

SHOFTIM

FIRSTHAND FEAR

In *parashas Shoftim*, the Torah deals with various aspects relating to the conduct of the Jewish nation in times of war. A central figure in this passage is a specially designated *kobhein* called the *kobhein mashu'ach milchamah* (priest anointed for war). His role was not that of a military captain, but that of a spiritual leader. The verses describe his pre-battle procedure of addressing the nation with the following words of encouragement:

It shall be that when you draw near to the war, the *kobhein* shall approach and speak to the people. He shall say to them, “Hear, O Israel, you are coming near to the battle against your enemies; let your heart not be faint; do not be afraid; do not panic; and do not be broken before them. For Hashem, your God, is the One Who goes with you; to fight for you with your enemies, to save you.”¹

With this proclamation, the *kobhein mashu'ach milchamah* lifted the people's morale by bolstering their trust in Hashem's salvation.

The Torah details several categories of people considered unsuitable for combat. The *kobhein* pronounced these exemptions,

¹ *Devarim* 20:3-4.

and then the officers repeated them to the people. The first group was comprised of those who had built a house, but had not yet dedicated it. The second group included anyone who had planted a vineyard, but had not yet redeemed it. The third group consisted of betrothed individuals who had not yet married. People in any of these three situations were exempt from battle.

Interestingly, the *kobein's* final announcement presented a fourth category of exempt soldiers, albeit with a separate introduction:

The officers shall continue speaking to the people and say, 'Who is the man who is fearful and fainthearted? Let him go and return to his house, and let him not melt the heart of his fellows, like his heart.'²

Our Sages disagree as to whom this concluding pronouncement refers.³ According to Rabbi Akiva, this verse excuses anyone who is unable to see a drawn sword, meaning he fears the physical risks of combat. Rabbi Yossi HaGelili, however, explains that this person is actually someone who fears the repercussions of the sins he has committed.⁴ Someone who has transgressed feels vulnerable to punishment, which Hashem could deliver more naturally on the battlefield.

Rabbi Yossi HaGelili supports his interpretation with the following logic. Why does the Torah group these fearful men together with those with a new house, a new vineyard, or a new bride? If the Torah had not offered multiple grounds for exemption, anyone who applied for a discharge (because of his sins) would essentially be publicizing himself as a transgressor. Therefore, in order to protect those sinners from embarrassment, the Torah provides several valid reasons for military exemption. It is noteworthy, as well, that

² *Devarim* 20:8.

³ Rashi *ibid.*

⁴ *Sotah* 44a.

the *gemara* expounds that fearful of sin includes even a transgression of a rabbinic nature, and the example given is a seemingly minor one – speaking between donning the *tefillin shel yad* (of the hand) and the *tefillin shel rosh* (of the head).⁵

These passages from the *parashah* and the *gemara* spark several questions for further study. First, if we follow the opinion of Rabbi Yossi HaGelili, it seems inconceivable that the Torah would excuse several categories of potential soldiers for the sole purpose of saving sinners from embarrassment. These mandatory exemptions appear to weaken the Jewish army, thereby risking people's lives. How can we understand this inexplicable war tactic of downsizing the army? Why does the Torah take such extreme measures to avoid a sinner's feelings of shame?

Second, we must analyze the *gemara's* example of a transgression for which a soldier fears punishment. Speaking between donning the *tefillin shel yad* and *tefillin shel rosh* seems like such a minor infraction. It is notable that our Sages considered it a grave error for which a soldier felt humiliated. Nevertheless, why do our Sages single out this specific transgression as an instance that disqualifies a soldier from battle? Furthermore, instead of dismissing so many soldiers, why does the Torah not simply offer the opportunity for these minor sinners to do *teshuvah* (repentance) and then serve in the military?

Last, it is important to relate to our subject matter in seasonal context. *Parashas Shoftim* is often the first *parashah* read in the month of Elul, the period of time designated for introspection and self-improvement in preparation for Rosh Hashanah. What does exemption from the battlefield have to do with this time of year? The opinion of Rabbi Yossi HaGelili seems naturally relevant, since it

⁵ *Sotah* 44a, as cited by Rabbi Eli Munk, *The Call of the Torah*, p. 206.

alludes to fear of punishment for sins. But what can we learn from the opposing opinion of Rabbi Akiva? What lessons can we glean from this *parashah* that are especially appropriate for Elul and the season of *teshuvah*?

Laxity or Sensitivity

By analyzing the exemption procedure of the *kohein mashu'ach milchamah*, we may better understand what message the Torah imparts by discharging these four categories of people. Rabbi Moshe Ibgui echoes our above question.⁶ He notes that it seems from the *gemara* that the Torah commands us to put *Am Yisrael* in danger by exempting many individuals from an imminent battle. Preventing the humiliation of sinners appears to justify diminishing the army's manpower. Why does the Torah go to such lengths to protect the honor of the sinner?

Rabbi Ibgui explains that the procedure of exempting many people demonstrates the mandate to preserve the dignity of others, even of those who have transgressed. From here, we can derive the level of sensitivity Hashem expects us to have for others. As Rabbi Ibgui explains, a person who transgresses experiences pain and guilt. We need to empathize with the sinner's feelings and recognize that publicizing his mistakes will intensify his suffering. The Torah teaches that we must sensitize ourselves to people in this situation, even when it relates to going out to war and potentially compromises the army's manpower. Thus, the *kohein mashu'ach milchamah* publicly exempts several categories of people from the military, in order to conceal the errors of a transgressor and protect his dignity.⁷

⁶ *Chochmas HaMatzpun*, p. 88, quoting *Toras HaNefesh*.

⁷ *Chochmas HaMatzpun*, p. 88.

This sweeping gesture (dismissing many out of sensitivity to the few) allows us to infer the grave severity of humiliating another person. In fact, our greatest enemy is not an external opponent on the battlefield, but our own internal laxity in character refinement. In fact, successful combat is heavily reliant on the degree to which we guard each other's dignity.

The Torah does not hesitate to eliminate people from the army, because military victories are not dependent on the number of soldiers. The Jewish nation is not subject to the laws of probability. As the *kohein* pronounces in his pre-battle speech above: "For Hashem, your God, is the One Who goes with you to fight for you with your enemies, to save you."⁸ When we tune in to each other's feelings and genuinely empathize with each other's pain, we become united. Only then does Hashem unite with us and fight on our behalf.

The Torah preserves the dignity of the sinners not only with added categories of exemption, but also with the manner in which these dispensations are publicized. Rabbi Boruch Mordechai Eizrachi notes that those who fear punishments from their sins are listed **last** as well as **separately** from all other categories.⁹ In addition, as mentioned above, the Torah writes a separate introduction as follows: "The officers shall continue speaking to the people and say, 'Who is the man who is fearful and fainthearted?'" We may ask why these sinners are discharged by an officer and not included in the *kohein's* original pronouncement. It would seem instinctive that those afraid of Divine retribution would be announced first. Why does the Torah write, "The officers shall

⁸ *Devarim* 20:4.

⁹ *Birkas Mordechai*, page 212.

continue speaking to the people and say..." almost as an afterthought?

Rabbi Ezrachi explains that even the exemption procedure itself demonstrates sensitivity.¹⁰ Consider the level of embarrassment a transgressor feels when his mistakes are publicized. An announcement regarding those who fear punishment essentially emphasizes people's mistakes. Instead of providing relief, the exemption pronouncement actually draws attention to the sinner's downfall and humiliates him more. Therefore, the Torah attempts to shift the focus away from these people by announcing their discharge lastly and separately. This passage represents yet another reminder of the extent to which we must recognize the feelings of others and protect their dignity.

In His Image

Although we may appreciate the imperative to protect others from humiliation, we still may ask the following question: do not these sweeping exemptions put human lives at risk? True, Hashem fights for us, as mentioned above. By the same token, however, He does not want us to rely on miracles. Hashem expects us to do our part – our own due diligence. In fact, saving lives is of paramount importance, to the extent that we even break *halachah* in cases of *pikuach nefesh* (saving a life).

The answers to these questions become clearer when we remember this fundamental concept: physical human life is valuable primarily because of its supreme spiritual potential. Publicly humiliating someone is the blatant degradation of that individual's

¹⁰ *ibid.*

spiritual greatness, and therefore, is compared to murder – taking a human life. In fact, one who shames another person loses his portion in *olam haba* (World to Come).¹¹ Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz underscores that only he who **humiliates**, and not an **actual killer**, forfeits his future portion.¹² This premise appears counter-intuitive. Embarrassment is traumatic, but it is alleviated over time. Death is permanent and irreversible. How is it possible that this is a legitimate Torah principle?

Rabbeinu Yonah compares one who murders with one who shames.¹³ The former may eventually understand the gravity of his misdeed, regret it, and then do *teshuvah*. By contrast, one who shames another person fails to recognize that public humiliation is irreparable. Such a sinner lacks the essential awareness of the spiritual greatness of human beings. His ignorance thwarts his potential for *teshuvah* and disqualifies him from receiving a proper share in *olam haba*. Rav Yerucham explains that embarrassing people not only causes them emotional pain, but it also eradicates the respect owed to a *tzelem Elokim* – a being created in the image of God.¹⁴ In this sense, humiliation is a more serious transgression than murder, because it assaults the honor of Hashem Himself. Perhaps this idea explains the following statement of our Sages: “The verse, ‘When God created man, He created him in His image’¹⁵ is the most important principle in the Torah.”¹⁶

¹¹ *Pirkei Avos* 3:11.

¹² As quoted by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin, *Consulting the Wise*, p. 138.

¹³ *Sba'arei Teshuvah*, III:141.

¹⁴ As quoted by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin, *Consulting the Wise*, p. 138.

¹⁵ *Bereishis* 5:1.

¹⁶ *Yerushalmi Nedarim* 9:4.

In this vein, we begin to understand the relevance of *parashas Shoftim* to the month of Elul. Typically, we think of this season of *teshuvah* as a time to focus on our relationship with Hashem, thereby emphasizing *mitzvos bein adam laMakom*. We concentrate more on prayer, saying *berachos* with *kavanah*, learning more Torah, or being stricter in *halachah*. In truth, however, this passage regarding exemptions from the military exemplifies how scrupulous we must be in our *mitzvos bein adam lachaveiro*, which relate to our interpersonal relationships. Recognizing that other people are fashioned *b'tzelem Elokim* means that we are obligated to respect them, and thereby honor Hashem who created them.

The central theme of the Rosh Hashanah *tefillos* (prayers) is *malchus* – Hashem’s Kingship. Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz elaborates that careful *mitzvah* observance by simply listening to the King is only one level of recognizing Hashem’s *malchus*.¹⁷ A deeper notion is honoring the King by respecting human beings – who were created in Hashem’s image. At the time of our final judgment, one of the questions we will be asked is: “Did you honor your friend **like a king** over you?”¹⁸ Protecting the dignity of others requires more than simply not embarrassing them. We are obligated to monitor our own gloomy, defeatist feelings so that they do not adversely affect other people.

The notion of helping to preserve the self-respect of others by concealing our own negative emotions is actually alluded to in the *pasuk* concerning one who is fearful: “Who is the man who is fearful and fainthearted? Let him go and return to his house. And let him not melt the heart of his fellows, like his heart.”¹⁹ According

¹⁷ *Consulting the Wise*, p. 138.

¹⁸ Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, *Alei Shur*, p. 231, quoting *Reishis Chochma*.

¹⁹ *Devarim* 20:8.

to the Rambam, the second part of the *pasuk*, “Let him not melt the heart of his fellows, like his heart” is an independent commandment that applies even nowadays; it demonstrates that we may not influence others with our fear or depression.²⁰ Negative emotions are dangerously contagious, spreading without a single word spoken. Rabbi Avraham Pam explains that a sour face actually constitutes a transgression of *ona’as devarim* (affliction with speech).²¹ Although they may be unintentional, off-putting facial expressions actually discourage others and lower their spirit.

Rabbi Bernard Weinberger reminds us that one of the acronyms of Elul אֵילּוּל is an allusion to the following verse from *Megillas Esther*: אִישׁ לְרֵעֵהוּ וּמִתְנֹנֹת לְאֲבִיוֹנִים (each man to his friend and gifts to the poor), the textual source for the *mitzvos* of *mishloach manos* and gifts to the poor.²² What is the connection between these Purim *mitzvos* and the season of *teshuvah* preceding Rosh Hashanah? *Mishloach manos* and *matanos la’evyonim* are both *mitzvos* designed to strengthen interpersonal connections by spreading the joy of the holiday.

Interestingly, fostering joy through giving is a concept also mentioned in connection to Rosh Hashanah. As described in *sefer Nechemiah*, when the Jewish nation returned from exile, Ezra HaNavi read from the Torah on Rosh Hashanah. The words of Torah moved the people to cry from remorse. The prophet urged them not to despair and encouraged them to be joyous on Rosh Hashanah: “Today is sacred to Hashem your God; do not mourn and do not weep. Go eat rich food and drink sweet beverages, and send portions (וּשְׁלַחוּ מִנוֹת) to those who have nothing

²⁰ *Shemen HaTov*, p. 346.

²¹ As cited in *Atarah LaMelech*, p. 24.

²² *Esther* 9:22.

prepared.”²³ Rosh Hashanah is a day of returning to Hashem with joy; we express that joy by sharing rich, sweet foods with others.

Adar (the month of Purim) is the final month of the year, because Nissan (the month that follows Adar) is called *rosh chodashim* (the head of the months).²⁴ Therefore, the month of Elul is parallel to Adar, because Elul is the last month on the calendar. Adar and Elul are times to take a spiritual accounting of the past year, the first step of doing *teshuvah*.²⁵ They are designated as preparation periods: Elul as preparation for Rosh Hashanah and Adar as preparation for Pesach.

As mentioned above, the most effective method to afford honor to the King is to sharpen our sensitivity to other people. Rabbi Weinberger explains that *matanos la'evyonim* (gifts to the poor) is not limited only to material gifts.²⁶ Rather, we are obligated to give each other emotional gifts as well, in the form of compliments and encouragement. In truth, we all experience spiritual “poverty” at one time or another. Everyone needs and appreciates emotional support, friendship and camaraderie. Advancement in personal refinement, therefore, is achieved by giving others a spiritual boost during the month of Elul.

Rabbi Shmuel Tal analyzes the Adar-Elul comparison from a different angle. He explains that the inherent struggle of the Elul preparation period is similar to the challenge of pre-Pesach cleaning. For weeks, we vigorously rid every corner of the house of *chometz*. Then as soon as Pesach is over, the house deteriorates

²³ *Nechemiah* 8:9-10; see also below, *parashas Ki Savo*.

²⁴ *Shemos* 12:2.

²⁵ See *Torah Tapestries Shemos, parashas Terumah*, p. 123.

²⁶ *Shemen HaTov*, p. 346.

into a mess almost instantaneously! All that hard work seems futile when the results are obliterated so quickly.

Similarly, we are often frustrated by the spiritual efforts we expend during Elul. We work diligently to improve our *avodas Hashem*, yet not long after Yom Kippur has passed, we find ourselves slipping back into the very same behavioral and emotional pitfalls where we felt we had progressed. Discouraging messages play over and over in our minds: *Why should I bother working so hard during Elul when I know I will make the same mistakes again? This year will end up being just like last year!*²⁷

These disparaging thoughts create a psychological barrier to *teshuvah*. Rabbi Tal utilizes the Elul and pre-Pesach similarity to clarify three fundamental ideas. The first guideline is to simply live in this moment! Don't let your anxieties about the future spoil the positive energy and vitality that you are presently feeling. Enjoy the sparkling clean house on Pesach. Recognize and appreciate your spiritual renewal on Rosh Hashanah. Revel in your growing sense of being a true *eved Hashem* during the *aseres yemei teshuvah* (ten days of repentance). Bask in the aura of the purity you feel on Yom Kippur.

The personal refinement process of Elul transforms us into different people during the *yamim nora'im* (days of awe) period. Although most of us can only maintain this elevated state for a short intense period, the process actually makes an impression on the remainder of the year and, in fact, on the rest of our lives. This idea explains the *minhag* in many communities to sing the *vidui* prayers (*Ashamnu, Al Cheit*, etc.), the long litany of our sins, in a lilting, upbeat tune, to express confidence that all these sins are

²⁷ *Tal Chaim*, p. 35.

wiped out on Yom Kippur. In this way, each congregant not only revels individually, but shares his optimism with all the other participants.

Rabbi Tal's second guideline is to remember that Pesach cleaning is a fixed mechanism to avoid over-accumulation. In the same way, each Elul we have the opportunity to begin again with a clean spiritual slate. The human soul thrives on renewal, so it needs regular opportunities to start over. If we never try to clear out our spiritual cobwebs, the emotional weight of our cumulative errors would be too much to bear.

Third, it is critical to maintain our long-range vision and long-term spiritual goals. Although we might falter again, the yearly Elul process prevents us from completely deteriorating and reverting back to our previous condition. Although we will surely make mistakes again, we never sink back down to the same exact place. The soul-cleansing aspects of Elul and the pre-Pesach season are like a semi-annual booster shot. Perhaps most importantly, recognize gradual progress. While far from becoming perfect, those who spiritually strive during Elul **do in fact improve in the long term**. When taking a journey, there may be bumps in the road and setbacks along the way. But the Elul and Adar periods enable us to continue moving in the right direction.

Fear of Fear Itself

Thus far, we have gained insight into the opinion of Rabbi Yossi HaGelili, who explains that those who feared punishment for their sins were released from military service. The Torah permits several reasons for exemption, thereby protecting the dignity of these sinners by concealing their tainted past from the public eye.

As we have seen, preserving the dignity of others is our strongest weapon on the battlefield. Rabbi Yossi HaGelili's perspective offers us an important pre-Rosh Hashanah mission – to honor the King by respecting His subjects. But how can we understand the opposing position, of Rabbi Akiva, that these soldiers feared the physical danger of war? Why does outright cowardice justify military exemption, and what Elul lesson can we learn from Rabbi Akiva's interpretation?

To address these questions, we need to analyze the concept of fear. Fear is an emotional reaction to a perceived threat. A person who is afraid senses that he is in danger. Rabbi Akiva's opinion is that "the fearful people" are those who are "unable to see a drawn sword".²⁸ Yet, just a few verses earlier, the *kohein* exhorts the people explicitly to **not** be afraid! "Let your heart not be faint; do not be afraid; do not panic; and do not be broken before them. In fact, **אל תיראו** (do not be afraid) is counted as a negative commandment in the Torah. According to the Rambam, one who is very fearful in wartime actually transgresses this *mitzvah*.²⁹ However, if fear is essentially a reflex response, how then can humans be held accountable? Emotional reactions can oftentimes be modified and redirected. Fear, however, is hard-wired into our brains as a basic survival instinct, and surely the imminent threat of war is reasonable cause for alarm.

Yet it seems that in this case, facing the battlefield is not reasonable grounds for feeling afraid. The reason is that in war, Jewish soldiers should have confidence that Hashem will help and protect them. The fear being discussed in this passage stems purely from deficient belief in Hashem. Rashi expounds on the

²⁸ See Rashi on *Devarim* 20:8.

²⁹ Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilchos Melachim* 7:15.

above verse as follows: your enemies are only armed with human power, but the Jewish nation is fortified with the triumph of Hashem.³⁰ Being frightened in this situation, therefore, is a sign of weakness in *emunas Hashem*. Under the circumstances in this *parashah*, perceiving an enemy as a real threat is indicative of fundamental doubt in Hashem's ability to protect us from our foes. Therefore, Rabbi Yosef Sorotzkin explains that the Torah dismisses such a fearful person in order to prevent his transgression of the *mitzvah* of **אל תיראו**.³¹

From this concept, we glean a timely message for the month of Elul. *Teshuvah* is not only the repair of past mistakes. Rather, an inherent component of repentance is avoiding repeated errors. An effective technique in terminating destructive behavioral patterns is distancing oneself from the risk of sin. Rabbi Sorotzkin underscores that the essence of our *avodas Hashem* is identifying suspicious situations and avoiding them entirely.³² As Rabbi Shaul Wagschal notes, the chief recommendation against temptation is to simply avoid testing yourself.³³

Today's war is the battle against the *yetzer hara* (evil inclination). Our only hope in winning against the evil inclination is to never approach the place where he lays his traps. We all have areas that challenge us; while these areas differ among people, challenge itself is a universal phenomenon. Just as fearful people are discharged from the battlefield to avoid the possibility of transgressing **אל תיראו**, we must also flee from scenarios we perceive as personal spiritual pitfalls.

³⁰ Rashi on *Devarim* 20:4.

³¹ *Megged Yosef*, p. 221.

³² *ibid.*

³³ *Sha'arei Elul*, p. 34.

Sin is a Separation

In this season of Elul, when we are immersed in a personal refinement process, it is important to equip ourselves with weapons against the *yetzer hara*. We need to identify spiritually hazardous areas and avoid testing ourselves. An effective *teshuvah* tool is to recognize the severity of transgressing *mitzvos* of any kind. Acknowledging the gravity of sin leads to natural avoidance. Our Sages state that a person sins when he is gripped by a “spirit of insanity.”³⁴ This madness may be interpreted as a lack of awareness. When we transgress, we are surely “insane” – oblivious to the dual power of *mitzvos*: the benefit of observing them and the harm of neglecting them.

Human perspective on Torah and *mitzvos* is often subjective and inaccurate. Why do we forgive ourselves so regularly and easily for our misdeeds? We tend to downplay our mistakes to avoid the discomfort of feeling guilty. Essentially, we often fail to recognize that **all** transgressions are destructive. Attempting to judge *mitzvos* on the basis of which are “more important” and which are “less so” is a completely invalid undertaking. Essentially, just as there are no small *mitzvos*, there are no small *aveiros* (sins).

This notion sheds light on some of our questions above, regarding the opinion of Rabbi Yossi HaGelili. As mentioned, our Sages relate that those who were afraid of being unworthy soldiers had a sin even as minor as speaking between putting on the arm and head *tefillin*.³⁵ Why is this considered to be such a cardinal sin? Rabbi Moshe Sheinerman strengthens this question by adding that

³⁴ *Sotah* 3a.

³⁵ *Sotah* 44b; see also Rabbi Eli Munk, *The Call of the Torah*, p. 206.

this infraction is against a rabbinic decree, which is a lower level than a biblical one. Furthermore, he notes that in situations of necessity, one is actually **permitted** to interrupt between donning the two *tefillin*. Why then is such a person undeserving of surviving on the battlefield?³⁶

Rabbi Sheinerman explains with a simple, yet profound answer. The reality is that every *aveira* makes a destructive impression. *Aveiros* have natural consequences; ultimately, the sin and the punishment are one and the same. Every transgression, even a seemingly minor infraction, inherently creates distance between us and Hashem. A person who speaks while putting on *tefillin* demonstrates that he is not cognizant of the damage caused by *aveiros*.

It is spiritually hazardous to have a flippant attitude toward *mitzvos* perceived as insignificant. This apathetic mentality is dangerous in our war against the *yetzer hara*. Even if we can't fully grasp the mystical and intricate mechanics of neglecting certain *mitzvos*, we need to internalize the fact that *aveiros* sever our Divine connection. An essential component of our Elul efforts is sharpening the consciousness of our bond with Hashem. Working to become intensely aware of this connection is what will inspire us to do everything in our power to preserve it.

Responding, Returning and Removing

A deeper understanding of the spiritual damage of sin helps us address another question. Instead of receiving exemptions, why are these minor sinners not given the opportunity to do *teshuvah*

³⁶ *Ohel Moshe al HaTorah*, p. 839.

and then serve in the military? To address this question, we need to explore different levels of *teshuvah*. Rabbi Boruch Mordechai Ezrachi cites³⁷ two *pesukim* that allude to two kinds of *teshuvah* – אלוֹקִיךָ וּשְׁבַת עַד ה' אלוֹקִיךָ (and you will return to Hashem, your God),³⁸ and אלוֹקִיךָ וּמַל ה' אלוֹקִיךָ אֶת לִבְךָ וְאֶת לִבְ זַרְעֶךָ (and Hashem, your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your offspring.)³⁹

The first kind of repentance is defined by the verb לָשׁוּב (to return). One is only able to feel regret if he first reflects on his errors. Only when we return in our minds to past mistakes are we capable of avoiding their recurrence. Indeed this should be our first response to recognizing our transgressions. Perhaps this is why the word לְהַשִּׁיב (to reply) shares the same word root as לָשׁוּב. In fact, the word *teshuvah* itself also means “answer”. This is the behavioral aspect of *teshuvah* – changing one’s actions. Authentic repentance is not repairing one’s tainted history, but rather transforming one’s mistakes into inspiration for growth.

The second level of *teshuvah* is deeper than the first, and is described with the word *milah* (circumcision). The *mitzvah* of *bris milah* for Jewish males is well-known, but what does *milah* imply within the context of repentance? What concept does the imagery of “circumcising the heart” really symbolize? The removal of *orlah* (lit. foreskin) represents the elimination of that which is repugnant. Rabbi Pinchos Roberts explains that *orlah* represents a barrier to holiness.⁴⁰ The heart represents our desires and motivations; therefore, “circumcising the heart” means removing the aspects of our will that oppose Hashem’s will.

³⁷ *Birkas Mordechai*, p. 217.

³⁸ *Devarim* 30:2.

³⁹ *Devarim* 30:6.

⁴⁰ *Timeless Seasons*, p. 19.

Rabbi Ezrachi elaborates that this second kind of spiritual work is much more intensive. “Circumcising the heart” necessitates honest soul-searching to explore the root cause of one’s sins. *Why did I speak lashon hara about him? What motivated me to make that comment? What made my desire to slander him override the laws of shmiras halashon? What aspects of my will need to be removed to make room for Hashem’s will?*

This kind of analysis needs extra *siyata d’shmaya* (heavenly assistance), as suggested in the verse itself: **וּמַל ה' אֱלוֹקֶיךָ אֶת לִבְכֶךָ**; Hashem will “circumcise our hearts” because only He can help us uproot the underlying motivations behind our *aveiros*. The *Ba'al HaTurim* notes that the acronym **אֵלֵי־רִל** is encoded into this verse: **וּמַל ה' אֱלוֹקֶיךָ אֶת לִבְכֶךָ וְאֵת לִבְכֶךָ זֶרַעַךְ**, as this type of *teshuvah* is especially appropriate during the month of Elul.

With our understanding of the different aspects of *teshuvah*, we can now better comprehend why those sinners were not given an opportunity to repent before heading out to war. While it seems that a break between the head and arm *tefillin* is not a cardinal sin, nevertheless, it is impossible to fully repent for this mistake while standing on the battlefield. True, the pausing action itself can be addressed and a person may commit himself to not repeating his error. But can he truly “circumcise his heart” while poised at the battlefield?

Speaking while donning *tefillin* might be a straightforward thing to avoid, but analyzing and uprooting one’s underlying motivations requires much more careful consideration. *Why did I talk while I was putting on tefillin? Maybe I don’t fully understand or appreciate the mitzvah of tefillin. Why was I so distracted?* A soldier on the brink of combat is ill-equipped to engage in deep analysis of the impulse behind his behavior. Therefore, he is spiritually unworthy to go to war; he remains at risk for repeated *aveiros*.

Tefillin: Head and Hand

We can appreciate that a soldier at war is incapable of doing rigorous *teshuvah* for past sins. But we may still wonder why our Sages use this example. Why does speaking between the head and arm *tefillin* deem a soldier spiritually unworthy? What does this misdeed represent on a deeper level? To address these questions, it is important to review the passage preceding the exemptions, which is essentially a pre-war pep talk delivered by the *kobain masbu'ach milchamah*. והיה כקרבכם אל מלחמה ונגש הכהן ודבר אל העם ואמר אלהם שמע ישראל (when you draw near to the war, the *kobain* shall approach and speak to the people. He shall say to them, 'Hear, O Israel').⁴¹

Rabbi Mordechai Miller highlights the *kobain's* invocation of the *Shema* prayer and notes that reciting the *Shema* exemplifies acceptance of the Kingship of Heaven.⁴² The meritorious power of this acceptance can save one's life from the danger of the battlefield. Furthermore, the message of this *tefillah* underscores Hashem's unity, which should further reinforce *emunas Hashem* – שמע ישראל ה' אלוֹקינו ה' אחד.

The Maharal explains that there is a direct association between belief and victory.⁴³ The degree to which the Jewish soldiers trust in Hashem's omnipotence determines their military triumph. As mentioned above, soldiers who feared the physical dangers of war were discharged due to their weakness in *emunah*. Thus, the pre-war message underscored Hashem's role on the battlefield.

⁴¹ *Devarim* 20:2-3.

⁴² *The Sabbath Shiur*, p. 432.

⁴³ As quoted in *The Sabbath Shiur*, p. 432.

“Hashem, your God, is the One Who goes with you, to fight for you with your enemies, to save you.”⁴⁴ The *kobein mashu’ach milchamah* aimed to bolster the faith of the Jewish army, to ensure their military success.

For the Jewish people, the real dangers of war are not the physical risks but the spiritual tests. Rabbi Yissocher Frand cites the Tolner Rebbe, who elaborates on the struggle between *emunah* (faith in Hashem) and *hishtadlus* (our efforts). Of course, an army must prepare itself with military technology and strategy. But a Jewish army must never attribute victory to its own power. As the *navi* states: “Not through army and not through strength, but through My spirit said Hashem the Lord of Hosts.”⁴⁵ It is human nature to invest our energy and then give ourselves credit for success. The Torah recognizes this tendency, as indicated in these verses: “You might say in your heart, my strength and the might of my hand made me all this wealth. Remember Hashem your God, Who gave you strength to make wealth.”⁴⁶

How can Jewish soldiers sufficiently prepare for war without attributing subsequent victory to their own efforts? This issue is addressed by the *kobein mashu’ach milchamah* who inspires the people to have faith in Hashem. The verse states that the *kobein approached* the people; that wording (approach) alludes to *tefillah*. A Jewish army prepares with prayer. *Please, Hashem, help us remember that the outcome of every battle is in **Your** hands, and not in our hands.*⁴⁷

⁴⁴ *Devarim* 20:4.

⁴⁵ *Zechariah* 4:6.

⁴⁶ *Devarim* 8:17-18.

⁴⁷ *Rabbi Frand on the Parashah* 3, p. 282.

This notion of the balance between *emunah* and *hishtadlus* clarifies the symbolism of taking a break between donning the two parts of *tefillin*. The hand represents action and influence; therefore, the *tefillin shel yad* represents the power in a person's hand. The *tefillin shel rosh* symbolizes the thoughts in one's mind. Thus, interrupting between donning the head and arm *tefillin* symbolizes that the entities of physical power and mental recognition are completely separate.⁴⁸ Although it might be perceived as a 'minor transgression', this misdeed indicates a basic disregard on the part of the person. He ignores the connection between his military prowess and Hashem's providence. An individual who either lacks the awareness of Hashem's role or chooses not to acknowledge it on the battlefield is an unsuitable soldier.

It is a constant struggle to maintain our consciousness of Hashem while simultaneously exerting ourselves. The *yetzer bara* works overtime to dim our awareness of Hashem's role in our lives. Strengthening our *emunah* is the only antidote to our innate self-centeredness. An important goal of Elul is to keep Hashem's providence in our minds, thereby keeping our personal efforts in proper perspective. Our partnership with Hashem is reflected in another verse that is encoded with the Elul acronym: **אני לרודי ורודי לי** (I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine).⁴⁹ Hashem is especially close to us in Elul. Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi once offered a well-known parable regarding Elul: "The King is in the field and receives all people".⁵⁰ The field represents our spiritual workplace; if we "show up to work" during Elul, Hashem will greet us there with compassion and love.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Sbir HaShirim* 6:3.

⁵⁰ *Likutei Torah, parashas Re'eh.*

***Tefillin*: Intention and Action**

Maintaining our awareness of God while expending personal effort is a daily challenge, even when the effort is spiritually motivated. Sometimes, we are so focused on the minutiae of *mitzvos* that we lose sight of the meaning behind them. In this vein, Rabbi Moshe Sternbuch interprets the misdeed of pausing between the head and arm *tefillin*. The *tefillin shel yad*, he explains, represents the *mitzvah*'s actions while the *tefillin shel rosh* represents thoughts and intentions. One who disconnects his thoughts from his actions while doing a *mitzvah* is spiritually unworthy. He is not fit for battle, since his *mitzvos* are mere perfunctory performances. They are habitual motions that do not foster a relationship with Hashem. This concept is alluded to in the *gemara* cited by Rashi: "One who is fearful because of the sins he has committed (lit: the sins in his hand)."⁵¹ One who does not elevate his actions (the deeds of his **hands**) to achieve Divine closeness is in spiritual danger and may not go out to war.⁵²

Torah observance obligates us in both thought and action. Just as mindless actions do not suffice, neither does unapplied intellectual study. Our Sages stated that if a person says that the gentile nations have *chochmah* (wisdom), you may believe him. However, if a person says that the gentile nations have Torah, you may not believe him.⁵³ What is the primary distinction between wisdom and Torah? *Chochmah* is knowledge alone – symbolized by the *tefillin shel rosh*. Torah is represented by **both** *tefillin*: the head and the hand – the integration of knowledge and action. Only the Torah of the Jews, and not the wisdom of other nations, demands

⁵¹ *Sotah* 44b.

⁵² *Ta'am VaDa'as*, p. 131.

⁵³ *Eichah Rabbah* 2:13

refined behavior to accompany wisdom.⁵⁴ Hashem does not desire an intellectual exercise of theoretical Torah study. When our behavior emulates that of our forefathers, we foster a loving and lasting relationship with Hashem.

Our *mitzvah* observance needs to exemplify Torah wisdom and make us into better people. Rabbi Imanuel Bernstein explains that there are two components of every *mitzvah*, which are suggested by the two verbs in the *berachah* formula: אשר קדשנו במצותיו וצונו (who has sanctified us with His *mitzvos* and commanded us). קדשנו (sanctified us) refers to the mystical chemistry of the personal spiritual benefit derived from performing a *mitzvah*. וצונו (commanded us) alludes to our relationship to Hashem in our discipline and alignment with His will. These two aspects underscore that *mitzvos* are designed to be both **performed** (וצונו) and **experienced** (קדשנו). Therefore, each *mitzvah* requires thought and focus in order to benefit from the full value of the action.⁵⁵

Unfortunately, today's society places great emphasis on multitasking. Modern technology entices us with the ability to perform several tasks simultaneously, boasting the advantage of greater speed and efficiency. The inherent problem with multitasking in *avodas Hashem* is that, at times, individual actions are not carried out with full consciousness or spiritual benefit. The Torah recognizes that performing multiple *mitzvos* at once might seem technically efficient, but in practice is spiritually ineffective. That is why our Sages assert the principle: "One who is involved in one *mitzvah* is exempt from another."⁵⁶ Only when we fully implement a single *mitzvah*, can we experience the deep and meaningful impact.

⁵⁴ *Lesischa Elyon*, p. 240.

⁵⁵ *Aggadah*, p. 218.

⁵⁶ *Berachos* 11a.

Elul Messages

Parashas Shoftim offers us valuable guidance during the spiritual preparation period of Elul. Just as the Torah protected the dignity of sinners when exempting soldiers from battle, so too must we be aware that our actions and emotions affect other people. Our most dangerous enemy is carelessness with our *middos*. When we unite, Hashem unites with us for victory. Elul is an auspicious time to be meticulous in our interpersonal relationships. Throughout this month, it is fitting to give each other emotional *mishlo'ach manos* and *matanos la'evyonim* through encouragement and support. Everyone was created *b'tzelem Elokim*; we honor the King by respecting his subjects.

Elul is our spiritual pre-Pesach cleaning. Our souls thrive on the opportunity to renew, rekindle and restart. Let us give ourselves a fresh start and not be discouraged by what we perceive as a vicious cycle of repeated mistakes. In the long term, we are growing and improving. During Elul, we should distance ourselves especially from areas in which we recognize the risks. For example, if we always find ourselves gossiping in certain settings, this month is the time to avoid those places in the first place. Furthermore, we are obligated to engage in honest self-reflection in order to “circumcise our hearts” and undermine the motivations behind our *aveiros*.

Elul is the season to bolster our *emunah*. Like the two parts of the *tefillin*, we need to unite our heads with our hearts. Although we exert the effort in spiritual combat with the *yetzer hara*, we need to remember that it is Hashem who determines our victory. As we endeavor to improve our *mitzvah* observance, we must not lose sight of meaning behind the motions. The Torah demands both actions and intentions. During Elul, it is appropriate to avoid *mitzvah* multi-tasking. Instead, we should focus on

one *mitzvah* at a time, give it our full attention, and tap into its underlying spiritual power. In all these ways, the Elul season prepares us for the Day of Judgment on Rosh Hashanah and our final judgment in the time of our redemption.