

Why Jews Abhor Bloodshed:
Tenets of Judaism, especially dietary laws,
instill reverence for life

How could one possibly associate God's name with such a cruel, bloodthirsty deed? A former student, now a highly respected colleague, asked me this question the day a Palestinian Arab fatally stabbed a 15-year-old Jewish girl and shouted that the heinous murder was in the name of God.

Unfortunately, this has been happening ever since God created man, and no society has as yet succeeded in eliminating acts of violence committed for a higher cause.

Most people have a conscience. When their conscience tries to inhibit them, they find justification for ignoring it. When Nero burned Rome, he did it to save Rome from the inroads of the dangerous Christians. When Nazis cremated millions, they too were protecting humanity from inferior breeds. When Arab fathers kill their daughters who shame them, they do so for the family's honor.

Unlike Gandhi - whose unqualified refusal to engage in violence is well known - Jews did not embrace that doctrine. They preferred resistance to evil and even, if necessary, a resort to violence to end violence. The best that Judaism sought to accomplish was curbing violence and, if more was possible, its humanization. If Jews had heeded Gandhi's counsel during the Holocaust, there would have been no survivors and Hitler might now be ruling the world.

But Judaism did induce in Jews a hatred for bloodshed. The dietary laws especially contributed to that aversion from the cradle to the grave.

Through our tradition we were made very aware that there is no greater threat to the human personality than homicide. Therefore, God feared that its incidence would increase because of man's carnivorous habits. It appears from a chapter of Genesis that God

had hoped that man would be herbivorous. Only after the flood in Noah's day was permission granted to man to eat the flesh of animals. (*See Genesis 9:1-4*)

This, however, might cause man to esteem life lightly. Therefore, the commandment against murder and suicide was promulgated simultaneously. (*Ibid.* v. 5-6) Sharing the fears of ethical vegetarians, the Bible suggested that the shedding of the blood of an animal even for the purpose of food might make man callous to the shedding of the blood of fellow humans.

The Bible, therefore, did more than prohibit murder. It sought to induce an aversion for blood. The Law's maxim was that blood was life. (*Ibid.*) Consequently, the drinking of blood was prohibited. Moreover, the horrifying practice of barbarisms to cut steaks from live animals for food was also enjoined.

This was a minimal prohibition incumbent on all humanity. For Israel, however, there were additional proscriptions. Jews were not to eat meat unless the animal was so slaughtered that its death was immediate and the maximum amount of blood was removed from the body and tissues at the same time. Even after this manner of slaughter, the meat must be soaked and salted or broiled so that its blood content was further reduced. (*See Shulchan Aruch Y.D. regarding the laws of Shehitah.*) Perhaps some nutritive benefits were lost, but no Jew could fail to be impressed by the moral suggestion that, though the eating of meat was permitted, Jews must be ultra-careful, even squeamish, about eating blood.

Thus their almost congenital aversion to war, dueling and murder was no accident. It was definitely the consequence of the Torah's preoccupation with the prohibition regarding blood. (In one instance, the method of slaughter was varied so that the blood was not speedily removed, but that situation involved atonement for murder. This different method of slaughter was, so to speak, a reflection of the murderer's performance.)

Yet even if the manner of removing the blood had ethical significance, what of the act of slaughter itself? What could induce a greater disrespect for life than the act of killing the beast? Visitors to slaughterhouses may behold how coarse and vulgar are the men who grip the animals, swing the sledgehammers and then, in fun and frolic, cut up the cadavers. That we may have meat, alas, some human beings must be made callous.

This is something that Jewish law sought to avoid. And in order that no Jew who eats meat should do so at the cost of a brother's loss of humanity and refinement, qualifications to become a slaughterer were so numerous and so exalted that the slaughterer became a religious functionary. Upon him higher standards of ethical and ritualistic behavior were imposed than upon rabbis or cantors. To prevent degradation, requirements were exalted to the opposite extreme. He was to be learned in Torah, a man of impeccable trustworthiness and integrity, capable of great personal sacrifice and absolutely immune to any kind of pecuniary appeal.

Pious Jews were wont to boast that they ate from the *Shehitah*, or slaughter of saints. No greater compliment could be paid a man than to say that a famous rabbi ate the meat of an animal he had slain. Such was the Torah's method to save from degradation not only him who eats the meat but him who makes it available!

Jews generally abhorred human bloodshed to such an extent that though the Bible permitted capital punishment, it was almost totally abolished in Jewish society. (*Talmud Makkot* 7a) There were also laws to control cruelty and bestiality in times of war. (*See Ramban Hilchot Melachim* Chapter 6.) There were even laws to limit the circumstances in which one could be a martyr and sacrifice oneself for God's sake. (*Talmud Sanhedrin* 74a)

All of this may account for the relatively small number of Jews who commit crimes of violence. However, the daughter religions of Israel did not, as Jews did, discourage violence in general and violence for the sake of God.

Jews could engage in violence to prevent an innocent person's murder or woman's rape but not to prevent a Jew from defying God or engaging in an idolatrous practice or the desecration of the Sabbath. (*Mishah Sanhedrin* 8:7)

There was no minor brake on fanaticism or fundamentalism. In medieval Europe both Christians and Moslems massacred Jews in God's name, and even Daniel Dafoe, author of the classic "Robinson Crusoe," defended laws that outlawed religious toleration. The "heretics" were "snakes ' who should be killed with impunity.

Thus, one can expect a fanatic to kill a Jewish child for God's sake more readily than a Jew would reciprocate. And it hurts when

a Jewish organization - to raise funds - equates the religious extremism of Jews with the extremism of Moslems in Israel.

It is consummately to be hoped that all killing for God' s sake will cease. That is His will. He is well able to take care of His enemies by Himself.