

-Save This Page as a PDF-

Regulations for a Holy War

20: 1-20

Regulations for a Holy War DIG: When going to war, what were the Israelites to trust? What memory was to strengthen them? Why do you think the LORD enters into their world of war? When most armies build up, why did Isra'el scale down? How was Isra'el to approach her enemies? What lesson do we learn from the four exemptions given in the Israelites' military service? What do we learn about ADONAI from this?

REFLECT: Does verse 4 apply to military wars today? Is it ever correct to say God takes sides? Why? Why not? Are the exemptions of verses 5-8 more important than going to war? Why? Why not? How might they apply today? How does verse 4 apply to situations outside the military setting? How does it apply to you? What competes for your allegiance in the busy stretches of your life? How do you follow through with ADONAI?

There was no need for God's chosen people to fear a more numerous and better equipped army because YHVH, the One who delivered them from Egypt, would give them the victory.

Deuteronomy 19:1 to 26:15 (to see link click [DI](#) - The Social and Family Mitzvot) deals with individual mitzvot, and to today's readers they might appear irrelevant at first, but the very principles behind these commandments were the ones that have brought dignity to mankind. We need to examine these mitzvot in depth to discover the spirit in which they were given, so that we can still live in obedience to **God's Word** today. For example, in **Numbers 18**, the Israelites were to bring **their tithes** to the Tabernacle because **the priests** and **Levites** had **no inheritance**. But today we have no Temple and no priesthood; however, we bring our tithes to our place of worship. That is the spirit of the mitzvah.



Moses didn't minimize either the size or the strength of the enemy, for **he** knew that the nation living in **Canaan** had horses, chariots, large armies, and fortified cities. The spies who had investigated the Land forty years before had seen all these obstacles and dangers (**Numbers 13**), but had failed to see how small those matters were when compared with the greatness of their **God**. **Moshe** reminded the people that **the LORD** had successfully brought them from the land of Egypt to the plains of Mo'ab and defeated every enemy that had attacked them. In fact, the territory **Isra'el** inhabited at that time belonged to the Jews and not to the enemy, because **ADONAI** had given **His people** a great victory over the nations east of the Jordan (see [At - Isra'el's Conquest of the Transjordan](#)). Just as **Ha'Shem** had defeated Pharaoh and his army in Egypt, so **He** would also defeat **the nations** in **Canaan**.⁴³²

*Dear Great and Mighty **Father**, Praise **You** that **You** are all powerful! Even when all the kings of the world with their armies come against **You**, **You** mightily defeat them. **Coming out of his mouth is a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. "He will rule them with an iron scepter." He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty (Revelation 19:15).***

*Praise **You** that "The Battle belongs to the Lord." Whenever we get into a problem/battle that we do not know how to solve, we can call on **You**. **You** hear us and will answer us: **Call to Me, and I will answer you (Jeremiah 33:3a)**. No problem/battle is too hard for **You** for **You** are all wise and all powerful. As **Jahaziel** the prophet said about the vast armies that were against **Your** people: **Listen all Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem and King Jehoshaphat. Thus, Adonai says to you: Do not be afraid or be dismayed because of this great multitude, for the battle is not yours, but God's' (Second Chronicles 20:15)**. Praise **You Father** for **Your** mighty power which **You** delight in using to protect*

*Your child when we call to **You**. We love **You** always! In **Yeshua's** holy name and power of **His** resurrection. Amen*

Do not be afraid (20:1-4): Moses introduces some broad principles (rather than detailed instructions) to govern **Isra'el's** conduct whenever the nation engaged another **army**. The hypothetical future battle that **Moshe** delineates involved **Isra'el** facing an **army** not only larger than **their** own, but also having **numerous horses and chariots**. But **they** were not to **be afraid of them**. **When you go out to battle against your enemies and see horse and chariot - a people more numerous than you - do not be afraid of them**. For ADONAI your God, the One who brought you up from the land of Egypt, is with you (20:1).

The role of the priest in battle was not only to care for the ark, which symbolized **the LORD's** presence with **Isra'el's** army, but also by **God's** Word to encourage the soldiers to be strong. This was not the high priest, but one of the other priests who was assigned to address the army. We shouldn't be surprised to hear a priest encouraging the army, because the wars with **the Canaanites** were holy wars (see [Ag](#) - **The problem of Holy War in the TaNaKh**). ADONAI had given **them** ample time to repent and turn to **Him**. But **they** refused to obey.⁴³³

When you draw near to the battle, the cohen will come forward and speak to the people (20:2). He will say to them, "Hear, O Isra'el." This cry is heard four times in Deuteronomy (5:1, 6:4, 9:1, and here), and each time these words **called the people** to consider something very serious, something that would challenge the very survival of **their** nation. It would remind **them** of **His** repeated call for obedience and faith in **Him**. **You are drawing near today to the battle against your enemies. Don't be fainthearted! Don't fear or panic or tremble because of them. For ADONAI your God is the One who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies to save you (20:3-4). YHVH Himself was the basis for this lack of fear. He would be with them; He would fight for them, and He would give them the victory.**⁴³⁴

ADONAI's "**Don't be afraid**" is what every believer needs to hear when confronting the enemies of faith. It's the message **the LORD** gave to **Abraham** after helping **him** rescue Lot (see the commentary on [Genesis Ef](#) - **Abraham Believed the LORD and He Credited It to Him as Righteousness**); and to **Jacob** when **he** left home to go to **Egypt** (see the commentary on [Genesis Kl](#) - **So Isra'el Took All His Offspring with Him to Egypt**). **Moses** gave that message to **the Israelites** as they stood at **the Sea of Reeds** (see the commentary on [Exodus Ch](#) - **The LORD Will Fight for You, You Need Only To Be**

Still), and the prophet **Isaiah** repeated it several times to encourage **the Jewish remnant** (**Isaiah 41:10** and **13-14**, **43:1** and **5**, **44:2** and **8**). You will find the phrase seven times in the gospel of **Luke** (**1:13** and **30**, **2:10**, **5:10**, **8:50**, **12:7** and **32**). When we walk by **faith** and keep our eyes on **the Lord** (see the commentary on **Hebrews Cy - We Are Surrounded by a Great Cloud of Witnesses**), **He** will give us **the peace** we need to go forward (**Philippians 4:4-9**).⁴³⁵

Following these encouraging words, four military exemptions are given (20:5-9): To **build a new house but not live in it (20:5)**, to **plant a vineyard but not enjoy its fruit (20:6)**, or to **become engaged to a woman but not marry her (20:7)**, were all elements in “*futility curses*,” widely known throughout the ancient Near East (**28:30**). Therefore, part of the reason for military exemption for these categories would be that a man should not be slain in battle, in circumstances that made him seem under a curse, and how that would affect his surviving dependents. Another possible reason, however, was that the wars envisioned here were wars connected with possession or defense of **the Promised Land**. Enjoyment of the blessing of the Land was thus their end purpose. It would be tragic if **Israelites** should be killed without experiencing the very gifts and blessings for which the war was being fought.⁴³⁶ The first three exemptions rest on humanitarian grounds, while the last one would help maintain better morale among those who remained. These four examples demanded total commitment from every soldier.

First, the officers are to speak to the troops saying: **What man has built a new house but has not lived in it? The officers** were responsible for making sure that **the army** was composed of qualified **men**. However, the most qualified were not necessarily those most gifted for battle. They were, rather, **men** most committed to **Ha'Shem** and free from any distractions that might dampen their spirits for battle. Therefore, for humanitarian reasons, as well as for the morale of the army, anyone who had **built a new house but not lived in it** was granted an exception: **Let him go back to his house - otherwise he might die in the battle and another man would dedicate it (20:5)**.

Secondly, the same exemption was granted to anyone who had **planted a vineyard but had not begun to enjoy it. Let him go back to his house - otherwise he might die in the battle and another man would begin to use it (20:6)**. This particular exemption would last for up to **five years (Leviticus 19:23-25)**.

Thirdly, a **man** engaged to be married was also exempt from military service. **What man has become engaged to a woman but has not married her?** The length of the exemption for a newly **married man** was **one year (Leviticus 24:5)**. **Let him go back to**

his house - otherwise he might die in the battle and another man would marry her (20:7).⁴³⁷

Fourthly, the officers will speak further to the troops and say, “What man is afraid and faint hearted? Let him go back to his house - so he does not weaken his brothers’ heart like his own.” Whereas the previous exemptions had been granted on humanitarian reasons, the exemption for a **fainthearted** soldier was granted for reasons of army morale. Since the best army was the most committed to **ADONAI**, anything or anyone who might affect the faith and confidence of **the Israelite** troops was granted an exemption. These **men** were not to be bullied into battle, scorned for their fear, or court-martialed; they were to be sent home along with the others who qualified for exemption. The reason is clear, for fear in an army is like an infectious plague, which can quickly cripple the ranks with debilitating effect. **Gideon** lost 22,000 **men** when **he** issued this challenge (**Judges 7:1-3**). **Fear** and **faith** cannot coexist successfully in the same heart (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Ff - Jesus Calms the Storm**). **Then when the officers have finished speaking to the troops, they should appoint army commanders (20:8-9)**. Only after those granted exemption had left, would it be clear who was available for military service. And from those remaining, **army commanders at the head of the troops** would be **appointed**, who would be responsible for **their men** in the approaching conflict.⁴³⁸ It may seem that these procedures would reduce the army to too small a size. But **YHVH** would be victorious with many or few. The size of the army was less important than the faith of those who composed it.⁴³⁹

Distant cities outside the Land (20:10-15): This section shifts from military personal to military strategy. Then **Moses** gave instructions for **Isra’el’s** foreign policy. **The people very distant from them** included the nations outside **Canaan** but within the extensive territory promised to **Abraham** and **his** descendants (**Genesis 15:18-21**). **When you go near a city to fight against it, call out shalom to it (20:10)**. The command to make a **city’s people** an offer of **peace** meant to offer **them** a vassal treaty. In this way **the city** acknowledged the sovereignty of **Isra’el’s God** and of **Isra’el**. **Now if it answers you shalom and opens up to you, then all the people found in it will serve you as forced laborers. If it does not make peace with you but makes war against you, then lay siege against that city. When ADONAI your God hands it over to you, you are to strike all its males with the sword. Only the women, children, livestock and all that is in the city - all its spoil - may you take as plunder for yourself. Then the women and the children** had the opportunity to become proselytes (see the commentary on **Acts Bb - An Ethiopian Asks about Isaiah 53: There were three levels of Gentile relationship to Judaism**). **So, you may consume** (Hebrew: *veachalta*, meaning to eat,

devourer, enjoy) **your enemies' spoil, which ADONAI your God has given you. Thus, you will do to all the cities that are very distant from you, which are not among the towns of these nations nearby (20:10-15).** This relatively humane approach to military conquest was only to apply to **the cities** who were **very distant** from **the Land**.

Canaanite cities within the Land (20:16-18): However, the cities within the boundary of **the Promised Land** were a greater danger both to **Isra'el's** political freedom and to **her** religious independence, so that there was all the more reason to be obedient to **Ha'Shem's** command and set **them** apart for **destruction** as part of **their** Holy War. **Only from the cities of these peoples, which ADONAI your God is giving you as an inheritance, you must not let anything that breathes live** (this phrase refers to the human population. As with **the distant nations**, they were allowed to keep the livestock for **their** own personal use). **You must utterly destroy them, even children.** Little **Canaanites** would grow up to be big **Canaanites** (see [Ag - The Problem of Holy War in the TaNaKh](#)). **The Hittites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites** were to be **utterly destroyed**. The verb **utterly destroy** is related to the noun **ban**, or *cherem*. There are examples in the books of **Joshua, Judges** and **First Samuel** to show that *the cherem judgment* of **God** was carried out (**Joshua 7:21-26, 11:10-15; Judges 7:25; First Samuel 15**),
in at least a number of cases.⁴⁴⁰

There were two reasons for this total **destruction**, only one of which is stated in this context. The unstated reason **the Israelites** were instruments of **YHVH's** judgment was that the conquest was not only the means by which **Ha'Shem** granted **His** people **the Promised Land**, but it was also the means by which **He** executed **His cherem judgment** on **the Hittites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites** for **their** sinfulness. The second reason was that if those **nations** survived, **they** would surely entice **Isra'el** to worship false **gods**, and turn **the Israelites** aside from serving **their LORD** wholeheartedly. **You are to do this so they will not teach you to do all the abominations as they have done for their gods, and so you would sin against ADONAI your God (20:16-18).**⁴⁴¹

The treatment of trees (20:19-20): In the ancient Near East military powers punished their enemies by indiscriminately destroying the land. However, this practice made no sense in relation to the land of **Canaan** for it was to become **Isra'el's** own possession. Why should **Isra'el** cut down trees whose fruit *she* could eat?⁴⁴² **When you lay siege to a city for a long time, making war against it to capture it, you are not to destroy its trees by swinging an axe at them. For from them you may eat, so you shall not chop them**

down. And why should **trees**, that were not the enemy, be treated with vindictive wrath as if **they** were persons? **For is the tree of the field human, that it should enter the siege before you? You may destroy and chop down only the trees that you know are not trees for food, so that you may build siege equipment against the city that is making war with you until its downfall (20:19-20).** The spared **fruit trees** would give the **Israelite** soldiers an available source of **food** during **their siege** of the enemy **city**, and provide necessary economic benefits for the ongoing life of anyone who lived in **the city** once it was in **Israelite** hands.⁴⁴³

In **Deuteronomy 20**, Holy War was an instrument of divine policy; **Isra'el** could not have survived without it. But war does not always have the stamp of divine approval. Even in the TaNaKh, **David** was denied the privilege of building **the Temple** because he had **shed too much blood and had fought many wars** (see the commentary on [the Life of David Ep - David Makes Preparations for the Temple](#)). One of the coming features of the coming Messianic Kingdom is the abolition of war (**Isaiah 2:4**). That our society today still resorts to war proves nothing except that mankind is terribly resistant to the grace of **God**.⁴⁴⁴