

## Arboreal Battle Tactics (Shoftim)

*“All you need in this life is ignorance and confidence; then success is sure.” - Mark Twain*

The army marches across the field. Sandaled feet stomp over the newborn sheaves of wheat. The advancing troops see the walled city in the distance, with torches lit and boiling pitch prepared. This promises to be a difficult siege.

The engineering unit, armed with axes and saws, begins foraging for wood to build the siege devices. One of the soldiers spots a strong, unusually tall olive tree that would make an excellent battering ram. He starts hacking away at the tree. The unit commander runs to the soldier and shouts:

“Hey Shmeril! Stop! We can’t chop down fruit trees! Weren’t you listening to the orders?”

Shmeril dutifully stops, apologizes, and goes off to look for other suitable non-fruit-bearing trees.

As the Israelite campaign to conquer the land of Canaan commences, one of the unusual commands they face is:

“When you besiege a city for many days to wage war against it, do not destroy its trees by swinging an axe against them, for from it you will eat, and you shall not cut it down; is the tree of the field a man that it should enter the siege before you? Only a tree that you know is not a food tree, that one you may destroy and cut down, and build a bulwark against the city that makes war with you, until it is conquered.”  
[Deuteronomy 20:19-20]

Rabbi Ovadia Sforno, living in Italy during the wars between its city-states, draws military strategy from this verse.

Sforno contends that cutting down a fruit tree outside the city is a particularly destructive act, often done by an army that wants to starve a city after it withdraws from battle.

In other words, it is an act of desperation by an army that doesn’t really believe it will conquer the city. Cutting down fruit trees signals to the defending city that the attackers themselves doubt victory. The battle is lost before it has begun.

May we approach all our worthy battles with confidence, and thereby achieve success.

Shabbat Shalom,

Ben-Tzion

*Dedication*

*To the launch of Elbit's JUPITER space camera on the SpaceX Falcon 9.*

<https://www.jpost.com/defense-and-tech/article-865439>