

## **How Important is Morale? (Parshat Shoftim)**

This Shabbat we read *Parshat Shoftim* which informs us that before Jewish soldiers go out to battle, the Kohen who was responsible to accompany the troops would inspire them with uplifting words whose purpose was to lift morale (see Devarim 20:3-4).

At the same time, the officers accompanying the troops then stated that all those men who have recently built but have yet to dedicate their home; or who have planted a vineyard but have yet to redeem its first crops; or who have betrothed a woman but have not yet married her, or who are simply afraid of going to fight, should go home rather than demoralize the rest of the troops. From here we learn how important morale is, and how various exemptions are made to ensure that morale is maintained.

Significantly, while morale is felt by individuals, most discussions relating to the maintaining of morale generally relate to groups such as armies or societies, and while not always the case, the great majority of references to morale are often made during times of tension, war or other similar emergency situations.

As we know, the Mishna, Gemara and almost all rabbinic literature was penned in places and times when Jews did not have an independent state or army. Accordingly, morale considerations were rarely addressed. However, since the establishment of the Modern State of Israel our situation has drastically changed.

The problem is that when modern Rabbis render halachic decisions solely based on the existing rabbinic literature, they can easily overlook the critical consideration of morale which is emphasized in the Torah, but which is not significantly discussed in rabbinic sources.

A case in point are discussions relating to paying a monetary or human ransom for the release of IDF soldiers. In general, we are taught that we may not pay a significant ransom for the release of Jews who have been taken captive (see Mishna *Gittin* 4:6, *Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah* 252:4). And applying this to tragic circumstances where IDF soldiers have been captured, this would mean that these soldiers would be left in the hands of their terrorist captors.

However, as Rabbi Hayyim David Halevy points out (see *Asseh Lecha Rav* Vol. 7 p. 233), applying these rules without considering their impact on morale (which, significantly, is exactly what most halachic authorities do when addressing this question) is a major oversight. As he writes:

*'If an IDF soldier knew that, were they to be captured, that the entire State of Israel would stand behind them for the sake of releasing them, then that soldier would be more likely to fearlessly risk his life during battle. However, were it to be that we apply the rule of this Mishna of not redeeming captives for more than their worth, then it is reasonable to assume that every soldier would act with greater caution on the battlefield to prevent the possibility of them being captured. Given these two options, who is in a position to measure which poses the greater potential danger? The strengthening of the power of the terrorists through the release of their comrades? Or the sustaining of the morale of the IDF soldiers in future wars should they occur God forbid?'*

Interestingly, this question is not limited to soldiers. For example, Rabbi Mordechai Goodman (*Tzohar* Journal, Vol. 13 pp. 29-44) analyses whether it would be permitted to transgress Shabbat to provide mental health support in order to lift the morale of civilians following a terrorist attack. Yet while Rav Re'em HaCohen (*Sh'ut Badei Ha'aron: Pikuach Nefesh* pp. 221-222) partially limits the license penned by R' Goodman, he nevertheless acknowledges that if the morale of the people will have a direct bearing on being victorious, then this may be done.

Overall, we learn from our parsha how important it is to maintain morale, and this is something that – especially since the establishment of the State of Israel – has returned to be a significant consideration, at least in the minds of some, in halachic decision-making.

*Shabbat Shalom!*