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synagogue



### **When You Go Out To War – Deuteronomy 21:10**

The opening of this week's Torah portion knows war. The first commands speak to the way a dangerous sexuality can instil itself in fighters – the Torah mandates its control. Then comes an instruction on what we have come to call 'collateral damage' or perhaps wilful damage of the means of production that will be needed for decent society to return even after the passing of a time of war.

It all feels horribly current.

I've spent years fascinated by the work of Rav Shlomo Goren, the first Chief Rabbi of the Israeli Defence Forces. Rather than seeing his role as one of providing Chizuk v'Nechamah – inspiration and comfort, Rav Goren took it upon himself to return to Israel, in a contemporary manner, a military Halachik ethic that had not existed, in any meaningful way, for two thousand years.

Not since the time of Bar Kochba, Goren wrote in the introduction to his major collection Meishiv Milchamah, has Judaism had any reason to consider the contemporary implications of having a citizens and a land to save and having a military to command. The Jewish people need, he wrote, an entirely new section of the Shulchan Arukh – the central code of Jewish law and life.

Meishiv Milchamah has much Halachah directed at the soldier facing their own ethical and Halachic decisions, in a time of war. There is a heartbreaking analysis of whether a soldier is obligated 'to enter into a place of possible danger in order to save their fellow from certain danger.' There's a huge section on Shabbat – what, for example, are the implications of Jewish law for the soldier setting out in a vehicle to inspect a border on the Sabbath. But the most remarkable sections are those which seek to recover and impose frameworks on generals and politicians – 'Musar HaLechia B'Or HaHalachah' – the ethics of war in the light of Jewish Law. What is the ethical way to treat an enemy? Who has responsibility for deaths in war? And most famously, how is a war-time siege to be conducted according to Halachah. Rav Goren argued fiercely, based on a line in Maimonides' Halachic masterwork, that an escape route – 'Ruach Patuach' - should be maintained for the people of Beirut during the siege of their city in 1982.

The sense I have reading his teachings is of a man trying to do what is right and good in the face of very real, existential, threats. It's clear that he believed the only way to address this question, as a Jew, lay in the verses and teachings of our faith. But that didn't render any of his conclusions simple, certainly there is nothing in his writing that is simplistic or reductive. The sense I have is that he didn't sleep well. No military ethicist, Jewish or otherwise, should sleep well at a time when human beings, creations in the image of God, go out to war.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi Jeremy