

**Parashah One Hundred and Forty-One**  
Deuteronomy 20:10–21:9; Joshua 24:1–15; 1John 2:15–17

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notes by Tim Hegg

*Torah Rules for War*

As Israel prepared herself to enter the Land and wage war against the inhabitants, God prescribes laws for proper battle. Now this is clearly at odds with the perspective of many other cultures, ancient and modern, which essentially teach that all moral and ethical standards are suspended in the arena of battle. For Israel, however, clear standards of ethics were prescribed by God through Moses for engagement in battle against her enemies. It is, in fact, the influence of the Torah upon modern nations founded upon a Judeo-Christian ethic, that has established rules of engagement in our modern times. Even in the midst of war, we are to remember that life is precious, and that there are always innocent victims of war. Even in war there is a rule of ethics. In stark contrast is the lack of any adherence to ethics in war that clearly characterizes modern day Islamic terrorist regimes. The same inhumane perspective fueled the Nazi regime of World War II. While we may at times wonder about military courts that convene to judge the ethical behavior of our soldiers in the midst of battle, the very presence of such courts distinguishes civilized nations from those which remain barbaric. And it is the foundational teaching of the Torah that has established this difference.

In the opening of our *parashah*, the rules for attacking a city outside of the Land are given. Essentially, when Israel's armies approached a city that was "far off" (הַרְחִיקָה מִמֶּנָּה, v. 15) they were first to offer the city peace. If the city accepted the offer, the people became the servants of Israel and were afforded the rights prescribed by the Torah for a slave or servant. If they refused the offer of peace, and battle ensued, all of the men (those that could form a potential armed rebellion in the future) were to be executed but the women and children were to be spared. Likewise, the cattle and goods of the city were to be taken as the spoils of war.

A different injunction is given, however, for the fortified cities that were in the Land itself (those that are near, הַגְּוִיִּם הָאֵלֶּה הַנֵּה, v. 15). These Canaanite cities were not to be offered a peaceable surrender but were to be utterly destroyed, and no person left alive. Our text lists six nations, while Deut 7:1–2 adds a seventh (the Girgeshites). The primary reason given for the destruction of these nations is that their demonic religions would inevitably influence Israel to disregard God and follow in their abominable practices. History proved this a reality. Our text (v. 18) speaks of the "abhorrent things they have done for their gods." Often this phrase refers to child sacrifice (Deut 12:31) and occultist practices (Deut 18:9–14). It should be noted that it is the abhorrent practices that call for such extreme measures against the Canaanite cities, not beliefs.

The Sages struggled with the extreme measures prescribed against the cities of the Land. They understood our *parashah* and parallel texts to still hold a conditionality. According to some of the Sages, if the Canaanite cities were willing to submit to the Noachide Laws, they were to be spared (*Sifrei* 202; t.*Sota* 8:7; b.*Sota* 35b; see Rambam, *Hilkhot Melakhim* 6:1). It is understandable why teachers and scholars throughout the ages have struggled with the divine command to wipe out entirely all living persons in a city. This goes contrary to our own sense of fairness and the high sanctity for life prescribed everywhere in the Torah. Yet the text is quite clear, and no manner of explanation contrary to its clear meaning can be derived from it.

What does this tell us about God—about ourselves? First, it makes a very strong statement about God's hatred for idolatry and all of the things it brings with it. Idolatry is thus entirely contrary to God's plan for His people, and fully thwarts the Almighty's intentions for how His chosen people should live. Secondly, it seems reasonable to conclude that in some cases idolatry becomes so ingrained in a culture that the only way to rid oneself of that idolatry is to forsake it entirely or have no contact with it. Which leads to a third

application: God knows that to whatever extent we allow an idolatrous culture to become our culture, to that extent we will succumb to idolatry itself. We fool ourselves if we think that we can make certain aspects of a pagan culture our own, and not have it affect our souls!

We only need to pause and consider the outcome of Israel's history to see how this works. In the conquest of the Land Israel did not follow the commands of our text—she allowed many of the pagan nations to remain, and even inter-married with them. As a result they become a snare to Israel and led her into a mixing of pagan worship with that prescribed for her by God. And the result of this mixing was her final demise from the Land and her exile into the lands of her enemies.

But there is more in our text which reveals the true character of God: He not only hates idolatry, but He also loves justice. Even in the terrible events of war He intends that His people act with justice and sincerity. It was common in the ancient times for invading armies to entirely destroy the lands they conquered. Often this was done by cutting the trees, salting the fields, and fouling the wells. As a result, after the invasion was complete, the land was worthless and would go for centuries before, by natural cycles, the pollution of the invasion was neutralized and the land was once again able to support life.

HaShem's instructions to Israel, however, included something as "insignificant" as not cutting the "food bearing" trees as they besieged a city. The tree was not to be put on the same level as an enemy warrior—it had been created by God to sustain life and was therefore to be cared for even in the heat of war and battle. This is because there is a clear attachment of God's purposes to the Land—it is His Land and He intends for His vassal, Israel, to take care of it for Him. This, then, gives us yet another glimpse of the God we serve and worship: He cares for physical realities as worthy of His great concern and guardianship. What a contrast! Trees are to be preserved but the people who tended them are destroyed! What do we learn from this—that trees are more important than people? No! What we learn is God's intolerance for idolatry is absolute. The tree was created for mankind, to give him food. But mankind was created for God, to give Him glory. As long as the tree performs its creative task, it is worthy and should be allowed to remain. But when man has turned from his creative purpose and worships the creature rather than the Creator, God gives them up to their own devices and their inevitable demise (cf. Rom 1:17ff).

This attribute of justice is found emphasized once again in the part of our text which describes the procedure of dealing with a homicide in which the murderer is not found. Here there is need to make a clear declaration of innocence. Those elders of the city closest to the place where the corpse is found must undergo a ritual in which the blood of a sacrificial animal (slain in the field as the victim was) is shed in the field and the elders of the city wash their hands over the slain heifer. This is no doubt symbolic of the confession that the elders have nothing at all to do with the slaying of the person, and that they, as the representatives of the city, maintain the innocence of the city in regard to the murder. It must also emphasize the fact that they have no knowledge of the murder or of the one who committed the crime. Thus, though the murder cannot be avenged through justice of the court, the city itself confesses innocence to the whole matter.

The point? Murder, the taking of innocent life, simply cannot go unattended or without due process—at least to the extent possible. We may therefore reason that whenever a society begins to look upon murder as something acceptable, that society has given up the standard of justice which HaShem Himself reveals. In this regard we should consider our societies views of abortion, the murder of innocent children, and the manner in which this is considered not only acceptable but the sure "right" of every woman. The same may be said of the move toward euthanasia. And we see the consequences of this acceptance of murder—the devaluation of life itself, so that violence continues to rise and random taking of life is viewed by a new generation of Americans as almost something that is expected. Once again it is the message of who God is and His gracious teaching (Torah) which leads us in the life He has designed for us. Such a life is both to

His glory and our happiness.

The *haftarah* was chosen by the Sages to accompany our Torah text because it focuses upon the history of the conquest and the victories God gave to Israel over the inhabitants of the Land. It also includes Joshua's exhortation to turn entirely away from anything that is connected to idolatry, and to serve the Lord with wholeness of heart. His declaration at the end of our *haftarah* is a model for every head of household: "but as for me and my house, we will serve Adonai."

The Apostolic portion also emphasizes the wholehearted devotion to God that should characterize all of us who have been redeemed by God's grace. Why is it that the "world," the ungodly ways of rebellious mankind, continue to attract the attention of God's children? Why would John have to exhort us not to "love the world?" The answer is that remaining in us all is the sinful nature that is a friend to the world. Only through God's grace and the strength of His Spirit are we enabled to put to death the deeds of the flesh and live lives set apart to Him. But we must actively engage in this battle: we must learn to submit to the Spirit and to resist the evil one. We must make it our habit to say "yes" to God and to say "no" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age (Tit 2:12). The ability to do this, to say "no" to what God hates, and to say "yes" to what He loves, is the privilege of all who are born again by His Spirit, and who have been forgiven of all their sins. It is, in fact, the love of God, learned by the heart of the one who has been rescued, that produces the desire to say "yes" to Him. "We love Him, because He first loved us" (1Jn 4:19). The more we realize what God has done for us through His Son, Yeshua, the more we are motivated to love Him by obeying Him and sanctifying His name in every way possible.

For you know the grace of our Lord Yeshua HaMashiach,  
that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor,  
so that you through His poverty might become rich.

2Cor 8:9