

Ki Tetzei 5781

כ' תצא תשפ"א

Before Going Out to Fight, Look Inside

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We know that every extra word in the Torah invites exploration to arrive at its deeper meaning. The opening words of Parashat Ki Tetzei require such consideration: “*When you go out to war against your enemies . . .*” Why mention *enemies*? Who else would one be going to war against? Rabbinic interpretations focus on the use of the plural (*enemies*) as signifying a distinction between categories of conflict, each requiring different rules of engagement. This helps explain why the rules of war that open the parashah differ from the closing instructions about how to fight Amalek. The Torah is talking about two different categories of conflict.

Conflict is inevitable (after all, it’s “*when you go to war*,” not *if*). In fact, Judaism values argumentation. The Talmud reads like a ping-pong match of conflicting opinions. One noteworthy dispute between Hillel and Shammai lasted three years, until a heavenly voice proclaimed that both sides represent the words of a living God (Eruvin 13b). As is the case in Ki Tetzei, there are different categories of conflict. Hillel and Shammai’s arguments, tradition tells us, were “for the sake of heaven” and these arguments are bound “to endure.” Arguments not “for the sake of heaven” will end badly.

How do we know when an argument is or is not for the sake of heaven? The distinction between the two seems to have to do with intention: Does one seek to gain an understanding of God’s will that leads to communal growth, or is one only seeking personal power? If this is the case, then acceptability of a disagreement hinges on what we know about the other party’s motivation. This is problematic.

A plethora of psychological research shows that we tend to hold biases that are self-serving and work against cutting others the same slack we cut ourselves. When *someone else* does something foolish or objectionable, we tend to read that as a sign of who that person is (and will continue to be). When we do the same foolish or objectionable thing, we excuse ourselves by seeing it as a momentary lapse. You trip because you’re a klutz; I trip because the sidewalk was uneven. We divide the world up into what psychologist Joshua Greene refers to as “moral tribes,” with *us* being in constant opposition to *them*.

Our self-serving biases are of particular concern given that our evolutionary, neuro-developmental journey has left us with an instinctive reaction to perceived threats: We fight or we flee. Conflict escalation can be seen as a cycle in which those involved mutually provoke one another’s fighting and/or fleeing. Many of our disagreements these days take place in cyberspace, and the internet provides anonymity and algorithms that act as catalysts to fighting and fleeing. Anonymity allows us to dehumanize our opponents by avoiding real connections. We become disinhibited and feel less accountable. Algorithms feed us information that confirms our own position, allowing us to flee from engaging with those with whom we disagree.

This brings us back to *enemies*. Another strand of interpretation of the use of the plural in this parashah posits that when we fight, we always face two types of enemies, one external and the other internal. The parashah opens with laws governing the treatment of captives of war. The commentator Shlomo Ephraim Luntschitz (aka the Keli Yakar) explains that the second enemy here is the

yetzer hara, the inclination for evil. Having vanquished a physical enemy, the victor must combat lust or desires for vengeance, and observe the prohibitions described.

By now it is a cliché to say that we live in contentious times, where shrill shouting has taken the place of dialogue and debate. There is a growing tendency to approach those with whom we disagree as if they were Amalek, worthy of utter contempt and annihilation. The cycle of fight or flight and our cognitive biases create a self-fulfilling prophecy. *Look at the terrible behavior of my enemies . . . what horrible people they are. When I behave similarly? That's only because I was reacting to them.* It's unending; our "evil inclination" results in more shouting, calling-out, or canceling, not substantive progress.

We can fight the *yetzer hara* of conflict escalation by developing our ability to self-regulate our emotions. We can learn to recognize the bodily sensations of an impending fight or flight response and take action (for example, by deep breathing, or positive self-talk) to stay engaged. We can question our own biases and assumptions about "the other" and consider our goals and the best ways to achieve them. After all, our tradition is clear that Amalek is the exception; self-regulation is the rule.

Dr. Judith Plaskow explains the contradiction between "remembering" and "blotting out the memory of" some enemies: "We cannot forget the commandments to exclude the Ammonites or blot out the memory of Amalek because their presence in the Torah reminds us of how easy it is to respond to vengeance with more vengeance, or injustice with more injustice." As we approach the New Year, we'll need to develop the capacity to stop that cycle. That work starts with ourselves.