

Dear Chavraya,

Today is Rosh Chodesh Elul. Throughout this month of preparation for the Days of Awe the Shofar is sounded every day, except on Shabbos. It is a month of renewal, of turning to each other, of seeking wholeness. In this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Shoftim*, a vision of ultimate wholeness is shattered through what appears to be an assumption of war's inevitability. Beneath the surface, though, there is a different reality that affirms the vision of Elul and fulfills the call of the shofar.

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 exemptions 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, *hayareh v'rach halevav*. These words can quite literally be translated as, "the one who is of reverential and tender heart." *Yirah* means "awe" or "reverence" as well as "fear." *Rach* means "soft," "tender," or "gentle." Of our mother Leah, the Torah says, *v'eyney Leah rakot/Leah's eyes were tender*, using the same word in a different form. In a prayer for healing said at a b'ris the baby is referred to as *hayeled rach/the tender child*.

A number of Torah commentators, drawing on the meaning of *rach* as tender, offer insight into a deeper teaching of the text that flows just beneath the surface. From the fifteenth 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." Rabbi Boruch HaLevi Epstein, known as the *Torah T'mimah*, speaks from the nineteenth century, "Tenderness is the attribute of compassion (*rachmonus*) which can also be found in the hero and in the valiant heart."

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. It is time to hear the truth of a tender heart.

In the end of days, when swords are turned to plowshares and spears to pruning hooks, a great shofar will sound. An intimation of that time, the shofar is sounded throughout the month of Elul, but not on Shabbos. Shabbos itself is a vision of that time.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor