

The Complex Battle with the Yetzer Hara

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In Parashat Ki Tetze, Moshe presents us with more mitzvot than in any other parasha. A cursory examination will reveal that these mitzvot share a common theme. They are all mitzvot which come into play within a specific context, one with which the Torah opens its discussion in each case. For example:

- “When you shall go out to war upon your enemies” (Devarim 21:10)
- “When a man shall have two wives” (21:15)
- “When a man shall have a rebellious and wanton son” (21:18)
- “When a man shall have committed a capital crime and be put to death” (21:22).

This pattern accounts for most of the parasha.

If we examine more closely, we will see another common tendency which threads its way through each of the mitzvot discussed. Before telling you what you should do in each case, the Torah first highlights what you might be inclined to have done and tells you not to do that, but rather to do something else.

So, in the case of a man who has a wife he loves and a wife he dislikes, may not give the double-portion of the inheritance to the firstborn son of the wife he loves if he was not born first, even though he would be naturally inclined to want to do so. Rather, he must give it to the one actually born first. (21:15-17)

In other words, the Torah is drawing attention to the fact that one’s own biases and interests may affect their moral judgement and lead them to justify behavior which may sound reasonable, but is actually ethically problematic. The Torah hones in on that tendency, identifies it for us and demands that we fight it.

The type of inclination identified varies from case to case. In the above case, the inclination is to bend the rules in order to favor a particular party and achieve a desired outcome. Elsewhere, the inclination is to fail to take responsibility out of laziness, by ignoring one’s fellow’s animal going astray (22:1). In some cases, the inclination is to be overly harsh to those who have sinned, such as leaving a hanged criminal hanging overnight (21:23). At other times, it is to be overly compassionate, such as by allowing the descendants of the cruel Amonites and Moabites to marry into the fold (23:4-5).

Interestingly, the parasha closes with the obligation not to forget what Amalek did to us. The natural inclination might be to let bygones be bygones and put the past behind us. The Torah tells us that - as natural as it is, and whether we understand it or not - this is not the correct response. Indeed, King Saul later fell into this very trap, feeling compassion for the Amalekite king, Agag; a mistake which ultimately cost him his kingdom.

Essentially, Parashat Ki Tetze is an entire Sefer Mussar (book of self-development) with an important message to reflect on in this month of Elul, as well as all year round.

Fighting one's yetzer hara cannot be achieved by one single approach. With the Torah's guidance we must study the nuances of all our inclinations and learn to calibrate our moral fiber in order to respond in accordance with Hashem's will to every situation we may confront. That is what true righteousness demands.

Shabbat shalom

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