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# Jewish Views of War and Peace

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When the Israelites stood between the Sea of Reeds and the advancing Egyptian army, our sources tell us they divided into four camps (Palestinian Talmud, *Taanit*, 2.5). Some wanted to "press on," disregarding danger, with complete trust in God. Some wanted to surrender, and return to slavery. Some wanted to fight back, despite the odds. And some believed the answer would be found in prayer. *Just as there is no one "religious" response to the threat of violence and war, there is no one Jewish response.*

Our tradition does record positions taken in the past: both actions and opinions. But we must review past decisions and teachings with great care, for what was true in one context, and in one world, may not apply to other times and places. Decisions good for slaves may not be right for kings. As life changes, so do alternatives from which we must make a choice.

## THREE APPROACHES

In this talk, therefore, I will not try to offer "the Jewish view" of war and peace if that means a position on any question—whether that be the use of nuclear arms or involvement in Central America—which cannot change. Instead, I will share what I think is a framework of values within which we must struggle to reach decisions for today, and then reexamine them for tomorrow. To introduce this framework, it is possible to make at least a general comparison of three faiths: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Each of these faiths has peace as *a goal*. None has peace as its primary goal, or *raison d'être*. Comparisons are not easy, for peace is linked to each religion's dreams of "perfect worlds" which them-

selves are not the same. However, we can examine the answers to one telling question: *What is to be the role of war on the path to peace?*

*Early Christianity* would answer: "none." Violence had no role in the path to peace, it was a deviation, not on the road at all. Pacifism was the answer, and when Jews would confront Rome, this stance helped widen the gap between Judaism and what was quickly to become a separate faith.

Of course, this position was based in large measure on the belief that the dawn of redemption had arrived. Thus concerns for other problems and other powers were diminished. Later, when the so-called "second coming" had not materialized, and violence still reigned, an "interim theology" would give birth to concepts of "just war." But for Christianity at its inception, violence and war were unacceptable, no matter what the provocation.

*Islam* answered differently. For Muslims, war itself became the path to peace! Amidst a world of warring tribes, constant warfare was replaced by war between a mere two worlds: the world of Islam (at peace within), and the enemy (the world without). As the first would grow through conquest, the second would diminish. In the end, all would be one Empire, and the world would be at peace.

Muslim theology would all but rule out force as an instrument of conversion. Wars themselves would not do away with non-believers; they would, however, ensure that all would submit to one united rule.

As time went on, and initial dreams of quick world victory gave way to the realization that empire, like the Christian "second coming," belonged to a future age, an interim theology developed in Islam as well, what we might call a "just peace" theory. Treaties could be made and honored, and certain visions could be relegated to a far-off time. Also, the call to war could be interpreted in ways other than that of the sword. Still, just as Christianity once rejected war altogether, Islam began with a vision that war, violent war, would result in peace.

I believe that we must understand a "Jewish view" that rejects both extremes. It would not concede that violence and war have been abolished, but it would not reject our potential for achieving that goal.

Jewish questions of war and peace must be examined within a framework which is based on three beliefs: (1) that violence and nightmares still exist for now, but so do dreams; (2) that power can be used or can use us; and (3) that in our world we must remember both the depths to which humanity might sink, and the heights to which we might aspire.

## DREAMS AND NIGHTMARES

Judaism begins with a stand for peace. The entire Torah was written for the sake of peace (*Gittin* 59b). As we return the Torah to the ark, we sing *Etz Haim*, and remind ourselves that "all her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace" (*Proverbs* 3:17).

We must *follow* most commandments; but we must *seek and pursue* peace (*Pe'ah* 1:1). Seek, in your place; pursue, in other places.

And, perhaps the most amazing teaching of all: if we practiced idolatry, but were at peace, we would not be punished by God! (*Genesis Rabbah* 38:6)

But, with all our dreams of peace, we must not confuse dreams and reality. Beware the false prophets, Jeremiah reminds us, who cry "peace" when there is no peace (*Jeremiah* 6:14). Peace is a goal, and *it is not the same as our own safety.*

We cannot ignore suffering. We remind ourselves it still exists. We remember times of glory in the Yom Kippur *avodah*; then we remember how ugly life can be, in the *eilah ezkerah*. We sing and dance at a wedding, but we also break a glass. For a moment we remember the Temple's destruction, the symbol that all is still not right with the world.

*We are challenged to dream, but not to go to sleep.* We are taught to cling to dreams, but to face nightmares as well. *We are taught to live with world dreams, but not to live in dream worlds.*

Isaiah (3:4), quoted by Micah (4:3), speaks of a time when we will beat our swords to ploughshares. Joel (4:9-10), speaking of the here and now, reminds us that there are times when ploughshares must be turned to swords.

When we make decisions, we must remember both of these visions. Reality must give our actions foundation. But dreams must give them direction.

## POWER: TOOL AND MASTER

Tevye said that it is no sin to be poor, but it is "no great honor, either." We might say the same for weakness. We do not rush to fight. But sometimes we must take a stand, and power can be used in the fight for good.

If someone comes to kill us, we understand we have the right, and even the responsibility, of self-defense (*Berakhot* 64b, *Sanhedrin* 74a). When others are threatened, we are called to help them as well. "Do not stand idly by your neighbor's pain" (*Leviticus* 19:17-19) means

we must take action, even violent action, against the pursuer. Similarly, a woman in danger should cry out, for the assumption is that if her cry is heard it should not be ignored (see Deuteronomy 22:27 and *Sanhedrin* 8:7).

For non-Jews, this idea is traced to the laws of Noah. "He who sheds human blood, by humans will his blood be shed" (Genesis 9:6) means not merely punishment, but prevention too. "He who would shed human blood" should have his blood shed by human hand, if there is no other way to make him stop (*Sanhedrin* 72b).

From the *Hanukkah* story we reaffirm the stance that freedom, not just life, might demand a call to arms. And, because the State defends our freedom, we must at times bear arms to defend the State. Sometimes war is justified, perceived as "preventive" or "preemptive" within the context of power struggles in the ancient world. These wars (*milhemet reshut*) were "limited" in that only "partial mobilization" was demanded. Other wars (*milhemet hovah*; *milhemet milhamah*) were undertaken during times of clear and present danger, and total mobilization might be required. Sometimes, even when lives were not threatened, strategic concerns could require battle, even on Shabbat (*Eruvin* 45).

But although war was often seen as the lesser of two evils, war itself introduced new danger. Modern military thinkers have come to realize that war by its very nature defies control, "tends," as Clausewitz puts it, "toward the absolute." Power must be used with caution, for it is easy for the tool to become the master.

And so we must ensure that, *just as we do not glorify pacifism, we do not glorify militarism*. War presents a danger which is not limited to human life, but to humanity itself. War is a danger not only to the vanquished, but to the victors. Our sources challenge us to keep alert.

David was the greatest of all kings, but he could not build the Temple for his hands had shed blood (I Chronicles 28:2-3). When we recall our victories, we, along with angels, mute our joy (as in the Seder story of the plagues). "My children are drowning," God cries out, "and you would sing?" (*Sanhedrin* 89b)

"There have been some who increased their strength to their advantage, and others who increased it to their disadvantage" (*Kohelet Rabbah* 1,4). Strength and power can be used for good, or can use us for ill. Examples offered of the latter: Goliath and Samson. Goliath is the symbol of strength which will continue to be challenged, then finally bettered, whether by a stronger foe or a new approach. Violence can indeed breed violence, leading to a cycle of

hate and war. Samson can be seen as a Biblical symbol of what we today call MAD (mutually assured destruction), strength which, even in the end, will prevail against the foe, but at the cost of destroying ourselves as well. Both examples teach that *strength is not the long-term answer*. As Abba Eban has said, it buys, at best, some time to seek solutions.

Of all historic memories, the story of *Hanukkah* could most easily have become the time to glorify military might and prowess. Instead the Rabbis focused on the light which would keep burning, if we would but keep faith. And in the holiday's *haftarah* it is no accident that we recall prophetic words that "not by might, nor by power" will we see our most important dreams come true (Zechariah 4:6).

### GOOD AND EVIL IN OUR HEARTS

Perhaps of all the tensions within which our decisions must be made, the most important of them all is the tension which comes from knowledge of the best *and the worst* which human hands and human deeds have wrought.

Our inclination for the good makes possible a heroism of the body and the spirit. But our inclination for the bad must caution us against decisions which leave no room for doubt. We might be wrong, and even when we're right it is not clear that our actions will not be tainted and deterred based on factors we may refuse to face, or may disguise so well that we even fool ourselves.

Laws of *kashrut* are not designed to protect animals alone. They help protect the humanity within us, put in danger when blood begins to flow and the inclination for evil might take control.

When some lives might be saved in Roman circuses, when spectators sometimes had the chance to vote "thumbs up" or "thumbs down" for life or death, some Rabbis felt that Jews should go and vote for life. But the question was raised, as it still must be: how long can values hold in such a place, before we join the crowd? (*Avodah Zarah* 18b).

The first time that we sin, we feel guilt. The second time, we rationalize that guilt away. The third time we disdain and mock all those who would not do the same. The horrors of the battlefield can strengthen the animal within, and paralyze those feelings that keep humanity alive.

*Violence and war affect both inclinations for the good and for the bad. They numb the first; they feed the second.* And so, even in battle, we struggle to apply some rules. Force, even to protect our lives, may

be justified, but never more than necessary (Exodus 22:1-2; *Berakhot* 58a, 64b, *Sanhedrin* 74a). Our prophets cursed other peoples who exceeded the limits of cruelty (Isaiah 14:17, 47:16). Jacob cursed Simeon and Levi, his own sons: "A curse on their anger, *because it was fierce*; a curse on their wrath, *because it was ruthless* (Genesis 49:5-7).

When I served in the rivers of Vietnam, there was an incident which touched my life forever. The Captain of my ship stood two officers up against the wall, officers whose actions, while involving no risk to human life, had raised questions about our standards and our values. He told them, in no uncertain terms, that so long as he was in command we would understand that we were fighting two wars, not just one. The first was against the "enemy without," in our case, the Viet Cong. That war, he said, would be fought with all our strength. But, he said, we would fight as well the war against the "enemy within": the potential within us to turn us into animals, the threat within our own hearts which could do us more damage than all the enemies in uniform we might have to face.

#### VIEWS OF WAR AND PEACE

Based on the sources discussed above, what are our "Jewish" views of war and peace? I believe there is no one answer to any threat, but that there are values in tension within which all decisions must be reexamined from day to day.

*First:* terrible but true, in this violent world, violence as a controlled response still has a place. But, even as we stand against the nightmares, we must struggle to stand up for dreams. We must keep faith, and let it touch our actions. We cannot measure or justify our deeds against what has been done by others, or what we ourselves did last. We must also measure them against ideals, even if those ideals cannot be fully met. Like the Israelites who fought against Amalek "in the trenches," we must keep sight of Moses, arms lifted high, atop the hill.

*Second:* even as we understand that strength and power can be used for good, we must remember that they are themselves a danger. "God, grant us strength; God, bless us with peace" (Psalms 29:11). Strength may be necessary, but it is not sufficient, and can never be the goal. At best, it is a means, a temporary and fragile means at that. It should never be the end we seek.

*Third:* we cannot rest easy just because we have the upper hand. We ourselves are human, too. "We have met the enemy, and he is

us," taught Pogo. We have a potential, and an "inclination," to act for good; but we are tempted to act, and use our power, for reasons which are selfish, petty, and cruel. We must agree with Pogo, at least in part: there is an enemy without, but there is also one within. Our views of war and peace must recognize *both* threats to the dream of peace we still must actively pursue.

While in Beirut, in a Mideast foxhole, a marine once asked me how so much blood could be shed where three great religions had been born. I could only say that perhaps it was because of our religions—the visions of the prophets and the promises of holy books—that we had the dream of peace at all. By measuring our world today against this glimpse of future times, rather than against the past, questions such as his could be given voice. Those questions must become first steps toward the time of peace of which we dream.