

*Self-Defense No Guarantee of Right to Violence*

With regard to violence, Judaism appears to agree with Konrad Lorenz that to act aggressively is human. However, as with all instincts, whether for food, sex or recognition, Jewish law never seeks totally to repress. It seeks only to control, to regulate, to make constructive, to dignify, even to sanctify. That applies to the drive for violence or aggression. For this reason, it must be conceded that Judaism is not committed to pacifism.

It may be that there were rabbis in the third or fourth century who opposed violence as a means of ensuring Jewish survival, but theirs was decidedly a minority point of view. On the other hand, Rabbi Maurice Lamm, in his essay "Red or Dead," shows that the sources establish that pacifism is not a Jewish ideal. If pacifism is the pursuit of peace at any and all cost, then it was never an authoritative Jewish teaching.

Tolstoy rejected all violent resistance to evil in the social order, regardless of cause and circumstance, because an active revolution must fight evil with another evil, violence. He believed in passive, individual resistance and derived it from the New Testament, from Matthew: "resist not evil."

Gandhi also made it a strategy of politics and later attempted to make it a policy of state. Gandhi's proposal for Jews during the Holocaust was also passive resistance. Gandhi's passive resistance might have been effective against an England which had a conscience, but it would not have accomplished anything with Hitler. Quite the contrary, it was precisely what Hitler would have wanted.

But even in situations in which humans less beastly than Hitler are the enemy, passive resistance often has serious limitations. It either cannot be consistently maintained, or it results in the loss

of the best manpower that a cause can possibly mobilize. One such situation in modern times is that of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, which played an important role in the black revolution in the United States during the '60s. Howard Zinn's "The New Abolitionists" questions how nonviolent a non-violent direct action can be. He proves, for example, that in 1964 the group had to concede that it would not stop a Negro farmer in Mississippi from arming himself to defend his home against attack.

Judaism, therefore, is more concerned with regulating the circumstances which would permit the exercise of violence - by individuals, by groups, and by states - than it is with the elimination of violence at all costs. Violence is an important way both to destroy and to conserve one of the most important of the values system of Judaism - human life.

Violent action usually endangers the life of the aggressor as well as the lives of those against whom violence is directed. Generally, one's own life is regarded as having the highest priority. But if one is to engage in violence, it must be in accord with Jewish law and in behalf of the value of life or a value even higher than the value of life. Never is one to lose sight of the ultimate value to be achieved.

Thus, war for war's sake, which in Judaism is represented by Amalek, is the essence of evil. There can be no compromise in opposition to such a policy. Duels to vindicate one's honor are heinously sinful. Sadism and masochism are not to be tolerated. Even asceticism is frowned upon. It is held to be a form of violence against the self, except in the very special cases in which nothing less will help a person to overcome physically or spiritually self-destructive behavior.

It must be obvious that when one practices violence against an aggressor to save one's own life, one is committed to a value - the value of one's own life. One has a right to prefer one's own life to the life of the attacker. However, may one use an innocent bystander to protect oneself?

Or may one kill another, complying with the request of the attacker, in order to save one's own life? Jewish law in such cases says that it is morally wrong to do this, although one may not be punished for so doing except by God Himself.

Jewish law also held that if an enemy should demand that a city surrender to it one person - male or female - or face total destruction, it is better that all should die rather than save themselves by betraying an innocent human being. In Jewish history communities may have been saved by volunteers who martyred themselves. But to use the life of an innocent person for any purpose was absolutely forbidden, even if the purpose was to save many lives.

Are modern terrorists guided by such an ethic? I refer especially to terrorists who are killing their own people, not even enemies. They have no regard whatever for human life. And when they are the trainees of a foreign state who infiltrate another country to destroy it, they certainly are not guided by any regard for the value of human life.

What was so remarkable about the underground activity of Jews in Palestine before the establishment of the State of Israel was that they attacked principally military objectives, never civilians, and only rarely the military personnel of Britain. They were mindful of the sanctity of human life. How can one equate them with the terrorists of today!

During the Holocaust many Jews suffered martyrdom because they would not substitute someone else for themselves on the lists for the gas chambers. It also happened at other times in Jewish history that many a community refused to resist and kill Christian attackers because of the disastrous effect their resistance would have on Jews elsewhere.

A Moslem minority in a Christian country could always threaten assailants with reprisals against the Christian minorities in lands where Moslems were in the majority. Jews, however, even when they were in a position to deal a strong blow, found that they had to subordinate the destiny of their particular community to the welfare of Jews all over the world.

Thus, for example, the Jews of Tulczyn in 1648 refrained from attacking treacherous fellow combatants among the noblemen. They chose to die instead when their leaders exhorted them: "We are in exile among the nations. If you lay hands upon the nobles, then all the kings of Christianity will hear of it and take revenge on all our brethren in the dispersion, God forbid."

In our own century we had a tragic but eloquent example of what the Jews always dreaded, the bullet fired in 1938 by Herschel Grynzpan. At that time Poland was calling back all of its citizens, and Grynzpan's parents were caught in a vise. After receiving a letter from his parents describing their distress, he decided to take revenge by destroying some great Nazi officials. He made his way into an embassy in Paris and killed a third-rate bureaucrat of Nazidom. That shot was the pretext for the dreadful pogrom of November 1938, a reprisal against all the Jews in Germany.

Is the situation so different today? Self-defense may sometimes be helpful to one Jewish community, but Jews must always be terribly concerned about how it will affect Jewish communities elsewhere. Thus Jews in South Africa are concerned when the State of Israel exercises its sovereign right to vote in the United Nations in accordance with the dictates of its conscience against South Africa. And Jews of the Soviet Union are pawns in an international struggle with the U.S.

From all of this it appears that even in self-defense one must be mindful of values. Even in self-defense there is no absolute right to engage in violence. Thus, while Jewish law does not absolutely outlaw the right to rebel or resort to violence, it is preoccupied with the when, where and how. Perhaps this should apply to all rights.