

"And the officers shall speak unto the people saying what man (is there) that has built a new house and has not dedicated it yet... and what man (is there) that has planted a vineyard and has not used the fruit thereof... and what man (is there) who has betrothed a lady and has not taken her.... what man (is there) that is fearful and fainthearted let him go and return to his house." (20:5,6,7,8)

In these *pasukim*, the *Torah* describes *Klal Yisrael's* procedure for entering into a *milchemes reshut*, voluntary war, a war for which the king needed the authorization of the *Sanhedrin*. We note here an interesting set of laws that were implemented as the men prepared to go into battle. The *Kohen Mashuach Milchamah*, specially anointed for war, would address the assemblage of would-be soldiers and exhort them regarding the cruelties and dangers they could expect to face. Three groups of people were encouraged to leave, lest their concern regarding affairs unfinished at home pre-disposed them to be excluded from active participation in battle. They were: he who had built a new house and had not yet dedicated it; he who had planted a new vineyard and had not yet partaken of its fruit; and he who had betrothed a lady and had not yet taken her. One additional type/group of potential soldiers who was excluded from war: the fearful and fainthearted.

The *Torah's* exceptions from battle seem puzzling. It is easy to justify sending home the fainthearted. Fear is contagious. It can destroy a complete army when the unknowing instinctively follow the unnerved. Indeed, unseen terror can be worse than the real enemy. Why send home the other three groups? Why does planting a new vineyard, building a new house or betrothing a wife, exempt one from battle? What kind of adverse influence will these three individuals have upon the other soldiers?

Chazal give us a poignant answer, one that truly describes the essence of *Torah* life. The Almighty is concerned with the dignity of each human being. Therefore, when the "fearful and fainthearted" leave the battle field, people might say, "Perhaps he built a new house, planted a vineyard or betrothed a wife." Imagine, the *Torah* is willing to lose three good soldiers, so that the fourth would not suffer from disgrace on his way home from the battlefield. This is the *Torah's* idea of a cover-up!

Let us advance this idea. Who really is this fearful soldier? *Chazal* explain that "fearful" and "fainthearted" doesn't define their attitude towards battle, but rather to their personal spiritual failings. This person is actually fearful of the sins which he has committed. This private knowledge of sin despairs him so that he fears its punitive effect on him during moments of danger. Such a person is unsure of Divine protection. He is insecure because he has sinned, and he questions whether he deserves to be protected from scorn and disdain. How fortunate are we to have a code

of life, a *Torah*, whose laws address every aspect of human concern.

No one realizes the pain caused by shame and insult until they are on the receiving end. Numerous stories concerning our *Torah* leaders demonstrate their overriding sensitivity for the feelings of every human being. One such story which comes to mind occurred when *Rav Yisrael Salanter z.l.* spent a *Shabbos* in a small town. A prominent householder rushed to invite the distinguished *Rav* to be his guest. When they returned home from *shul*, the householder noticed that the two *challos* on the table were uncovered. The two *challos* must be covered until after *kiddush* and *ha'motzi*. In the flurry of the pre-*Shabbos* preparations and the presence of their eminent guest, however, the man's wife forgot this detail.

Thinking that this oversight might impugn *Rav Yisrael's* opinion of him, the man of the house flew into a rage and berated his poor wife for her "disgraceful" act. The wife immediately apologized for her forgetfulness and proceeded to cover the *challos* with a beautifully embroidered cover. Nonetheless, the harm had been done; the husband had mercilessly shamed his wife in front of the great *gadol*, *Torah* giant.

Immediately following the meal, *Rav Yisrael* called his host aside and asked him, "What is the reason for covering the *challos* until after *kiddush*?" The host, demonstrating his erudition, immediately responded, "Oh that's simple. It is permissible to recite *kiddush* upon either the wine or on the *challos*. Since we choose to defer the *challos* to the wine, it would seem that we are "slighting" the *challos*. We, therefore, cover them not to put them to "shame."

Rav Yisrael thereupon looked gently into his host's eyes and said, "Do you realize what you are saying? The *Torah* is concerned for the theoretical feeling of two pieces of baked dough, yet you forgot the feelings of your wonderful wife, who made a simple error! If Hashem concerns Himself with the "feelings" of inanimate objects, it would serve you well to think of those who suffer pain and hurt when embarrassed."

This message sensitizes us to our routine interaction with people. How often do we, in pursuit of a *mitzvah*, "knock down" those who stand in the way? Our mission is to serve Hashem and raise ourselves higher, but not by stepping on others.