

A Teaching from Rabbi Weintraub: Sh'mot "Fighting Justly"

Shabbat Shemot | January 16, 2009

In this week's Portion, Sh'mot, Moses shows his qualification for leadership by risking his life, three times, to rescue oppressed people. In the first, "He (Moses) saw an Egyptian man (ish) beating a Hebrew man (ish) one of his brothers. He looked this way and that, and, seeing no one (ish) about, he stuck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand". (Exodus 2:11-12). In the second and third rescues, the term "ish" is included, but much less dramatically.

The Netziv, (Rabi Naftalai Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, 19th Century Poland) pointed out that Biblical Hebrew has four terms for a human being, and "ish" is the most elevated. After the initial scene, where Moses kills the Egyptian, the term becomes less prominent. Battle, in other words, even for the supreme value of defending life, is inherently dehumanizing.

There are few dilemmas more thorny than the prosecution of war, especially when one's enemy purposely mixes combatants and noncombatants. The Israeli army to its credit passes its operational plans by jurists, and soldiers learn a code of ethics. The current war against Hamas is waged necessarily for the just, necessary goal of protecting Israelis. Still, while it is impossible to fight Hamas without civilian casualties, it is critical to view civilian casualties as exceptional, not "collateral" or G-d forbid, acceptable.

In the words of Israeli philosopher Donniel Hartman, who recently sent his son Yitzi Hartman, to fight in Gaza, "To be a Jew and moral human being is to be fearful for one's own life and never to become callous at the taking of another... Any person or people who believe they are immune from moral evaluation and criticism are idolators for they view themselves as gods. It is precisely by engaging in such discussions that our greatest strengths lie, and that our soldiers are safe knowing what they are fighting for, and that theirs is a noble and just cause".

900 years, Rashi, explaining the aforementioned verses, wrote that Moses, before killing the Egyptian, looked "this way and that way" not to check for immediate witnesses, but rather to peer in the future and make sure he didn't kill someone who "atid latzet mimenu l'hitgayer - from whom a convert to monotheism might descend".

My colleague, Rabbi Leonard Gordon of Philadelphia, traveled to the South of Israel this past week on a Conservative Rabbinic mission. In an email he shared a story which reminded me of Rashi's comment. Recently, at Berzalai Hospital in Ashkelon, a doctor delivered a Palestinian baby. Another Israeli pressed him, "How do you feel about giving life to the next Shahid (suicide martyr)?" The doctor replied, "I am helping to give birth to the next President of Palestine who will bring peace".