

Parshat Shoftim
Fighting for Work Life Balance
Rabba Dina Brawer - Class of 2018

This week's sedra discusses who may be exempt from conscription to the army:

מִי־הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר בָּנָה בַּיִת־חֲדָשׁ וְלֹא חֲנָדְשׁוֹ וְלֹא חֲנָלְוֹ יֵלֶךְ וַיָּשֵׁב לְבֵיתוֹ פֶּן־יָמוּת בַּמִּלְחָמָה וְאִישׁ אַחֵר יִחַנְּנֵנוּ:
וּמִי־הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר־נָטַע כְּרֶם וְלֹא חֲלָלְוֹ יֵלֶךְ וַיָּשֵׁב לְבֵיתוֹ פֶּן־יָמוּת בַּמִּלְחָמָה וְאִישׁ אַחֵר יִחַלְלֵנוּ:
מִי־הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר־אָרְשׁ אִשָּׁה וְלֹא לִקְהָהּ יֵלֶךְ וַיָּשֵׁב לְבֵיתוֹ פֶּן־יָמוּת בַּמִּלְחָמָה :

'Whatever man has built a new house and not dedicated it...

Whatever man has planted a vineyard and not enjoyed it...

Whatever man has betrothed a woman and not wed her,

let him go and return to his house, lest another man...' (Devarim 20:5-7)

There is a distinct sense of empathy for the man who is about to enjoy a rewarding moment in life, who may be ambivalent about going to war, torn between duty and the risk of losing all that he worked for.

The Torah returns to the topic of exemptions from war a few chapters later:

'When a man takes a new wife, he shall not go out in the army and shall not cross over on its account for any matter. He shall be exempt in his house for a year and gladden his wife who he has taken.' (Devarim 24:5)

The mishnah (Sotah 8: 2,4) elaborates on the two sets of laws and infers two categories of exemptions. The engaged man is exempt from active combat duty, but he is not entirely free of responsibility to support the war effort, he must work to supply the troops with water and food, or in repairing the roads. The newlywed however, in the mishnah's language *'does not move from his place'*, he has no obligation other than looking after his wife. This language suggests a vulnerability in newlyweds and that dedicating time and attention to one's spouse is crucial in the very first year, when a couple is newly committed and has not yet built a reserve of resilience and trust in their relationship.

The above exemptions do not apply to all wars equally. The mishnah distinguishes between *'milchemet reshut'*, a war of aggression waged for economic expansion, to which these exemptions apply. In the event of *'milchemet mitzvah'*, a defensive war, there are no exemptions, in fact even a bride and groom would have to leave their *chuppah* to support the battle (Sotah 8: 7).

What relevance might these laws hold for us today?

Perhaps we can creatively repurpose these passages to point to the challenge of earning a living.

In this reframing, *'Milchemet mitzvah'*, a required battle, represents the struggle to earn a living to support one's family. *'Milchemet reshut'*, a discretionary battle, is representative of one's career ambitions. One is a vital battle, the other is nonessential. For many of us, a successful career is bound up with our identity and ego. Even when it entails sacrificing quality family time, we assure ourselves that all our hard work is essential and for our family's benefit. We can easily convince ourselves that our *milchemet reshut* is indeed a *milchemet mitzvah!*

Carefully distinguishing between the two can be useful in achieving an optimal life-work balance. But we do not necessarily have to choose between the two. The mishnah, in its application of the exemptions to war, suggests that there's a time and place for each type of battle. When establishing a new relationship, one is not only exempt from non-essential war, but '*does not move from his place*'. Nothing but the most vital needs should distract us from focusing entirely on our new spouse and anchoring or new relationship. This is at the core of *shannah rishonah*, the first year of marriage. Once our priorities to our spouse and family are firmly established, we can expand our horizons and follow our aspirations for personal success. Maintaining an awareness that this is a *milchemet reshut*, reminds us to 'exempt' ourselves at moments of significance. Dedicating a new home or enjoying a new vineyard might mean, in a contemporary setting, being present at important family moments such as birthdays, a child's school play, an anniversary dinner, or a well-earned family vacation.



Rabba Dina Brawer was born and raised in Milan, Italy and studied in Jerusalem, New York and London. She holds a BA in Hebrew and Jewish Studies from the University of London and an MA in Education and Psychology from the Institute of Education, London, and Semikha from Yeshivat Maharat. She is the founder of [JOFA UK](#), and the producer of [#YourTorah](#) podcast, a journey to discovering Mishnah. Her work has been [featured](#) in '10 Women, 10 Decades' a short film produced by Chocolate Films. She has recently been appointed Director of Recruitment and Admissions for Yeshivat Maharat.