



## Proper Conduct in the Military Camp By Rabbi David Silverberg

We find among the many laws presented in Parashat Ki-Teitzei a number of guidelines regarding proper conduct in a military camp (23:10-15). Specifically, the Torah commands that soldiers who experience a nocturnal emission must leave the camp until sundown the following day, and that soldiers leave the camp to perform their bodily functions. The final verse of this section explains the reason for these commands: “For the Lord your God is present in the midst of your camp to save you and deliver your foes unto you, and your camp shall [thus] be holy. He shall not see anything unclean in you, such that He will turn away from you.”

At first glance, the Torah here teaches that the Israelite military camp enjoys a special level of *hashra'at ha-Shekhina* – divine presence. God accompanies the troops, as it were, for the purpose of offering assistance, and they must therefore conduct themselves in an especially dignified manner to give respect to the divine presence, much as *Halakha* requires respectful conduct in the *Mikdash* or in a synagogue. Indeed, the Rashbam and Chizkuni, in their comments to this verse, explain that it refers to the *aron* (ark) that accompanied the Israelite military to war, symbolizing God’s special presence in the military camp.

Maimonides, however, appears to have understood this verse somewhat differently. In the third section of his *Guide for the Perplexed* (chapter 41), Maimonides addresses the command that soldiers designate a place outside the camp for performing bodily functions, and initially attributes this law to hygienic concerns: “As I have told you, it is one of the objects of the Law to train Israel to cleanliness; that they should keep free from dirt and filth, and that men should not be degraded to the condition of cattle.” Warfare, when human beings are entitled – and in fact obligated – to maim and kill, contrary to the most basic codes of humanity, poses the risk of complete moral degeneration. When men on the battlefield are called upon to act like beasts, they are prone to generally savage and brutish behavior. The Torah therefore insists upon proper hygiene in the military camp to remind the soldiers of their humanity and to ensure that, in Maimonides’ words, they are not “degraded to the condition of cattle.”

Maimonides then proceeds to give another explanation, one which takes into account the Torah’s description of God’s presence in the military camp:

Another object of this law is to confirm by these preparations the belief of the warriors that God dwells in their midst. The reason of the law is therefore stated thus: “For the Lord thy God walketh in the midst of thy camp.” The mention of this reason gave occasion to add another lesson: “That he see no unclean thing in thee and turn away from thee.” These words warn and caution us against the

unusual inclination of soldiers to fornication, when they are away from their homes a long time. God therefore commanded us to do certain things which remind us that He is in our midst; we will thereby be saved from those evil practices... Even those who are unclean by [nocturnal] pollution were compelled to stop outside the camp till the evening... It will thus be confirmed in the heart of every one of the Israelites that their camp must be like a sanctuary of the Lord, and it must not be like the camps of the heathen, whose sole object is corruption and sin; who only seek to cause injury to others and to take their property; whilst our object is to lead mankind to the service of God, and to a good social order.

It emerges from Maimonides' discussion that the emphasis here is on God's residence among the people *even* during warfare. Military camps are usually characterized by immorality and depravity, as Maimonides describes toward the end of this passage. The Torah here stresses that the soldiers are to live with a sense of being in God's presence even under the conditions of warfare, while living for extended periods far from their families and exposed to the pressures and tensions of battle. The requirements mentioned here, which reflect a sense of respect and dignity toward the camp, convey the message that God accompanies the people even in the battlefield. The Torah does not refer here to a special dimension of divine presence in warfare, but rather emphasizes that the soldiers must see themselves in the presence of God even under circumstances that seem very distant from Godliness.

These commands thus convey the critical lesson that we must act in a dignified, refined manner and in accordance with the laws and values of the Torah regardless of the conditions and circumstances. Not all situations in life naturally lend themselves to a sense of religious duty. We often tend to compartmentalize our lives, assigning different objectives and standards to the different areas of life. The Torah here reminds us that "the Lord your God is present in the midst of your camp" under all circumstances, and we are thus in the Almighty's service at all times. Even when we must engage in very ordinary, mundane, and even seemingly undignified activities, we are to sense God's ongoing presence and our obligations to serve Him.