IT'S WAR!!

This week's Torah reading begins with the Jewish nation going off to war. At the end of last week's parsha and again at the beginning of this week's, we have a few rules about how to conduct a war. This is important, because war, and violence, in general, can bring out the worst in humanity. Way before the four Geneva Conventions established international legal standards for the conduct of war, the Torah set up some guidelines. We always knew that this was important, but the present Russian behavior in the Ukraine is shocking us all over again.

All of this is very important, but throughout much of Jewish history, at least for the last 2000 years, we had no armies, therefore, no wars. Therefore, many commentaries looked at these verses allegorically. The Kli Yakar, writing in the early 17th century explains:

The verse refers to enemies in the plural, but when the verse reports that God will place the enemy into your hand, the term is NOTANO, in the singular... Rather the verse is definitely talking about a specific, personal enemy, who earlier was referred to as one of many individual enemies. So, MI HU ZEH, V'EIZEH HU? (Who is this, and who is he? Famous reference to Haman). This is none other than the inner oppressor and enemy, the SATAN, the YETZER HARA (the evil inclination), who fights against you at your most vulnerable times, especially times of war (D'varim 21:10).

One cool and important aspect of this approach is that initially the reference to the YETZER HARA is plural. Then each soldier on the front lines conquers a singular, specific enemy. This is crucial, because each one of us has our own evil inclination to combat and, hopefully, defeat. It's like standing at a buffet and watching the diners examine the choices, then check their plate, then check their waistline. Each diner has a different dietary demon to defeat. So, too, with sins, it's a smorgasbord of temptations out there. Know your particular enemy!

The Ba'al Shem Tov heartily agreed with this approach. He added that this allegory about the YETZER HARA is a warning that this fiend is ever on the prowl to entrap the unsuspecting. So, you must go to war with great speed and cunning to 'capture' the
YETZER HARA, by noticing the danger and then being careful to never heed the SATAN's evil suggestions.

The Ohev Yisrael adds that this war is specifically to recollect the NITZOTZOT (sparks) which were spread throughout the world as a result of Adam and Chava's primordial sin, 'Yisrael through their MA'ASIM TOVIM ('good deeds'?) and pure thoughts redeem them from their imprisonment in the impure earthly realm'. It sounds like a noble quest, and we are worthy knights errant, in search of chivalrous adventure.

But later the Ohev Shalom quotes the Gemara in Chagiga (15a) about the BAT KOL (Heavenly voice) which descends pleading with the Jews to do T'shuva. The Rebbe then explains that God, in infinite compassion, deeply desires that all the sinners return to Him in truth and sincerity. This is a very sweet, but totally different scenario. Where's the swashbuckling conquest of the YETZER HARA?

It's clear that there are two visions of T'SHUVA. There is the fierce battle against the foul forces which will entice one into sin, but there is, simultaneously, a warm welcome home for the person who lost their way and wandered from the path. L'HAVDIL (and it's clearly not an exact analogy, by any means) we should behave similarly in the war on drugs. The evil drug lords, who personify the YETZER HARA, should be treated swiftly and harshly, while addicted victims, must be treated with compassion and care.

This approach to the war against sin allows us to see the SHOFAR calls during Elul in a different light. Yes, it's the wakeup call discussed by the Rambam (Hilchot T'shuva 3:4) -

Wake up you, sleepy ones from your sleep and you who are in deep slumber, arise. Inspect your deeds, repent, remember your Creator. Those who forget the truth, because of the vanities of time, and throughout the entire year devote their energies to vanity and emptiness which will not benefit or save: Look to your souls. Improve your ways and your deeds and let every one of you abandon his evil path and thoughts.

However, the Shofar is also the trumpet call to war against the YETZER HARA. I believe strongly that we need both analogies. Fight for your lives against the enemy at your gates, but, simultaneously, look to a loving, benevolent God for a warm embrace and a welcome home.
In general, I think that we, as the Jewish community, must adopt a similar approach. Never be too harsh to those who are OTD ('off the DERECH'). Don't burn bridges, and there is always a hope that our wayward friends and relatives may find their way back. Simultaneously, our own personal struggles against our own demons must be fiercely fought, tooth and nail, with the certain knowledge that the energetic enemy eternally lurks just outside our defenses. Be ever vigilant.

It's a war out there every day, and we must marshal all of our resources to win the battles we can, with the certain knowledge that the enemy will be there again tomorrow. It's great that we also know of God's love and compassion, but that faith shouldn't lessen our resolve in the face of an eternal adversary. 🙏