

Parashat Ki Teitzei: When You Go Out

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War, Boundaries, Memory, and the Refining of the Soul in the Month of Elul

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In the unfolding of Sefer Devarim, as Moshe Rabbeinu stands on the plains of Moav and prepares the people for life in the Land, the Torah moves from the grand structures of national governance and judicial order into the dense fabric of daily existence. Parashat Ki Teitzei opens with the words “Ki teitzei lamilchamah al oyvecha” — “When you go out to war against your enemies” — and proceeds to set forth more commandments than any other single portion in the Torah. The classical count reaches seventy-four mitzvot. This density is not accidental. It is a deliberate concentration of directives that touch the most intimate spheres of human life: the battlefield and the bedroom, the inheritance and the lost object, the rooftop and the nest of a bird, the worker’s wage and the memory of Amalek.

We stand now in the month of Elul. The shofar has already begun to sound each morning. The air itself carries a different weight. In this season the external command to go out to war is heard with particular clarity as an internal summons. The soul that has been immersed in the routines of the year is called to step outside its accustomed fortifications and confront the enemies that have taken up residence within. The parsha becomes, in the language of the Chassidic masters, a battle plan for the month of preparation that leads into the Days of Awe.

The Opening: War and the Beautiful Captive

The portion begins not with an obligatory war of commandment but with a voluntary war, a milchemet reshut. Rashi, drawing on the Sifrei and the Midrash, immediately signals that the Torah is speaking here to the reality of the yetzer hara. The soldier sees among the captives a woman of beautiful form and desires her. The Torah does not pretend that such desire does not arise. Instead it legislates a process: he must bring her into his house, she must shave her head, let her nails grow, remove the garments of captivity, and sit and weep for her father and mother a full month. Only then may he take her.

The process is deliberately cooling. Passion, left unchecked, burns hot and consumes. Given time, space, and the visible signs of mourning and ordinariness, the desire often fades. The Torah knows the human heart. It does not demand an instantaneous perfection that the heart cannot yet sustain; it creates a corridor of delay in which the higher self may reassert itself. Should the man still choose to marry her after the month, the relationship is permitted, yet the Torah already anticipates the next stage: if he comes to hate her, he must free her and may not sell her. And should a firstborn son be born to her, that son retains the rights of the firstborn even if the father prefers the son of a beloved wife. The sequence is stark. Rashi notes the progression: the Torah places the law of the captive woman, the law of the two wives, and the law of the rebellious son one after another because one leads to the next. Desire unconstrained, even when initially regulated, can generate domestic discord and, ultimately, a child who becomes a ben sorer u’moreh.

In the Chassidic reading the entire episode is transposed inward. The “enemy” is the animal soul or the yetzer. The “beautiful captive” is the attractive form of material pleasure or of a particular negative trait that has been taken captive in the course of one’s inner struggle. One is permitted to engage it, but only after a process of stripping away its external allure, allowing the mourning of what must be relinquished, and subjecting the impulse to the discipline of time. The month of weeping that the captive must observe is itself linked by some masters to the month of Elul — a full month of honest confrontation before the higher relationship is sealed.

Family as the Foundational Unit

From the battlefield the Torah turns at once to the household. The rights of the firstborn cannot be transferred according to the father’s emotional preference. Biological primacy is protected. Then comes the law of the wayward and rebellious son — the ben sorer u’moreh. The requirements are exacting: he must be of a specific age, he must steal from his parents and consume meat and wine in a particular manner, both parents must bring him to the court, and the court must find him guilty. The Talmud in Sanhedrin records the view that such a case never occurred and never will occur, or that it occurred only once. The law is written “al shem sofo” — for the sake of his end. The Torah teaches the gravity of early patterns of gluttony, theft, and defiance that, left unchecked, lead to bloodshed. It also teaches the limits of parental authority. Parents cannot simply declare a child rebellious and dispose of him; the matter must pass through the court. The ideal remains chinuch — the patient, firm formation of character long before the threshold of the rebellious son is reached.

These laws sit within a larger cluster concerned with the integrity of the family and the purity of the camp. The Torah regulates accusations against a bride, the penalties for adultery and rape, the prohibition of certain marriages, and the requirement of purity in the military camp because the Divine Presence dwells among the people. The household is not a private enclave sealed off from the public realm. What happens within the home shapes the moral atmosphere of the entire community. In Elul this teaching carries special force. The work of teshuva is never solely individual. It is the repair of relationships, the restoration of honesty between spouses, the careful education of children, the willingness to examine whether the home has become a place of genuine kedushah or a place where smaller compromises have accumulated.

Responsibility for the Vulnerable and the Ordinary

After the intensity of family law the parsha turns to a series of mitzvot that appear almost prosaic yet are foundational to a just society. One must not leave the body of an executed criminal hanging overnight; the dignity of the divine image remains even in the one who has forfeited his life. One must return a lost object when identifying marks are present and the owner can be located. One must not hide from a fellow’s animal that has collapsed under its burden; one must help unload and reload. One must send away the mother bird before taking the young or the eggs. One must build a parapet around a flat roof so that blood-guilt does not fall upon the house. One must not sow kilayim, plow with mixed animals, or wear shaatnez. One must wear tzitzit.

Each of these commands trains the eye and the hand in a particular discipline of attention. The lost object is not “finders keepers.” The collapsed animal is not “someone else’s problem.” The mother bird is not merely a source of eggs; her maternal bond is to be honored. The roof is not

merely private property; it is a place from which another might fall. Mixtures are not to be blurred because the Torah insists on clear boundaries in the created order. Tzitzit are a constant visual reminder that one lives under commandment.

The mitzvah of shiluach haken is singled out by the Torah itself with the promise of length of days. Rashi notes that if so light a mitzvah carries such reward, how much more the weightier ones. Yet the deeper teaching is the cultivation of compassion even toward the animal world, and the recognition that small acts of restraint shape the soul. In the Chassidic literature these mitzvot become training for the larger war. The person who trains himself to notice the fallen animal and the lost object is a person who trains himself to notice the subtle movements of the yetzer and the small opportunities for kindness that Elul multiplies.

Economic Integrity and the Protection of the Weak

The latter half of the parsha contains a dense set of laws governing economic relations. Wages must not be delayed overnight when the worker depends upon them. Interest may not be taken from a fellow Jew. Collateral taken for a loan must be returned at nightfall if it is a garment needed for sleep, and one may not enter the borrower's house to seize it. A newly married man is free from military service for a year so that he may bring joy to his wife. Honest weights and measures are required. The escaped slave is not to be returned to his master. These are not peripheral regulations. They form the practical expression of a covenantal society in which the vulnerable are protected by law rather than left to the mercy of the powerful.

In Elul the economic mitzvot take on the character of cheshbon hanefesh. Have wages been paid promptly? Have loans been handled with integrity? Has the dignity of the worker and the borrower been preserved? The Torah does not allow the spiritual life to float free of material dealings. The same God who commands the blotting out of Amalek commands the timely payment of a day laborer's wage.

The Closing Command: Remember Amalek

The portion ends with the mitzvah to remember what Amalek did to Israel on the way, when they attacked the weak and the stragglers, and with the command to blot out the memory of Amalek from under the heavens. The juxtaposition is deliberate. After seventy-three mitzvot that refine the inner and outer life, the Torah returns to the archetype of the enemy that attacks when the people are weary and that seeks to cool the enthusiasm of covenant.

Amalek is not merely a historical nation. In the inner reading it is the force of doubt, the cold calculation that asks "Is God in our midst or not?" It is the voice that rises precisely when one is tired, when the journey is long, when the stragglers fall behind. In the month of Elul this voice is particularly insidious. The work of teshuva can itself become a source of discouragement if one begins to measure one's progress by the standards of perfection rather than by the standard of honest effort. The command to remember and to blot out is therefore both historical and immediate. One remembers the external enemy so that one never becomes complacent. One blots out the internal Amalek that seeks to freeze the heart in cynicism or despair.

The Chassidic masters emphasize that the war against Amalek is never finished in this world. It is a continuous labor of vigilance. Yet the same parsha that commands the blotting out also fills the days with seventy-four concrete acts through which the soul is strengthened. One does not

defeat Amalek by abstract declaration alone. One defeats it by returning the lost object, by paying the wage on time, by building the fence, by sending away the mother bird, by guarding the purity of the home, and by refusing to allow desire to dictate the terms of the relationship.

The Larger Movement of the Soul

Taken as a whole, Ki Teitzei maps the movement of the soul that has “gone out.” The soul leaves the relative security of prior spiritual attainment and enters the field of engagement with the world and with its own lower nature. In that engagement it is permitted certain concessions so that it does not break under the pressure of desire, yet those concessions are carefully bounded. It is required to protect the dignity of the body even of the condemned, to notice the lost and the fallen, to maintain clear boundaries, to honor the family structure, to deal justly in economic matters, and finally to keep alive the memory of the enemy that seeks to erase memory itself.

In the calendar of the year this portion falls in Elul. The timing is itself Torah. The month whose letters form the acronym of “Ani le-dodi ve-dodi li” is also the month in which the Torah places the densest concentration of practical mitzvot and the explicit command to remember Amalek. The path of return is not a flight from the world into pure spirituality. It is a disciplined going out into the full range of human responsibility, armed with the detailed instructions that turn ordinary life into a field of refinement.

The Pittsburgh steel that forges under pressure and the Jerusalem light that illuminates the ancient walls meet in this teaching. Strength is not the absence of struggle; it is the willingness to enter the struggle with clear boundaries, with compassion for the vulnerable, with honesty about desire, and with an unrelenting memory of what must never be allowed to cool the heart. The parsha does not promise that the war will be easy. It promises that the one who goes out according to these statutes will find that the enemies — external and internal — are delivered into his hand, and that the work of refining the world and the self is itself the preparation for the great return of the Days of Awe.

May the study and the living of these words strengthen us in the remaining days of Elul, so that when we stand before the King we stand as those who have already begun the battle, who have already practiced the small fidelities, and who carry within them the memory that refuses to be erased.

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