



## A Shared Heart: The Civilian-Military Divide

By: Rabbi Myra Meskin

On Veterans Day, we honor the veterans who served our nation and recognize those who have made personal sacrifices for our country and fought for our shared values. Other nations and times in history have seen mandatory conscription to the armed forces, but today the United States is blessed to have a volunteer military corps. While this reality is a blessing to those citizens for whom military service is not a personal ambition, it is also a reality that creates a divide of experience between civilians and service members, both past and present. What then might help us bridge that divide?

Let us look to chapter 20 of the book of Deuteronomy: the Israelites are given laws for how to conduct themselves in war, and before setting out to battle, the officers are to address the troops and say the following:

*Who is the one who has built a new house but has not yet inhabited it? Let them go and return to their house, lest they die in the war and another person inhabit their house.*

*Who is the one who has planted a vineyard and has not yet harvested it? Let them go and return to their house, lest they die in the war and another person harvest it.*

*Who is the one who has been betrothed to a woman but has not yet taken her as a wife? Let them go and return to their house, lest they die in the war and another person marry her (Deuteronomy 20:5-7).*

The idea here seems to be that if we leave something incomplete, we fall into a state of mind that the rabbis call *trafe da'at* - a torn mind - a mind pulled in various directions. Such a person would be distracted, of little use in an army, potentially even endangering the lives of others. According to Deuteronomy, we can become so distracted by our own unfinished business, that we are useless to serve any communal need. It is no wonder that the Hebrew word for wholeness (*shalem*) shares the same root as the word for peace (*shalom*), as often the feeling of completion is what brings us a sense of true peace.

A torn mind might not be how we articulate the reason we civilians abstain from military service; however, the idea that one's mind must be fully committed when engaging in something as consuming and tactful as military action is not difficult to understand. It follows then that those who've volunteered for military service have sacrificed not only their physical health and safety, but also their time and efforts toward other goals they might wish to pursue in life, in order that their minds be focused and whole during their service. It is with this perspective that we can seek further guidance from Deuteronomy in how we might begin to acknowledge this effort given by our veterans.

Deuteronomy provides one last instruction in this (20:8):

*Who is the one who is fearful and faint-hearted? Let them go and return to their house, lest their brother's heart melt as their heart has.*

In Rabbi Alan Lew's book, *This is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared* (p. 81), he teaches that what is implied by this statement is quite simple, but quite profound: we all share the same heart. In a dangerous situation, just one fearful person can affect the safety of us all, because in reality, we affect each other so much more deeply than any of us realize. From the outside, says Lew, we can tell where one of us ends and another one of us begins, but emotionally and spiritually, it is much less clear.

I believe that this reality – that we all share the same heart – is similarly the simple yet profound remedy to the divide often experienced between civilians and veterans. That when our life experiences differ, the answer is to seek unity with the hearts of those around us, that the joys and sorrows of their life experience might give us perspective and remind us of our greater and shared purpose. This Veterans Day, let us commit to sharing our hearts: show up for veterans at a local event, ask a veteran about their time in the military, write a letter to a veteran at a local VA hospital, look up your ancestry and learn about a family member who was a veteran, or find [a myriad of other ways to connect](#) hearts with a veteran.

In doing so, may we discover a oneness in our hearts that brings us comfort, strength, and a vision for a shared future.



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