

Moses recognizes that when Israel inhabits its land, it, like every nation, will have a political life. It will form alliances and relationships with other nations, but it will also have to contend with threats to its security from adjacent countries and regional powers. Then as now, wars are inevitable and, as we can plainly see in the rest of the Bible, the history of Israel in its land is comprised of many wars, skirmishes, conquests and defeats. Thus, in several locations in Deuteronomy, Moses provides the basic elements of what we could call, a military code.

כִּי תֵצֵא לְמִלְחָמָה עַל אִיבֶיךָ וְרָאִיתָ סוּס וְרֶכֶב עִם רַב מִמֶּךָ... (דב' כ:א)
When you go out to battle against your enemies and you see horses and chariots, fighting-people many-more than you... (Deut. 20:1a)

Consider this to be an aerial snapshot as it were, of an army amassing its force against Israel. No specifics are given. We don't know where or why. We don't know the logistics, or the geopolitical context. All we know is that military conflict is imminent, and that there is asymmetry here. You are outnumbered and out equipped. The enemy has **horses and chariots** and **fighting-people many-more than you do**. Naturally, you will be afraid. But Moses continues:

לֹא תִירָא מֵהֶם כִּי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ עִמָּךְ הַמַּעֲלֶה מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם. (דב' כ:א)
Do not fear them, for the Lord your God is with you, the one who brought you up from the land of Egypt! (Deut. 20:1b)

More than calming reassurance, Moses is in effect commanding them to not be afraid of the enemy. He then grounds the commandment in the invisible yet palpable reality that **God is with them**. The words **כִּי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ עִמָּךְ** are extremely resonant in the Torah and throughout the Bible. They summon a rich catalogue of examples of divine protection (see examples at the bottom of the next page).¹ Then, in the deftest rhetorical move, having already cued the listener with the term **horse and chariot**,² Moses summons the archetypal moment of Israelite

defenselessness and fear, namely when God brought Israel out of Egypt. In so doing, he triggers in his audience (and in us!) the memory of the greatest miracle of the Torah, the splitting of the Red Sea, and sparks in us an instant **then-and-now** contrast.³

Then: At the Red Sea	Now: Living in the Land
We were powerless.	We have power.
We were unsettled.	We are settled.
We were unorganized.	We are organized.
We were haggard, traumatized, and destitute.	We are free, proud, and strong.
We were facing total annihilation.	We are facing a single necessary battle.
Pharaoh's horses and chariots are coming to attack and decimate us.	The enemy's horses and chariots are arrayed against us to wage war.
We panicked and screamed to Moses.	Moses anticipates and neutralizes our fear.

To deal with the imminent threat and its associated fear, Moses calls for a convocation to take place in which the priest will speak to the people.

וְהָיָה קִרְבָּכֶם אֶל הַמִּלְחָמָה וְנִגַּשׁ הַכֹּהֵן וְדִבֶּר אֶל הָעָם. וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם: שִׁמְעוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל אַתֶּם קִרְבִּים הַיּוֹם לְמִלְחָמָה עַל אִיבֵיכֶם אֵל יָרֹד לְבַבְכֶם אֶל תִּירְאוֹ וְאֵל תַּחֲפוּזוֹ וְאֵל תַּעֲרִצוֹ מִפְּנֵיהֶם. כִּי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם הֵהָלֵךְ עִמָּכֶם לְהִלָּחֵם לָכֶם עִם אִיבֵיכֶם לְהוֹשִׁיעַ אֶתְכֶם. (דב' כ:א-ד)
And it shall be: when you draw near to the battle, the priest is to approach and speak to the people and say to them: Hearken, O Israel! You are drawing near today to battle against your enemies. Let not your heart be soft, do not be afraid, do not be in trepidation, do not be terrified before them! For the Lord your God is the one who goes with you, to do battle for you with your enemies, to deliver you! (Deut. 20:1-4)

¹ And I can't resist two other great examples, one from the Prophets, Solomon's Prayer at the dedication of the Temple:

יְהִי ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ עִמָּנוּ כְּאִשֶּׁר הָיָה עִמָּנוּ אֲבוֹתֵינוּ אֵל יַעֲזֹבֵנוּ וְאֵל יִשְׁשֹׁנוּ. (מל"א ח:ד)

May the Lord our God be with us as he was with our fathers—may he not abandon us, may he not leave us! (1 Kings 8:57) and one from the Writings:

גַּם כִּי אֵלֶךְ בְּגִיא צִלְמוֹת לֹא אִירָא רָע כִּי אַתָּה עִמָּדִי. (תה' כג:ד)
Though I walk through a valley of deepest darkness, I fear no harm, for You are with me. (Psalm 23:4)

² We recognize it instantly from the first verse of the Song of the Sea: **יָסוּס וְרֶכֶב רָמָה בָּיָם** *sing to God for he has triumphed, yes triumphed, horse and charioteer he flung into the sea!*

³For easy reference, here is the relevant text at the Red Sea:

וַיִּדְּפוּ מִצְרַיִם אַחֲרֵיהֶם וַיִּשְׁיֹגוּ אוֹתָם חֲנִים עַל הַיָּם כֹּל יוֹם רֶכֶב פָּרָעָה וּפָרָשָׁיו וַחֲיִילוֹ עַל פִּי הַחִירָת לִפְנֵי בְעַל צָפֹן. וּפָרָעָה הִקְרִיב וַיִּשְׂאוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת עֵינֵיהֶם וַהֲנֶה מִצְרַיִם נֹסֵעַ אַחֲרֵיהֶם וַיִּירָאוּ מֵאֵד וַיַּעֲזֹקוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל ה'. וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל מֹשֶׁה הַמְּבִלִּי אֵין קִבְרִים בְּמִצְרַיִם לְקַחְתָּנוּ לְמוֹת בְּמִדְבָּר מֵה זֶאת עֲשִׂיתָ לָנוּ לְהוֹצִיאֵנוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם. הֲלֹא זֶה הַדָּבָר אֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְנוּ אֵלֶיךָ

בְּמִצְרַיִם לֵאמֹר חֲדָל מִמֶּנּוּ וְנַעֲבֹדָה אֶת מִצְרַיִם כִּי טוֹב לָנוּ עֲבֹד אֶת מִצְרַיִם מִמֹּתֵנוּ בַּמִּדְבָּר. וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל הָעָם אֵל תִּירְאוּ הַתִּיַּצְבוּ וּרְאוּ אֶת יְשׁוּעַת ה' אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה לָכֶם הַיּוֹם כִּי אֲשֶׁר רָאִיתֶם אֶת מִצְרַיִם הַיּוֹם לֹא תִסְפוּ לְרַאתָם עוֹד עַד עוֹלָם. ה' יִלָּחֶם לָכֶם וְאַתֶּם תִּחְרְשׁוּן. (ש"מ י"ד:יג)

*The Egyptians pursued them and overtook them encamped by the sea, all of Pharaoh's **chariot-horses**, his riders, and his army, by Pi ha-Hirot, before Baal-Tzefon. As Pharaoh drew near, the Children of Israel lifted up their eyes: now here, Egypt marching after them! They were exceedingly afraid. And the Children of Israel cried out to the Lord, they said to Moses: Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us out to die in the wilderness? What, now, have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? Is this not the very word that we spoke to you in Egypt, saying: Let us alone, that we may serve Egypt! Indeed, better for us serving Egypt than our dying in the wilderness! Moses said to the people: Do not be afraid! Stand fast and see the Lord's deliverance which he will work for you today, for as you see Egypt today, you will never see it again for the ages! The Lord will do battle for you, and you—be still! (Exod. 14:10-13).*

Again, we can contrast this to the moment at the Red Sea.

Then: At the Red Sea	Now: Living in the Land
Moses speaks to the people. <i>Do not be afraid! Stand fast and see the Lord's deliverance which he will work for you today!</i>	The priest speaks to the people. <i>Hear O Israel! Let not your heart be soft, do not be afraid, do not be in trepidation, do not be terrified before them!</i>
ה' ילחם לכם ואתם תחזקו. (שמו' יד:יג)	כי ה' אלהיכם ההלך עמכם להלחם לכם עם איביכם להושיע אתכם. (דב' כ:ד)
Moses: <i>God will do battle for you. And you, be silent!</i> (Exod. 14:13)	The priest: <i>God is the one that will be with you to do battle for you with your enemies to save you.</i> (Deut. 20:4)
We should be silent and passive to God's actions.	We should be active and participatory with God.

We can draw the following conclusions, when we compare the two situations:

God rescued us with a miraculous intervention: the splitting of the sea and subsequent drowning the Egyptian army.	God will not rescue us with a miraculous intervention. Victory is contingent on God being among the fighting force.
When Israel moves from slavery to freedom, God is the warrior. Israel watches. God's actions alone enable Israel's victory over Egypt.	When Israel settles the land, Israel is the warrior. God is "embedded" within the Israelite army. God's presence combined with Israel's actions enable Israel's victory over its enemies.
Israel is totally dependent upon God for its security and well-being.	Israel is independent and responsible for its destiny, provided it maintains God's presence in its midst.
In the book of Exodus, we are in a world in which God upends nature. God has total agency and responsibility for the outcome of events.	In the book of Deuteronomy, we see a world in which human beings assume agency and responsibility for the outcome of events.

Four Phrases for Fear. When the priest addresses the people, he uses four phrases.

1. לִבְבְּכֶם-let your hearts not be soft.
2. אַל-תִּירָאוּ-do not fear.
3. וְאַל-תִּתְחַפְּזוּ-do not act rashly.
4. וְאַל-תִּפְּתָרוּ מִפְּנֵיהֶם-do not break down before them.

It is tempting to see a kind of physiological progression here, that the immediate reaction to the sight of **horses and chariots**, is a loss of resolve or **soft-heartedness**, followed by actual **fear**, **rashness**, and finally a complete mental



breakdown. While we know that when we are in a state of fear, we undergo a complex series of physiological responses - such as an increase in pulse, respiration blood pressure, and increase in adrenaline - **it is more likely here that the priest was trying to be more rhetorical than clinical.** His job was to stir the individuals who would make up the force into action. Such is the opinion of Italian commentator, Isaac Samuel Reggio (YaShaR, 1784-1855) who suggests that when the priest says, **אַל-לִבְבְּכֶם-let your hearts not be soft** he is stating a **בְּלָל-a general term** for the loss of courage and follows with three specific terms that are specific responses to the specific situation: **אַל-אַל-תִּירָאוּ-do not fear-the thunderous noise that their multitudes are making. וְאַל-תִּתְחַפְּזוּ-do not act rashly: do everything possible according to a set regimen, without impulsivity or shuddering. וְאַל-תִּפְּתָרוּ מִפְּנֵיהֶם-do not break down before them: when they advance to you face-to-face.**

In other words, what he is saying is, be courageous. Be people who are **לֵב-אֱמִיצִי-steadfast or courageous of heart**, in effect foreshadowing a big theme at the end of the book, when Moses stirs the people to be **וְאַמִּץ-be strong and courageous** for their upcoming conquest of the land. The priest understands that it will require great courage to wage war. Therefore, his job during this convocation is to stir the people to keep their minds clear and focus on the tasks at hand with clarity and resoluteness. And, in lieu of Moses,

A Sample of "With God" Texts	
Gen. 21:22 אֱלֹהִים עִמָּךְ בְּכָל אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עֹשֶׂה. <i>God is with you in everything you do.</i>	Phichol, general to Avimelekh of Gerar says this to Abraham, noting how God protects Abraham.
Gen. 26:28 רְאוּ רָאִינוּ כִּי הָיָה ה' עִמָּךְ <i>We have seen, yes, seen that God has been with you...</i>	Phichol and Avimelekh say this to Isaac, recognizing God's protection.
Gen. 48:21 הִנֵּה אֲנִי מֵת וְהָיָה אֱלֹהִים עִמָּכֶם <i>Here, I am dying, but God will be with you;</i>	Jacob to Joseph, promising God's protection in Egypt and the return to the ancestral land.
Exod. 3:12 וַיֹּאמֶר כִּי אֲהִיָּה עִמָּךְ <i>He said: Indeed, I will be with you...</i>	God's promise to Moses that he will protect Moses in his petitions to Pharaoh.
Exod. 18:19 וְהָיָה אֱלֹהִים עִמָּךְ <i>May God be with you: You represent the people before God...</i>	Yitro to Moses, invoking God's protection over him as he faces the daunting task of judging the people.

vested with the task of symbolically maintaining God's presence among the people, he will now be the one to invoke God and stir the people to believe that God is with them, and to trust that God will not let them falter. **כִּי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם הֵהלֵךְ עִמָּכֶם-it is precisely because God is the one who is going with them in their midst**, that the people will have a constantly replenishing reservoir of courage and strength to face their enemies. Moreover, because God is will and always be with them, they will

sustain the fortitude and resolve that their cause is just and their actions are noble. It is one thing to have strength of arms. It is another thing, to have strength of purpose. And faith. And trust. That God is with us. **Shabbat Shalom!**