

# War as an Ideal in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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## The Letter

1. Letter from Colonel Ofer Winter to Givati Brigade before entering Gaza, July 9<sup>th</sup> 2014



Bs”d

Dear officers and soldiers,

It is our great honor to command and serve in the Givati Brigade at this time. **History has chosen us to be the vanguard** of the offensive against the brazen terrorist enemy who never ceases to insult, scorn and revile the G-d of the armies of Israel. We have prepared and readied ourselves for this moment, and we undertake this mission as emissaries, in complete humility, knowing that we are risking our lives in order to defend ourselves, our people and our homeland.

We will act **together** with determination and strength, initiative and cunning. We will take the fight to the enemy. We will do everything we can **to carry this mission through to the end** in order to destroy the enemy and abolish the threat to the Jewish people. In our unit we say: **“We don’t come back until we finish the job.”**

We will act and do everything possible in order **to bring back our boys unharmed**. We will use every means at our disposal and employ whatever force is necessary to achieve this end.

I trust each and every one of you to act in this spirit – the spirit of the warriors of Israel who lead their regiments into battle. **This is spirit called “Givati.”** I raise my eyes to the heavens and call out together with you: **“Hear O Israel, the Lord is our G-d, the Lord is one.”** Hashem, the G-d of Israel: Please grant our efforts success. We are going out to battle for the sake of your people Israel against an enemy who reviles your Name. On behalf of all the troops of the IDF, and the commanders and soldiers of our unit, I ask that what is written in the Torah come true for us: “For it is Hashem your God Who is going with you; He will fight for you against your enemies and He will deliver you. (Devarim 20:4) Amen!

***United – the victory is ours***

Colonel Ofer Winter  
Commander, Givati Brigade

## The Backlash

2. The IDF: Army of the People or Army of God?, Prof. Mordechai Kremnitzer, September 14, 2014<sup>1</sup>



### **The IDF as the army of God**

The statements in Col. Winter's letter can be understood as transforming the IDF into the army of God, especially since the enemy is defined as the enemy of God. The Israel Defense Forces is the army of the state, not the army of God. It must be the army of the state and only the state, it must be subject to the government's authority and not any other authority, and it must be accountable to the Knesset. There is no room for another entity between the army and the representative of Israel's citizens in the government—not even for the Almighty Himself in all His glory. If He is there, then in effect, those who speak for Him are also there, and as we have seen, their words are likely to be different than those of IDF authorized officials.

An army that is accountable to different authorities is a threat to democracy and a real existential threat. There is no difference between such an army and the Islamist armies. Moreover, this kind of approach, which corresponds to the views of Hamas, Al-Qaeda, and the most radical groups in the region, serves the goals of these organizations and strengthens them within their target audiences on the Arab and Palestinian street. In addition, if every war declared by the state, including a war of choice, is automatically a war in God's name, it would grant undue power to the government, power which no human government deserves and which citizens in a democracy should greatly fear.

...

An army that is an army of God cannot be an army of the people. Such an army would not deserve to be the army of the people in the Jewish and democratic State of Israel at the beginning of the 21st century.

### **The commander's letter and freedom of religion**

In a democratic country, the army is prohibited from imposing a foreign or unacceptable worldview upon any soldier. As long as the IDF includes non-Jewish soldiers and Jewish soldiers who are not members of the national religious community, military orders may not include prayers or calls to God. No one is permitted to call out to God in the name of soldiers, and no one is allowed to recruit God to accompany them in battle. Any other approach is disrespectful to soldiers who do not identify as national religious. It violates their freedom of conscience and religion. The harm is especially serious because military service in Israel is compulsory and because of the nature of military discipline. It is also problematic in terms of utility, as it creates a sense of alienation among those who do not share the same religious outlook, precisely at a time when total and absolute identification is required.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://en.idi.org.il/articles/6270>

## The inherent danger of the commander's letter

Just as the IDF is not the army of God, the enemies of the state are simply our enemies, and that is sufficient. The issue of whether they curse, revile, and defame the God of the battles of Israel is a metaphysical question, not a military matter.

This is not linguistic pedantry. The question is what message was received from the statements in the letter, and it must be noted that what is important is the message received and not the message that was sent or that was intended to be sent. The message of the letter was a message of demonization, and demonizing the enemy is the gateway to war crimes. For example, is it appropriate to take a surrendering enemy soldier prisoner or should he be killed, since he is not only our enemy but also the enemy of God, who accompanies us in battle?

## The Source

Colonel Winter drew his letter from three sources:

### *Shoftim*

3. Devarim 20:3-4

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהֵם שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל אַתֶּם קֹרְבִים הַיּוֹם לַמִּלְחָמָה עַל־אִיְבֹיְכֶם אֲלֵי־יָדְךָ לְבַבְכֶם אֲלֵי־תִירְאוֹ וְאֲלֵי־תַחֲפֹנּוֹ וְאֲלֵי־תַעֲרָצוֹ מִפְּנֵיהֶם:

He shall say to them, “Hear, O Israel! You are about to join battle with your enemy. Let not your courage falter. Do not be in fear, or in panic, or in dread of them.

כִּי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם הוֹלֵךְ עִמָּכֶם לְהִלָּחֵם לְכֶם עִם־אִיְבֹיְכֶם לְהוֹשִׁיעַ אֶתְכֶם:

For it is the LORD your God who marches with you to do battle for you against your enemy, to bring you victory.”

### *David and Goliath*

4. I Shmuel 17:45-47

וַיֹּאמֶר דָּוִד אֶל־הַפְּלִשְׁתִּי אַתָּה בָּא אֵלַי בַּחֶרֶב וּבַחֲנִית וּבַכִּיזָוֹן וְאֲנִי בָּא־אֵלֶיךָ בַּשֵּׁם יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת אֱלֹהֵי מִעֲרֹכֹת יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר תִּרְפֹּת:

David replied to the Philistine, “You come against me with sword and spear and javelin; but I come against you in the name of the LORD of Hosts, the God of the ranks of Israel, whom you have defied.

הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה יִסְגְּרֶךָ יְהוָה בְּיָדִי וְהִפִּיתֶךָ וְהִסַּרְתִּי אֶת־רֹאשְׁךָ מֵעַלְיָךְ וְנָתַתִּי פָגֶר מִחַגְגָּה פְּלִשְׁתִּים הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה לְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּלְבֵהֵמַת הָאָרֶץ וְגִדְעוּ כָל־הָאָרֶץ כִּי יֵשׁ אֱלֹהִים לְיִשְׂרָאֵל:

This very day the LORD will deliver you into my hands. I will kill you and cut off your head; and I will give the carcasses of the Philistine camp to the birds of the sky and the beasts of the earth. All the earth shall know that there is a God in Israel.

וְנִדְעוּ כָּל־הַקָּהָל הַזֶּה כִּי־לֹא בַחֶרֶב וּבַחֲנִית יְהוֹשִׁיעַ יְהוָה כִּי לַיהוָה הַמַּלְחָמָה וְנָתַן אֶתְכֶם בְּיָדָיו:

And this whole assembly shall know that the LORD can give victory without sword or spear. For the battle is the LORD's, and He will deliver you into our hands."

### Eileh Ezkerah

#### 5. Piyut Eileh Ezkerah

אוֹיֵב מְנַאֵץ שְׂמֶדָה הַגָּדוֹל וְהַנוֹרָא  
וּמְחַרֵף וּמְגַדֵף עַל דְּבָרֵי תוֹרָה

## The Questions

1. Isn't Colonel Winter's idea directly from the Torah?
2. Doesn't the Torah prescribe war and makes it clear that every man, woman and child should be wiped out?
3. If the Torah is meant to be relevant at all times, then how can this be the perspective of the Torah?
4. Isn't this just the precursor to Crusades and Jihad? How can we criticize those movements if the Torah expects the same of us when we are in power?

## Different Types of Wars

### 1. Mishna Sotah 44a

בד"א במלחמות הרשות אבל במלחמות מצוה הכל יוצאין אפילו חתן מחדרו וכלה מחופתה אמר [רבי יהודה](#) במה דברים אמורים במלחמות מצוה אבל במלחמות חובה הכל יוצאין אפילו חתן מחדרו וכלה מחופתה

The mishna adds: **In what case are all of these statements, with regard to the various exemptions from war, said? They are said with regard to elective wars. But in wars whose mandate is a mitzva, everyone goes, even a groom from his room and a bride from her wedding canopy. Rabbi Yehuda said: In what case are all of these statements, with regard to the various exemptions from war, said? They are said with regard to wars whose mandate is a mitzva. But in obligatory wars, everyone goes, even a groom from his room and a bride from her wedding canopy.**

### 2. Talmud Bavli, Sotah 44b

אמר [רבא](#) מלחמות יהושע לכבש דברי הכל חובה מלחמות בית דוד לרווחה דברי הכל רשות כי פליגי למעוטי עובדי כוכבים דלא ליתי עלייהו מר קרי לה מצוה ומר קרי רשות נפקא מינה לעוסק במצוה שפטור מן המצוה

[Rava](#) said: With respect to the wars that Joshua waged to conquer Eretz Yisrael, all agree that they were obligatory. With respect to the wars waged by the House of King David for the sake of territorial expansion, all agree that they were elective wars. When they disagree, it is with regard to preventative wars that are waged to reduce the gentiles so that they will not come and wage war against them. One Sage, [Rabbi Yehuda](#), called this type of war a mitzva, and one Sage, the Rabbis, called it an elective war. There is a practical difference between these opinions with respect to the principle: One who is engaged in a

**mitzva is exempt from performing another mitzva.** According to [Rabbi Yehuda](#), one fighting in this kind of war is exempt from performing another mitzva.

### 3. Mishna Torah, Melachim U Milchamos 5:1-2

אין המלך נלחם תחלה אלא מלחמת מצוה. ואי זו היא מלחמת מצוה זו מלחמת שבועה עממים. ומלחמת עמלק. ופירת ישראל מיד צר שבא עליהם. ואחר כך נלחם במלחמת הרשות והיא המלחמה שנגלחם עם שאר העמים כדי להרחיב גבול ישראל ולהרבות בגדלתו ושמעו :

A priori, the king does not go to fight other than a War of Mitzvoh (Mandatory War). What is a War of Mitzvoh? This is the war against the Seven Nations<sup>30</sup> *Aboriginal to Eretz Yisroel*. or the war against Amalek or any war to assuage Israel of a persecutor. After this, he may fight Discretionary Wars which are those wars he conducts against the other nations in order to enlarge the borders of Israel, and increase his renown and reputation<sup>31</sup> *So that the Gentiles will be afraid of us and won't bother us..*

מלחמת מצוה אינו צריך לטל בה רשות בית דין. אלא יוצא מעצמו בכל עת. וכופה העם לצאת. אכל מלחמת הרשות אינו מוציא העם בה אלא על פי בית דין של שבועים ואחד :

He does not need to obtain permission from the Court to engage in a War of Mitzvoh but he may, at any time, on his own, compel the people to go out to war. However, he requires the authorization of the Court of Seventy-One to take the people with him go out to fight a Discretionary War.

## The Bid for Peace

### 4. Devarim 20:10-18

כי־תקרב אל־עיר להלחם עליה וקראת אליה לשלום:

When you approach a town to attack it, you shall offer it terms of peace.

והיא אם־שלום תענה ופתחה לך והיא כל־העם הנמצא־בה יהיו לך למס ועבדוך:

If it responds peaceably and lets you in, all the people present there shall serve you at forced labor.

ואם־לא תשלים עמה ועשתה עמה מלחמה וצרת עליה:

If it does not surrender to you, but would join battle with you, you shall lay siege to it;

ונתנה יהנה אליה בנגד והכית את־כל־זכורה לפי־חרב:

and when the LORD your God delivers it into your hand, you shall put all its males to the sword.

רק הנָּשִׁים והטָּף והבהמָה וכל אֲשֶׁר יִהְיֶה בְּעִיר כָּל־שָׁלָלָה תִּבְזוּ לָהּ וְאֶכְלָתָּ אֶת־שָׁלָל אִי־יָדֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר נָתַן יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לָּךְ:

You may, however, take as your booty the women, the children, the livestock, and everything in the town—all its spoil—and enjoy the use of the spoil of your enemy, which the LORD your God gives you.

כֵּן תַּעֲשֶׂה לְכָל־הָעָרִים הַרְחֹקֹת מִמֶּךָ מֵאֹד אֲשֶׁר לֹא־מִעָרֵי הַגּוֹיִם־הָאֵלֶּה הֵנָּה:

Thus you shall deal with all towns that lie very far from you, towns that do not belong to nations hereabout.

וְכִּי מִעָרֵי הָעַמִּים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר יִהְיֶה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נֹתֵן לְךָ נַחֲלָה לֹא תַחַיֶּה כָּל־נֶפֶשָׁהּ:

In the towns of the latter peoples, however, which the LORD your God is giving you as a heritage, you shall not let a soul remain alive.

כִּי־תִחַרְמֵם תִּחְרַמְתֶּם הַחִתִּי וְהָאֱמֹרִי הַכְּנַעֲנִי וְהַפְּרָזִי הַחִתִּי וְהַיְבוּסִי כְּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּךְ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ:

No, you must proscribe them—the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites—as the LORD your God has commanded you,

לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יִלְמְדוּ אֶתְכֶם לַעֲשׂוֹת כְּכָל־תּוֹעֵבוֹתֵם אֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ לֵאלֹהֵיהֶם וַחֲטָאתֵם לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

lest they lead you into doing all the abhorrent things that they have done for their gods and you stand guilty before the LORD your God.

5. Rashi 20:10

**כי תקרב אל עיר.** בְּמִלְחַמַּת הַרְשׁוֹת הַכְּתוּב מְדַבֵּר, כְּמוֹ שֶׁמְפָרֵשׁ בְּעֵינָיו "כֵּן תַּעֲשֶׂה לְכָל הָעָרִים הַרְחֹקֹת וְגו'" (ספרי)

6. Ramban 20:10

**כי תקרב אל עיר להלחם עליה וגו'** במלחמת הרשות הכתוב מדבר כמו שמפורש בענין **דברים כ:ט"ז** (כן תעשה לכל הערים הרחוקות ממך מאד לשון רש"י) **רש"י על דברים כ:י"ז** (כתב הרב זה מספרי (שופטים קצט) ששנו שם כלשון הזה במלחמת הרשות הכתוב מדבר והכונה לרבותינו בכתוב הזה אינה אלא לומר שהפרשה בסופה תחלק בין שתי המלחמות אבל קריאת השלום אפילו במלחמת מצוה היא שחייבים לקרא לשלום אפילו לשבעה עממים שהרי משה קרא לשלום לסיחון מלך האמורי ולא היה עובר על עשה ועל לא תעשה שבפרשה כי החרם תחרימם) **דברים כ:י"ז** (ולא תחיה כל נשמה) **דברים כ:ט"ז** (אבל הפרש שביניהם כאשר לא תשלים ועשתה מלחמה מצוה הכתוב ברחוקות להכות את כל זכורה ולהחיות להם הנשים והטף בזכרים ובערי העמים האלה צוה להחרים גם הנשים והטף

7. Yerushalami, Shevi'is 6:1

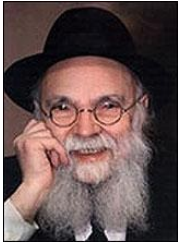
דאמר רבי שמואל שלש פרסטיגיות שלח יהושע לארץ ישראל עד שלא יכנסו לארץ מי שהוא רוצה להפנות יפנה להשלים ישלים לעשות מלחמה יעשה גרגשי פינה והאמין לו להקב"ה והלך לו לאפריקי (מלכים ב יח) עד בואי ולקחתי אתכם אל ארץ כארצכם זו אפריקי גבעונים השלימו (יהושע י) וכי השלימו יושבי גבעון את ארץ ישראל שלושים ואחד מלך עשו מלחמה ונפלו



8. Rav Hirsch, 20:10

*The complete annihilation out of the Land ordered in V. 16-17 was only if they refused to accept these terms of peace, and, keeping the polytheistic ways of life wished to assert themselves in the Land.*

### The Moral Grain of Judaism



9. Devarim 13:18-19

**יג, יח** ולא ידבק בידך מאומה, מן-החֵרֶם--לְמַעַן יֵשׁוּב יְהוָה מִחֲרוֹן אַפּוֹ, וְנָתַן-לְךָ רַחֲמִים וְרַחֲמֵךְ וְהִרְבָּה, פֶּאֶשֶׁר **יג, יט** כִּי תִשְׁמַע, בְּקוֹל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ, לְשׁוֹמֵר אֶת-כָּל-מִצְוֹתָיו, אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מֵצַוֶּה הַיּוֹם--לַעֲשׂוֹת, . נִשְׁבַּע, לְאַבְרָהָם הַיֵּשֶׁר, בְּעֵינָי, יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ.

10. Rav Hirsch Devarim 7:13

**לֹא תַחֲוֶה עֵינֶיךָ עֲלֵיהֶם.** The repeated admonitions not to have any mercy on the Canaanite population shows how much such a merciless procedure goes against the grain to the Jewish people and is against what they are meant to be, which is, and is to remain the predilection to protect all living creatures. They are to regard this merciless procedure against the Canaanite population as an exception, expressly commanded by God, to be done at His bidding because of the special circumstances.

11. In Defense of Samuel, Drashos, Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm March 21st 1970

Now, what I am saying is that when compassion conflicts with other duties of man, it is not true that compassion must always, under any conditions, prevail. We Jews are proud of our compassionate characteristics. The Rabbis refer to Israel as *בני רחמים* merciful ones, the sons of merciful ones. But nonetheless, we do not consider it absolute and beyond modification.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: *כפי שיהיה אדם עם רחמים*, "whoever is merciful towards the cruel, will ultimately become cruel towards the merciful." Saul began by having compassion on Agag, and a few chapters later he cruelly destroys Nob, the city of priests, without even the pretext of any moral justification. That is why I am so furious with those who had pity on Eichmann and have compassion for Nazis in their advanced middle ages, who had been apprehended after 25 years. A show of pity for such inhuman beasts is easily converted to inhumanity towards the innocent. It should not be

## Moral Evolution

12. Horatius at the Bridge, Thomas Babington McAulay, 19th century

Then out spake brave Horatius,  
 The Captain of the Gate:  
 "To every man upon this earth  
 Death cometh soon or late  
 And how can man die better  
 Than facing fearful odds  
 For the ashes of his fathers  
 And the temples of his gods?"





13. Gettysburg Address, Abraham Lincoln November 19, 1863

**But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate -- we can not consecrate -- we can not ha**



**llow -- this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us -- that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion -- that we here highly resolve that**

**these dead shall not have died in vain -- that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom -- and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.**

14. The Second Coming, William Butler Yeats, November 1920

Turning and turning in the  
widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the  
falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre  
cannot hold;



Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.

15. Slaughterhouse Five, Kurt Vonnegut

“It is so short and jumbled and jangled because there is nothing intelligent to say after a massacre. Everybody is supposed to be dead... everything is supposed to be very quiet... and it always is, except for the birds.”



## Polygamy

### 16. In Defense of Samuel, Drashos, Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm March 21st 1970



That is because we can detect two levels of morality: one we may call absolute, and the other consensual. By absolute morality I mean such moral principles as are common to human beings in all times and in all societies. They are, within the Jewish framework, the laws of the Torah or, at the very least, "the seven laws of the sons of Noah." While societies may fail according to such standards, but that does not affect the universality of the moral principle -- which remains absolute. However, in addition to such absolute moral principles, there are moral insights that develop slowly in the history of the human family as a result of various individual insights, until by consensus, by common agreement, they are recognized as binding moral judgments. Most of Rabbinic morality, or the moral laws referred to as minhag or custom, even those still developing, are consensual in nature.

The following examples will suffice to illustrate the difference. Adultery is, according to the Jewish perspective, always an absolute moral principle. Its violation represents the transgression of an absolute Biblical principle. Bigamy, however, is consensual rather than absolute. While Jews rarely practiced polygamy, even in the ancient past, there were some who did. It was only in the beginning of the Middle Ages, in the days of Rabbenu Gershom, that it was formally elevated to a moral principle that polygamy is to be banned. Now, anyone who today practices polygamy is utterly reprehensible, regardless of the fact that the immorality of the act is consensual rather than absolute. However, whereas we can blame any individual of the past for violation of an absolute principle, such as adultery, we cannot blame anyone of the past who lived and acted at a time when the consensus of the consensual moral principle had not yet been achieved. It would be ridiculous, therefore, to fault David or Solomon or Jacob for having more than one wife, when we developed this particular sensitivity at a much later time in history.

## Slavery



### 17. The Slow End of Slavery, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

This is not accidental but essential. In Judaism, law grows out of the historical experience of the people. Egypt was the Jewish people's school of the soul; memory was its ongoing seminar in the art and craft of freedom. It taught them what it felt like to be on the wrong side of power. "You know what it feels like to be a stranger," says a resonant phrase in this week's parsha (23: 9). Jews were the people

commanded never to forget the bitter taste of slavery so that they would never take freedom for granted. Those who do so, eventually lose it.

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Slavery, like vengeance, is a vicious circle that has no natural end. Why not, then, give it a supernatural end? Why did God not say: There shall be no more slavery?

The Torah has already given us an implicit answer. Change is possible in human nature but it takes time: time on a vast scale, centuries, even millennia. There is little doubt that in terms of the Torah's value system the exercise of power by one person over another, without their consent, is a fundamental assault against human dignity.

...

So slavery is to be abolished, but it is a fundamental principle of God's relationship with us that he does not force us to change faster than we are able to do so of our own free will. So Mishpatim does not abolish slavery but it sets in motion a series of fundamental laws that will lead people, albeit at their own pace, to abolish it of their own accord.

...

A slave may stay a slave but not without being reminded that this is not what God wants for His people. The result of these laws was to create a dynamic that would in the end lead to an abolition of slavery, at a time of free human choosing.

And so it happened. The Quakers, Methodists and Evangelicals, most famous among them William Wilberforce, who led the campaign in Britain to abolish the slave trade were driven by religious conviction, inspired not least by the biblical narrative of the Exodus, and by the challenge of Isaiah "to proclaim freedom for captives and for prisoners, release from darkness" (Is. 61: 1).

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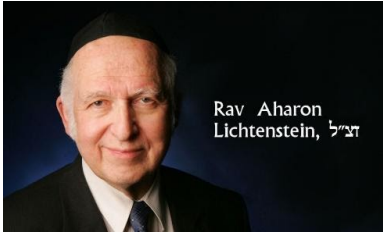
If history tells us anything it is that God has patience, though it is often sorely tried. He wanted slavery abolished but he wanted it to be done by free human beings coming to see of their own accord the evil it is and the evil it does. The God of history, who taught us to study history, had faith that eventually we would learn the lesson of history: that freedom is indivisible. We must grant freedom to others if we truly seek it for ourselves.

**"GOD WAITED FOR LINCOLN TO FREE THE SLAVES"**

*Rabbi Jonathan Sacks*

## Humility

18. Being Frum and Being Good: On the Relationship Between Religion and Morality, Rav Lichtenstein <sup>2</sup>



### AN EDUCATIONAL DIFFERENCE?

There is a third risk as well. I spoke before of accepting the problem of the *akeida*, of recognizing a certain conflict here between morality and mitzva, and of granting legitimacy to one's grappling with this issue. This too can present an educational problem. Let me illustrate with an incident which occurred to me during the Lebanon War.

After the massacre at Sabra and Shatila, I published an open letter to the Prime Minister. Among other things, this letter dealt with the use of force and the motivation behind it. I asked: Why was it that King Shaul was punished for not killing Agag, King of Amalek? Was it simply for not having killed the last remaining Amalekite? I suggested that he was punished not just for sparing Agag, but because the fact that he refused to kill Agag placed in a totally different light his killing of all the other Amalekites beforehand.

Shaul had been commanded to take a whole people and kill them—and this is, morally, a frightful thing. The only justification lies in it being a response to an unequivocal divine command. Therefore, if Shaul had been motivated in his actions purely by fear of God, by obedience to the *tzav*, then he should have followed the command to the letter. God didn't say, "Kill Amalek but spare Agag." Now, if he didn't kill Agag but killed everybody else, what does that indicate? It indicates that what motivated him in killing the others was not the *tzav* of God, but rather some baser impulse, some instinctive violence. And the proof is that he killed everyone, but spared his peer, his royal comrade. If that is the case, then Shaul was not punished for sparing Agag: rather, he had to be punished because of the Amalekites he did kill! Why? Because he killed them not purely due to a divine command (which is the only thing that can overcome the moral consideration), but rather out of military, diplomatic or political considerations.

Subsequently, I heard that a leading Religious Zionist rabbi in a prominent yeshiva had taken thirty minutes out of his *Gemara shiur* in order to attack what I had said. I called and asked him, "What did I say that merits this great wrath?" He replied, "I think it is a terrible thing to speak in this way, describing the divine command to destroy Amalek as asking a person to do something which ordinarily is not moral. This poses an ethical problem."

I said to him, "Wiping out Amalek does not conform to what we would normally expect a person to do. Normally, you should not be killing 'from child to suckling babe.' But I'm not saying, God forbid, that it is immoral in our case, where God has specifically commanded the destruction of Amalek—'A faithful God, without iniquity, righteous and upright is He' (*Devarim 32:4*). Although generally such an act would be considered immoral, it assumes a different character when God, from His perception and perspective, commands it. The same holds true of the *akeida*—it demanded that Avraham do something which normally is immoral. But in the context of the divine command, surely it partakes of the goodness and morality of God. We must admit, though, that there is a conflict in this case between the usual moral norm and the immediate *tzav* given here."

He said, "Yes, but you shouldn't describe it as being something which is not moral in a sense." So I asked him, "Do you agree that the *tzav* given here is something which we would not normally encourage people to do, something that we would normally consider to be immoral?" He said, "Yes, but it should not be described that way." And he added, "*Yesh kan hevdel chinukhi*—there is an educational difference."

I admit, there is something to this. The moment one speaks of a kind of clash between the demands of *yirat Shamayim* and the demands of morality—even given the qualifications which I mentioned—there is some kind of problem. There are risks in this approach.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://etzion.org.il/en/being-frum-and-being-good-relationship-between-religion-and-morality>

## 19. Rav Solovetichik, RCA Convention 1975



The study of the Torah is an ecstatic, metaphysical performance; the study of Torah is an act of surrender. That is why *Chazal* stress the importance of humility. Humility is necessary because the study of Torah means meeting the Almighty, and if a finite being meets the infinite, the Almighty, the Maker of the world, of course this meeting must precipitate a mood of humility; and humility results in surrender. What do we surrender to the Almighty? We surrender two things: first, we surrender the everyday logic, or what I call mercantile logic, the logic of the businessman or the utilitarian person, and we embrace another logic—the logic of Sinai. Second, we surrender the everyday will which is very utilitarian and superficial, and we embrace another will—the will of Sinai.

What does *kabbalas ol malchus shamayim* require of the person who studies Torah? First, we must pursue the truth, and the truth in *Talmud Torah* can only be achieved through singular *halachic* thinking and understanding. The truth is attained from within, in accord with the methodology given to Moses and passed on from generation to generation. It is ridiculous to say, “I have discovered an approach to the interpretation of Torah which is completely new, of which the Rashba didn’t know, the *Ketzos* didn’t know, and the Vilna Gaon had no knowledge.” One must join the ranks of the *chachmei hamesorah*—*Chazal*, *rishonim*, *gedolei acharonim*—and not try to rationalize from without. Such an attempt, be it historicism, be it psychologism, be it utilitarianism, undermines the very foundations of Torah and our tradition, leading eventually to assimilationism and nihilism, no matter how worthy the original intentions. We must not feel inferior, yielding to the charm of modern political and ideological trends. Not only may we not compromise; we may not even yield emotionally, to feel inferior. There is no need for apology—we should have pride in our *mesorah*. One must not try to gear the *halachic* norm to the transient ways of a neurotic society. (See also commentary on *Gen. 3:16*.) (*RCA Convention, 1975*)