criminals in beit din. If we were worthy, Hashem would battle our enemies and we would not need to fight, but we **have not** been worthy and so we **have** needed to fight.

The idea that war is a concession to reality is not new to Judaism; almost two thousand years ago, a gemara (Nedarim 22a) blamed our wars on the Eigel. Rav Ada, son of Rabbi Chanina declared: If we had not created the Golden Calf, Tanach would have been very short – we would have needed only the Chumash, and the book of Yehoshua describing the division of the Land of Israel. As Rav Kook explained (Orot HaMilchamah 4): We would have faced none of the wars and challenges and Divine rebukes which fill the rest of Tanach. Our righteousness would have awed the nations of the land, and we would not have needed to fight.

Indeed, according to the Rambam **these bedieved wars were an undesirable, weak and inferior means** of sanctifying the land of Israel. He wrote in Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Beit haBechirah 6:16 that sanctity which comes about via the sword can also be removed by the sword, and so the kedushah conferred by Yehoshua through battle was actually removed by the Babylonians when they conquered us.

Within this view, the ideal would be for victory to come through Divine intervention. Perhaps this is why our Sages looked for less bloody ways to re-interpret the violent exploits of our greatest leaders.

- Moshe kills an Egyptian who is beating a Jew – but Avot d'Rabbi Natan 1:20 says he did it by invoking the Name of Gd.
- The book of Shoftim says that Kalev marries off his daughter to the shofeit Otniel ben Kenaz, after he **conquers the city of Kiryat Sefer** – but according to the Talmud (Temurah 16a), what Otniel actually did in “Kiryat Sefer” was to **teach hundreds of laws** which had been forgotten upon Moshe's death.

Both of these derashot are based on solid textual analysis, but they also reflect a certain perspective: **War represents a failure of spirituality, and our greatest leaders did not need to resort to fisticuffs.**

In truth, this bedieved view of war may be part of a **broader philosophical view of this world** as a perfect planet shaped by imperfect people:

- **We should receive food** from the heavens or miraculous crops, but because we are imperfect, we need to plow and plant and harvest.
- **We should be healed of disease upon praying to Gd**, but because we are imperfect, we need to rely on painful, expensive and uncertain medicines.
- **And we should be protected from enemies without fighting**, but because we are imperfect, we must go to war.

So the WOPR is indeed correct; the only winning move is not to play – but sometimes you don't have another option. Amalek, and the Canaanites, forced our hand.

⁹ Contrast Esther 8:11 with Esther 9:10 and 9:15-16

The redemptive character of war, that which makes it a mitzvah, and a pursuit for our greatest and most righteous, is found in living beyond ourselves, pursuing neither pleasure nor power, but selfless purpose.

In truth, this approach requires more nuance; not every selfless fight is noble or heroic. The suicide bomber also thinks he is pursuing selfless purpose in the name of country and ideology. We need more discussion of what constitutes a “just war”. But the message I see in the Torah’s mitzvot of war and in the mitzvah of Zachor is about not the glory of finishing our foes, but the glory of risking one’s life for others and for ideals.

Rav Aharon Lichtenstein made this point in an essay¹⁰ describing the mission of Hesder yeshivot which blend Torah study with military service. He wrote:

No less than every Jew, the typical Hesdernik yearns for peace, longs for the day on which he can divest himself of uniform and *uzzi* and devote his energies to Torah... In one sense, therefore, insofar as army service is alien to the ideal Jewish vision, Hesder is grounded in necessity rather than choice...

In another sense, however, it is very much *l'hathillah*, a freely willed option grounded in moral and halakhic decision... We advocate it because we are convinced that, given our circumstances - would that they were better - military service is a *mitsvah*, and a most important one at that.

This is the source of our mitzvot of war – the perpetual war with Amalek, and the other wars we fight, down to Aza in our own day. It’s a bit paradoxical.

- The sword may not cut the stones of the mizbeiach, and Dovid haMelech cannot build the Beit haMikdash, because war is bedeviled; if you can choose, don’t play.
- But war is also lechatchilah, an ennobling living for others, sacrificing years, and possibly one’s life, to serve and save the nation. In that sense it may be the greatest mitzvah we can perform.

Gan Eden

In the beginning, Hashem created a garden, and populated it with many trees. One of those trees was the Eitz haChayim; eat from it and live forever. Another of those trees was the Eitz haDaat, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Chavah and Adam chose the latter, the fruit which gave us good and evil combined, and the result was the blending of good and evil in all of our pursuits, however noble. Chavah was told that bringing a baby into this world would involve not only life, but also pain. Adam was told that bringing food from the earth would involve not only life, but also pain. And protecting our nation, too, involves both life and pain.

May we soon know a day when we will return to the Eitz haChaim, when *לא ישא גוי אל גוי חרב ולא ילמדו עוד מלחמה* – when nation will not raise sword against nation and no longer will they study war, when instead of *מלאה הארץ חמס* a land filled with chamas, we will have *מלאה הארץ דעה את ד' כמים לים מכסים*, a land filled with knowledge of Hashem, as the sea is filled with water.

¹⁰ *The Ideology of Hesder*