

Parshat Ki Tetse 5779

The sedra of Ki Tetze is daunting as we are presented with many laws and commandments. However, this shows us the standards that Hashem expects of us. The sedra introduces the eishet yefet toar. Rabbi M Miller states: "One of the most striking concessions of the Torah is given at the beginning of this Portion. When the Israelites go to war they are told that they may, if they see a beautiful woman among the prisoners of war, take her as a wife." The Torah provides a way for the soldier to satisfy his desire so that it will not lead to sin; this being a realistic response to a situation that Chazal recognise is not ideal. The word 'desire' has negative connotations but we see that Chazal appreciate the soldier's position.

If you see among the captives a beautiful woman and you desire her and take her as your wife . . . (21:11) The Torah is countering the yetzer hara (evil inclination), for if G-d would not permit her to him, [the soldier] would take her illicitly. In essence however, the Torah views this as a negative thing, and if he marries her, he will ultimately come to despise her, as it says after this, "*If a man has two wives, one beloved and the other despised . . .*" (verse 15). Moreover, he will ultimately father through her, a wayward and rebellious son (see verse 18). For this reason, these three laws are juxtaposed. The fact that this chain reaction occurs with these three passages of the sedra next to each other, shows that this liaison can lead to family tragedy. (Midrash Tanchuma; Rashi)

This is the Torah countering the yetzer hara - not supporting it. The yetzer is very strong in the special circumstances of war, where one's usual environmental and social pressures are absent. In these circumstances the Torah proscribes an approach for dealing with the yetzer hara with wisdoms. The idea is: Don't say "NO!" say "Yes, but...."

However, the Torah stipulates that before the soldier may marry her, she is to be left for one month to weep for her parents and her hair shaven and her nails to grow. This delay is to allow the captor's desire to evaporate in the interim. There are various interpretations of why the captive must be treated in such a fashion. The Ohr Hachaim

says that sometimes a most holy soul is imprisoned in the depths of the kelipot (the "husks" which conceal G-dliness in our world). Thus, the Jewish soldier is attracted to a captive woman because his soul recognizes the "beauty" imprisoned within her. (This is why the Torah refers to her as a "beautiful woman," even though, as the Sifri derives from the verse, the same law applies if one is attracted to a physically ugly woman.) Hence the Torah provides the procedure by which she is to be cleansed of the impurity of the kelipot and "brought into your house"—included in the holy community of Israel . . .

The Rambam states in Moreh Nevuchim that the captive needs time to mourn. Her nation has lost in battle and she can comfort herself by crying for a month of mourning. This way she will settle her soul. Both the Ramban and Rabbi Akiva state that she is crying to uproot the avodah zarah in her. She is weeping for the idols she has repudiated. This view is based on the verse in Jeremiah 2:27 "*They say to a piece of wood, 'You are my father'.*" So although Rabbi Eliezer says she is actually mourning the loss of her real parents, whom she will probably never see again, it appears that the idols are her "parents."

But why a month? We know that that the power of first impressions can be indelible. To quote Rabbi Miller: "It is an illogical and often unconscious power, exerting its sway over all later and better found conceptions." It is because of human nature that the Torah gives the captive a whole month to cry over her idols. What was learnt in childhood would not be easy to discard. All her basic conceptions have to be changed and one month in which to do this is not unreasonable.

This month, according to the Zohar, is related to the month of Ellul. Ellul is a month of introspection reflection and self examination where we are expected to uproot deeply planted negative ideas and attitudes, and that is compared to the month of introspection by the captive. We are so fortunate to be given this month's opportunity.