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Today's Torah

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Veterans Day
November 11, 2020 - 24 Heshvan 5781



By: Rabbi Elliot Dorff
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Judaism and War

A season is set for everything, a time for every experience under heaven:

A time for being born and a time for dying, ...

A time for slaying and a time for healing, ...

A time for loving and a time for hating,

A time for war and a time for peace.

(Ecclesiastes 3:1-8)

Although the Rabbis who shaped the Jewish tradition had trouble with some parts of the biblical

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not pacifistic. While Judaism abhors war and yearns for a Messianic world in which it will cease, it recognizes that our world is unfortunately not Messianic. It provides guidelines for determining when it is indeed “a time for war” and when not, and it establishes rules for the just conduct of wars -- all the time seeking to avoid war and to work for peace. It recognizes that sometimes justice requires even violence, not only in personal self-defense but in the military action of a nation.

The morality of war is a topic Jews faced seldom in their history. Only in three relatively short periods of Jewish history did Jews have political and military autonomy -- namely, from the time of Moses to the destruction of the First Temple (c. 1300 B.C.E. - 586 B.C.E.), during the Maccabean period (168-40 B.C.E.), and since the establishment of the modern State of Israel in 1948. It is only in these periods that Jews directly confronted the realities of power and the agonizing decisions of determining when and how to use it.

Jews, of course, have been part of other people's armies, and in democratic countries they have even fought for the right to serve. Asser Levy, for example, insisted on the privilege of personally doing his military duty in the colony of New Amsterdam and refused to pay a tax in lieu thereof. But then the decisions of when and how to fight were in other people's hands.

The modern State of Israel, of course, has unfortunately had a surfeit of experience with war, and it has developed a Code of Ethics to govern the conduct of its wars. That code, *Ru'ah Tza'hal (The Spirit of the Israeli Defense Forces)* specifies at its beginning that it draws on four sources:

The tradition of the IDF and its military heritage as the Israel Defense Forces.

The tradition of the State of Israel, its democratic principles, laws, and institutions.

The tradition of the Jewish People throughout their history.

Universal moral values based on the value and dignity of human life.

Notice that the document, while drawing on “the tradition of the Jewish People throughout history,” does not use Jewish law as a source. That, I would suggest, is because of the precious little experience Jews have historically had in deciding which wars to fight and how for over two thousand years, and so what Jewish law says about such things is both outdated and inadequate.

In 2012 Professor Asa Kasher, author of the first version of Israel's Code of Ethics for the IDF and a Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Tel Aviv University, organized a conference on this issue. Professor Michael Walzer, Professor Emeritus at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, suggested that here, as in many other places and times in our history, Jews should borrow from other cultures, in this case from Just War Theory developed largely in Catholic thought but more recently in secular philosophical thought as well. I instead suggested that we can articulate a Jewish Code of Ethics for war by doing what I call “depth theology,” that is, probing the foundational perspectives and values of the Jewish tradition and applying them to the contemporary means and conundrums of war. Both papers were published in 2012 in the journal *Philosophia* and can be found [here](#). (accessed 11/2/20)

Both of us, like the Jewish tradition, would have us do everything possible to avoid war, but we both would also acknowledge that sometimes war is both just and necessary. It is that understanding that should lead us American Jews to take time to honor the veterans who have fought for our country when that was necessary, sometimes at considerable cost to their physical or mental health

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and sometimes even at the cost of their lives. Israel does the same to honor its veterans, and we Americans should do no less for ours.

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