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Amidst the war unfolding in Israel, we have decided to go forward and continue publishing a variety of articles to provide meaningful opportunities for our readership to engage in Torah during these difficult times.

Ki Ani Hashem: A Literary Analysis of the Makkot

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I. Introduction

One of the central tenets of the Jewish faith is that God took the Jewish people out of the land of Egypt. Whether through reciting the passages of *shema*, observing the Sabbath, or saying the benedictions at the end of a meal, Jews constantly remind themselves of this significant event in its history. Most prominently, the Passover *Seder* each year provides parents with the opportunity to transmit the miraculous story of the exodus to their children through colorful songs and stories: Rivers of water morph into pools of blood, frogs swarm Pharaoh's palace, and God splits seas. However, while the Jewish tradition undoubtedly emphasizes the importance of these miracles, very seldom do people carefully examine the biblical verses in a way that transcends the nursery rhymes and folk tales of their youth.

This is particularly true regarding the "ten plagues" that God brought against Pharaoh and the Egyptian people. Although the average learned Jew could probably recount all ten plagues by heart, he may not internalize any significant messages from the biblical narrative. Deeper topics like the purpose of the plagues and their specific details are notably absent from the Passover *Seder* each year. In fact, many would intuit that the role of the plagues is to compel

Pharaoh to let the Jewish people go, but a careful observation of pentateuchal verses, midrashic literature, and biblical commentators reveals that the wonders actually inculcate the Egyptians with awareness of the God of the Jewish people and perhaps even serve as punishments for Pharaoh's obstinance to reach this understanding.

II. The Challenge of Finding a Unifying Theory of the Plagues

While it is actually quite difficult to construct a coherent theory about the purpose of the *makkot*, there are certain interpretations that should be rejected at the outset. More specifically, the notions that the plagues were solely brought to either subjugate[1] Pharaoh or impel him to let the Jewish people go free are both unfounded and illogical. As Benno Jacob, presented by Nechama Leibowitz in her *Gilyonot Nechama*, expresses:

> There is no room to speak about "a war between God and Pharaoh" – that would not be a suitable picture of what is being told in these chapters. God had not wanted to subdue Pharaoh, or He would have done it with a single plague. The plagues are not an embodiment of God's power…The purpose of the plagues was something else, and that is that which is stated by Moses to Pharaoh each time.[2]

According to Benno Jacob, the plagues were not brought so that the Jewish people would be sent out of Egypt, nor were they designed to display God's might over Pharaoh. From a logical standpoint, if these were the goals, God certainly could have brought one powerful plague. Moreover, he writes, such a theory is not supported by the biblical verses in Exodus.[3]

So, what *is* the purpose of the ten plagues? Aside from particular symbolism, is there a unified theme behind the variety of wonders: blood, frogs, lice, swarm of animals, pestilence, boils, fiery hail, locusts, darkness, and plague of the firstborn? To answer this question, as Benno Jacob says, one must examine the verses and see what "is stated by Moses to Pharaoh each time."

The most difficult aspect of Benno Jacob's challenge is the fact that Moses does not speak to Pharaoh before all the *makkot*. Some of the plagues – blood, frogs, swarm of animals, pestilence, fiery hail, locusts, and plague of the firstborn – are preceded by warnings given to Pharaoh while others – lice, boils, and darkness – are not.

The *makkot* differ in many other ways. Although many of the plagues seem quite harmful towards

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[1] By "subjugate," I do not mean a recognition that one is serving God per se; rather, I mean a general surrender and a desire to do what is demanded of oneself.

[2] Benno Jacob Commentary on Exodus, Introduction to the Plagues. Cited in Nechama Leibowitz's *Gilyonot Nechama*.

[3] An interpretation that Benno Jacob would object to is that of Ralbag (8:11). Ralbag not only writes that the entire purpose of the *makkot* is for Pharaoh to send the Jews out of Egypt but even claims that the plagues without recorded warnings still had warnings.

human life and supplies – swarms of animals, pestilence, fiery hail, locusts, and plague of the firstborn – some of them – blood, frogs, lice, boils, and darkness – are not as threatening. Moreover, some of the plagues explicitly discriminate between Egyptians and Jews while others do not. Finally, the Torah does not consistently use one term when referring to the plagues.

Some address the first two inconsistencies – warnings and severity – with the same answer. Ramban, for instance, states that not all the plagues were violent and that out of God's mercy, only the ones that cause "death to man" were prefaced with a warning to allow the Egyptians to repent.[4] Such an interpretation supports Benno Jacob's thesis that the *makkot* are not there to impel Pharaoh to let the people go, for wouldn't the most efficient way to compel an expulsion of the Jews be through instituting the most harmful plague possible?

However, Ramban's position is lacking in a few areas. First, the distinction he makes between which plagues were life-threatening is not the strongest. After all, given that the verse explicitly states that the Egyptians could access water so long as they dug for it,[5] what is so life-threatening about the blood *makkah*?Finally, according to Ramban, it is unclear whether there is a unified pattern found in the biblical verses, or whether each plague operates without any relation to the others?

Rashbam, however, does recognize a pattern in the verses. He notes that two *makkot* with warnings precede one *makkah* without a warning. For instance, blood and frogs have a warning while lice does not. This model closely resembles the position found in the *Haggadah* from R. Yehudah, who categorizes the plagues into three groups titled *detzakh, adash, be-ahab* – blood/frogs/lice; swarm of animals/pestilence/boils;hail/locust/darkness/firstborn. However, while Rashbam and R. Yehudah view the *makkot* as some sort of pattern or collective unit, they do not explain what the significance of this unit is. In other words, why do some plagues have warnings and others do not?

III. *Ki Ani Hashem*

Upon a careful reading of the biblical verses, one will find that the significance of a conversation between Moses and Pharaoh before certain plagues transcends a simple warning for physical harm. In fact, in all of Moses' warnings to Pharaoh, he explicitly states that the purpose of the *makkot* is to inculcate an awareness of the God of the Jewish people.

The *makkot* embodying such a purpose parallels earlier verses in the Book of Exodus. When Moses first asks Pharaoh to let the Jews leave Egypt to serve their God in the desert, Pharaoh says as follows:

"Who is the Lord[6] that I should

[4] Ramban on Exodus 8:15.

[5] Exodus 7:24

[6] Lord is a substitute for the Hebrew tetragrammaton.

> heed him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, nor will I let Israel go" (Exodus 5:2).[7]

Pharaoh clearly states that he does not know the God of the Jewish people. With this in mind, one can understand the subsequent aspects of the plagues.

The *makkot* contain several elements that allow Pharaoh to become aware of the Hebrew God. First and foremost, the smiting of Egypt with numerous plagues is in and of itself an attempt to educate Pharaoh about the Hebrew God. This is seen from God's introduction to the *makkot*:[8]

> And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I stretch out My hand over Egypt and bring out the Israelites from their midst (Exodus 7:5).

In the metaphor, the plagues are symbolized by God stretching out his hand, which will lead to the Egyptians learning about God. At first glance, as Rabbeinu Bahya points out, the idea of providing a warning before one commits an evil action to someone is counterintuitive.[9] Without a warning, though, as R. Tamir Granot points out, the plagues are not necessarily connected to God. After all, "if a warning was not given, how would Pharaoh and the Egyptians know that this plague was brought by the God of Israel. They would have understood the plagues as bad luck or a natural disaster."[10]

Rabbeinu Bahya also takes this position. Answering his question about the perplexing nature of providing a warning before committing an evil action to someone, he writes that God actually wants to warn people to allow them to repent.

The *midrash* in Exodus Rabbah (9:9) elaborates even further:

> It is customary in the world that when flesh and blood seeks to do bad to his enemy, he does so immediately so that [the other] not become aware. But the Holy One, blessed be He, warns Pharaoh about each and every plague, so that he would repent. **This is that which is written (7:17), "In this you will know that I am the Lord**" (Exodus 7:27).

Similar to Rabbeinu Bahya, the *midrash* writes that God warned before the plagues to allow Pharaoh to repent. However, according to Ramban and Rabbeinu Bahya, it is unclear as to what the objective of this repentance is supposed

[7] All translations of Tanakh are from *sefaria.org*.

[8] For other instances of the plagues where Pharaoh learns about God, see 7:17; 8:5-6, 18-19, 25, 27; 9:4-5, 14, 16, 20-21, 24, 26-29; 10:2, 16-19; 11:4-8.

[9] Rabbeinu Bahya on Exodus, 8:17.

[10] https://etzion.org.il/he/tanakh/torah/sefer-Exodus/parashat-vaera/number-plagues-egypt.
Rav Soloveitchik argues a similar position in *The Emergence of Ethical Man*, pages 187-188, where he states that it is not the dynamics of the plagues themselves that reveal the divine involvement but the historical context of them, for the plagues could have been explained as natural phenomenona.

to be. Is Pharaoh simply to let the people go, or is there something else that is expected of him? In contrast, the *midrash* quotes the verse of "In this you will know that I am the Lord," explicitly linking the warning before the plagues to a recognition of the Hebrew God.

Even more significant than the foreknowledge of the plague itself is the discrimination that often occurred between Jews and Egyptians. While a plague could be attributed to some sort of environmental phenomenon, nature cannot explain why only the Egyptians were affected by the darkness or why the swarm of animals did not attack the Jews.

The plagues also informed Pharaoh about the God of the Jews through the preciseness of timing in each plague. While bad luck may come about at any instance, the plague of the firstborn struck exactly at midnight. Similarly, after Pharaoh pleaded to Moses for the frog plague to cease the next day, Moses declared that "As you say—that you may know that there is none like our Lord" (Exodus 8:6).

Another way Pharaoh learns about God is through the hardening of his heart. While many read the hardening of Pharaoh's heart as God limiting his free will and preventing him from freeing the Jews, Seforno articulates a novel approach. With apprehension for the incoming plagues, Pharaoh actually wanted to free the Jewish people from bondage. However, such a decision would be out of physical fear and not out of true repentance. Therefore, through hardening Pharaoh's heart, God uses his plagues to inculcate Pharaoh with an awareness of his presence.

In many ways, Seforno's approach is perhaps the greatest proof for Benno Jacob's theory. The Jews could have been sent out with one plague, and if not for Pharaoh's heart being hardened, this would have been the case. However, the story of the exodus, for both Jews and non-Jews alike, is more than simply escaping the chains of Egypt; it also serves as an educational process where people become more conscious of God's role in the world.[11]

IV. *Makkah* or *Mofet*?

Although as a unit the plagues are brought to instill the Egyptians with an understanding of the Lord, this may not be true for all of the *makkot*. The greatest support for such a theory is the construction of the biblical verses for the plagues. While in seven of the plagues, one can find warnings to Pharaoh, descriptions of the plague that attribute it to God, and mentions of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, in three of the plagues – lice, boils, and darkness – the structure is noticeably different. The verses pertaining to these plagues do not mention any preface given to Pharaoh or the goal of learning about the Hebrew God.

In fact, upon careful examination, the notion of there being ten plagues is also questionable. At the beginning of Chapter 7, God tells Moses about his plan to use the *makkot* as an educational tool

[11] For an interpretation of *Parshat Beshalah* that views the elongated journey of the Jews in the desert as an educational effort, see Nachum Krasnopolsky, "Of Split Wood and Waters," *The Lehrhaus* (February 2, 2023).

for the Egyptians to learn about him. Following this preface, God instructs Moses to go to Pharaoh and turn his staff into a snake. Moses does this without any warning to Pharaoh and does not mention God's name either. While this episode is often excluded from the "ten plagues," from a literary perspective, there seems to be little difference between this wonder and the other three which lack warnings.

Based on the distinct structure found in the verses connected to the wonders without warnings, which is even shared by the snake episode, Shadal goes as far to say that there are actually twelve plagues, also including the eventual splitting of the Red Sea.[12] In contrast to R. Yehudah's identification of three groups of plagues, Shadal quotes Naphtali Hirz Weisel, who states that there are four groups. Moreover, while Rashbam views the plagues without warnings as the ultimate plagues in their respective groups, Shadal views these as introductory plagues. Because of the unique structure of the plagues without warnings, he identifies them as separate in purpose from the other plagues. For Shadal, the plagues without warnings are called "*moftim*,"[13] instead of *makkot*, as he claims that their whole purpose was not to afflict but serve as warnings for the incoming, more severe plagues. In other words, the plagues that do not have warnings actually are warnings themselves. Such a model is parallel to the stance of Ramban that the plagues with warnings are the ones that pose a risk to human life – because those plagues are deadly, they require a whole warning plague first. More broadly, though, Shadal presents a model that differentiates between the different plagues – some which serve as warnings and others that are presumably educational opportunities.

Another figure who differentiates between two types of *makkot* is Malbim. Commenting on the recount of the *makkot* found in Psalms Chapter 78, where the verses list only seven out of ten *makkot*, Malbim notes that the ones listed are only those that had warnings.[14] For Malbim, such a division is obvious, as, like Shadal, he understands the *makkot* with warnings to be "signs," or *otot*, while the ones without a warning are "wonders," or *moftim*. However, while Shadal views the plagues without warnings as introductory warnings for the subsequent *makkot*, Malbim understands them to be punishments that follow the other *makkot*. Excluding the snake episode, Malbim understands blood and frogs as potential educational opportunities that were rejected by Pharaoh, leading to a punishment of lice. Although in general the *makkot* are supposed to provide the Egyptians with knowledge of the Hebrew God, they are also surrounded by wonders that punish those who fail to internalize the messages of the *makkot*.

Regarding the snake episode, Malbim interestingly writes that the snake has dual purposes. When the wonder of the snake was presented to the Jews earlier in the Book of

[12] Shadal on Exodus 7:17.

[13] The word *mofet* was actually used when describing the snake.

[14] Malbim on Tehillim 78:43.

Exodus, the act was internalized by the observers as a proof of the Lord. The Egyptians, however, viewed the act as a mere symbol, and did not internalize any understanding of the Hebrew God.[15] Surprisingly, Malbim asserts that this symbol, despite its literary similarities, is not part of the *makkot*.

Malbim also views the plague of the firstborn in a different light from other commentators. While most view this *makkah* as part of the general unit of ten plagues, Malbim views it as separate, since its purpose is not to punish or prove God but to free the Jews from Egypt.[16]

Interestingly, Malbim disagrees with the view of Benno Jacob. According to Malbim, some of the plagues can be viewed as punishments or as part of the effort to remove the Jews from Egypt, not just educational lessons. In general, though, Benno Jacob's implicit assertion that the plagues serve a more elevated purpose – inculcating the Egyptian people with an understanding of the Hebrew God – remains accurate.

In light of Malbim's interpretation of the final plague, it is difficult to understand his exclusion of the snake from the *makkot*. After acknowledging the variety of functions of the plagues – education, punishment, and an impetus for sending the Jews out – why couldn't the snake episode also be included? Perhaps Malbim is somewhat dogmatic in his understanding of there being only ten plagues, since this is what the Sages identified. However, the average reader is left with a few questions, namely how many plagues there are, the meaning of the snake episode, and how it contributes to a broader understanding of the *makkot*. To truly internalize the messages of the plagues, these questions must be honestly examined.

V. Conclusion

There are still many questions about the *makkot* that should be examined in great depth. Is there individual symbolism for each plague, or are the specific *makkot* arbitrary? Do the subunits of the plagues emphasize different educational messages about the nature of God? Finally, as the plagues proceed, do they increase in severity and miraculousness? Such analysis is beyond the scope of this piece but is crucial for a profound understanding of the plagues.

As a unit with subcategories, the plagues provide Pharaoh and his people with a greater understanding for the Hebrew God. Seen through this prism, the plagues are no longer a method to simply subjugate Pharaoh or coerce him to let the people go; they serve as a profound educational experience. While at the beginning of the story, the Egyptians were unfamiliar with the Lord, through the marvelous and powerful plagues, they slowly attained a consciousness for the Master of all masters.

[15] Malbim on Exodus 7:9.

[16] Malbim on Exodus 7:14.

There Are No Lights in War: We Need a Different Religious Language

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What is the role of religious discourse during wartime? If we were to judge by the current situation, religious discourse serves, in many cases, to shine an idealizing light on the war and seeks to see it as a positive phenomenon that advances the world. Instead of peace, about which the sages said, "[There is] no vessel that holds blessing but peace" (*Mishnah Uktzin* 3:12), and which is one of God's names, there are those who see divine revelation specifically in times of war and view those moments as the zeniths of Jewish and human history.

An example of this can be found in the recent words of R. Amihai Friedman, the rabbi of the Nahal brigade's training base: "I sit and imagine that in these days there are no casualties, hostages, or injured," he told his soldiers. "And the second I remove them from the screen, I'm left with what is maybe the happiest month in my life since I was born."[1]

R. Friedman's words give rise to a harsh realization: around us is a religious world that is happy, in many respects, about the current war. Thus, for example, writes R. Yigal Levinstein in the pamphlet *He Leaps Up Like a Lion: On the Exaltation of the Spirit and the Special Level of Life During Times of War* that saw light in the situation: "The war is not a marginal thing, and we should not view it as a 'mistake' or a 'mishap' which we would have preferred to avoid. The war is a great thing and, at the end of the day, brings a great message to humanity on its wings."[2] According to R. Levinstein, the greatness of the war is rooted in the fact that it is one of those extraordinary moments in which "the inner soul shines in all its vitality." Indeed, for the individual, the war is a difficult event, but at the national level it calls forth great moments in which the people of Israel "reveals from within itself its mighty heights of life."[3]

R. Zvi Tau writes in a similar vein in the pamphlet *A Time for War – Words to Strengthen the National Spirit*.[4] According to him, the days of peace and serenity that preceded the war caused the "slumber of the nation's spiritual life forces." This state of slumber caused "great confusion in all of the nation's cultural goals" until people searched for happiness "in low places." This slumber brought about, among other things, words of weakness regarding insubordination and leaving Israel. This situation brought on "these extraordinary days" whose goal is "to raise up the

[1] See the video at https://www.kan.org.il/content/kan-news/defense/596704/.

[2] See the pamphlet at https://haravyigal.co.il/-חוברת-חדשה-לזמן-מלחמה-כארי-יתנשא, at 6.

[3] Ibid., 4.

[4] See the pamphlet at https://forum.otzar.org/download/file.php?id=129222.

mind and to shed the slag that has stuck to us." Thus, according to him, the external persecution by Hamas is nothing but a means for the revelation of "the soul's light" that "pushes to be revealed in life," the light that manifests in national heroism. The national heroism awakens thanks to the war and is what "connects the entire nation to its faith and its land."[5]

It would seem, therefore, that R. Friedman's words did not come to be in a vacuum. They represent a school that idealizes war and wants to see wartime as "special," "vital," and "joyous."

A Different Religious Horizon

In opposition to this religious discourse, I would want to imagine a different religious discourse—a discourse in which religion functions as our horizon and allows us to think beyond the concrete political circumstances. In this manner, the religious discourse will return to its mission, and rather than offering an aestheticization or a glorification of war, it will grant our politics a horizon and an orientation. This is the secret of the power of religious discourse in wartime: its ability to maintain tension and to speak both in the language of the present and the language of the future, the language of the extant and also the language of the desired, to differentiate between the place in which we currently stand and the place in which we wish to be, and all without blurring the difference between them.

An example of the attempt to blur these poles is the picture that was published recently, in which a soldier reads from a Torah scroll in Gaza while pointing at the scripture with a sharp knife as his '*yad*.' The picture became widespread and was seen by many as a reflection of the Jewish spirit of "*Safra ve-Sayfa*," book and sword. Certain rabbis even joined in with enthusiasm and enlisted to permit this act from a halakhic perspective.[6]

However, analysis of the Jewish tradition teaches that the religious language attempts to mold holy spaces into spaces from which war and its tools are excluded. The Torah sees the brandishing of a sword above the altar as its desecration. Sages explain that this prohibition is derived from the contrast between them: "For iron was created to shorten the days of man, and the altar to increase the days of man" (*Mishnah Middot* 3:4). In the same fashion, it is prohibited to bring a knife into a synagogue "because prayer lengthens the days of man, and the knife shortens."[7] Additional halakhic adjudicators also prohibited the writing of a Torah scroll (and even Torah commentaries!) with an iron quill based on a similar reason: "the Torah lengthens days, and the iron shortens."[8]

It is forbidden to bring into the religious sphere—the sphere of synagogue, Torah, and prayer—objects whose purpose is the taking of life. The Torah did not prohibit the use of weapons for the purposes of war and defense; if weapons were not permitted, there would be no need to prohibit taking them into holy spaces. Despite this, the Torah ruled that holy spaces are intended

[5] Ibid., 28.

[6] See https://www.srugim.co.il/865353--הרב-אבינר-על-התמונה-שהסעירה-את-הרשת-אי#google_vignette.

[7] Ta"z, *Orah Hayyim* 151:6.

[8] *Arukh Ha-Shulhan, Yoreh De'ah* 271:38.

to mark a horizon which is radically loyal to the preservation of life. The very fact of the existence of such a religious sphere prevents any attempt at exalting war or its tools. Thus also in the case of King David—who, despite the righteousness of his wars had to abstain from building the Temple in which the divine presence would reside, because his hands were full of blood ("You shall not build a house for My name, for you have spilled much blood to the earth before Me," I Chronicles 22:8)—only his son Solomon, in whose days there would be peace, would be able to bring about the presence of the divine spirit ("Behold a son is born unto you; he shall be a man of rest, and I shall give him rest from all his enemies around him, for Solomon shall be his name, and peace and quiet I will give unto Israel all his days," I Chronicles 22:9). The Jewish horizon is, if so, a horizon free from war.

As a student in Yeshivat Otniel, I saw how R. Re'em Ha-Cohen, at a party prior to the enlistment of students, dealt with the question of whether to recite the blessing of "*she-hehiyanu*" on the uniform while being enlisted to the IDF, as is the practice in many *yeshivot*. R. Re'em would reply that we should recite the "*she-hehiyanu*" blessing not when donning army uniforms but when, as a society, we will be able to remove them. Enlistment is not the complete religious horizon about which to rejoice. True happiness on which to recite the blessing will come only in the future situation in which "nation shall not bear sword against nation and they shall study war no more" (Isaiah 2:4).

In the picture that was published and the accompanying halakhic ruling, there is an attempt to annul the divide which Halakhah attempts to establish between the extant and the ideal worlds, between our reality and the horizon which religious discourse opens for us. Religious discourse is undergoing a serious reduction and is becoming a tool designed to justify the extant situation, attempting to make it "pleasant" and aesthetic. But we must note: this attempt is possible only after we have concealed essential aspects that are entailed by war. This is precisely why R. Friedman suggests "putting aside" the dead and the captives, or why R. Levinstein suggests we view the war not through personal eyes that are interested in the individual and his destruction but through "national" eyes. As opposed to this approach, our sages teach that weapons are never pleasant but rather disgraceful to the bearer (*Mishnah Shabbat* 6:4). This is not because of a pacifistic position but because of an obligation to the religious horizon that teaches that beauty and the aesthetic are not present in warfare but rather in peace, when "nation shall not bear sword against nation and they shall study war no more."

If so, the role of religious discourse in this context is "to remove the enchantment" from war and to oppose any attempt to glorify it, beautify it, or turn it into a societal or human ideal. The religious discourse must highlight the ugliness of war and the disgrace that is inherent in it, its post-facto nature, how it is a phenomenon that testifies to a nadir in human relations—that it is founded on blood, pain, and destruction. Indeed, there are wars that serve righteousness and protect human life, and therefore it is proper to fight them. Additionally, no one denies that times of war may bring out expressions of heroism on the

battlefield and stupendous expressions of human solidarity. Despite this, these inspiring acts should not blur the fact that war as a whole is an eclipse in human light, and it would be better if we could prevent it.

Thou Shalt Not Kill: War as an Affliction of *Tzara'at*

A prime example of this sort of religious discourse can be found in the words of R. David Cohen, known as "Ha-Rav Ha-Nazir," in the book *A Scroll of War and Peace*, which was published after the Yom Kippur War: "War is the *tzara'at* affliction of humanity in our generations and in all the generations that have ever been," he writes. "Mass murder, general murder, killing tens of thousands, the best of humanity and the finest. Leaving sick and injured, maimed for all their days, destroying works of culture, demolishing the splendid buildings and exalted institutions of literature and art, and whosoever exceeds in killing, destroying, and annihilating is the winner, successful and praised."[9]

According to Ha-Rav Ha-Nazir, the prohibition of "Thou shalt not murder" is to be "an absolute decision, an absolute edict." Indeed, the Torah permitted war: "And there are wars of *mitzvah*, and permissible wars, and wars of defense which are obligatory as well." However, all these commands have a post-facto nature and are in terms of: "The Torah has not spoken but in regard to the evil inclination."[10] In these words, Ha-Rav Ha-Nazir expands on the words of the sages who read the section of Deuteronomy dealing with the taking of the *eishet yefat to'ar* as being of a post-facto nature which addresses humanity's evil inclination, and he reads all the sections in the Torah that deal with war in the wake of that section. War is possible, according to him, only after the fall of humanity and its enslavement to the "evil inclination" within man.

As opposed to this, according to him, "the peace movement" is the one that "needs to grow mightier and stronger, and which will grow mightier and stronger, in distinction to war, in the disbanding of armies and the beating of weapons" [into farming tools]. The strengthening of the peace movement must be the goal of the people of culture and those who fear heaven: "And this must be the aim of culture, this must be the function of schools, the houses of learning, the great *batei midrash*, the teachers and the students—to stop the evil, the murder, and the impurity, and to raise the banner of the good, purity, and holiness."[11] Holiness and purity are identified with the striving for peace, while the spirit of war is identified with impurity and evil.

Another thinker who wrote about the Jewish attitude toward war is R. Avraham Hen (Ukraine 1887 – Jerusalem 1957), in his book *In the Kingdom of Judaism*.[12] R. Hen writes that the Jewish aspiration mentioned above—to achieve a state of "nation shall not bear sword against

[9] R. David Cohen, *Megillat Milhamah Ve-Shalom* (Jerusalem: Nezer David, 1973), 11.

[10] Ibid., 14.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Avraham Hen, *Be-Malkhut Ha-Yahadut* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1958).

nation and they shall study war no more"—means "not the honor of Jewish weaponry. Not national victory. Not the Israeli flag raised in all the ports" but rather "the abolition of the very phenomenon of victory. The abolition of the art of war and its study, the abolition of the very tools of weaponry—here is the yearning of Judaism."[13] R. Hen bemoans "the genius which humankind wastes on inventing tools of death, ruin, and destruction" and asks: "Who will count the physical and spiritual fortune of the time which each land sacrifices to the *Molekh*?"[14] In his words, war becomes actual idolatry (this may be compared to the words of *Gesher Ha-Hayyim* regarding World War II).[15]

R. Hen also writes that "no war is ideal" and no war is preferable to peace, including those described in *Tanakh*. Despite this, he stresses that there are degrees of evil—a war that protects justice that has been breached is the most preferable, in the sense of the lesser of two evils.[16]

R. Aharon Shmuel Tamares, a rabbi and writer who was active in Eastern Europe during World War I, also dealt with the Jewish tradition's opposition to aestheticization and glorification of war.[17] He writes that, after World War I, "False prophets will deceive us to view the result of the world war as world progress." Despite this: "In truth, the world is now, after the wars, far more broken, shattered, and contemptible than it was previously. So there is no reason to be envious of the 'gain' that has befallen nations from the revolutions or the revivals that grew out of the courtyard of death and were built on the ruins of both the material and ethical worlds."[18]

Such claims regarding apparent world progress in the wake of war bring R. Tamares to ask: "Have all the killed, the butchered, and the strangled come back to life? Has the mound of the dying whom I heard spasm in the agonies of death and spurt blood from their necks, been healed and returned to their strength?... Calamity of calamities, thousands of thousands of widows, orphans, maimed, and sick, people whose light of life has been dimmed forever."[19] As opposed to Rav Kook's well-known words in the wake of the outbreak of World War I—"When there is a great war in the world a messianic power arises. The time of the singing bird has come…the evil are eliminated from the world and the world becomes fragrant"[20]—R. Tamares sees the very same war as the climax of human deterioration to the pits of killing and disgrace.

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[13] Ibid., 38.

[14] Ibid., 9.

[15] See R. Yehiel Mikhel Tikochinsky, *Gesher Ha-Hayyim* (Jerusalem: Salomon Printing Press, 1947), 3-4, available at https://hebrewbooks.org/31174.

[16] *Be-Malkhut Ha-Yahadut*, 46.

[17] His articles were recently republished in the collection *Tohu Va-Vohu: Hamesh Masot*, ed. Tzahi Slater (Jerusalem: Blima Books, 2022).

[18] Ibid., 123.

[19] Ibid., 25.

[20] *Orot*, *Orot Mei-Ofel*, *Ha-Milhamah* 1.

Ethics of War

Alongside the idealization of war in contemporary religious discourse, religion is being used also to justify revenge, cruelty, and lack of differentiation between blood and blood. Since the beginning of the war, analysts on television panels have been calling for us to "begin speaking Arabic," when what they mean is to adopt semi-Hamas-esque behaviors which do not differentiate between blood and blood, and which condone unbound killing and destruction. In opposition to these voices, which are often justified in religious discourse, we must remember that the current struggle is not merely for the physical existence of the Jewish people but also for our existence as Jews, whose language is not the language of Hamas but of holiness.

The role of the imperative religious discourse in this context is to highlight that ethical conduct during war is not an invention of "Western culture" but is, at the heart of hearts, of Jewish tradition. Abraham was chosen because he kept the way of God "to do righteousness and justice" (Genesis 18:19). Abraham's way of justice is revealed a few verses later, when he suspects that God intends to commit undifferentiated slaughter of the evil Sodom: "Will You indeed make perish the righteous with the evil?!" asks/demands Abraham. "Shall the Judge of all the land not do justice?" (Genesis 18:23). In opposition to claims that differentiation between groups in the same population and that strong opposition to collective punishment are a product of "Western ethics," we must remember that separating between the inhabitants of a city based on their deeds is the heart of Abrahamic ethics; it is the heart of God's choosing of Abraham.

Sweeping disapproval of punishment not for a person's actions but for their assumed actions when he grows, or because of his belonging to a particular collective—reasons whose proponents' voices have been growing much stronger recently—is the heart of the Torah's ethics. "The fathers shall not be put to death for the children; neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers; every man shall be put to death for his own sin." (Deuteronomy 24:16). The sages taught that even the sections of the Torah which seem at first glance not to match this fundamental idea—like the punishment of the wayward and rebellious son who is judged based on his future, or the collective punishment of "the city led astray"—are theoretical sections, and each of the cases described in them "never were and never shall be" (*Sanhedrin* 71a).

In opposition to the feeling of joy that R. Friedman described in light of the war, R. Hen teaches that the inner stance with respect to war should be learned from our forefather Jacob, about whom it was said prior to his meeting with Esau that he feared not just his brother's violence but his own violence as well: "And he was afraid—lest he be killed. And he was distressed—if he should kill."[21] R. Hen remarks that this does not concern the killing of an ordinary person but the killing of the evil Esau who planned to destroy the house of Israel, which seemingly would make the war on him a war of defense against "the great disaster that would be liable to occur if Esau were to

[21] Rashi to Genesis 32:8, s.v. "*va-yira va-yetzer*."

win."[22] And even in such a case, Jacob's thoughts of killing Esau trouble him deeply. Jacob is distressed. As opposed to the "happiness" which R. Friedman described, R. Hen calls for us not to relinquish the distress that accompanies the thought of killing, even in places where it is justified and necessary, and even more so in relation to innocents and bystanders. This feeling is essential to a society that sanctifies life and the image of God in humanity.

Widening segments of the contemporary religious community are seeking to wrap the war in a halo of enchantment and holiness and turn it pleasant, ideal, and even joyous from an emotional perspective. In furtherance of this aestheticization and idealization, there are those who seek to remove any ethical brakes from the war. They call for us not to differentiate between blood and blood and condone any action done in its framework. These conceptions treat the spirit of battle as the climax of the revelation of the human spirit, but within this, implicitly, it is as though they require war to happen again and again, so that this "spirit of battle" may be revealed. In light of this attempt, we must seek a different religious language—one that remembers that the Jewish horizon is not war but peace, that the goal of the Jewish nation's existence on this land is not "to shorten the life of man but to lengthen," and that ethical conduct even in times of war is the soul of our religious tradition.

Religious Zionism: A View from the United Kingdom

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Editor's Note: The following piece is part of Lehrhaus' current symposium: Israel At War.

Being Religious Zionist and Modern Orthodox (overlapping but not identical concepts) is my core identity.

What does being a Religious Zionist mean currently in daily life? As for so many Jews worldwide, both religious and secular, a huge shadow of worry and concern hangs over everything, every day. Though not (yet) living in Israel, this is accentuated even more by my having a son in Tzahal and a brother and other family in Israel – again, like so many others.

Obviously, being a Religious Zionist in these days means supporting Israel as much and in as many helpful ways as possible. It also means combining total identification with Israel and deep anguish at the loss of life and intense suffering on our side with genuine compassion for those innocent Palestinians who have been injured or have died. The responsibility for their suffering is entirely that of Hamas, but real concern extending beyond Am Yisrael is essential for anyone aspiring to live Torah values.

[22] *Be-Malkhut Ha-Yahadut*, 24.

Faced with the global rise in anti-Semitism since the terrible events of Shemini Atzeret, I believe that the single most important message for Jews both within the Religious Zionist community and beyond is: Stand tall! Israel's cause is fully just and our military action is entirely necessary, indeed morally obligatory, and would be undertaken by any other responsible country in the world. It has become clearer than ever since October 7th that there is deep hatred in much of the Diaspora for Am Yisrael and Medinat Yisrael which will never be blunted, whatever Israel or Jews do or do not do. There are also those who are not anti-Semites but who have a moral blind spot regarding Israel, making their support conditional on Israel avoiding civilian casualties in war to an extent that is demanded of no other country – effectively demanding that Israel just "turn the other cheek." We should engage with non-Jews who are decent, fair-minded, and genuinely supportive, and not be deflected or discouraged by those who are not.

Let me add some detail on the rise in anti-Semitism from my perspective in the UK. It is clearer than ever that there is much virulent anti-Semitism just beneath the surface, which does not take much coaxing to openly emerge. This is so despite the large number (perhaps a silent majority) of decent and pro-Semitic non-Jews in this country. "*Ve-hayu hayekha telu'im lekha mi-neged*," as the *tokheihah* warns about Diaspora existence: we are radically at the mercy of political, social and other developments beyond our control. Every time Israel is involved in military action, anti-Semitic incidents spike in the UK. We are (justifiably) extremely anxious when a Jeremy Corbyn looks likely to gain high government office, reassured when a Rishi Sunak visits Israel – and totally powerless to control or even get off the jolting rollercoaster. Antisemitic incidents in the UK more than quadrupled in the four days from October 7th-10th, 2023 compared to the same period in 2022. The situation has deteriorated further since then. The Community Security Trust (CST) recorded an increase in anti-Jewish hate acts in the UK of 534% between October 7th and December 13th, 2023 compared to the same period in 2022. While some congregants have told me of surprising and welcome empathy from work colleagues, others have expressed deep discomfort about the atmosphere in their offices. In mid-November, an anonymous student at Oxford University published an article in the *Guardian* newspaper describing the hatred and intimidation faced by Jewish students.

In terms of interfaith activity, relations with Muslim and Arab communities are certainly more difficult now, at least in my experience here in London. This is a great pity, given the considerable theological and axiological common ground between the Jewish and Islamic traditions. Since October 7th, I have received a small number of empathetic messages from Church clergy in my locality but none from Muslim religious leaders, not even from local mosques with which we have previously had positive engagement. One wants to maintain and develop relationships, but it takes two to tango. And one needs Muslim dialogue partners who are prepared to understand that love for, and commitment to, Medinat Yisrael is a key religious value for us, not something that can be disregarded in favor of an exclusive focus on more comfortable and less controversial topics. Identifying commonalities is important, especially

in light of the many shared concerns and challenges faced by Muslim and Diaspora Jewish communities – but never at the cost of our proud and utterly non-negotiable Religious Zionism.

Finally, returning to the internal Jewish world: I believe that our community should place more emphasis on *aliyah*. I would have answered this question similarly before October 7th. *Aliyah* has only taken on even greater urgency and importance since then. It is not simply a question of attempting to flee anti-Semitism (though I sense more talk of this in the community). Much more importantly, the most authentic and intensive way in which we can live our Religious Zionism and Modern Orthodoxy is to make *aliyah*, taking the precious opportunity to maximize the meaning of our lives by participating directly in the ongoing miracle that is Medinat Yisrael.