

B”H

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RE-CAPTURING THE CAPTIVE

THE TORAH TELLS US THAT ‘WHEN YOU GO TO WAR OVER YOUR ENEMY, HASHEM WILL GIVE him into your hand, and you will capture his captive’¹. One question on this literal translation of the text is why does it say ‘over’ the enemy? And why do we capture ‘his captive’, rather than members of the enemy population? And what is the meaning of the further rules given, that the woman who has been captures has to shave the hair of her head, and pare her nails², and weep for her father and mother for a month..?

The point is that this is speaking about the personal service of each individual Jew, throughout time. For the Torah is the inheritance of every Jew, and in all its details it provides guidance on how to live.

The battle which is being described here is the battle to capture aspects of the world and make them into vessels for G-dliness. When one embarks on this task one should know that one is ‘over’ one’s enemy. The ‘enemy’ can be understood as the force to draw us into a purely materialistic, mundane experience of life.

Since our entering this battle is at the behest of the Torah - as it says: ‘when you go to war’ - which means with the power of the Torah, one should know that these are not two equal sides. G-d gives us an advantage, we are over’ the enemy.

Rashi on this verse tells us that the Torah is referring to a ‘permitted battle’ (as distinct from a necessary battle, such as that to conquer the Land of Canaan, in which such captives could not be taken). The Rebbe explains that this means that the battle being described concerns the ‘permitted’ realm of life, the battle to transform the neutral, permitted realm of activity³, and make it a vessel for the Divine, as expressed in ideals such as ‘all your acts should be for the sake of Heaven’⁴ or even more deeply, ‘in all your pathways you should know Him’⁵. In this battle we should know that we are above and over the enemy, and if we only embark on the battle with this awareness we will succeed.

Indeed, the verse continues that ‘Hashem will give him’, your enemy, ‘into your hand’. This means not only will you be victorious, but that the victory will be without special effort.

¹ Deut.21:10.

² Literally ‘fix’ her nails (21:12). Rashi explains that she should let her nails grow long, but as interpreted in this discourse, the words mean that she should cut them short.

³ As distinct from either the necessary activities of the positive commands, or the forbidden activities of the negative commands. This battle concerns the neutral realm of ordinary permitted activity, and the quest to render that realm holy. This is discussed further below.

⁴ Ethics 2:12

⁵ Prov.3:6.

Sometimes one is victorious, but only after tremendous effort with great strain. Here the promise is that it will be an easy victory, something ‘given’ to us by G-d, like a gift which is given generously.

However, at the same time the goal is to transform our immediate environment⁶, and therefore we are not just passive spectators. As in the image of a physical war, we have to take captives. This is achieved through the person making an effort with their own power within their own environment, conquering it, in order to reveal the G-dliness in it.

This is the force of the idea in the verse that we take a captive. But at this point we come to the intriguing literal translation of the verse, that our captive (woman) taken from the enemy had herself been a captive in his hands.

There are two ways to consider what is taking place when one transforms the world. One is that the world is dark and unspiritual, but one elevates it to a higher realm, in which it can become an expression of the Divine. Another way is to see the world as having an exalted spiritual source. However, it has fallen, it has been ‘captured’, through processes such as the Breaking of the Vessels and Exile. But now the person through his or her service in the world can redeem it. Hence, explains the Rebbe, following this latter route, the person recaptures the captive who was in the grip of the mundane.

The Torah then tells us that the captive woman must shave her head and par her nails. Chassidic teachings explain that hair represents excess of the mind, which has fallen into worldly preoccupations, and finger-nails express excess of emotion which has descended into inappropriate forms. In order for us properly to recapture the world, we have to avoid these wayward paths of mind and heart.

The Torah then states that she should ‘weep for her father and mother for a month’. Rabbi Isaac Luria states that this is a hint to the month of Elul, just before Rosh Hashanah, the month of accounting of the year which has gone by, and of spiritual preparation for the year ahead. While all which has been said above applies every day of our lives, in Elul there is an extra thrust of Teshuvah, expressed in our tears. This brings us to the intense closeness with the Divine as the text continues ‘and after that you come to her and make love with her’, we bond with the Shechinah, the Presence of the Divine.

This process takes place in general terms in the lives of each individual, in which we transform our ‘permitted’ activities such as one’s home, food, marital intimacy, and everything else, into an expression of the Divine. But there is also another important mode in which this process takes place.

The Torah states that G-d ‘put the world in their hearts’⁷. The transformation of the world described above can take place within our inner being. The Animal Soul is in the grip of the materialist and narcissistic ‘enemy’. The battle to transform it, and to reveal its essential G-dliness, takes place during daily prayer, when it can be re-captured by the Divine Soul.

⁶ And ultimately, the whole world.

⁷ Kohelet 3:11.

Every day G-d recreates the world, and each person in it, so every day there is a new Animal Soul within us to be transformed.

The task which has been described here is expressed in the teaching of the Sages ‘sanctify yourself in the realm which is permitted to you’. The positive Mitzvot define actions which we must do; the negative Mitzvot define the forbidden actions. But the neutral permitted realm which lies in between is the realm which this teaching is encouraging us to transform. The discourse concludes with a discussion of the nature of Mitzvot: those from the Torah, including the positive Mitzvot, and, higher, the negative Mitzvot⁸. Then there are the rabbinic laws, taught by the Rabbis of the Talmud; then their decrees and extra rules. Then during the Middle Ages and into the modern period, various points of extra strictness by latter-day Sages.

This increasing spread of the halachic element of our lives is a positive part of the process of history. As we enter darker realms of Exile, we need to encroach more into the ‘permitted’ realm and transform it to holiness. Through this the unlimited radiance of the Infinite will ultimately be revealed in our lives and in the whole world.

Torah teachings are holy - please treat any print-out of this page with care

⁸ Chassidic teachings explain that the negative Mitzvot which are not encased in and ‘defined’ by a specific action, but rather by refraining from a forbidden action, give greater access to the Divine. The spiritual realm of ‘not-doing’ is boundless.