

HEARING THE TRUTH OF A TENDER HEART**Rabbi Victor Hillel Reinstein****Rosh Hashannah, 5767**

This was a summer of blighted beauty. Flowers and fields were scorched, seas and skies were blackened, homes and lives were shattered, terror reigned on both sides of the Israel - Lebanon border. Earth plowed by the sword, seeds of hatred were sown yet again in fields of the collective psyche of two peoples. It was a time of feeling sick, of being lost, of being in a place we had been too many times before, unable to find the seeds of hope we thought had sprouted. And the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan continued unabated..., and there is no end to terror, there is no peace, only belligerence and no wisdom, no humility. The fear for our own people, loved ones and friends in Israel, weighed heavy, and the churning horror for the devastation wrought on the Lebanese, also our people, all one before God. As war raged across the border where quarriers once crossed to cut stone for Solomon's Temple, I learned that a former Hebrew school student of mine in Victoria, British Columbia, a child of my congregation, quiet and sensitive, now an Israeli soldier, had been wounded in Lebanon. Ayal was born in Israel, reared in Canada, and as a young man he returned to Israel on his own. The worry now personalized, I called Ayal's mother. As we spoke, I confirmed with her his full Hebrew name to be included in our prayers for healing. She assured me that his body would be alright, that his wounds were not serious. The words she spoke next continue to haunt me, "Pray for his soul. He has seen evil and done evil." At the start of this new year, a time of hope renewed, I offer these searchings of heart and text as a humble prayer for the healing of souls..., and of bodies, ravaged by the evil of war. I want to include here mention of a young man named Jonathan who davened with us in this *shtibl* on these Days of Awe last year, and who now lies wounded in a hospital in Iraq. While Ayal may not agree with all of the sentiments of his former teacher, I dedicate these thoughts to Ayal, and to young people everywhere who are sent into battle by elders who lack the vision and the courage and the wisdom to find another way.

The background set, as we turn to the text now that gives context to these thoughts, I also offer grateful acknowledgement to those of this קהילה קדושה, this holy community, who, on a mid-summer's Shabbos morning sat around the learning table in this space, and through Torah engaged matters of war and peace. They helped me to see and inspired me to explore, in passages long familiar, possibilities that I had never seen before.

The dialectics of history, evolving toward fulfillment, play out in quiet struggle on the sheets of parchment that form the inner path of our people's journey. Ever unfolding, the terrain of this journey is marked by strokes of quill and ink. As letters form words and blank spaces appear around them, gates open that invite us to enter and engage and interpret. Given voice by the rabbis, the Torah speaks to us and says, "dirshuni, dirshuni - - interpret me, interpret me." Why engage Torah? Torah is a mirror of life. The word for mirror and for vision in Hebrew can be one and the same - מִרְאָה. In Torah we see ourselves and the world in which we live, and so in every generation. The Torah is timeless, eternal. "Turn it and turn it," the rabbis said, הפוך בה הפוך בה דכולא בה, "for all is within it." Torah presents realities that are archetypal, transcending time and place. The Torah challenges us to the core, at times through the grandeur of its moral calling, at times through the horror that is meant to be evoked through the cruelty of both human and divine behavior. To wrestle with Torah is to wrestle with life. Challenged in ways both grand and base, we are brought to confront within ourselves and in the human condition the profound potential for both good and evil.

Engaging Torah we engage life in a context of sacred discourse. We are challenged, fresh insight is gained, we are bidden to take new knowledge of head and heart out into the world and to make real the ultimate ideals that pulsate through Torah. Sometimes it is hard to engage the ultimate. We don't probe deeply enough. We are afraid. We don't ask the right questions. At times willfully, at times innocently, we close our eyes to new ways of seeing and being. So it is in the world itself. When we remain stuck in one way of being, one way of reading the text and of seeing reality, we impede the emergence of deeper knowledge and truth. It is true for ourselves as well as for generals and policy makers. A pure stream flows just beneath the surface of Torah, waiting to be tapped, waiting to bubble up through us and to water the land with new hope and possibility.

During the dark days of summer, I began to see a parallel between a narrow reading of the Torah portions of that time and a narrow reading of the reality of that time. In Deuteronomy chapter 20, verses 1 through 10, text and life meet and beg for new insight. From the text, a voice long stifled cries out to be heard. The section begins, "When you go forth to battle against your enemy and see horses and chariots, a body of men more numerous than yourself, do not be afraid of them; for God, your God, is with you, Who brought you out from the land of Egypt." The stage is set for battle, and then there follows immediately a series of exemptions from military service. One who has just built a new home and not yet dedicated it may return home, lest he die in battle and another man dedicate it. Similarly, one who has planted a vineyard and not yet enjoyed its fruit may return home; and, most poignantly, one who has betrothed a wife but not yet consummated the marriage may return home, lest he die in battle. All of these represent an affirmation of life in the face of death. In that context we read the next verse, verse 8, the final exemption, usually understood to be about fear and cowardice. I suggest that this verse too should be read in the way of the other exemptions, as an

affirmation of life. That is not the tone of its common translation, "And the officers shall continue to speak to the people and say, Who is the man afraid and fainthearted? Let him go and return home and not make the heart of his brothers to melt with cowardice like his own." This young recruit is described in the text as, הַיָּרֵא וְרַךְ הַלֵּב. These words can quite literally be translated as, "the one who is of reverential and tender heart." יֵרֵא means "awe" or "reverence" as well as "fear." רך means "soft," "tender," or "gentle."

So why has such a different translation and the assumption it represents become the norm? And why be concerned, why challenge the translation of a Biblical text as a matter of life and death? Precisely because to challenge the translation is to challenge the underlying assumption, that war is inevitable and that bravery is expressed through wielding of the sword. The tender-hearted recruit of Deuteronomy 20:8 represents a different truth and a challenge. Neither the officers then, nor nations ever since have been ready to hear that truth and accept its challenge. Even as God seems to sadly accede to the human penchant for violence, yet trying to give it a framework of control, whether through the dietary laws or the laws of war, the ultimate vision of "swords into plowshares," pulsates beneath the text, challenging, waiting.

In some translations of the Torah, recognition is given in footnotes to an alternate reading of the text. In one edition there is an asterisk in the text itself, directing us to look below at traditional commentary that suggests this recruit is "afraid of weapons and unable to kill" (Kaplan). In another recent *chumash* (Etz Chayim), a footnote to one of the problematic words says, "Literally, 'soft-hearted,' meaning cowardly." The footnote continues, "Some commentators took this idiom to mean 'tenderhearted,' in the sense of compassionate, unable to harm others." Why do these insights remain relegated to footnotes, to the margins of the page? Because in real life that is where they are. Translation and interpretation reflect prevailing understanding and norms. In the world of power, the commanders, then and now, and the kings and queens, the presidents and prime-ministers, are all afraid of the tender-hearted truth that challenges the only way they know, the way of power, the way of the sword. They are the fearful ones, and through fear they are not free to imagine another way. As with all armies, fear and need for conformance turns force upon their own. The Talmud conjectures that guards with iron axes were stationed at the rear of the troops to cut off the legs of any who sought to flee, whose hearts melted only then, upon seeing the carnage of war, when forced in the moment to see and do evil. The one who already knows his tender heart, whose quiet presence speaks truth to power, is sent home first because the officers know the power of his truth. This has been the brave and lonely role of pacifists and conscientious objectors in every land throughout time, to nurture an ultimate vision, that it not be lost in the midst of war's thrall. The tender-hearted is sent home, "lest he melt the heart of his brothers [to be] like his own heart," וְלֹא יִמַּס אֶת-לֵבב אָחִיו כְּלֵבבוֹ. In the Hebrew for this second part of the verse, a specific word for "cowardly" does not in fact appear, only the more ambiguous word, "to melt." A heart that is able to melt is a human heart,

a heart that can feel compassion, a tender heart. There is hope in the very fear of the officers, hope in their knowledge that the other soldiers are capable of the same feelings as the one who is sent home, who is brave enough to declare his feelings of horror. The officers know the truth of this one, but they cannot admit it into their reality. "Not now, not now," they seem to say, "it is not time yet to hear your truth." So it has remained, and finally we ask, if not now, when? It is time to remove the asterisk, and to admit the truth of the tender heart into the text and into the political and philosophical discourse of war and peace. It is time to acknowledge that war itself is evil, even when the cause is deemed just. It is time to acknowledge the ultimate futility of war as a means for resolving conflict, and to acknowledge that war represents the most devastating and damning failure in human relationships.

There is a powerful and deeply instructive tradition of peace and nonviolence that flows through Jewish tradition. Like the tender hearted recruit who is sent home and, literally, marginalized by translators, this tradition is too often ignored, eyes averted through fear, through lack of faith and imagination. While there are many traditional sources to which we can look, I want to share some of the sources that speak for this one whose nature is incompatible with the sword, because this is the place in the weekly cycle of Torah reading where we found ourselves during the dark days of summer. This was a time, sadly, when monolithic thinking and reflexive response among our people drowned out expressions of love for Israel that also included the wide panoply of human suffering, of Israelis and of Lebanese and Palestinians, that saw with prescience the utter futility of reliance on military power. Relegated to the margins, these voices of today have a noble place in the tradition of Israel, in the fabric of the talis of our moral survival as a people.

As we listen to voices from the margins that help shed new light on our verse in Deuteronomy, and, by extension, on the quality of discourse today, a starting point is set by Rabbi Akiva, whose martyrdom we recall on Yom Kippur. We need to remember now the problematic words, הירא ורך הלבב, usually translated as something like "fearful and fainthearted," but which I have suggested is more accurately translated as "of reverential and tender heart." Rabbi Akiva says that the usual meaning of these words refers to "one who is unable to stand in the battle phalanx or see an unsheathed sword (Sotah 44a)." From within the rabbinic period itself, the period of the Talmud, in the work known as the *Tosefta*, we find a comment on Rabbi Akiva's statement. The *Tosefta* asks why are there two words, הירא and רך הלבב? The second term, "of tender heart," as we are translating it, is meant to tell us that "even a hero among heroes and the strong among the strong who (in that moment) becomes a person of compassion is to return home," שאפילו גבור שבגבורים וחזק שבחזקים והיה רחמן חוזר.

In the way that the conversation of *oral Torah* unfolds across time and space, Rabbi

Boruch HaLevi Epstein, known as the *Torah T'mimah*, now weighs in from the 19th century to expand on the words of the *Tosefta* in the fourth century. A most sensitive commentator, the *Torah T'mimah* says, "Tenderness is the attribute of compassion (*rachmonus*) which can also be found in the hero and in the valiant heart." Even the heart of a seasoned warrior at a certain point has had enough..., and his heart melts. Another rabbinic work, *Avot d'Rabbi Natan*, asks, "Who is a hero of heroes?" The answer, "one who makes a friend of an enemy."

This thread of hope that shuttles through our sacred literary tradition, challenging assumptions that today seem to have ossified, reminds me of an old Pete Seeger song, *Golden Thread*, "Oh had I a golden thread, and needle so fine, I would weave a magic strand of rainbow design, of rainbow design." With a quill as needle so fine, two Medieval commentators, Rabbenu Bachya and Avraham ibn Ezra, weave our strand of hope into the discussion from their place in the continuum of time. They too ask, why the two words to describe our gentle recruit? They respond that the first word means he is afraid to strike another, and the second indicates fear to suffer the blows of others. Back to the rabbinic period, a *midrash* similarly describes Jacob approaching his encounter with his brother Esau as "afraid that he will be killed, and distressed that he will kill." Remarkably, Rabbenu Bachya introduces his entire commentary to the Torah portion *Shoftim*, from which this discussion emerges, with teachings culled from rabbinic tradition on the greatness of peace. From the 15th century, Don Yitzchak Abravanel, at various times advisor to the royalty of Portugal, Spain and Italy, speaks of the tenderness in a person's heart, "who by nature is not able to countenance blows of the sword and the spilling of blood." There is powerful strand of Jewish religious thought in which concern for self and concern for the other, even enemy other, are part of one whole. We are all joined as one in the image of God's Oneness. That is the essential meaning of the *Sh'ma*.

In virtually all of Chassidic literature, the call to arms in the book of Deuteronomy is entirely spiritualized, coming to represent the inner struggle between the *yetzer tov* and the *yetzer ha-rah*, the good inclination and the evil inclination. There is a complete disconnect from the reality of war itself. In the non-Chassidic world of Eastern Europe, a story is told of the famous Volzhin yeshiva. A group of students based a Purim play on the list of military exemptions in Deuteronomy. A great army of 100,000 soldiers stood ready to go to war. The commanders announced in succession each of the exemptions. When those who had built a house and not yet dedicated it were called, 20,000 soldiers got up and left the camp. When those who had planted a vineyard and not yet enjoyed its fruit were called, another 20,000 soldiers got up and left the camp. When those who had betrothed a wife and not yet consummated their marriage were called, another 20,000 soldiers went out. The commander concluded, "And whoever is of reverential and tender heart (as I translate it), let him go and return home. At that, all of the remaining soldiers left the camp." It reminds me of an old bumper sticker, "What

if they gave a war and nobody came?" As the Purim play concluded, the only ones who remained in that Biblical camp, with the obvious help of a time machine, were four East European giants of Torah. Three of the rabbis were referred to simply by the titles of their books, and the fourth was the Vilna Gaon, the genius of Vilna, the great Rabbi Eliyahu. And these four, whom we can be sure had never touched a sword in their lives, were victorious in battle. There is such rich and textured irony in this story. The rabbis taught, "Where the book is, the sword is not; and where the sword is, the book is not." In replacing all of the soldiers, the tongue in cheek victory of these rabbis represents the triumph of book over sword.

In our sacred books of commentary, the text appears in the middle of the page, surrounded on all sides by interactive conversations from across time and space. All of the opinions on the page embrace the same text, both literally and figuratively. The geography of a page of text is a model for civil discourse. All are included in the conversation, even as we are, once we open the book. Long ago, at a table in the back of the historic old synagogue in Victoria, British Columbia, I shared with Hebrew School students the beauty of our holy books. Engaging the senses, we touched and looked and smelled an old Hebrew volume. As I love to do, I opened the book to the frontispiece to show the beautiful gate that, as at the front of most holy books, invites us to enter. A question was raised that day, in Talmudic manner, "Is there also a gate at the end of the book?" As we turned to the back cover and found no exit, the next question was, "why not?" Invariably, whenever I open a holy book and pause at the gate before entering, I remember the answer given with such quiet pride by a shy and gentle student. In the rays of late afternoon sunlight that filtered through the rose window high above, it was Ayal who said, "There is no gate at the end, because we never leave the book."

It is a beautiful dream, that we might always remain in the book. The book in Jewish life is a metaphor. It is an orchard, an oasis of peace. Though we wrestle even in the book sometimes with the more sordid ways of the world, with violence and deceit, we are strengthened by that process in the loftier ways of the word. "Use words," we tell our children, and so do we need to learn. War cannot be an option in solving problems. It is a sin to bring parents to say of their children, "he has seen evil and done evil," and a sin to burden our young with the weight of such knowledge. The gate of a new year beckons. It is a time of hope and new possibility for each of us, for our people and for all peoples. The gate to the book of life is a gate of our own making. It is made of our striving, of our seeking peace and pursuing peace, and of the stones raised up from the paths they once blocked. May our hearts melt until we find the way, as together we raise our voices to become the voice of nations. In the book of life, voices from the margins rise to the text in full chorus, joining the conversation, their wisdom heeded. It is time to remove the asterisk, and to hear the truth of a tender heart.

Let us pause here for a moment of quiet reflection, and hear the sound of a silent shofar that calls from within. We are told that a great shofar will sound in the end of days, when swords are turned to plowshares and spears to pruning hooks. The shofar is not sounded on Shabbos. Shabbos itself is a vision of that time. Hear the sound of the shofar that calls to you from within yourself.