



Trauma Returning From Battle

In Parashat Shoftim, we first encounter the phrase “*ki teitzei lamilchama*” –when you go out to war (20:6). Several verses later, the Torah again issues rulings related to waging a war: “when you approach a town to attack it...” (20:10). A few *pesukim* after that, the Torah speaks of a situation “When in your war against a city you have to besiege it a long time in order to capture it...” (20:19). Next week’s parasha begins with the phrase “*ki teizei lamilchama*” (21:10).

While the insights from these passages that focus on waging war remain profoundly relevant to the ongoing war, I want to focus on one aspect of the post-combat return from the battlefield. Generally speaking, the returning soldiers might fit into one of three psychological trajectories. One trajectory is that of the resilient or quick-recovering soldier. He may not experience a significant decline in his psychological state, and if he does, his recovery is quick and robust. A second group includes the soldier who is clearly struggling with his post-combat adjustment to regular life, and he is not showing signs of recovery. For such a person, the post-combat disorientation spills into work, close relationships, and daily routines. Loved ones often take on a caregiving role. For such a soldier, there are typically support

systems available, imperfect as these systems can be, and many soldiers in this category do receive substantial support over time.

The soldier in the third group, which I refer to as “the blender,” is less visible, but I suspect this group is quite large. He functions well enough to manage, at least at the outset, but his trajectory is not one of full recovery. This soldier may have turned down psychological support at the beginning because it was not necessary, but after several months, his progress plateaus or regresses. He may be uncomfortable reaching out for support at this later point and he may not even know exactly what he would be trying to address. He also finds that public support is declining for people in his situation, partially because the systems were not designed for someone in his middle-ground position. He has a job, but he is not as productive as he used to be; his marriage is still technically intact and he spends time with his children, but he and his wife are not feeling connected to one another. He looks like he is functioning, but he experiences internal turmoil.

The blending-in soldier may seek relief in ways that are not conspicuously destructive, but his coping strategies do not promote recovery and may lead to increased feelings of disconnection. He may drink or smoke more often, may spend more time scrolling on his phone, or avoid time with friends or family. External events like new call-ups for reserves or news of a fellow soldier’s injury can be destabilizing.

This soldier’s spouse and loved ones also may feel frustrated and lost. Are they supposed to push the soldier to reduce or eliminate these

coping strategies? And if so, what happens when the soldier is not receptive to this encouragement? Or, alternatively, is his wife supposed to be hands-off and be patient as her husband seems bogged down—would this be considered help or neglect?

On a communal level, we also face a variety of challenges in supporting this soldier. Activating more psychotherapists does not really help address the issue, as the struggle of this group typically is not related to an inability to access mental health professions. The funding and services that might be the most useful—like covering some bills or childcare costs during the recovery time, or ensuring job security as they recover finding—are very complicated to implement, especially as public attention dissipates.

While it may not be possible to solve all the challenges faced by the “blenders,” we might take a lesson from the *eglah arufa* where the elders must testify that they did not abandon the traveler. The “blenders” among our returning soldiers are precisely such figures. Their suffering is easy to overlook because it is muted, overshadowed by more obvious crises. Yet the Torah demands we notice and try to take steps to ease their burdens. ■

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