

Arm men from among yourselves for the legion that they be against Midyan that they may inflict Hashem's vengeance against Midyan. (31:3)

When the Jewish army went into battle, it was unlike any other national army. **Horav Mordechai Druk, Shlita**, notes the apparent differences between our army and the armies of the nations of the world. Moshe *Rabbeinu* did not lead the Jewish army in a war of retribution against Midyan because he had benefitted from the land of Midyan years earlier when he escaped Egypt. Clearly, such a moral compass is unlikely to be found in any other nation: a leader to choose not to lead against a sworn enemy because he owes them *hakoras hatov*, a sense of gratitude, is unusual, to say the least.

The *Nesiiim*, Princes, of each tribe did not go to war because one of their own, Zimri, the *Nasi* of Shimon, had been killed by Pinchas. Zimri had blatantly committed an act of immorality, thus incurring the death penalty, which was executed by Pinchas. This was, of course, embarrassing to the other Princes. In order not to cause them undue humiliation, none of them went to war.

Indeed, the soldiers were men of elevated spiritual, moral and ethical standing. *Chazal* teach that the only soldiers who could go out to war were men who would not don the *Shel Rosh*, *Tefillin* of the Head, prior to putting on the *Tefillin Shel Yad*, *Tefillin* of the Hand. Is this such a sin that it would preclude acceptance in Hashem's army? *Rav Druk* explains that, during the reign of David *HaMelech* and Shlomo *HaMelech*, *Klal Yisrael* did not accept *geirim*, converts. Certain individuals, however, secretly converted and wore *Tefillin* and *Tzitzis*, the complete Jewish uniform. When *Chazal* mention that these unsavory converts wore *Tefillin*, they emphasize that they wore *Tefillin* on their head and *Tefillin* on their arms. For some reason, the *Tefillin* of the head precedes the *Tefillin* of the hand. Is this by design?

Rav Druk explains that *Chazal* are alluding to the reason that these converts were unacceptable: They wore *Tefillin* of the *Rosh* before the *Tefillin* of the *Yad*. *Tefillin Shel Rosh* corresponds with a person's thoughts, his mindset and focus in life. *Tefillin Shel Yad* coincides with the person's activities, his actions on behalf of Judaism. The Jewish People accepted the Torah with a resounding declaration, *Naaseh v'Nishma*, "We will do and (then) we will listen." Our actions/commitment comes even before we develop an intellectual appreciation and understanding of the *mitzvos*. The soldiers that represented the Jewish People in our army were individuals who acted out of commitment – not intellect.

Last, twelve thousand soldiers went into battle – one thousand representing each tribe. In addition, another twelve thousand soldiers had the task to *daven*, to entreat Hashem, that their brothers emerge triumphant from battle. These soldiers did not *daven* in *shul*. They went out to the front and created their own makeshift *shul*, *davening* in the shadows of the front-line fighting.

Why was this? Why could they not simply pray for the soldiers' welfare from the comfort of their own *shuls*; their own *batei medrash*? Was it that critical that they *daven* at the front? The answer is that *Kochi v'otzem yadi asah li es ha'chayil ha'zeh*, "My strength and the might of my hand made me all this wealth" (*Devarim* 8:17) is a powerful intoxicant. A person becomes so infected by the disease of arrogance that he begins to believe that the triumphs he has experienced are the result of his own doing. He thinks that he is an able warrior, that his aim is outstanding and, thus, he always hits his mark. He must realize that whatever skills he has been able to enjoy is due to Hashem's blessing – a blessing which is stimulated by sincere prayer. Those who pray, do so at the front, to serve as a steady reminder to the soldiers: If you succeed, it is only because of the power of prayer.

Perhaps we may suggest another reason that it was crucial that those who prayed did so with the specter of the battlefield in their foreground. During World War II, the *talmidim*, students, of the Mirrer *Yeshivah* were miraculously saved from the horrible fate suffered by European Jewry, as six million were murdered by the accursed Nazis. Escaping from Europe, they arrived in Shanghai, the city which would serve as their home for the duration of the war. The physical conditions in Shanghai were brutal. The suffocating humidity and burning heat in Shanghai sapped the strength of the students, exhausting them and wreaking havoc on their immune systems, leaving them open to disease and infection. The *bais hamedrash* which was their home for most of the war was even more stifling, with temperatures climbing over 100 degrees.

Yet, **Horav Yechezkel Levenstein, zl**, the legendary *Mashgiach*, encouraged the students to dress as expected of a *ben Torah*, student of Torah – with suit jacket and tie. During the *Aseres Yemei Teshuvah*, Ten Days of Repentance from *Rosh Hashanah* through *Yom Kippur*, the weather had become impossible. The humid air was thick and almost unbreathable. In addition, the city was disease-ridden, with infection and death manifesting everywhere. That *Yom Kippur*, the *talmidim* simply could not dress as expected. It was oppressive – simply too much for a human being to endure – and to fast all day and *daven* with *kavanah*, proper devotion, no less. The *Mashgiach*, however, seemed to be in a different world, standing on his feet, deeply ensconced in prayer, while wrapped in his heavy wool *kapata*, long jacket. He allowed nothing – the fast, the heat, the absolute physical torture – to deter him from serving the Almighty in his usual manner.

It was nothing unusual for *Rav Chatzkel*. Serving Hashem represented extreme devotion. Anything less would not suffice. What, however, about the students? It takes years of unimpeded service on a level of extreme spirituality to achieve such a level of devotion, such a transcendent relationship with the Almighty, that one senses nothing else but G-d. To them, he shared another reasoning – one that is practical – even compelling. The greater the *mesiras nefesh*, self-sacrifice and dedication, of those in Shanghai, the greater the merit created for their brethren suffering untold misery, persecution and death in Europe. It was hot in Shanghai. It was much hotter in Auschwitz!

The *Mashgiach* spoke to the students, emphasizing the need to identify with the plight of others: "We need to visualize clearly the horrifying suffering that now consumes the world and, in

particular, the suffering of our brothers and sisters. We must visualize their suffering as if we are personally witnessing their suffering: we are hearing their cries; witnessing their bitterness; feeling their agonizing hunger, the freezing cold, their torture, and the savage acts done to them. We need to hear the death cries that pour out from the hearts of our people in Poland, Russia and Lithuania – the thousands and thousands of weak and suffering that we have left behind.”

The idea expressed above sums up why the twelve thousand soldiers whose function it was to pray for the success of their brothers in battle should do so at the front, in the heat of the battle. If one does not visualize, he cannot properly empathize; thus, he will not pray with the same fervor. It is hard to feel the heat of battle in an air conditioned *bais medrash*.