

Musar* at a Time of War
Rabbi Dr. Geoffrey Claussen (Elon University)
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I. Midrash Genesis Rabbah, 44:4

“Do not be afraid, Abram; I am a shield [*magen*] to you; your reward is very great.”
(Genesis 15:1).

Rabbi Levi said: This was [said] because our father Abraham was filled with anxiety and said: “Perhaps there was a righteous or God-fearing man among the soldiers whom I killed.”

This may be compared with someone who was passing by the king’s orchard, and seeing a bundle of thorns, he came down [from his wagon] and took it.

The king caught sight of him, and he tried to hide himself. [The King] said to him: “Why are you hiding? I would have needed many workers to gather it up! Now that you have gathered it up, come and receive a reward.”

Thus the Holy Blessed One said to Abraham: “those soldiers whom you killed were cut thorns”—as it is written: “the peoples shall be like the burnings of lime, like cut thorns that are set on fire” (Isaiah 33:12).

II. Menachem Mendel Lefin, Moral Accounting (Cheshbon Ha-Nefesh), on humility:

Always desire to learn wisdom from every human being, so that you may learn your own weaknesses, and repair them. Thus you will learn to stop thinking of your virtues and of the deficiencies of your fellow....

Certain people in certain contexts, Lefin suggests, might need to remind themselves of humility with harsher language:

Close your mouth and open your ears to hear others speak of your faults and accept them lovingly as constituting a remedy for your soul.

III. Menachem Mendel Lefin, Selections of Rules (Likkutei Kelalim), 1.3:

The kings of Spain thought of themselves as just and wise, [believing] their abundant humility filled them with mercy. They tortured the Jews grievously in order to admit them—through forced conversion—into the Christian paradise....

* “moral discipline”—the cultivation of virtues/good character traits