

# Of Soldiers and Slaves: Going to War & Echoes of Egypt

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**The Big Idea.** A series of intertextual parallels link going to war in Deuteronomy with three aspects of our experience in Egypt, under Pharaoh (and being released from subjugation to Pharaoh). Through these parallels, the Torah seems to insist that soldiers not be turned into slaves. Moreover, the atarah describes an excruciating process under which the original shotrim were corrupted. And the shotrim sought justice for it. When did the justice ever happen? Answer in parshat shoftim. See below for elaboration.

## Part I: Some Corner Pieces

In Deuteronomy 20, the Torah states that before going to war, the ‘Shotrim’ the officers, should address the soldiers with a speech, telling them that certain among them, for various reasons, may freely leave the coming battle to go back home. So... “Shotrim”... when’s the last time we heard about people called that?

וְדַבְּרוּ הַשְּׂטָרִים<sup>1</sup> אֶל־הָעָם לֵאמֹר מִי־הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר בָּנָה בַּיַּת־חֵדֶשׁ וְלֹא חָנְכוֹ יֵלֶךְ וַיֵּשֶׁב לְבֵיתוֹ פֶּן־יָמוּת  
בַּמִּלְחָמָה  
וְאִישׁ אַחֵר יַחְנֹכֶנּוּ:

It was back in Egypt. The *Shotrim* were the Israelite officers who stood between the slaves and Pharaoh, in the infamous episode involving Pharaoh increasing the quotas of bricks his beleaguered slaves would be required to produce.

A coincidence? Could be, except this same Parsha in Deuteronomy, just a bit earlier, contains some other language, unmistakably resonant of Pharaoh in Egypt: (א) כִּי־תֵצֵא לַמִּלְחָמָה עַל־אִיבֵי יָרֵךְ וְרֹאִיתָ (א) וְסוֹס וְרֶכֶב עִם רֶב מִמֶּךָ<sup>2</sup> לֹא תִירָא מֵהֶם כִּי־יְהוּהוּ אֱלֹהֶיךָ עִמָּךְ הַמַּעֲלֶךְ מֵאַרְץ מִצְרָיִם:

*Am rav mimenu*... was the phrase Pharaoh used to describe his paranoia about the Israelite nation. What was he worried about? That *when* a *war* would come, they would join the other side.

As if to confirm the resonances with Egypt, look at the verb used to describe the way a higher level of leader, the Kohen, would address the troops about to go to battle: וְהָיָה כִּקְרֹבְכֶם אֶל־הַמִּלְחָמָה וְנִגַּשׁ

<sup>1</sup> **Corner Piece 1: Shotrim.** When else have we had these people? Back in Egypt... the Israelite intermediate taskmasters.

<sup>2</sup> **Corner Piece 3: Am Rav Mimcha / Am Rav Mimenu.** The three of these create a pretty unmistakable connection between the *parshiot*.

הַכֹּהֵן וְדָבַר אֶל-הָעַם. Back in Egypt, there were also leaders who were even more powerful than the Shotrim, and an eerily similar noun appears to denote who they were: וַיֵּצֵא פְרֹעָה בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא וְאֶת-הַנְּגָשִׁים בְּעַם וְאֶת-שֹׁטְרָיו לֵאמֹר:

All in all, the constellation of these resonances looks like this:

The Corner Pieces	
Egypt “Goes to War” Against Israel	Israel Goes to War Against an Enemy
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>שמות א': טי-י"ד</b></p> <p>(ט) וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-עַמּוֹ הַנִּיְהוּ עַם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל רַב וְעַצוֹם מִמֶּנּוּ: (י) הִבֵּה נִתְחַכְמָה לּוֹ פֶן-יִרְבֶּה וְהִיָּה כִּן-תִּקְרָאנָה מִלְחָמָה וְנוֹסֵף גַּם-הוּא עַל-שְׂנְאֵינוּ וְנִלְחַם-בָּנוּ וְעָלָה מִן-הָאָרֶץ: (יא) וַיִּשְׂמִי עָלָיו שְׂרֵי מַסִּים לְמַעַן עֲנֹתוּ בְּסִבְלַתֶם וַיָּבִן עָרֵי מִסְכְּנוֹת לְפְרֹעָה אֶת-פְּתָם וְאֶת-רַעְמֶסֶס: (יב) וְכֹאשֶׁר יַעֲבֹד אֹתוֹ כֵּן יִרְבֶּה וְכֵן יִפְרֹץ וַיִּקְצֹוּ מִפְּנֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: (יג) וַיַּעֲבְדוּ מִצְרַיִם אֶת-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּפֹרֶךְ: (יד) וַיִּמְרְרוּ אֶת-חַיֵּיהֶם בַּעֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה בַחֲמֹר וּבִלְבָבִים וּבְכָל-עֲבֹדָה בְּשָׂדֵה אֶת כָּל-עֲבֹדָתָם אֲשֶׁר-עֲבָדוּ בָהֶם בְּפֹרֶךְ:</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>שמות ה': הי-כ"ג</b></p> <p>(ה) וַיֹּאמֶר פְּרֹעָה הַן-רַבִּים עִתָּה עִם הָאָרֶץ וְהִשְׁבַּתֶם אֹתָם מִסְּבִלְתָּם: (ו) וַיֵּצֵא פְרֹעָה בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא אֶת-הַנְּגָשִׁים בְּעַם וְאֶת-שֹׁטְרָיו לֵאמֹר: (ז) לֹא תֹאסְפוּן לִיתֵת תְּבֹן לְעַם לְלַבֵּן הַלְּבָנִים כִּתְמוֹל שֵׁלֶשֶׁם הֵם יִלְכוּ וְקִשְׁשׁוּ לָהֶם תְּבֹן: (ח) וְאֶת-מִתְכַנְּתֵי הַלְּבָנִים אֲשֶׁר הֵם עֹשִׂים תְּמוֹל שֵׁלֶשֶׁם תִּשְׂמִי עֲלֵיהֶם לֹא תִגְרַעוּ מִמֶּנּוּ כִּי-נִרְפִים הֵם עַל-כֵּן הֵם צַעֲקִים לֵאמֹר נִלְכָה נִזְבַּחַה לֵאלֹהֵינוּ: (ט) תִּכְבַּד הָעֲבֹדָה</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>דברים כ': א-י"י</b></p> <p>(א) כִּן-תֵּצֵא לְמִלְחָמָה עַל-אִיבֶיךָ וְרָאִיתָ סוֹס וְרֶכֶב עִם רַב מִמֶּךָ<sup>3</sup> לֹא תִירָא מֵהֶם כִּי-יְהוֹה אֱלֹהֶיךָ עִמָּךְ הַמַּעֲלֶךְ מֵאָרֶץ מִצְרַיִם:</p> <p>(ב) וְהִיָּה כְּקִרְבְּכֶם אֶל-הַמִּלְחָמָה וְנִגַּשׁ הַכֹּהֵן וְדָבַר אֶל-הָעַם:<sup>4</sup> (ג) וְאָמַר אֱלֹהִים שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲתֶם קִרְבִּים הַיּוֹם לְמִלְחָמָה עַל-אִיבֵיכֶם אֶל-יָרֵךְ לְבַבְכֶם אֶל-תִּירְאוּ וְאֶל-תַּחֲפְזוּ וְאֶל-תַּעֲרֹצוּ מִפְּנֵיהֶם: (ד) כִּי יְהוֹה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם הַהֹלֵךְ עִמָּכֶם לְהִלָּחֵם לָכֶם עִם-אִיבֵיכֶם לְהוֹשִׁיעַ אֶתְכֶם:</p> <p>(ה) וְדָבְרוּ הַשֹּׁטְרִים<sup>5</sup> אֶל-הָעַם לֵאמֹר מִי-הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר בָּנָה בַּיִת-חֲדָשׁ וְלֹא חִנְכוֹ יֵלֵךְ וַיֵּשֶׁב לְבֵיתוֹ פֶּן-יָמוּת בַּמִּלְחָמָה וְאִישׁ אַחַר יַחֲנֹכּוּ: (ו) וּמִי-הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר-נָטַע כָּרֶם וְלֹא חָלְלוֹ יֵלֵךְ וַיֵּשֶׁב לְבֵיתוֹ פֶּן-יָמוּת בַּמִּלְחָמָה וְאִישׁ אַחַר יַחֲלֹנוּ: (ז)</p>

<sup>3</sup> **Corner Piece 3: Am Rav Mimcha / Am Rav Mimenu.** The three of these create a pretty unmistakable connection between the *parshiot*.

<sup>4</sup> **Corner Piece 2: Nigash / Nigas.** Once we see the ‘shotrim’ connection – the middle management, as it were, we can see that in both stories, there was a higher level of authority, too – the Kohen in Deuteronomy, and the Nogsim in Egypt. They are opposites: Both press, but the *nogsim* press down, and the Kohanim *pull* you close, lovingly [i.e. at the moment when a commander can be most stern and standoffish, in the moments before battle – the kohen ‘comes close’ to the people instead and speaks to them compassionately.

To complete the power structure: in both cases, there is an ultimate level of authority on top of the nigash / nigas: The king’. One king is Pharaoh. The other is God.

<sup>5</sup> **Corner Piece 1: Shotrim.** When else have we had these people? Back in Egypt... the Israelite intermediate taskmasters.

<p>עַל־הָאֲנָשִׁים<sup>6</sup> וַיַּעֲשׂוּ־בָהּ וְאֶל־יִשְׁעוֹ בְּדַבְרֵי־שָׁקֶר<sup>7</sup>: (י) וַיֵּצְאוּ  נְגִשֵׁי הָעַם וְשֹׁטְרָיו וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל־הָעַם לֵאמֹר כֹּה אָמַר פְּרַעֲהַ  אֵינֶנִּי נֹתֵן לָכֶם תְּבוֹן: (יא) אֵת־ם לָכוּ קַחוּ לָכֶם תְּבוֹן מֵאִשֶׁר  תִּמְצְאוּ כִּי אֵין נִגְרַע מֵעַבְדְּתֵכֶם דָּבָר:</p>	<p>וּמִי־הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר־אַרְשׁ אִשָּׁה וְלֹא לְקַחָהּ יֵלֶךְ  וַיֵּשֶׁב לְבֵיתוֹ פֶּן־יָמוּת בַּמִּלְחָמָה וְאִישׁ אַחֵר  יִקְחֶנָּה: (ח) וַיִּסְפוּ הַשֹּׁטְרִים לְדַבֵּר  אֶל־הָעַם וַאֲמָרוּ מִי־הָאִישׁ הִירָא וְרַךְ  הַלֵּבב יֵלֶךְ וַיֵּשֶׁב לְבֵיתוֹ וְלֹא יִמַּס אֶת־לִבֵּב  אֲחִיו כְּלָבְבוּ:</p>
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<sup>6</sup> In Egypt: If you weren't up to the task, it didn't matter – the shotrim insisted the standard remained the same and you suffered and were beaten. In Devarim, if you aren't up to the task, the shotrim are compassionate and you can go home.  
<sup>7</sup> True salvation vs. false salvation: See God's salvation of people at the sea, and recall how at the end of Exodus 5, even Moses suspects that the promised salvation might not be coming, as Pharaoh himself suggests: Don't be saved by false words.