

1972

The Thin Line

The Jewish Attitude Towards

Violence

BY RABBI DR. HERBERT M. BAUMGARD

TEMPLE BETH AM, MIAMI, FLORIDA

YOM KIPPUR, 1972 — 5733

Recently, here in Miami, a sixteen year old white boy entered the home of an eighty year old man, presumably with the intent to rob him. The old man awoke from his sleep, saw the intruder, took his gun, and killed him. The boy, it turned out, was unarmed.

I tore this story out of the newspaper and brought it to my eighth grade class in our religious school. I asked the young people to tell me whether they thought the eighty year old man should have shot the sixteen year old boy. Overwhelmingly, with few exceptions, the class said, "The man did the right thing". I think I cried a little right there, as I became dramatically aware of what has happened to the Jewish soul here in violent America. I carried the lesson a little further, however. I placed this proposition before them: "Suppose you saw a stranger in your backyard. He might be coming to steal something from your house or not. Would you shoot?" About half the class indicated they would shoot, even then. I could not help but think to myself, "How far we have come from the Talmudic teaching, 'He who takes one human life is as if he has destroyed the whole world.'"

While the initial attitude of the young people was painful to accept, I wondered later, "How could they really think otherwise?". Their daily lives are filled with incidents that teach them to accept death and violence easily. The newspapers constantly report auto deaths caused by speeding and drunken-driving (50,000 a year). Every day, the children learn from T.V. that this or that store was robbed, and the proprietor was killed by gunmen. They are programmed to accept calmly the fact that a hundred Americans were killed in Viet Nam last week, while one thousand of the enemy fell. How could they possibly be sensitive to the value of a *single* human life? Further, the atmosphere of crime in which we live tends to make them fearful for their own lives; so one does not have to be inclined towards violence to shoot an intruder. One only has to be fearful, to have a gun handy, and to imagine that one is re-enacting a scene from a John Wayne movie or a "Mannix" TV script.

A Theoretical Proposition

I tried to teach my Sabbath School class something about the Jewish attitude towards violence through the following discussion that takes place in the Talmud. We are to imagine that the Rabbis were seated in academic session trying to fashion a doctrine that could be applied in just such an instance as we described between the old man and the boy. The Talmudic proposition was this. Suppose a thief approaches a man and proclaims, "Give me your money or I will kill you." Is the victim automatically entitled to defend himself by doing physical harm to the thief? "No", said the majority of the Rabbis, for they concluded, "Perhaps the blood of the thief is redder than the blood of the victim." This was a way of saying, perhaps, the life of the thief is more significant than the life of the victim. The proposition in the Talmud continues. Suppose the thief draws back his knife, as if to stab the victim, should the victim let himself be killed? The Rabbis concluded, "No, the victim cannot permit himself to be killed, for to do so is to participate in his own murder, and murder is forbidden under the commandments." Then, what is to happen here, the proposition asks? At what moment is the victim entitled to use violence to defend himself? The Rabbis could not bring themselves to authorize the use of violence at a specific point. "Taku", the discussion ends. "Let the matter stand unresolved."

Basically, the Jewish attitude, elsewhere propounded in the Talmud and in our Bible, is that a person is entitled to use measured force to defend himself against bodily harm. We see from the proposition we have discussed, however, that the Rabbis were so opposed to violence that they were reluctant to give *general* legal sanction to its use at any particular point. That point, they concluded, must be decided individually *on the basis of each specific case*, balancing, ever so delicately, a man's right to defend himself against the human rights, even of a thief. It took me a while to demonstrate to my eighth grade class that from the Jewish point of view, a thief is also a child of God. The enemy is also human. In our age, the opponent becomes an "it", a blob without thought or feeling, an ogre worthy only of death. If this view comes to dominate our thinking, where, then, is our Jewishness? Where is our religiosity?

In the New Testament, the Jewish teacher there glorified teaches, "If a man smite thee on one cheek, turn the other to him also." As we can see, this carries the basic Jewish teaching concerning violence one giant step further. I am going to make the point here however, that until the time of Hitler, the Jews, as a group, have come closer to observing this New Testament teaching as a matter of practice than have Christians, as a group. We know that while Jesus taught the doctrine of non-violence, some Popes actually led armies into battle in his name. Many, so-called, "Christian" kings have, in the name of their Jewish teacher, slaughtered their opponents. We Jews still carry the memory of the pogroms approved by the Russian Orthodox Church, which were conducted against Jewish villages. The Crusades were the Christian answer to the holy wars of the Moslems. The Moslems slaughtered peoples on three continents to force their conversion to Islam, and Christian armies swept Moslems and Jews before them in destructive response.

Perhaps the reason that many Christian kings, and, even some Popes, have not followed the New Testament teaching of non-violence is that their life experience had not trained them in this direction. While the Christians were still a small group persecuted by the Romans, they understood and practiced the doctrine of non-resistance, but when the pagan emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire, Constantine, converted to Christianity in the 4th century, he forcefully converted his forty million subjects. For long centuries thereafter, those who controlled Christianity were fed by undiminished channels of paganism and by the experience of the conquering majority. Such experience does not make for humility or for tenderness. Those who were fed by the same channels as fed Jesus, however, could understand more easily the nuances of his teaching, for he taught as a member of an oppressed minority, with two thousand years of ethical history behind it.

A Tactic of Survival

In the time of Jesus, who lived and taught in a Jewish community, there were only two ways a Jew could react to the cruelty of the Roman conqueror. One was the way of open military revolt, propounded by a small part of the Jewish people known as the Zealots. The other was to remain detached from the ruling power and to emphasize family spiritual life, as advocated by the dominant Jewish party of the time, the Pharisees. The Zealots led an army of brave resistance fighters against the Romans which led to the burning of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 C.E. (A.D.) The Pharisees did not participate

in the revolt, for they had learned from the example of the Prophet Jeremiah, who lived about 600 years earlier, that non-resistance was, frequently, the only way to survive against a mightier enemy.

With the exception of the successful revolt of the Maccabees in 167 BCE, the Jewish people managed to survive from 586 BCE, when the first Temple was destroyed, to 70 C.E. (A.D.), only by "turning the other cheek." The basic Jewish attitude towards the conquering Babylonians, then towards the Greeks, and, then, toward the Romans was "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and render unto God the things that are God's." That is to say, except for a few brief periods of military revolt, the Jews, for 650 years, paid the high taxes, suffered the indignities exacted by their conquerors, and contented themselves with elevating the spiritual quality of their family and group life. This is an essential part of the philosophy and beauty of Orthodox Judaism! Continuing well into the European phase of Jewish history, where the Jews were always a minority, the Jews built their private lives behind spiritual and cultural walls that no outside power could conquer.

The practice of non-resistance was a supreme defense tactic designed by a people unable otherwise to survive. It worked very well for the Jews of Europe until the advent of Hitler. I have little patience with those who ask, "Why didn't the Jews take up arms against Hitler earlier than the Warsaw Ghetto?" Those who put such a question obviously do not know European Jewish history. We survived centuries of pogroms only because we didn't make of them a pitched battle. By bowing low, the vast majority of Jews in small villages, and even in the large cities of Eastern Europe, managed to survive. To stand and fight was to invite total annihilation by a completely superior enemy. No child of this kind of heritage could have known that the tactic which had saved the Jews for two thousand years was not workable against a madman like Hitler.

The militarism of the modern Israelis was born of the delayed resistance movement against Hitler. Like the earlier practice of non-resistance, *the new resort to violence was also a tactic of survival*, but the basic view of Judaism towards violence remains unchanged. A man may ethically defend himself when he is attacked, but he is to refrain from using violence whenever there is a ray of doubt that violence is actually essential. The Israelis have my sympathy not only because they must violently defend themselves against hostile neighbors, but because the longer they survive by the gun, the more energy and time they devote to military defense, however essential, the less time and energy they will have for more distinctive Jewish values.

Around 1890, and for several decades thereafter, many Jews fled Europe because there were already signs that their old defense tactics were less effective. Hundreds of thousands of Jews, especially from Eastern Europe, fled from the mounting crisis on that continent. On the one hand, the pogroms were increasing, and on the other, the Russian Czar was conscripting Jews on a wholesale basis into his army. Caught in this squeeze of violence, all of the Jews who could came to America. Here in a free country, the Jew discovered that he did not have to turn the other cheek when he was attacked. He learned that he could turn to the courts and find justice. He learned that he could help influence Congress to pass civil rights legislation. One of the great untold stories of the America of this period is the tremendous influence of the Jews on the extension of democratic rights to an ever increasing number of Americans. Knowledgeable blacks know that

their freedom drive was built on the foundation of the Jewish-directed legal struggle, but part of the paradox of the Jew, in the country where he has found equality, is that he has been caught up in the new American attitude towards violence.

The Hardening of the Soul

As the ethical soul of Israel is threatened by the never ending military environment, so the longer America has been involved in Viet Nam, the more tarnished has become the American soul. The events in the village of Mai Lai teach us what can happen to Americans who have been taught to live by the gun, but it does not seem that the urge to kill is confined to the scene of Mai Lai. A more typical attitude was reported on TV recently when an American general was interviewed on the battlefield shortly after the invasion from the North was temporarily halted. "Do you think you can turn them back, General?", the TV reporter asked, The General replied, "We're going to do better than turn them back. We're going to kill them all before they get back to Cambodia". Such is the spirit of vengeance in war. In spite of the fact that the General's statement was heard by millions of Americans, there was no public protest against the General. Beth Am's eighth graders were also witness to this film clip. No wonder so many of them would not hesitate to approve the killing of a sixteen year old intruder by an eighty year old man.

And have America's religious leaders been much better than this particular general? For a long while, Cardinal Spellman of the New York Diocese was the most vocal of militants against North Viet Nam, and it was a rare Catholic dignitary who came out against the war. For a long while, only a few courageous Protestant leaders dared to say that such a war was not consistent with Christian teaching. It seems clear that the spirit of Rome, rather than the spirit of non-violence, has dominated the thought of much of America.

Unfortunately, we Jews have had our own advocates of violence in this country. Rabbi Myer Kahane has organized his own vigilante group in New York. He has encouraged Jews, some of whom have been robbed and brutalized, to fight fire with fire. Now, let me be clear about it, Rabbi Kahane and his Jewish Defense League are no more consistent with Jewish tradition than Cardinal Spellman is consistent with New Testament teaching.

In the early days of the Hebrew tribes, vengeance was a way of keeping order, just as Hamlet thought that vengeance was required of him, as a show of integrity. As the biblical society became more organized, however, vengeance was outlawed. "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth" yielded to the rule of law and to law enforcement by designated officials. Rabbi Kahane is a throwback to primitive times. His attitude is both un-rabbinical and un-Jewish, precisely because he treats the law and violence in a cavalier fashion.

The fact that there is a Rabbi Kahane, however, underlines the point we are making. The Jews in America are becoming as absorbed in the current violent culture as are non-Jews. To me, it is especially disheartening to observe that the people, which has suffered as a persecuted minority for 2500 years and which has practiced non-violence for most of that period, has come to this.

It has been said by some that America, once the home of wholesale lynchings, has reformed. What is a lynching, other than a violent judgement

upon a person who is denied a democratic trial? This is why the Talmudic rabbis could not bring themselves to say, as a matter of general rule, that a victim of an assault could, without guilt or limitation, cause serious harm to his assailant. The rabbis were too committed to the custom and the restraint of a democratic trial. Indeed, that is what the Talmud is all about. It is an amazing file of legal cases and ethically oriented decisions.

Here in modern America, however, there are lynchings at every moment. A thief robs a store; the owner is not quick enough in handing over the money; so the thief shoots. That's a lynching, a violent judgment without trial. Let's take another case. A possible thief stands in your backyard. He may try to enter your home; he may not. You are afraid, so you don't wait. You shoot and kill him. This, too, is a lynching, a violent judgment without benefit of trial.

Christians have justifiably complained about the crucifixion of Jesus, because it was a lynching. As a Jew, I am more concerned about the lynching of Jesus than are Christians, for he was a Jew, a soul-brother of mine, lynched by the Romans who crucified ten thousand other Jews for lesser reasons. But, alas, the lynching of their religious leader has not caused enough Christians to be sufficiently sensitive to the lynching of thousands of innocent Americans today, tens of thousands, by means of the gun alone last year.

"He Who Kills One Man . . ."

What has happened to a group of Israelis in Munich ought to reawaken what has been a slumbering Jewish distaste for violence. All of our tragic suffering ought to make the Jew the foremost advocate of non-violent solutions to human problems. Certainly, we, of all groups in America, have to take a stand. We must not join the mass hysteria. We must not stock up guns. We must rely on the law. We must not condemn a man before he stands trial. We must not be both judge and jury with an instrument of death in our hands.

Is this a call to absolute pacifism? It is not. The Jewish tradition has never been one of absolute pacifism. Our fathers have taught that there is a thin line where the Jew is authorized to defend himself by violence. What we are talking about is just where that line should be. Should it be sooner or later? The Jewish inclination is later, hopefully, never. There are terrorists in the world, and there are Hitlers. We can never afford to forget these lessons, but if we assume that all of our potential enemies are Hitlers and terrorists, and if we are prepared to react to all challenges by shooting from the hip, then, all that is sacred in Judaism will vanish in the smoke of our guns.

"*He who kills one man*", states the Talmud, "*is as if he has destroyed the whole world.*" Can Jews ever come to believe that whole-heartedly again? We must come to believe it, and the world must come to believe it, if the human society is not to explode on this planet.

Let us take a lesson home with us this day and deliberate upon it. The lesson is both theoretical and actual. It poses a problem for which there is no absolute answer, but the way you answer it may reveal the depths of your Jewish spirit. The way you answer it may tell us something about the future of the world. Here is the problem. An eighty year old man lies sleeping in his bedroom. He hears an intruder in his living-room. He takes his gun and goes into the living-room. He sees a sixteen-year-old boy. Should he shoot?