

The Discipline of Sanctity (Bamidbar)

The road to hell is paved with good intentions. — Proverb (widely attributed to Saint Bernard of Clairvaux)

In most military operations, what leads to a functioning organization is a clear chain of command, governed by written, understood, and mutually agreed-upon rules and regulations.

The organization and operation of the Tribes of Israel during their desert wanderings are likewise guided by military protocol and precision. The aspect that receives perhaps the greatest level of detail is the set of instructions governing the Temple/Sanctuary service.

In Numbers, Chapter 4, significant attention is given to the logistics of transporting the various components of the Sanctuary. It warns that if the Levites responsible are not careful, the infraction would be so severe that it would warrant the death penalty. Rabbi Ovadia Sforno offers an insightful interpretation on the matter. He explains that the holy components must never be left unattended or unassigned, lest it provoke a struggle over who has the honor of carrying them. The resulting scramble to reach the item first could lead to pushing and shoving – behavior completely inappropriate and disrespectful, especially in the Holy Sanctuary. Such a lack of protocol is liable not merely to a ‘court martial’ but to an actual divine death sentence.

Sforno quotes from the Babylonian Talmud (Tractate Yoma 23–24), which recounts such an incident in the Temple. The lesson is clear: enthusiasm for doing good, noble, or holy deeds is praiseworthy, but not when it involves trampling others or engaging in basic impropriety. According to Sforno, undue aggressiveness – or even rudeness – in the pursuit of “God’s will” is not only unacceptable; it is considered by God to be a mortal sin.

God appears to be far more concerned with how we treat our fellow human beings than with how we perform ritual commandments.

May we always remember to prioritize the needs of those around us over what may, in truth, be lesser matters. And may we always have the wisdom to know when to assert ourselves and when to step back in the pursuit of our life’s goals.

Shabbat Shalom,

Ben-Tzion

Dedication

To my sister and brother-in-law, Rebbetzin Ilana and Rabbi Daniel Epstein, on their appointment as the Senior Rabbinic team of the Mizrachi Community of Melbourne, Australia. Mazal Tov!!

<https://www.jewishnews.co.uk/marble-arch-synagogue-to-bid-gday-to-rabbi-epstein/>