



Be All You Can Be?

Rav Menachem Zupnik, *Mara D'asra BTU, Passaic, NJ*

An Undermined Army

A recent article in a secular publication attempted to analyze the case of Jack Teixeira, a National Guard airman who leaked classified information about the CIA — an act of treason that placed the country's national security at great risk. What is frightening is that although the airman is now in jail, he is viewed by the left and by many of his comrades in the military as a hero. The article addresses a burning question: How has America disintegrated to the point that our army is comprised of traitors who hate the very country they are tasked to defend with their life?

The author's answer is very disquieting, and not just for the U.S. Army: He explained that years back, the declining patriotism in this country left the military in a major bind: Fewer people were joining the army, and they could not meet their recruitment goals. The remedy was to change the recruitment strategy. Whereas historically, the call to join the army was built on an appeal to patriotic sentiments — the drive to defend our country and our honor — the mission statement changed. Instead of the iconic Uncle Sam pointing his finger while stating “*I want you, for the U.S. army*,” the slogan now reads: “*Be all you can be*.” Army service is now presented as an opportunity for self-fulfillment. Recruitment campaigns stress that joining the military entitles soldiers to free college tuition and leads to opportunities in medicine and hi-tech. Recruits can win up to \$50,000 in bonus money for enlisting. In short, “Be all *you* can be.”

Joining the army is no longer about becoming part of U.S. history and the country's accomplishments. The appeal is to the “self” — benefits, career advancement, and the chance to gain new skills. The goal is no longer to dedicate your life to

something larger and more meaningful than any one person. The army is merely a means to actualize yourself. While this marketing tactic might have been successful in boosting enlistment in the short term, in the long term, this method has tragically undermined the army from within.

The Army of Am Yisrael

What does this military analysis have to do with us? More than you might think. The *Medrash* tells us that at *Kabbalas HaTorah*, when the heavens opened, Klal Yisroel glimpsed the legions of *malachim* and their *degalim*. They deeply desired to have similar legions and *degalim* and Hakadosh Baruch Hu granted their request. Apparently, there is a fundamental aspect of *avodas Hashem* achieved only through *degalim* that Klal Yisrael longed to emulate.

At the beginning of *Sefer Bamidbar*, we are told that the legions of Am Yisrael were comprised of “*yotzei tzava*, everyone who goes out to the army.” This strongly suggests that the legions and *degalim* served a purpose in *avodas Hashem* similar to that served by army *degalim*, used by legions heading out to battle.

Soldiers fight for a cause — for their country and everything it stands for. This single-minded mission is embodied by the flag. When defending the flag, there is no room for self-interest. Allegiance, by definition, means overcoming personal interests and fighting for something greater and more consequential. Ever since *Maamad Har Sinai*, Am Yisrael, too, is on a mission, fighting for a unified cause. Klal Yisrael reached an extremely lofty level of devotion to Hashem, at the moment of the Revelation, but they feared they would not be able to maintain this level for the long term. As the *pasuk* says

(*Devarim* 5:26), “Who can assure that such shall be their heart, to fear Me and observe all My Commandments all the days...?” The solution was the *degalim*. Just as the flag on the battlefield, the *degalim* establish the focus on *kiddush Shem Shamayim*, leaving no room for self-interest. Klal Yisrael desired the *degalim* to maintain their focus and ensure that their mission remain on target.

The Mishnah in *Pirkei Avos* (2:2) states in the name of Rabban Gamliel: “Let all those who work for the community do so for the sake of Heaven.” An *askan* is responsible to do his work *l’shem Shamayim*. But not everyone is on that level. The *Poilishe chassidishe Rebbes* say that even if one’s intentions are not completely *l’shem Shamayim*, they should at least be for “*der zach, nisht zich*,” for the purpose (*zach*), and not for reasons of self-interest (*zich*). The underlying intentions may change, but the mission statement must remain the same. Woe to a generation where the community leaders openly adopt a mantra of self-promotion and self-interest.

Pursuit of Gashmiyus – Eroding Our Mission

The U.S. military will continue to train soldiers, arm them with sophisticated weapons, and hold military drills and parades. But if the soldiers’ mission statement is switched from fighting for the flag to fighting for their own self-interests, they can be sure that failure will be a frequent result.

Sadly, a similar problem seems to be eroding our own very spiritual army. The noble cause of being a soldier in the army of Hashem does not seem to be enough to inspire many of our fighting units. They also have to be promised that they will miss out on nothing that this world has to offer. They also need an assurance that they will be offered every possible physical pleasure our materialistic society has to offer. The mission statement is subtly being rewritten. If the focus is switched from promoting *ruchniyus* to promoting ourselves and our physical comforts to the extreme, how will the army continue to march towards its goal?

The accelerating pursuit of *gashmiyus* in our community is no secret. However, I believe it is important to make it abundantly clear that this trend is not just an unpleasant reality; it is an existential threat to the existence of Klal Yisrael.

Our mission as a group is *kevod Shamayim* and *avodas Hashem*. Every legion in Klal Yisrael has its specific role to carry out towards the very same goal. And although we may not always have the purest of intentions, our mission statement must still focus on our banner and what it represents. We dare not forget the “*zach*” in our focus on “*zich*.”

It is far too painful to put in writing where the obsession with the best and the finest of *gashmiyus* could lead. The damage caused by Jack Teixeira to the U.S. government

is negligible compared to what is happening to our communities before our very eyes. Outrageous public events — ostensibly held for the benefit of Klal Yisrael — placing *gashmiyus* as the focus and ideal are leading the masses of Am Yisrael down the wrong track. No one would have attended a fundraising event in the sixties that in any way lent credence to the Conservative movement. It was self-understood that it would be an act of mutiny, undermining the essence of Torah Jewry. The self-serving indulgent trend in our midst, which glorifies high-end living as a goal in our communities is even more insidious and liable to pervert the definition of *Yiddishkeit*.

Whom Do You Honor?

This concept is contained in the striking words of Rabbeinu Yonah (*Shaarei Teshuvah*, *Shaar* 3).

Rabbeinu Yonah categorizes the *mitzvos* according to the different levels of severity. The tenth level lists the sins for which transgressors have no share in the World to Come, including one who belittles a *talmid chacham*. Rabbeinu Yonah demonstrates a few reasons why such behavior should logically have such dire ramifications, and his fourth reason is most cogent. Rabbeinu Yonah has established many times that the primary function of man is to glorify the Name of Hashem and having one’s priorities straight is the greatest honor of Hashem. Those who belittle a *talmid chacham* obviously have confused their priorities and that perforce denies them a place in the World to Come. As he explains:

“Among the ways to sanctify Hashem’s name is to declare through every expression of one’s lips, every hint of one’s eyes, and every movement of one’s hands, that man’s crowning glory, essential purpose, and innate value is the service of Hashem and embracing his Torah. Those who belittle Torah scholars and G-d-fearing Jews undermine this awareness and their conduct demonstrates precisely the opposite — that the service of Hashem is not primary.”

How far are we from the truth if the general behavior in our society — our every expression, blink of the eyes, movement of the hands, in fact, our entire lifestyle — declares emphatically that honor is reserved for those who attain success in worldly matters, and not solely in the service of Hashem.

This is not a call for abstinence or for Klal Yisrael to live in poverty. I, too, pray every month that Klal Yisrael should have *osher v’chavod*. Rather, it is an urgent appeal to focus on our *degalim*. To keep our mission-statement firm and unbendable. I fear that many in our midst have captured the flag and are slowly changing its colors. We cannot allow that to happen! 🇮🇱