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Today's Torah

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Shabbat Parashat Shofetim
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Do Not Let Your Heart Falter

Torah Reading: Deuteronomy 16:18-21:9

Haftarah Reading: Isaiah 51:12-52.12

This week's Torah reading records that before going out to battle, the Israelite troops would gather together to hear from their leaders. The generals would give the orders, and then a priest would step forward and bless the assembled soldiers. He would say to them:

"Hear, O Israel! You are about to join battle with your enemy. Let not your heart falter. Do not be in fear, or in panic, or in dread of them. For it is the Adonai your God who marches with you to do battle for you against your enemy, to bring you victory" (Deuteronomy 20:3-4).

For all of recorded human history, one of the functions of religious leaders has been to give sacred sanction to warfare. Clergy of all varieties have inspired young men to fight, and often to die, on behalf of their nation or their God. Sermons like the one presented in Deuteronomy were meant to stiffen spines and harden hearts, to inspire bravery in battle and reassure the troops that victory is inevitable because they fight "with God on their side."

One of my favorite Torah commentators is Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin (1816-1893), known as

the *Netziv*, whose beautifully written commentary *Haemek ha-Dvar* (“The Depths of the Word”) is notable for its often stunningly subversive re-readings of the text. Writing on this passage, the *Netziv* adds his audacious spin on the line, “Do not let your heart falter” (Deuteronomy 20:3). He says: “Do not let your heart falter... *to cause you to do wrong to your enemies, after they fall into your hands.*”

In an instant, the priest’s role is transformed from exhorting the troops to be fearless in battle, to warning them of the moral pitfalls of unchecked aggression. Warfare, even in the most justified of circumstances, is always an ethically fraught undertaking. Religion’s proper role in it, the *Netziv* says, is to teach responsibility and restraint rather than inspire ferocity. We all have battles to be fought, some literal and some metaphorical, and in all cases, it is incumbent upon us not to lose our humanity in the process, lest we become exactly what we are fighting against.

Elul, the month of preparation for the High Holy Days, during which this parsha is read, is a period of deep self-reflection. In it, we are invited to examine our actions, our motivations, and our shortcomings. We are cautioned to check in with ourselves to ensure that we are listening to the better angels of our nature.

The *Netziv*’s re-reading of this parsha is a powerful example of the inner work that we are called to do during this time. He teaches us that even when it appears that right thing to do is to harden our heart, we are to remember that that is the way of Pharaoh, not the way of holiness. Our job is to keep our hearts open and pliable, to fight our battles but not lose our compassion, to do what the moment demands without succumbing to the temptation to abandon our values. That’s how we enter into this time of transformation. That’s what it means to keep our heart from faltering.

Rabbi Adam Greenwald, is the Executive Director of the Louis & Judith Miller Introduction to Judaism Program at American Jewish University. Before coming to AJU, he served as Revson Rabbinic Fellow at IKAR, a Los Angeles congregation often recognized as one of the nation’s most creative and fastest-growing spiritual communities. Prior to ordination, he served two years as Rabbinic Intern at Congregation B’nai Israel in Tustin, CA and as Director of Education of the PANIM Institute’s IMPACT: DC program. Rabbi Greenwald was ordained at the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies in 2011.



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