

God is on our side (*Shoftim*)

Parshat Shoftim informs us that before Jewish soldiers would go out to battle the Kohen (priest) would deliver the following stirring words:

“Hear Israel (*Shema Yisrael*), today you are about to engage in battle **with your enemies; do not be fainthearted, don’t be afraid, or tremble, or be scared of them, **for the Lord God is the One who goes out with you to fight for you** against your enemies in order to save you” (*Devarim* 20:3-4).**

Significantly, though just the two words of **‘Hear Israel’** (*Shema Yisrael*) are used in this verse, Rashi explains that this alludes to the *Shema prayer*, and how its recitation by those about to go to battle girds them and strengthens them. But the question is: how?

Maharal answers in his *Gur Aryeh* commentary that when a Jew recites the *Shema*, they declare their faith in the Oneness and Unity of God, and through doing so, they attach themselves to something greater than anything else, which overrides everything else. Accordingly, faith in *Hashem Echad* gives us hope and strength to fight against and hopefully overcome all the challenges we may face.

Interestingly, the Midrash (*Midrash Aggada*) focusses in on the phrase **‘with your enemies’** on which it notes that though Jews can be unkind to each other, we are not viciously cruel to one another. In contrast, ‘if Jews fall into the hands of our enemies, they will show no mercy.’ As we sadly know from the past 11 months and from the recent sickening murder of six hostages, this lack of mercy is a chillingly accurate description of who our enemy is, and this is why we must continue to fight against them be victorious over them.

Finally, commenting on the words **‘for the Lord God is the One who goes out with you to fight for you’**, Rashi explains that while our enemies, ‘are coming as flesh and blood to be victorious, the Jewish people are coming with the support of God to be victorious’, then adding, ‘[this is like the story of] the Philistines who came with Goliath to be victorious. But what was his end? He fell, and they fell with him!’

Taken together, these verses - which speak so deeply to us in these difficult times - serve as a reminder to us that we should continue to have faith in God and each other; that we should be kind to each other not only because it is the right thing to do but also because our enemies are so cruel towards us, and that when we continue to go out to battle, we should know that God is on our side and that we will ultimately overcome our enemies and be victorious.

Shabbat Shalom!