

for “Torah at 10” — 13 August 2021

Around the Shabbat Table

A Guide to Fulfilling and Meaningful Shabbat Table Conversations

Aryeh Ben David

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Note: The author divides each weekly *parsha* into three independent sections, one for each of the three *Shabbat* meals.

1. The first *Shabbat* meal (Friday night) focuses on a central theme stemming from the week’s *parsha*.
2. The second *Shabbat* meal (Saturday lunch) discusses a human quality or an aspect of interpersonal behavior that emerges from the *parsha*.
3. The third *Shabbat* meal (*Seuda Shlishit*) retells an anecdote—historical or fiction—related to an event in the *parsha*.

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Shoftim

FRIDAY NIGHT MEAL: Going to War

One of the painful but inevitable realities of becoming an independent people in its own land is the specter of war.

Is there a Jewish approach to War? What should transpire in the mind of the Jewish soldier during combat?

This week’s *parsha* states that:

When you go out to battle against your enemies, and see horses, and chariots, and a people more numerous than yourselves, do not be afraid of them, for the Lord your G-d is with you and brought you out of Egypt. And when you are close to battle, the priest [*kohen*] will approach and speak to the people, saying to them, “Hear, Israel, as you draw near today to do battle against your enemies, do not let your hearts melt, fear not, and do not tremble, nor be terrified because of them, for the Lord your G-d goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you.” [*Devarim* 20:1-4]

This whole section is quite baffling. While one might have expected a “pep-talk” moments before battle, the opposite seems to have occurred. Again and again the powers and resources of the enemy are mentioned; their horses, chariots, and numbers are stressed; while the Jewish army is repeatedly admonished not to fear or tremble. Moses reminds them of a moment in history with which they are surely already familiar—the leaving of Egypt. How are they expected to overcome their fear and panic? Furthermore, when they are close to battle, the priest, rather than the leader of the army, gives them their final words of encouragement. How is this supposed to prepare the soldiers for their battle?

It may be virtually impossible to psychologically prepare soldiers for the actual moment of combat. Nevertheless, the *Torah* does not deny the preeminent emotion that every soldier feels moments before entering battle—the flash of fear. Rather than negate this emotion, the *Torah* directly acknowledges its existence. A soldier who does not recognize his fear beforehand is more likely to either flee in panic or overcompensate and become savagely barbaric once the fighting commences.

Yet how is it possible to overcome these emotions of fear and doubt? Reminding the Jewish people of the leaving of Egypt seems, at first glance, facile and irrelevant. Every schoolchild knows about the story of Passover. Why is the Jewish army being given a history lesson precisely at this moment?

The path to overcoming personal anxieties is through transcending one's own identity, through subsuming one's individuality into that of the larger collective destiny. The leaving of Egypt, Passover, marked the birth of the Jewish people. Moses and the *kohen* are not giving the Jewish army a history lesson at this moment. They are conveying to them that all of Jewish history is now dependent on their efforts. All the struggles and sacrifices that countless Jews have made will have been for naught if the Jewish people are now overcome. The Jewish army is not fighting for themselves alone. If they fail, if the Jewish people are defeated, then all those who preceded them have also been defeated.

First, the personal fear of the individual Jew is acknowledged, hopefully precluding reactions of hysteria or savagery. Then, the people are reminded that they are not fighting for themselves, or even for their current generation; rather all of Jewish history and survival is now dependent upon the outcome of this conflict. This reminder should help the soldiers transcend their personal concerns and inspire them to fight a moral and determined battle.

Around the Shabbat Table

1. This week's *parsha* lists four categories of soldiers who are exempt from military service in a war that is not for self-defense:

1. A man who built a new house and has not yet lived in it;
2. A man who planted a vineyard and not yet eaten of it;
3. A man who has betrothed a wife and not yet married her; and
4. A man who is fainthearted.

What may be some of the reasons for the first three categories of exemption? Who do you think should be included in the fourth category?

2. During a war of self-defense, every available person is enlisted to fight. The *mishnah* (*Sotah* 8:7) expresses this idea by saying that “even a bride and groom must leave their wedding” to go to war. Why do you think the rabbis chose this example in particular?

3. What issues or circumstances would you be willing to fight for?

SHABBAT LUNCH: Escorting Guests

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Seudah Shlishit: The Tragic Battle of Latrun

This week's *parsha* describes the preparations of the Jewish army just prior to going to battle. In the brief history of the state of Israel, there have been many successful and heroic military campaigns. Regretfully, there have also been tragic failures and losses. Perhaps the most tragic battle waged in recent history was in the War of Independence, when a force composed primarily of Holocaust survivors attempted to protect Jerusalem by conquering the fortress of Latrun, west of the Holy City. Portions of the battle are recounted [note: paraphrased below, found] in *O Jerusalem*, by Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre [© 1972, Simon and Shuster, New York, NY]:

The situation in Jerusalem was so alarming that a disaster was inevitable if some way was not found to get help to the city. Ben-Gurion was determined to find a way. "At last we had a state," he would later write, "but we were about to lose our capital." A search for recruits began.

They arrived on the S.S. *Kalanit*. Carrying over 2,000 survivors of the ravages of Europe, there were uniformly thin blue-eyed Poles, Hungarians, Rumanians, Czechs, Yugoslavs, and Russians. Their faces revealed painful pasts.

When the fixture officer of the battle of Latrun pleaded with Ben-Gurion to delay their recruitment, Ben-Gurion replied, "You can't judge, you don't know how serious the situation is. We need them all."

The men would spend barely seventy-two hours on the soil of the land they had dreamed of before being enlisted for the battle of Latrun.

The battle of Latrun began at four in the morning of Tuesday, May 25.

A pale sun climbing into a leaden sky overhead heralded the arrival of still another enemy, the cruelest the Jewish soldiers would face that morning. It was the hot, burning wind rolling up from the depths of the Arabian Desert to wrap Palestine in a mantle of fire.

Studying the battlefield, Shlomo Shamir (the commanding officer) realized that his first battle as an Israeli officer was lost before it had really begun. His forces were much too weak to take Latrun in a daytime frontal attack. The only thing left was to minimize his men's losses and suffering by organizing a rapid retreat.

Trapped by flying shrapnel, bullets, the withering heat, the dense smoke of the burning fields, tortured by thirst and clouds of mosquitoes, men collapsed of sheer exhaustion. Some were not able to get up. Others crawled and dragged themselves, pulling their wounded with them, trying to jump from one rock to another for cover.

In the terror of the Arab shelling, many of the immigrants had forgotten the few words of Hebrew hastily learned on their arrival. Their officer tried to gather some of them and lead them to safety. They were like frightened animals. "They didn't even know how to crawl under fire. Some of them didn't know how to fire the rifles that had been thrown at them a few hours before."

He saw the familiar face of a seventeen-year-old boy he remembered from the *Kalanit*. He was lying in a ditch, dying. “Oh,” he whispered, “we must have disappointed you.” Farther on, he came on a boy who had mimeographed a news sheet for him in a D.P. camp in Germany. Weeping, the youth was clawing through the weeds looking for the thick glasses without which he was helpless.

No one would ever know how many of those immigrants had purchased with their lives the right to enter their new country. In the confusion that had preceded that attack, there had been no time to compile accurate rosters for their companies. Officially, the Hagana would admit to seventy-five dead. Unofficially, its historians acknowledged years later that their losses had far exceeded that. The Arab Legion claimed that eight hundred of the attackers had been killed, clearly an exaggerated figure, but they did capture 220 rifles, Their own losses were insignificant.

Whatever the true figures, the new immigrants of Shlomo Shamir’s Seventh Brigade suffered the bloodiest defeat an Israeli unit would receive in three wars with the Arabs.

Around the Shabbat Table

1. Perhaps unlike other nations, the Jewish people remembers its defeats as well as its victories. Many days are set aside during the year to commemorate times of national destruction. As painful as this may be, why do you think this is important?

2. The *Torah* and its commentators strive not to glorify warfare. Nachmanides comments that in battle, even the most kind-hearted of men become brutalized and undergo spiritual and emotional damage (*Devarim* 23:10). These scars may endure long after the end of the war. Have you ever witnessed postwar effects on its participants. What do you think is the effect on the society as a whole?

3. What would you have done in Ben-Gurion’s place?