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Ya'akov ben Chayim a"h
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his *neshamah*

Men and Trees

PARSHAS SHOFTIM 5775

A condensed digest of various interpretations to a very intriguing passuk

There is a particular *passuk* in this week's *parshah*, set in the context of the laws governing battle, whose meaning seems quite elusive. Obtaining a simple rendering of this verse is somewhat of a challenge, as evidenced by the concerted efforts on the part of a number of commentaries in arriving at its interpretation. Rashi on the very first *passuk* in the Torah makes the following statement: אין המקרא הזה אומר אלא דורשני – “This verse virtually demands explanation!” It would seem that such a sentiment would be applicable in this case, as well. To illustrate, we will simply present the *passuk* here, followed by a literal translation. The perplexities should be self-evident.

כִּיתְצוּר אֶלְעִיר... לֹא־תִשְׁחִית אֶת־עֵצָה... כִּי מִמֶּנּוּ תֹאכַל וְאֵתוֹ לֹא תִכְרֹת כִּי הָאָדָם עֵץ הַשָּׂדֶה לְבֹא מִפְּנֵיךָ בַמָּצוֹר.

“When you lay siege against a city... do not destroy its trees... for from them shall you eat, and you shall not cut it down, **for a man is a tree of the field to come from before you into the siege**” (*Devarim 20:19*).

What does that mean?

To list all of the various interpretations proffered by the commentators would be well beyond the scope of this forum; as such, we will have to suffice by presenting a limited selection.

Intimidation and Provocation

There does seem to be an implied equation of men and trees – something which, in itself, requires elucidation. Some commentators do, in fact, understand the *passuk* in this manner. What is clear is that the Torah is warning against the destruction of trees, even in the course of battle. Rashi interprets the verse as presenting a rhetorical question: What purpose is there in cutting down the trees? Is a tree like a person, whose elimination would serve a practical purpose in war? If an unfortunate is seized on the outside of a besieged city, his life is basically forfeit; the enemy will dispatch him in order to reinforce the siege. His death serves to “convince” the city’s inhabitants to remain inside the besieged city, despite the deprivations of thirst and hunger that result from the siege. However, a tree that is located outside the city is a different matter; its destruction will not serve this same purpose. This is what the *passuk* is conveying: “... Do not cut it down, for is a tree like a person (that its elimination will cause the onlookers) to retreat from before you into the besieged city?” (*cf. Mizrachi*).

Tosfos (*Da’as Zekeinim MiBa’alei HaTosfos*) takes a completely different approach than Rashi. Another somewhat complex aspect of this *passuk* is the term “*ki*,” which Chazal tell us (*Gittin 90a*) could have any one of four meanings. Rashi apparently adopted the definition of “perhaps” – “Perhaps a tree is like a man?” – in presenting the rhetorical approach. Tosfos chooses the definition of “rather/only” and render the *passuk* not in question form, but as a qualifier. They understand that the directive to avoid cutting down trees does not apply when

there is a pressing need. For example, if there are thick woods in proximity to the besieged city in which the inhabitants may hide (and even attempt to infiltrate the camp of the besieging army), these trees may be cleared away. The *passuk*, then, would read as follows: “Do not cut it down *unless* people (may utilize) the trees to enter within your besieging camp.”

The Netziv (*Ha’amek Davar*) provides a novel interpretation based on a strategic military tactic. The purpose of a siege, obviously, is the eventual conquest of the city – preferably sooner rather than later. A besieging army may attempt to speed up the city’s downfall by sending in provocateurs. These individuals are disguised and attempt to blend in with the besieged inhabitants. However, they cleverly instigate strife amongst the citizens. Due to the deterioration of the internal situation and the ensuing confusion, the opportunity arises to throw open the gates to admit the imposters’ true brothers-in-arms.

Now, when the army enters the city to lay it to waste, will they kill these agents with the other inhabitants? Of course not! They are on the same side, and they greatly aided the warriors. This, the Netziv explains, is the message of the *passuk*. Adopting the definition of “because,” he interprets the verse as prohibiting the destruction of the fruit trees on account of the help they afford the besieging army, providing them with sustenance. “Do not cut it down because a tree is like the people who infiltrate the besieged city on your behalf (and just as you would not kill those assistants, do not kill your arboreal helpers, either).

If a Tree Were to Fall Where No One Could Hear it...

Interestingly, the Tzror Hamor seems to take the comparison of men to trees literally – to an extent. He cites the *medrash* (*Pirkei D’R’Eliezer, ch. 34*), which states: “When a fruit-bearing tree is cut down, it emits a scream that reverberates from one end of the world to the other – but alas, it is not heard.” The Tzror Hamor explains that this is so because, just like a person, a tree also has an aspect of a soul that has feeling.

Another shared facet of both trees and man is the production of “*peiros*” (fruit). Consider the statement of the familiar Mishnah, incorporated into our daily prayers (*Peah 1:1*):

אלו דברים שאדם אוכל פרותיהן בעולם הזה והקרון קימת לו לעולם הבא...

“These are the things that one eats from their ‘fruit’ in This World, yet the principal remains (to be enjoyed) in the World to Come...”

Thus we see that the real fruits of one’s labor are his good deeds. In any event, the Tzror Hamor understands that a man is likened to a tree principally in these two ways. There are differences also, of course. Most significantly, a man has intelligence and ability to make choices and flee from danger, while a tree does not. Thus, he interprets the *passuk* as relating both the similarities and differences between man and tree, rendering it as follows: “Do not cut it down, for a man is like a tree (in that both can feel and both produce fruit. However, a tree is different and at a disadvantage, in that) it cannot escape from before your onslaught into the city. (Therefore, it is not appropriate to cut it down.)”