



Between Optional and Obligatory Wars

R. Avital Hochstein – hochstein@hadar.org

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Over the past three years, a myriad of terms for the reality of war have emerged in Israeli discourse: a commanded war (*milhemet mitzvah*), an existential war (*milhemet kiyyum*), a war of restoration (*milhemet komemiyut*), an optional war (*milhemet reshut*), and more. At the core of each concept lies a different mode of conduct and a different motive, and they express a stance on the place war occupies in society as a whole, and in relation to other social duties and needs in particular. Parashat Pinhas provides an opening for these distinctions, as the verses describing the selection of Yehoshua as leader in this *parashah* (Numbers 27:18-21) form the foundation for the halakhic, social, and political procedures required to embark on an optional war. Thus, the *parashah* serves as fertile ground for questions regarding the definition of war, the circumstances that characterize it, and how an individual should navigate their diverse duties and commitments during a time of war.

Our *parashah* describes the moment Yehoshua is chosen as leader:¹ “God said to Moshe, ‘Take Yehoshua the son of Nun’” (Numbers 27:18), and the manner in which Yehoshua is expected to conduct himself:

¹ I have discussed the characteristics of leadership that Moses requests in my essay on Parashat Ki Tissa, “When Moshe Leaves,” available here: <https://hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/when-moshe-leaves>.



וְלִפְנֵי אֱלֶעָזָר הַכֹּהֵן יַעֲמֹד וְשָׁאֵל לוֹ בְּמִשְׁפַּט הָאוּרִים לִפְנֵי ה' עַל פִּי יֵצְאוּ וְעַל פִּי יָבֹאוּ הוּא וְכָל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אִתּוֹ וְכָל הָעֵדָה:

²¹And he shall stand before Elazar the priest, who shall inquire for him by the judgment of the Urim before God; at his word they shall go out, and at his word they shall come in, he and all the Israelites with him, even the whole congregation.

This verse serves as the anchor for how the decision to go out to an optional war is made, as described in the first chapter of Sanhedrin: “And they do not lead [the nation] out to an optional war except by the authority of a council of seventy-one members” (Mishnah Sanhedrin 1:5). There is an obligation upon society, upon the king—perhaps, in modern terms—upon the executive branch, to turn to the supreme assembly of leading citizens—the modern judiciary—in order to embark on an optional war. The talmudic discussion explains that this procedure is based on the verses concerning Yehoshua: “R. Abahu said: As the verse states, ‘And he shall stand before Elazar the priest’” (Bavli Sanhedrin 16a). Thus, the authority of the single leader diminishes; additional stages are introduced that heighten caution, and perhaps even serve as checks against embarking on an optional war.²

But the discussion raises a more fundamental question: What is an optional war, what is an obligatory war, and what are their characteristics? In Massekhet Sotah, there is a statement by Rava that provides an example of each type of war.

² There is an entire array of conditions that must be met in order to embark on an optional war, and once again the verse from our *parashah* stands at the center: “‘He’—this is the king; ‘and all the Israelites with him’—this is the priest anointed for war; ‘even the whole congregation’—this is the Sanhedrin” (Sanhedrin 16a). And in contemporary language, we might say that the process of embarking on an optional war involves a variety of authorities: the judicial, the executive, and the religious. There is here not only formalization, something typical of the transition from the Torah to the Mishnah and the Tannaim, but also stages, people, and institutions involved in making the decision.



תלמוד בבלי סוטה מד:

אמר רבא: מלחמות יהושע לכבש — דברי הכל חובה.

Talmud Bavli Sotah 44b

Rava said: Yehoshua's wars for conquest are, by all accounts, obligatory.

From this example, one can try to generalize and deduce what an obligatory war is, yet questions also arise from it: Is this referring to a single historical point in time and nothing more—the era of Yehoshua—or is it about the conquest of the Land in general, at any time? Or perhaps Yehoshua's wars serve as a paradigm for any struggle for Jewish life—even outside the Land of Israel? And we must ask: What does “conquest” mean? A place where Jews can live? A place where Jews are the rulers? What does “conquest” signify regarding the place and status of non-Jews?

Rava continues:

מלחמות בית דוד לריוקה — דברי הכל רשות.

The wars of the House of David for expansion are, by all accounts, optional.

Once again, we can try to generalize and deduce what constitutes an optional war, and once again, many questions arise: Is this referring to a specific historical point in time—the era of the House of David—or is it that what makes a war “optional” according to Rava is the characteristic of expansion, and the mention of David's era is merely an example? And the expansion of territory for the sake of release from distress or for the sake of a more comfortable life, economic prosperity, or perhaps the intention is specifically physical expansion?

The talmudic discussion also presents a case where it is uncertain whether it is an optional war or an obligatory one. This case also relates to a dispute between R. Yehudah and the sages in the *mishnah* preceding the discussion:

כִּי פְּלִיגִי לְמַעוֹטִי נִכְרִים דְּלֹא לִיְיָתִי עָלֵיהֶּוּ. מֶר קָרִי לֵה מְצֻה וּמֶר קָרִי רְשׁוּת.

Where they (R. Yehudah and the sages) disagree is [regarding a war] to diminish the non-Jews so that they do not come against them; one Master (= R. Yehudah) calls it a *mitzvah* and one Master (= the Sages) calls it optional.

Attempting to formulate a precise definition reveals significant gray areas. The talmudic discussion notes that a situation where we “diminish the non-Jews so they do not attack”—meaning a defensive war aimed at neutralizing a threat—falls into a gray zone. Surprisingly, the status of a war waged to ensure that enemies “do not attack” is never cleanly categorized.³

This debate in Massekhet Sotah is complicated further by the passage in Massekhet Sanhedrin mentioned earlier, which relies on verses from our *parashah* to map out the protocols for an optional war. Yehoshua is the quintessential symbol of commanded wars, the leader most deeply identified with them. Yet, the text uses verses about Yehoshua as the legal foundation for launching an **optional** war. Why would the tradition derive the proper procedure for an optional war from a leader whose defining mission was entirely obligatory?

The result is a blurring of the boundaries between these two categories of conflict. One consequence is that the existential urgency of an obligatory war might bleed into the

³ A third category arises in this debate: *mitzvah*. Apparently, in this kind of war, a groom does not go out to fight. For a more complete discussion than I have space for here, see Mishnah Sotah 8:9 and the discussion in Bavli Sotah 44b.

framework of an optional one. Conversely, the extreme caution required for an optional war might bleed into how we approach an obligatory threat. This ambiguity deepens when we realize just how vast the space is between obligatory and optional wars—a reality perfectly exemplified by the unresolved debate over wars waged “so they do not attack.”

War is an extreme and terrible reality for all. By its very nature, it feels stark and definitive. Yet, as we have seen, trying to define and categorize different types of war raises profound questions. The brief discussion in Massekhet Sotah raises a further question about the practical implications of war: different types of conflict produce entirely different priorities. Consequently, our Sages clash over the status of other duties and commitments—those outside the battlefield—during a time of war. As the Talmud frames it:

נפקא מינה לעוסק במצוה שפטור מן המצוה.

The practical difference relates to one who is engaged in a *mitzvah* being exempt from another *mitzvah*.

The Gemara explains that this distinction is crucial because in some wars active involvement takes absolute precedence over all other civic and religious obligations, and by contrast others force us to confront a difficult question: should we abandon our other responsibilities, or must they still be maintained?

Obligatory wars demand total alignment behind a single leader—and perhaps this halakhic category ceased to exist after the era of Yehoshua. Optional wars require a delicate balance of political, religious, and judicial accountability—and perhaps this category, too, has been obsolete since the days of King David. But perhaps the true purpose of these halakhic categories—and the vast gray area between them—is to force us to constantly ask: How did we



decide to go to battle? What are we fighting for, and toward what end? Which institutions are guiding the decision and overseeing the conflict? And finally, what does this reality mean for the ongoing duties and moral commitments of every individual within a society at war?

