

VETERANS DAY AND ABRAHAM

As we approach Veterans' Day and today's honoring of loved ones and friends who have served in the United States Armed Forces, it is well worth reflecting on the mission of our armed forces and the best reasons for their employ in combat.

The Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States defines the mission as the following:

"The US Armed Forces...defend the US against all adversaries [and] serve the Nation as a bulwark and the guarantor of its security and independence. The US Armed Forces function within the American system of civil-military relations and serve under the civilian control of the President, the Commander in Chief. The US Armed Forces embody the highest values and standards of American society and the profession of arms."

The core of the mission is ensuring the defense, security and independence of the United States -- within an established order, and in concert with our highest values as a society and the rules of warfare. The order, values and rules guide the mission, the people, such as the

Veterans we honor today, who carry out the mission, and, in the best case, restrain the mission to its central tenets.

Our Jewish approach to military matters really gets its start with Abraham in last week's parasha, Lech L'cha. Abraham, in his pursuit and conquest of the foreign four king group and in his interplay with the local five king group, shares with the world, and with the American Armed Forces, a values-based, limited yet decisive approach to military engagement which sets a high bar for proper military action.

Abraham is a statesman, diplomat, negotiator and peacemaker in his political dealings with the nations and peoples of his new land. We see this in his graceful separation from Lot, his pleading for the people of Sdom, his commitment to making peaceful covenants with Avimelech and other kings, and his unwillingness to use God's promise of the land as a sword with which to engage the peoples of the land. He is a fighter for ideas and not for an empire -- and, outside of his pointed acquisition of a burial place for Sarah, rests comfortable that his descendants will eventually possess a goodly portion of the land.

Though Abraham has a keen eye to the duplicity and self-interest of other leaders -- such as Ephron the Hittite and the king of Sdom -- he is able to see their good as well and welcome their blessings. Witness his gracious and magnanimous acceptance of the blessing of Malchi-tzedek King of Shalem, who thrills Abraham with his praise of God on High, in front of a large grouping of local nations.

Blessedly, Abraham is not a cynic. He is a crafty diplomat looking to build a fountainhead for his people and his ideas in the land of Canaan, by building relationships with those who already reside in the land, not seeking to destroy them.

Abraham has a very conservative view of the use of arms, and only goes to war when his clan is in danger and their security is in doubt. And, at this moment, in chapter 14 of Lech L'cha, Lot is taken captive by the plundering 4-king grouping. Abraham also recognizes that the rivalry between the 4 foreign kings and the 5 local kings from the area of Sdom threatens to stamp evil on the entire region. The names of a few of the 5-king group, such as **ב-רע**, suggest their evil nature.

Abraham, though a reluctant warrior, acts decisively and takes charge of his destiny as a one-time warrior. He assembles a small, but highly

united and potent force that pursues the 4-king group all the way to the Damascus area and then defeats them. Yet, instead of breathing in the noxious air of conquest and seeking the conquest of other areas of Canaan, Abraham then quickly disrobes from his military attire. He resists the offerings of Sdom and the 5-king group, refusing excessive spoils of the foreign kings that the locals offer him and his troops, and making clear that he seeks not riches from his military endeavors nor the jealousies that might engender with the 5 nations. He stays the course with Sdomites, as we know, seeking their ultimate repentance and conversion to better ways. We all know that Abraham fails in this effort, but doesn't give up trying.

Throughout, Abraham remains true to his ideals of peacemaking, missionizing for humanistic and monotheistic values, carving a niche for his people in the land of Canaan, and, when challenged with a threat to his clan and the proliferation of evil across the land, warring in an ordered, convincing and highly principled manner -- seeking not to aggrandize power, riches or land.

This is a great model for humankind, and for the American Armed

Forces, to follow -- and for us to consider as we commemorate Veterans Day. To seek peace, not empire. To fight for values, not material gain. To fight evil and its insidious nature. To go to war in brevity, for defined aims, and then to remove our armor to resume the peacemaking process.