



The Conservative Kehila in Zichron Ya'acov

Dear Friends,

Parashat Ki Tetse - which literally means, "when you go out" - opens with the verse, "**When you go out to war against your enemies, and the LORD your God delivers them into your hands and you take some of them captive...**" (Deut. 21:10).

If we unpack this sentence, we will understand that this is, as usual, an accurate existential description of our lives.

"**When you go out**" - we humans go out all the time. The starting point is unknown, and is perhaps the greatest mystery of all, but if we take a known and agreed upon point in time, it will probably be the ovum that came out of the ovary, and the semen, which has emerged from the testis. And from that moment on, our chain of exits continues - from the baby that comes out of the womb, and the mother and child who come out of the hospital, and the child who leaves home for the first time to go to the nursery, then to the kindergarten, then to the school, and so on. And then one day he walks out of his father and mother's home for good, in order to bring forth his own inner creation - whether it is starting a new family or embarking on a life mission, such as a meaningful book, art, ph.d., etc. At the end of the long journey of exits, the man finally leaves the world altogether. Where to? We will surely know when the time comes.

It seems that a mysterious spell lies at the core of every living organism, whispering "Get out, come out, come out, become, be realized". This spell is the driving force behind all humans, animals, and plants. Even the universe is (still) spreading outwards.

"**To war**" - every exit is a form of going to war. This movement, from the inside out, from the familiar to the alien, from the soft to the harsh, from the comfortable to the challenging, always involves recruitment - or enlistment - for dealing with...

"**Against your enemies**" - these are the challenges we face, from the very first breath of air stinging our vulnerable lungs as we exit the womb, to the daily departure from home every morning as we go out into the world.

"**the LORD your God delivers them into your hands**" - these are our talents, our abilities, the life-force within us, that give us the inner strength to engage in the battles of life. Notice, that they are not "ours". They are all gifts given to us as we fight battles of existence.

"and you take some of them captive" - these are our achievements, the "prey" we bring home, our progress, our development.

After this opening sentence, the parasha lists 72 commandments dealing with a wide variety of things: commandments relating to war ethics, family law, interpersonal relations, social justice, prohibition of certain hybrids, burial matters, prohibition on various clothing, and more.

Is there any connection between these commandments?

This long and varied list may be read as operating instructions to ensure that our coming and going - our exits into the world - are worthy, accurate and fair. "Taking captives" - i.e., working, producing, influencing, moving, determining - requires good judgment and moral direction.

Like humans, animals and plants also "go out", from the inside out. But unlike humans, animals and plants do not need laws to regulate their exits. Their inherent nature dictates their conduct. Only we humans, who have long since disconnected from our innate inner nature, and no longer abide by the bodily sensations that multi-sensory intelligence which is there to guide us - need external laws to govern our lives.

We go out into the world and immediately lose awareness of boundaries. We are insatiable. We always want more and do not know when enough is enough.

In this sense, the entire Torah - from beginning to end - is the art of creating boundaries for the untamed human being, who goes out daily into the war of existence and creation. The Torah seeks to refine us out there in the battlefield of life. Indeed, when the Torah in Leviticus says "You shall be holy," Rashi understands this as a calling for boundaries.

But humans have a wonderful advantage over every other organism: to the best of our knowledge, humans are the only creatures who are aware of their very existence! We are aware that we emerged from our mother's womb - from a comfortable unity, to the harsh world of separateness. And we are the only organism that is conscious of the fact that one day we will leave the world altogether.

The Torah is not a historical-anthropological-biological account. It is the inner story of a creature lacking any awareness of its existence, evolving into a person who is aware of his being - his separateness from the unity of creation - and the implications thereof. Adam and Eve were the first to wake up to their knowledge of existence and death, but Abraham was the first to look directly into the eye of separation, and stand proud before his Creator, calling out "I am!" - "Hineni".

"Hineni" - I am - not only a creature who goes out all the time - from Ur Casdim to Haran, and from Haran to Canaan - and is yanked and tossed from one stage of life to another - to Egypt and back, and to Ghar and back.

"Hineni" - I am - is not a geographical statement (as in, "I am here, sitting in my office").

"Hineni" - I am - is the highest level of consciousness (that I am aware of), in which the separate ego finally knows and experiences that it is actually life itself! Not a particular person with a particular name, but the life force that seeks to emerge out of potential and fully become.

"Hineni" - I am - is the ultimate "going out to war".

To grasp this one needs to fully experience the Abrahamic "Hineni" - I am - awareness. It is to experience oneself as the very existence of life seeking to be lived.

The "Hineni" experience is very Jewish! It differs, for example, from the Buddhist nirvana. As it is at the same time very gentle, but also very active, alive, passionate, and creative. It is the living seam between Being and Doing.

This Jewish "Hineni" is always the process of going out.

In this sense, wars are not tragic. In fact, they can be very creative and yes, even wonderful! When we live our lives anchored in the "Hineni" - I am - consciousness, the wars of life become pure pleasure and surprisingly peaceful.

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha