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When You Go Out to War

21: 10-14

When you go out to war DIG: What were the rights of a woman prisoner of war? Of the Israelite soldier? Why were they only allowed to take wives from cities at a distance from the Promised Land? What attitude on the part of God toward women lies behind the instructions of these verses?

REFLECT: What did it mean for a foreign wife to shave her head? Why the month long wait to get married? What could a newly converted person do today to signal a new beginning? What are the dangers today of two people getting married that are unequally yoked?

Parashah 48: Ki Tetze (When you go out) 21:10-25:19
(to see link click Af - Parashah)

The Key People: Moshe, speaking to all Isra'el.

The Scene: In the wilderness east of **the** Promised **Land**, ready to **cross over the Jordan**.

The Main Events: this parashah begins and ends with the imagery of **going out to war (21:10 and 25:19)**. In between, seventy-four mitzvot address **marrying women** prisoners of **war**, rights of **the firstborn**, consequences for a rebellious **son**, miscellaneous mitzvot, tzitzit, sexual **purity**, restrictions on joining the assembly, avoiding impurities, more mitzvot about **loans, vows, divorce, newlyweds, skin diseases, poor people**, business practices, and removal of **Amalekites**.⁴⁵³ Most of **the Torah** doesn't deal with super-spiritual religious issues. **The Torah** deals with life! It describes building a healthy and godly society that has righteous and just and equitable life for all of its members even for the stranger that is passing by. The religions have taken this fountain of fresh and good water and sealed it under the heavy burden of religion and dogmatism that has snuffed the life out of both Judaism and Christianity. I know, from **Isaiah 1** and **Jeremiah 7** and **Hosea 6**, that it makes **God** ill when **His people** become so heavenly minded that

they are no earthly good.

While Jewish men were not allowed to take wives from the Canaanite nations, they were permitted to marry women from the conquered cities at a distance from the Promised Land.

We might like to live in a world without wars, and thus, without prisoners of war. However, the mitzvot in the TaNaKh recognizes such realities and seeks to mitigate their worst effects by protecting the victims as far as possible. The degradation and mistreatment of **women** during wartime was common. If we ask whose interests this mitzvah serves, the answer is clearly the female captive. If we ask whose power is being restricted, the answer, equally clearly, is the victorious soldier. This mitzvah is thus an example of the TaNaKh's concern to defend the weak against the strong, war being one of its most tragic expressions.⁴⁵⁴

Envisioning a situation where **Isra'el** engages a people in battle and **YHVH** gives **His people** victory, this mitzvah provides guidance for the man who notices an attractive woman among the captives whom he desires to marry. The fact that **Isra'el** takes captives in this scenario demonstrates that the battle has been against non-Canaanite people. **Jewish men** were not allowed to take wives from the Canaanite nations (**7:3**); however, they were permitted to marry women at a distance from **the Promised Land** (see [Dp](#) - **Regulations for a Holy War: Distant cities outside the Land**). In this scenario depicted, **the Israelite man** is permitted to take this captured **woman** as **his wife**, but with certain requirements.⁴⁵⁵



When you go out to war against your enemies, and ADONAI your God hands them over to you and you take them captive, suppose you see

among the captives a beautiful woman, and you genuinely desire her and would take her as a wife for yourself (21:10-11). This commandment told **the Israeli soldier** how to act if **he** wanted to take **her** home and marry **her**. This helped protect the dignity of **the women** captives and the purity of **the Israelite soldiers**. **The Israelites** were not to rape, plunder, or otherwise mistreat captives as other armies of the ancient Near East did.⁴⁵⁶ Of course, it was expected that these **women** would accept the faith of **Isra'el** and enter into the religious life of the nation.

1. A soldier's marriage to a foreign captive would not take place immediately. The prospective **wife** first needed to be prepared psychologically for **her** new life as **an Israelite**. **Then you are to bring her into your house, and she must shave her head, trim her nails, and remove her captive's clothing (21:12-13a).** If **the soldier's** attraction was merely physical? Was she merely looked at as part of the spoils of the battle? If that were true, then they shouldn't get married because their marriage would not last very long.

2. Then the woman was to **sit in your house and weep for her father and mother a full month (21:13b).** During this waiting period, the man could give serious consideration to what he was doing, and **the woman** could grieve **her** dead husband if he had died in the battle, and leave **her** parents if they were still alive. In short, the experiences of this month of waiting, painful as they might be, were designed to help **the woman** make the transition from the old life into the new. As for the Jewish man, he needed to ask himself would this **woman** fit into Jewish society. Would **she** be like the wives of **Solomon** who brought their gods along with them, or would **she** be like **Ruth** who adopted **the God of Isra'el**? The danger of being unequally yoked in marriage (**Second Corinthians 6:14**), was just as real then as it is today: **What agreement does Messiah have with Ba'al? Or what part does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement does God's Temple have with idols? For we are the temple of the living God (First Corinthians 6:14-16a).** Hence, **the woman** was observed for **one full month**. Was **she** fit to live among the priestly nation?⁴⁵⁷

3. After a full month the marriage could be consummated, **you may go to her and become her husband and she will be your wife (21:13c).** In the Jewish world, that means that you give her all the rights and privileges committed to in writing; including a document of divorcement, called a *Ketubah*, which was a contract of obligation including a price that you would have to pay her if you divorce her at a later time.

4. Then, after the full month of observation and testing, **if you are not pleased with her, then you may send her off wherever she wishes.** The phrase: if you are not pleased with her probably didn't refer to some trivial problem in their relationship, but to the new wife's refusal to accept her husband's spiritual values. In that case, the husband could dissolve the marriage by giving up all rights over her. **He** couldn't merely throw her or sell her as though she were a slave.⁴⁵⁸ **But you must certainly not sell her for silver - you may not treat her as merchandise, since you have humiliated her (21:14).** Therefore, even though **she** was dishonored through the divorce, **the woman** still retained a measure of dignity. It was assumed that another **man** would marry **her** or **she** could go wherever she wished. It is a wonderful way that **God** protected **the woman**. This mitzvah may seem unacceptable to the modern mind, but it protected the value of human life and is contrasted with the brutal treatment of women, common throughout the ancient Near East.⁴⁵⁹

Although this passage raises legitimate concerns about the potential religious or spiritual influences this foreign wife might have on her husband, it focuses on a different issue, namely the humane treatment of a captive woman. Regardless of whether or not the passage envisions an "official divorce" (**Deuteronomy 22:19** and **29, 24:1-3; Jeremiah 3:1; Malachi 2:16**), it does not give divine approval for divorce. Nevertheless, here, in these scriptures, **YHVH** addresses a real-life situation without mandating, or even recommending, divorce.⁴⁶⁰

*Dear Heavenly **Father**, Praise **You** for being the best spouse that ever could be. Though there is great joy in human relationships, spending time with you brings an even deeper peace and contentment. We seek to live in relationships with others that please **You**. **For I am jealous over you with a godly jealousy. For I betrothed you to one husband, to present you to Messiah as a pure virgin (Second Corinthians 11:2).** **You** are whom our hearts long to please and we look forward to spending all eternity worshipping and praising **You**. In **Yeshua's** holy name and **His** power of resurrection. Amen*