

**The Most Difficult War of All**  
**Ki Tetzei**  
**Shmuel Herzfeld, 5781**

*Ki tetzei lamilchama al oivecha*, when one goes into battle against one's enemies (21:10).

On a literal level this verse refers to a person going into a physical war against an external enemy. The Chofetz Chayim, however, argues that we should understand this verse metaphorically as an internal struggle against our temptation to sin. He writes that the most difficult war of all is the war within ourselves as we battle our misguided urges and sinful temptations.

A story is told about Rabbi Yisrael Yaakov Kanievsky, also known as the "Steipler." When he was in his youth, he was sent off to a labor camp in Siberia. The conditions in the camp were brutal. Temperatures were frigid. The cruel guards especially enjoyed torturing the Jewish prisoners. Despite the difficult conditions, the Steipler, was able to meticulously observe the Shabbat.

One Friday afternoon, right at the outset of Shabbat, it was especially cold, when a wicked guard decided to torture the Steipler. The guard menacingly shouted out: "Hey, Jew, remove your coat!" When the Steipler took off his coat, the guard taunted him and threw his coat as far away as he could throw it. The coat landed on a high tree branch. The guard laughed at the Steipler and told him to have fun getting his coat down from the tree. Aside from the difficulty of having to climb the tree in freezing conditions, the Steipler had another problem. Shabbat had just begun and it is forbidden to climb a tree on Shabbat. The Steipler said to himself let me just wait five minutes before climbing the tree. In five minutes, my life will be in danger from the cold and I will be permitted by halakha to climb the tree. Once five minutes had passed, the Steipler said to himself let me try waiting another five minutes, and then another, and another. In this manner the Steipler was able to use his incredible willpower to withstand the cold temperature for the entire Shabbat (*Vekarata Leshabbat Oneg*, volume 1, 298).

By harnessing and mastering his willpower and self-discipline, the Steipler went on to become the greatest Torah scholar of his generation.

The use of willpower to increase our spirituality is a fundamental goal of a religious person. It is a theme of our portion and also, in the days leading up to Rosh Hashanah, a theme of the month of Elul. In order to reach our spiritual potential in Elul, we need to dominate our *yetzer harah* by improving our willpower. To be sure, this is an impossibility. But we always need to be striving to do better in this area.

One example of this is the Talmud's explanation of a verse from Ki Tetzei.

The verse states: "You shall not see your brother's donkey or ox fallen down by the road and hide yourself from them, you shall surely help them to lift them up again" (22:4).

This verse requires us to help someone in the loading (*te'inah*) and unloading (*perikah*) of a burden on an animal—or actually any load that a person is carrying (*Choshen Mishpat*, 272:1; *Sefer Hachinuch*, 540-1). According to the Talmud, the basic law is that if there are two people in front of you and one of them is loading an animal, while the other is unloading the animal, then one must first help the person who is unloading the animal, so as to ease the burden on the animal and therefore not violate the biblical prohibition of causing pain to an animal (*tza'ar baalei chayim*; *Bava Metzia*, 32b). There is, however, an exception to this principle:

*If one encounters a friend whose animal collapsed and it is necessary to unload its burden, and one also encounters an enemy who needs assistance to load a burden onto his animal, the mitzva is to assist the enemy, in order to subjugate one's evil inclination. The Gemara reasons: And if it enters your mind that the requirement to prevent suffering to animals is by Torah law, that option, to unload his friend's animal, is the preferable course of action for him. The Gemara answers: Even if the requirement to prevent suffering to animals is by Torah law, even so, loading his enemy's animal in order to subjugate his evil inclination is preferable (Bava Metzia, 33a).*

This is a very difficult law for us to understand. We must help an enemy even before we help our own friend even at the expense of causing pain to an animal. Although causing pain to animals is a severe biblical prohibition, in this instance it is not our priority in order for us to learn the lesson of subjugating our evil inclination. This vital religious skill of defeating the *yetzer harah* is desperately needed because otherwise our lives will be completely out of control.

The inability to control our *yetzer harah* via discipline and willpower will lead to horrific consequences. The Torah portions begins with the example of one who forcibly abducts in battle a woman from the enemy (*eshet yefat toar*). Afterwards, the Torah moves on to the case of one who has two children—a hated child and a beloved child. After that the Torah moves on to the case of a rebellious child (*ben sorrer umoreh*).

Rashi explains that the three passages are written together because one situation follows from the other:

*If he does marry her, in the end he will hate her, for Scripture writes immediately afterwards, (v. 15) "If a man has two wives, one beloved, and another hated, etc." and ultimately he will beget a refractory and rebellious son by her (v. 18). It is for this reason that these sections are put in juxtaposition (21:11).*

The reason why the father has ended up with this rebellious child in this instance is primarily because he was unable to control his willpower and practice discipline. For, while technically, the Torah does allow the man to abduct this captive woman, it is only because the Torah recognizes that he is unable to control his willpower.

*The Sages taught: With regard to a beautiful captive, the verse states: “And sees among the captives,” teaching that this halakha applies only if he notices her when she is a captive. The expression “a woman” teaches that she is permitted even if she is a married woman. The phrase “a beautiful woman” indicates that the Torah here **spoke only in response to the evil inclination**, as it is due to her beauty that he desired her. And why does the Torah permit this? It is preferable for Jews to eat the meat of dying animals that were slaughtered, and let them not eat the meat of dying animals that were not slaughtered but which will become carcasses. In other words, it is preferable for this act to be performed in a somewhat permitted way rather than in a manner that is entirely prohibited (Kiddushin 21b--22a).*

When the Torah allows the captive woman to be taken in battle, it is because the Torah is speaking “**only in response to the evil inclination.**” If the Torah would not permit it then, otherwise, the Torah fears that the soldier will anyways kidnap and assault her. The Torah recognizes that this soldier will be unable to conquer his basest drives and therefore attempts to limit the brutality of the soldier by placing limitations on the manner in which he behaves with her. Says the Torah: “you shall bring her into your house, and she shall trim her hair, pare her nails, and discard her captive’s garb. She shall spend a month’s time in your house lamenting her father and mother; after that you may come to her and possess her, and she shall be your wife” (12-13). Nevertheless, although it is ultimately permitted for the soldier to act in this manner, the consequences of his inability to control himself are disastrous. The Torah warns that he will bring generational ruin upon himself and his family if he proceeds down this course.

Chasidic commentators are very much troubled by this literal explanation of the commandment. How can it be that our Torah—under any circumstances—will allow for the kidnap and assault of a captured woman? It is antithetical to the very essence of the Torah to act in this manner and allow a man to kidnap and marry a woman.

Therefore, the whole commandment must be understood metaphorically as a struggle with our *yetzer harah*:

*The verse here is referring to the constant struggle that exists between man and his eternal enemy – the yetzer harah. Indeed, our sages taught: ‘A man’s evil inclination challenges him every single day and were it not for the help of the Holy One, man would not be able to defeat this inclination’ (Kiddushin, 30a). This implies that by natural means it is extremely difficult for a person to conquer the yetzer. This reality will strongly discourage a person from even trying to fight against the yetzer. Therefore the Torah says, ‘when you go out to battle against your enemies,’ -- if you begin to wage the battle then you can be certain that Hashem will help you. ‘And Hashem will place the enemy in your hands,’ – from the heavens you will receive help to be victorious” (Torat Moshe).*

In a similar manner, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, understands each of the actions that the Torah requires to be taken upon the captive woman to actually be actions that we must do upon ourselves in order to grow spiritually specifically in the month of Elul:

*The captive woman—being one of the enemy captives—allegorically signifies the aspect of our consciousness that had been trapped in worldly materiality.*

*She must shave her head: The excess hair that we must shave off the head allegorically signifies the residual life-force of the intellect, the unnecessary intellectual indulgences in the culture of decadence and vanity.*

*And let her nails grow: Just as shaving the head signifies eliminating excess intellectual indulgences in materialistic culture, trimming the fingernails signifies eliminating superfluous emotional indulgences in the same—since action, represented by the hands, is the expression of the emotions.*

*She must take off the garments of her captivity: The soul's garments are its powers of expression—thought, speech, and action. Once we have trimmed ourselves of excess intellectual and emotional indulgences in materialistic culture, we must then divest ourselves of the habits of thinking, talking, and acting engendered by immersion in that culture.*

*She must weep for her father and mother for a full month: **This refers to the month of Elul, during which we prepare to renew our relationship with God on the High Holidays** (The Chumash, Based on the Works of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, 1184).*

The month of Elul is an opportunity to challenge ourselves to reach greater heights—to defeat our yetzer and refine our willpower and self-discipline. In this respect, each of us should take upon ourselves a spiritual challenge in this holy month in order reach our spiritual potential.

Looking back on this past year, I know that if we challenge ourselves to reach new goals and heights, that we can do it. Approximately 8 months ago I started jogging for the first time in my life. At first, I was unable to run even two blocks without stopping. Now with the help of dear friends, I am training for a marathon and I am able to run more than 6 miles. Last week our family spent some time in the Smokey Mountains. We were staying on top of a very tall mountain. I challenged myself to run up the mountain. It was a very steep mountain and I didn't think I could do it, but a friend told me the key to running up mountains is to just look down at your feet and not up at the mountain. And so by looking at my feet and not the mountain, I pushed myself and was able to do it.

This Elul we should all challenge ourselves to run up a spiritual mountain. Let's all set spiritual goals for ourselves and challenge ourselves to attain these goals in the year 5782!

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<https://youtu.be/3S4u9rL5aUw>