

The Giving Tree

This Shabbat's Torah portion, Shoftim, is replete with commandments. One fascinating commandment centers on the conduct of war and just combat. If Israel lays siege on a city, the legions are not to cut down any fruit-bearing tree. The verse in the Torah gives explanation in the form of a rhetorical question: "When you besiege a city for a long time, in making war against it to take it, you shall not destroy its trees by forcing an ax against them; for you may eat of them, and you shall not cut them down. For is the tree of the field a man that it should be besieged by you?" (Deut 20:19)

While laying siege upon a city, Israel's army must be careful not to destroy fruit trees. The Talmud understands this command during wartime as the precedent to care for our bounty. There is a dual command: We are enjoined to partake of the gifts of the soil and we must not wantonly squander or waste our G-d given gifts. (Sifrei, ibid)

The Talmud takes this message a step further: While it is forbidden to needlessly chop down fruit bearing trees, we are also prohibited from wasting anything at all. Here Maimonides writes very clearly: Whoever destroys vessels, tears clothes, razes buildings, damns streams and wastes food has violated the prohibition not to waste needlessly. (Laws of Kings, 6:10)

The juxtaposition of war and waste is important. Indeed, the warrior and the war can be just. Israel's effort to become a sovereign nation on its soil is a dream that the Jewish people carried with them throughout their servitude in Egypt. But the just use of might can easily become the cruel abuse and idolization of power.

Here the Torah offers a corrective, a way to war without becoming a warmonger. If, during the military campaign, the soldier can channel his destructive capacity to see the goodness and bounty of the soil, hegemonic impulses will be blunted. Protecting the vulnerable, preventing needless destruction and partaking of the God's gifts – these are our tasks and our blessings.

As we begin to approach the High Holiday season, let's use both parts of our soul: Engage in the acts of necessity, but never forgetting the beauty.

Shabbat Shalom Umevorach,
Rav Menashe East