

The Use of Force in Jewish Tradition and in Zionist Practice

By Yakov M Rabkin

[...] for it is not by strength that man prevails (Samuel I 2:9)

Force, and its use, is no stranger to the Torah. The Pentateuch and several of the Books of the Prophets (Joshua, Judges) teem with violent images. But far from glorifying war, Jewish tradition identifies allegiance to God, and not military prowess, as the principal factor in the victories mentioned in the Bible. Yet, today Israel's army - that many associate with Jews and Judaism - is considered one of the best and motivated in the world. How did this change come about?

Codified Pacifism

Tradition interprets the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple and the ensuing exile nearly two millennia ago as divine punishment for transgressions committed by the Jews, including armed resistance against the Romans. "If the warriors had heeded the rabbis, the Temple would still be standing."

Jewish tradition disdains physical force. The relationship with iron, the instrument of murder par excellence, provides illustrates this attitude. Iron tools would not be used to hew the stones of the Temple, and many Jews remove the knives from the table, associated with the altar of the Temple, before reciting grace after the meal.

Tradition praises humility before adversity. This led many secularized Jews to revolt in the early 20th century. Patience in the face of injustice and persecution filled them with shame, and impelled them to take the fate in their own hands.

The Founding Fathers

According to Jewish tradition, two figures created a Judaism that was at once more personal and more cosmopolitan. The first is Yohanan Ben Zakkai, a Torah scholar who fled the Roman besieged Jerusalem, hidden in a coffin. He put emphasis on Torah study that replaced the struggle for political independence.

The second is Judas the Prince (135-219), revered as the redactor of the Mishna. A signal aspect of the life of Judas the Prince, as preserved in the Talmud, was his friendship, even his intimacy with Antoninus, the Roman Emperor of the day.

Both figures, Yohanan Ben Zakkai and Judas the Prince, embody a conciliatory attitude toward any occupying power. They stand in sharp contrast with the patriots who perished in armed struggle or collective suicide (Masada or Gamla). Jewish continuity owes much to these two “collaborationist” rabbis.

Throughout history, some wondered whether these pacifist values were firmly anchored in the Jewish worldview. In a work of religious polemic, the Spanish poet and scholar Judas Halevi (1080-c. 1141) presents a dialogue in which in response to the rabbi who praises the Jews for their pacifism, the King of the Khazars responds with a touch of cynicism: “Such would be the case had you freely chosen humility: but you were so constrained. And should you gain hegemony, you too would kill.”

Frustration and Violence in Russia

In 1861, the liberal reforms of Alexander II gave every appearance of leading the Jews to emancipation. But when a terrorist bomb killed the Tsar in 1881, the period of liberalism came to an end and a wave of pogroms swept across Russia.

While other Jewish communities the world over remained faithful to the tradition of non-violence, and contemplated no armed action against the populations amongst which they lived, that tradition came under increasing attack in Russia, as ever-greater numbers of Jews discovered the allure of political violence. Russian Jews flocked to radical political parties.

The pogroms of the late 19th century deepened the insecurity of the Jewish populations of the Russian Empire. In contrast to Jewish reactions during the pogroms of the 17th century, which had been far crueller and more violent, for a growing number of secularizing Jews the suffering they encountered at the end of the “century of progress” had lost all religious significance. 20th century Jews who had broken with the Torah reacted in an entirely different way. Rather than scrutinizing their own behavior and intensifying their penitence while they fled the violence, they asserted their pride and called for resistance. It was a radical departure from tradition.

Zionism used to be multifaceted: it included, among others, Ahad Haam who saw Zion as a cultural beacon and Martin Buber who advocated an Arab-Jewish state in Palestine. However, the varieties of Zionism that won out and continue to dominate Israel’s public life were inspired by exclusive varieties of European nationalism and articulated mostly by Jews from Russia. This kind of Zionism would seek to transform the meek traditionalist Jew into a brawny, assertive Hebrew. The radicals proclaimed it necessary to straighten the spine of the Jew, long curved before his oppressors and long bent beneath the weight of the volumes of the Talmud. Implicit in this process of liberation was an increased reliance on the use of force. Nihilism and contempt for life, common among Russia’s revolutionaries, generated an upsurge of terrorism whose spectre haunts the world to this day.

Zionism emerged from a climate of shame, of insulted dignity. Even though the Torah, both written and oral, repeatedly cautions Jews against personal or collective pride, it was precisely in these traits that the Zionists sought the kind of respect that

they defined in European terms: a country, an army, political independence. What gave the Zionist movement its extraordinary vigor were not the suffering of pogrom victims, but the humiliation of the rejected supplicants, of those whose hopes of integration into Russian society the pogroms had shattered.

It was Haim Nahman Bialik, a Russian author who later became a cultural icon in Israel, that stoked the fires of revenge. In a poem written following the Kishinev pogrom of 1903, he castigated the survivors, heaping shame upon their heads and calling upon them to revolt not only against their tormentors, but also against Judaism. Bialik lashed out at the men who hid in stinking holes while their non-Jewish neighbors raped their wives and daughters. He mocked the tradition that attributed all adversity to shortcomings in the behavior of the Jews: “let fists fly like stones against the heavens and against the heavenly throne.”

Brenner, another Russian poet, and like Bialik the son of a pious Jewish family, also rebelled against the Jewish tradition. He radically transformed the best-known verse of the Jewish prayer book “Hear, O Israel, God is your Lord, God is one!” into “Hear, O Israel! Not an eye for an eye. Two eyes for one eye, all their teeth for every humiliation!”

Honor, pride, the thirst for power and revenge: these were the new motives that swept into Jewish consciousness at the beginning of the 20th century. The shift in outlook that took place in the late 19th century radically modified the meaning of Jewish history in the eyes of the youth, who thirsted after a specifically Jewish activism. The secular version of Jewish history had eliminated the privileged relationship between God and his people, and made the Jews the victims of an historical injustice. This vision stimulated a powerful impulse to action. Several of the founders of armed Jewish units, both in Russia and in Palestine, also recognized the importance of the use of force as a way of wrenching the Jew from his Judaic past. Hatred of traditional Judaism has been an important dimension of the Zionist movement.

The Russian dimension of Zionism cannot be overestimated. Despite the almost total prohibition of emigration from the Soviet Union since the early 1920s, more than 70% of the members of the Israeli parliament in the 1960s were Russian-born, with 13% born in Palestine/Israel of Russian parents. The emergence of the Jewish elites of Russian origin contributed to the shift, between the two wars, of Jewish public opinion in the United States in favor of Zionism. The Russian aspect of Zionism stands revealed in its concepts, its methods and the support it drew from the most powerful section of the Diaspora, that of the United States.

Israeli right-wing parties, which draw much of their support from voters of Russian origin, bear out the Russian dimension of the Zionist enterprise. Moledet is a nationalist party which call for deportation of the Palestinians. It also affirms that without the historical experience of the Russian Jews, the Israelis will remain unable to attain their historical destiny and purify the nation of its many illusions. Moledet's stance has won admirers among the nationalists in Russia, who lament that the Russian fighting spirit has survived only in Israel, among Israelis of Russian origin. While Moledet's web-site in Russian modifies the World War II slogan, “For Our Soviet Fatherland” to read “For Our Jewish Fatherland”, its URL in Russian is almost

identical to that of a Russian ultra-nationalist one (<http://nasha-rodina.ru/> and <http://www.rodina.org.il>) and the two sites contain reciprocal links.

Joseph Trumpeldor, a Russian war veteran, is the incarnation of romantic heroism in the Zionist curriculum. Killed in a skirmish with the local Arab population, he apparently managed to utter the last words: “How good it is to die for the fatherland.” The phrase was to become, with the officers’ oath at Masada, one of the symbols of the new determination to take up arms.

Trumpeldor, who had been decorated by the tsar for his bravery in battle, inspired Zionist youth throughout the Russian Empire. Vladimir Jabotinsky, a promising Russian author and Zionist leader, in 1923, set up a Zionist organization that took the name Brit Yosef Trumpeldor (the Josef Trumpeldor Alliance) its acronym—Betar—harked back to Bar Kokhba’s last stand. The organization quickly became a Zionist educational institution with a strong military component. Betar shock units drew stern opposition from many Jews of Palestine, who insulted the participants in a military parade organized by Jabotinsky in Tel-Aviv in 1928. The spectators spat upon them, calling them “Militarists! Generals!” Albert Einstein was among the Jewish humanists who denounced the Betar youth movement in 1935, described it as being “as much of a danger to our youth as Hitlerism is to German youth.” Reform Rabbi Stephen Wise expressed his indignation at what he saw as a slogan to fit the times: “Germany for Hitler, Italy for Mussolini, Palestine for Jabotinsky!” He maintained that “the whole tradition of the Jewish people is against militarism.”

Most traditional Orthodox rabbis rejected Zionism, accusing it of turning a Torah-based identity into a national one, centered on the land and the language. They were theologically bound to reject military action altogether. Yoel Teitelbaum, the Satmar Rebbe, believed that “the Torah in no way permits the loss of one Jewish life for the sake of the entire Zionist state. Even in a nation of tzaddikim, righteous people, there is no authorization in our era to subject Jews to war... It is clear as day that the Torah obligates us to make every effort to mediate for peace and avoid war. These evil people, the Zionists, do the opposite of the Torah view and quarrel with the nations constantly.” This may be another reason why most Haredi Jews do not serve in the Israeli army to this day.

A Sharp Break

Jabotinsky’s “offensive ethos” became overtly dominant in Israel only in the 1980s. Ben-Gurion preferred the “defensive ethos,” a discourse, which accepted the use of force only as a last resort, in reaction to living in a “dangerous neighborhood.” But, as the New Historians have shown, the deeds of the Zionist military under the command of Ben-Gurion reflected the offensive ethos of his political competitors more than he would publicly admit.

While the early Zionist settlers had projected onto Palestinian reality the images of bygone Russia - the Arab threat was likened to the murderous shadow of the pogroms - their actions were like those of all settler groups in a foreign territory: they took up arms to defend their settlements. The arrival of masses of European Jews following

World War II, and the Zionist interpretation of the Shoah created a cultural fusion of immense power: a self-image of the just victim. An expression frequently heard in Israel is *ein berera* (“there is no choice”), which often means that the State of Israel is the only place for the Jews, and that there is no other choice but to use force to maintain its Zionist nature.

The millennia-long pacifist and moralizing tradition of Judaism became eroded under the impact of the Palestinian question. Each succeeding generation was less ambiguous than the one before it about the use of armed force: “You can’t build a state wearing white gloves” wrote Nathan Alterman, a leading Israel poet born in Imperial Russia.

While most traditional rabbis deplored the militarism of secular Zionists, it found strong support among the National-Religious in the wake of the conquest of Biblical territories in 1967. The mystical teachings of Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935), a Russian rabbi whom the British would appoint as first Chief Rabbi of Palestine, were reinterpreted many years after his death by his son to create a potent brand of religious militancy. Rabbi Yitzhak Blau, who teaches at a yeshiva in the West Bank, has demonstrated how Judaic sources have been deformed to yield warlike teachings and to transform the possession of the Land into the supreme good. He notices that the National-Religious, like the secular Zionists, glorify concepts foreign to Jewish tradition, such as ‘national honor’ or ‘national pride’. “It would be quite an irony,” concedes Blau, “to discover that a virulent critic of Judaism, Friedrich Nietzsche, indirectly influenced the religious Jewish community.”

Anyone who regularly sees televised images of ostensibly pious Jews with machine guns from the West Bank can only conclude that Judaism inspires militancy, a conclusion that may have consequences for the Jews all over the world. This is why it is important to remember that Zionism constitutes a revolutionary break with Jewish continuity. The emphasis on military action that it has brought in its wake makes this rupture all too visible.

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