

Taking the Initiative: Reflections on Ariel Sharon

Parashat Bo

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In today's parashah, we read of the increasingly tense standoff between Pharaoh and Moses. Last week, and again this week, we read about plague after plague, as the struggle continues. And yet we know that this conflict will eventually come to an end, with the Israelites victorious as they depart Egypt defiantly, *b'yad ramah*.

The Israelites will defeat their foes in a manner that is almost impossible to conceive of today: without lifting a finger to defend themselves; in fact, without at all fighting their enemies. They'll be free because God is on their side.

Throughout the Exodus story, the use of physical force by humans is disparaged. We do have that story of the Egyptian taskmaster beating the Israelite. Moses intervenes, but is then not fully appreciated, and is even condemned the next day.

The bottom line is that the entire people is rescued in a cosmic, mythic, epic scene that is far different from the battlefields of modern warfare.

For generations, this model worked very well.

For two thousand years, in fact.

But although the story inspired liberation struggles all over the world among the powerless against the powerful, although the story bought hope to millions, it had nothing to offer those who were actively fighting for their freedom. It was of limited value to those actually fighting for their freedom. In fact, it was ultimately rejected by those who believed that it was necessary to **fight**, and not only to **pray**, for freedom.

Over the past few days, a lot of attention has been focused on the Tel HaShomer Hospital near Tel Aviv where Ariel Sharon, the former Prime Minister of Israel, lies in a coma, his condition deteriorating by the minute. [Note: On January 11,



2014, one week after this sermon was delivered, Prime Minister Sharon passed away.] Why is so much attention focused on him? Understandably, young people can't fathom it. After all, ever since they were five years old, he's been in a coma!

In many respects, Ariel Sharon's life reflects a rejection of the "Hope in the Lord" mentality of the Exodus story.

In **many** respects, but not entirely. He identified with the very first phrase of today's parashah: *bo el par'oh*; "Go to Pharaoh." Confront your enemy: on his turf.

If there's one operational principle of the I.D.F (Israel Defense Forces) that's identified with Ariel Sharon, it's that one: Take the initiative, and confront your enemy. Israel is a very small country. If its strategy were always to wait to be attacked and then to respond, it would long since have disappeared.

Born in 1928, Ariel Sharon took up arms at a very young age, and he almost never put them down.

He was a warrior, through and through, from his youth until his old age.

A controversial warrior, to be sure.

He was aggressive – but also insubordinate.

He was bold -- but also some would say foolhardy.

Yet, like Joseph in the Bible, he was an *ish matsliach* – he was successful.

He fought before and during the War of Independence in 1948.

He fought in the '50's, commanding the so-called Unit 101, which initiated retaliatory raids in Jordan in response to Palestinian Fedayeen attacks. He commanded the group that was responsible for the Qibya Massacre, which remains a stain on the IDF to this day. (See the essay on Qibya by Yeshayahu Leibowitz.)

He fought in the Sinai during the 1956 war – and controversially sparked a battle at the Mitla Pass (in which 38 Israeli soldiers were killed) for which he was reprimanded.

He fought in 1967 in the Sinai, and became Head of the Southern Front from 1969-1973.

He returned to the Sinai after the disastrous first few days of the 1973 Yom Kippur War, eventually leading a brilliant counterattack, surrounding Egypt's Third Army and forcing it to surrender.

He became Menachem Begin's right hand man, and engineered and prosecuted the Lebanese War in 1982. Ostensibly fought in response for the attack on Shlomo Argov, Israel's ambassador to England, the army was supposed to advance only up to the Litani River. But before too long, they were firmly ensconced in the suburbs of Beirut. In the midst of that war, Sharon's forces surrounded Beirut, and Phalangists were permitted to enter the Sabra and Shatilla refugee camps and murder many, many Palestinian civilians.

The Kahan Commission found Sharon indirectly responsible, and urged him to resign.

He resisted, and might have remained Minister of Defense, but then something tragic occurred: Emil Grunzweig, a Peace Now activist, was killed when someone threw a grenade into a Peace Now rally that was breaking up. In the aftermath of that tragedy, Sharon resigned as Defense Minister – but was permitted to remain in the cabinet.

In the late 1980s and 1990s, Sharon continued to be influential. He served in several Israeli governments, orchestrating the expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank.

In September 2000, he visited the Temple Mount, sparking a riot. Some say that the second intifada, that began the next day, had been planned well in advance, but in any event, it meant that his provocative gesture would always be associated with that conflict.

As Prime Minister, he came to the conclusion that it made sense for Israel to withdraw from the Gaza Strip. This was popular with the Israeli public, though not with his own party. In my estimation, and in that of many others, only Sharon could have pulled this off: he evacuated 9,500 settlers, forcing them to relocate within Israel proper.

During the evacuation, a rabbi put a curse on him. Sure enough, seemingly in response to that magical spell, at the end of the year Sharon suffered a series of strokes, and has been in a persistent vegetative state since then.

The story of the exodus suggests that Right makes Might.

Living in the real world, one comes to a different conclusion.

The question, though, is whether you can have both: Whether an army can be as devoted to decency and humanity, as it is to defeating the enemy; whether it can be as dedicated to maintaining its humanity, even in combat, as it pursues victory.

Certainly that is what's expected of the soldiers and officers of the IDF. As we'll be studying in my iEngage Israel course beginning this month, that's the real challenge: to pursue might while not abandoning one's values.

Shabbat Shalom.