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INSTITUTE הרטמן שלום

Living Between Purim and Pesach, Post-October 7

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Shalom Hartman Institute of North America

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Sara was a founding faculty member of Yeshivat Hadar, where she developed a Bible and Exegesis curriculum. She has taught in a variety of Jewish settings, most recently as a history instructor at the Frisch School. Her research interests include the intersection of ritual and relevance, ritual experimentation, and overcoming the binary of halakhic–non-halakhic/insider-outsider in Jewish ritual practice. As part of her participation in the Religious Worlds Seminar at the Interfaith Center of New York, Sara researched ways of integrating comparative religion into Jewish educational contexts.

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I. Dilemmas of Power and Jewish Values

1. Midrash Genesis Rabba 76:2

“Then Jacob was greatly afraid, and he was distressed” (Genesis 32:8). Rabbi Yehudah the son of Rabbi Ilai said: Are not fear and distress identical? The [reason for the redundancy], rather, is that he was afraid lest he should be slain and was distressed lest he should slay. He said [to himself] ‘If he overcomes me, he will kill me, and if I overcome him, I will kill him.’ Thus, he was afraid lest he should be slain and distressed lest he should slay.

וַיִּירָא יַעֲקֹב מְאֹד וַיִּצְרָר לוֹ: אָמַר רַבִּי יְהוּדָה בְּרַבִּי עִילָאֵי לֹא הִיא יְרָאָה לֹא הִיא צָרָה, אֶלָּא וַיִּירָא שְׁלֹא יִהְרַג, וַיִּצְרָר לוֹ שְׁלֹא יִהְרַג, אָמַר אִם הוּא מִתְגַּבֵּר עָלַי, הוֹרְגֵנִי, וְאִם אֲנִי מִתְגַּבֵּר עָלָיו אֲנִי הוֹרֵגוֹ, הִדָּא הוּא וַיִּירָא שְׁלֹא יִהְרַג וַיִּצְרָר לוֹ שְׁלֹא יִהְרַג

2. Rabbi Judah Halevi (1075-1141), Kuzari, 1:114

אָמַר הַכּוֹזָרִי: כִּן־הוּא אֱלוֹהֵי הַיְתָה כְּנִיעַתְכֶם בְּרָצוֹן. אָבֵל הִיא בְּהִכָּרַח, וְכֹאֲשֶׁר תִּמְצָא יְדָכֶם תִּהְיֶה. אָמַר הַחֶבֶר: מִצָּאֵת מְקוֹם חֲרָפְתִּי מִלְּךָ כּוֹזָר. כִּן־הוּא, אֱלוֹהֵי הַיְתָה רַבְּנוּ מִקְבֵּל הַדְּלוּת כְּנִיעָה לְאֱלֹהִים וּבַעֲבוּר תּוֹרָתוֹ, לֹא הִיא מְנִיחָנוּ הָעֲנָן הָאֱלֹהִי כֹל הַזְּמַן הָאֲרֻךְ הַזֶּה

The King of the Khazars retorts: “Maybe that would be the case if you had chosen your humble status, but it is only the product of necessity. When you have power, you too will kill your enemies.” The Rabbi conceded: “You have discovered our weakness.”

II. Pesach Judaism

3. Deuteronomy 10:17-19

יְיָ בִּי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם הוּא אֱלֹהֵי הָאֱלֹהִים וְאֲדֹנֵי הָאֲדֹנָיִם הָאֵל הַגָּדֹל הַגִּבּוֹר וְהַנּוֹרָא אֲשֶׁר לֹא־ יִשָּׂא פָנִים וְלֹא יִקַּח שֹׁחַד: יח עֲשֵׂה מִשְׁפָּט יְתוֹם וְאִלְמָנָה וְאָהֵב גֵּר לְתַת לוֹ לֶחֶם וְשִׂמְלָה: יט וְאָהַבְתֶּם אֶת־הַגֵּר כִּי־גֵרִים הָיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם:

(17) For your God is God supreme and Lord supreme, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who shows no favor and takes no bribe, (18) but upholds the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and befriends the stranger, providing food and clothing.— (19) You too must love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

4. Haggadah

הָא לַחֲמַא עֲנִיָא דִּי אֶכְלוּ אַבְהֵתְנָא בְּאַרְעָא דְּמִצְרַיִם. כָּל דְּכִפֵּין יִיתֵי וְיִיכֹל, כָּל דְּצָרִיף יִיתֵי וְיִפְסַח. הַשְּׁתָא הָכָא, לְשָׁנָה הַבְּאָה בְּאַרְעָא דְּיִשְׂרָאֵל. הַשְּׁתָא עֲבָדִי, לְשָׁנָה הַבְּאָה בְּנֵי חוּרִין.

This is the bread of destitution and affliction that our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt. Anyone who is famished should come and eat, anyone who is in need should come and partake of the Pesach sacrifice. Now we are here, next year we will be in the land of Israel; this year we are slaves, next year we will be free people.

5. José Andrés, “Let People Eat”, *New York Times*, April 3rd 2024

The peoples of the Mediterranean and Middle East, regardless of ethnicity and religion, share a culture that values food as a powerful statement of humanity and hospitality — of our shared hope for a better tomorrow.

There’s a reason, at this special time of year, Christians make Easter eggs, Muslims eat an egg at iftar dinners and an egg sits on the Seder plate. This symbol of life and hope reborn in spring extends across religions and cultures.

I have been a stranger at Seder dinners. I have heard the ancient Passover stories about being a stranger in the land of Egypt, the commandment to remember — with a feast before you — that the children of Israel were once slaves.

It is not a sign of weakness to feed strangers; it is a sign of strength. The people of Israel need to remember, at this darkest hour, what strength truly looks like.

6. Etgar Keret “Plague of the First Born” *Tablet* March 28, 2015

Ever since he was a child, Etgar Keret has always found it hard not to sympathize with the Egyptians in the telling of the Passover story. This came up in a recent conversation with Jonathan Goldstein for Vox Tablet’s Passover special, [“We’ll Be Here All Night.”](#)

“Sometimes when you read a story you hate the bad guy more and more,” Keret explained. “But here, you know, from very early on, [the Egyptians] just suffer and suffer and suffer and suffer. And then, they drown.” Keret first explored these sympathies in this short story from his collection *The Bus Driver Who Wanted To Be God* (St. Martin’s Press, 2001).

In late June, after the Plague of Frogs, people began leaving the Valley in droves. Those who could afford it left a caretaker in charge of their property, packed up their families, and set out on the long journey to Nubia, where they intended to wait until the wrath of the god of the Hebrews had been spent and the plagues had run their course. One morning, Father took Abdu and me to the King’s Highway, and together we watched in silence as the convoy wended its way in the distance. Father was about to head home when Abdu mustered the courage to ask the question that I had not dared utter: “Why are we not leaving with them, Father? We are among the richest families in the Valley. Why could you not hire someone to watch over our fields so that we might also go away?” Smiling softly, Father looked at Abdu, and said: “Why must we flee, Abdu? Have you too come to fear the god of the Hebrews?” “I fear no man and no god,” Abdu retorted. “Whosoever challenges me I will smite with my sword! But these plagues which have been inflicted upon us come from the heavens. There are no enemies in sight for me to defy. Why then do we not join all those who are leaving for Nubia? If there are no enemies pitting their strength against ours, then our presence here avails our Pharaoh nothing.” “There is truth in what you say, my son,” Father replied, his smile waning. “Indeed, the god of the Hebrews is both clever and cruel. Though He cannot be seen, He has dealt us a mighty blow. Yet you must understand, I am bound to this land by a vow which forbids me to send our family to Nubia.” “A vow?” Abdu was taken aback. “What vow?” “A vow I made many years ago, even before you were born,” Father said, his gentle smile reappearing. He gathered up his tunic and sat down on the ground, crossing his legs. “Come sit beside me,” he said, patting the earth, “and I will tell you about it.”

I sat down to the left of Father, and Abdu to his right. He lifted a clump of earth, crumbled it in his hands, and let the story unfold. “You know that my roots are not in this fertile soil,” he began. “After your mother and I were wed, I was forced, alas, to leave her in her uncle’s care, and to set out with my elder brother to faraway lands, where the black oil flows from the earth. For four years we lived as nomads and endured the heartache of separation, and in those years I amassed considerable wealth. Then I returned to Egypt, to my home. I gathered up your beloved mother, who had waited for so long, and bought a plot of land here in the Valley. On the very day when I completed the building of our home, I made two vows. First, never would I leave the valley. Second, I would do everything in my power so that my family does not become separated again, even for a short while.” Father tasted the sand that was clinging to his palm, sat up straight, and looked into Abdu’s eyes. “Even as a very young man, I knew that my family is like a plant. Uproot it, and it will wilt. Pluck away at it, and it will die. But leave it to thrive in the soil, untouched, and it will weather both gods and winds. It is born with the soil, and it will live so long as the soil shall live.”

That talk with Father, far from discouraging us, made us realize how strong we were. Now we also knew the secret of that strength and guarded it zealously. With each new plague, we grew stronger still, drawing closer and closer together. When the Plague of Lice descended, we learned to delouse one another and nursed the wounds of our kinfolk. On the morning after the Plague of Hail, we actually managed a smile, as we watched Abdu’s stupefied expression: he had just awoken out of his very deep slumber—so deep that even the hailstones rained upon us by the god of the Hebrews had not caused him to stir. Thus did the nine plagues descend on us, one by one, yet leave us unscathed. And then, towards the end of August, came the Plague of the Firstborn.

It was the shrieking of our neighbors that jolted me in the middle of the night. I ran outside and found everyone there already, except Abdu. Samira, our neighbor from just across the way, managed to blurt it out between sobs. We rushed toward Abdu’s room. Father got there first, then mother and me. Abdu was sprawled out on his cot, his eyes shut tight. “My son,” father whispered in a stifled voice, his face ashen. “My firstborn.” And for the first time in my life, I saw tears in his eyes. Mine began to well with tears too, more in agony over Father’s grief than even over my brother. Seeing my sorrow through his own tears, Father wiped his eyes with the border of his tunic and drew closer to Mother and me. His powerful arms embraced us, and our faces came together. Our tears mingled, and

we wept as one. “The god of the Hebrews is cruel,” Father resumed his whispering, as if afraid to intrude on Abdu’s repose, “but he shall not defeat us.”

“Could it be that he is not dead?” Mother mumbled. “That he is only sleeping?” “Please, Fatma,” Father whispered and planted a gossamer kiss on her brow. “Do not leave us now for a world of delusions. Much has been said about the god of the Hebrews, but never has he been known to favor one over another...”. “He is not dead,” Mother cried, “He cannot be dead! He is sleeping, just sleeping.” She broke the stronghold of our embrace and lunged towards Abdu’s cot. “Wake up, my son!” she cried, tugging at his gown. “Wake up!” Abdu opened his eyes, alarmed, and leapt out of bed. “What happened?” he asked, in a daze. “It’s a miracle, my son,” Mother said, hugging him and gazing at Father. “A great miracle has happened.”

Abdu was still dazzled when Mother let go of him and approached Father, who was standing in a corner, his eyes to the ground. “Did you see what just happened?” she whispered. “A great miracle! The god of the Hebrews has taken pity on us, and on our son.” Father peered straight ahead. His pain gave way to ill-concealed rage. “The god of the Hebrews harbors neither pity nor compassion towards us,” he fumed. “Only truth. Only truth.” His bloodshot eyes were like two hailstones, and his gaze filled me with greater fear than all ten plagues. “Why are you angry?” Mother asked. “Why do you not rejoice? Our Abdu is alive...” “Because he is not your firstborn,” Father cut her short. He raised his hand, as if about to strike her, but it froze in midair. Mother fell at his feet and let loose a sob as of one who has suffered an invisible blow. Thus did the four of us stand—motionless, steady and transfixed, like a cedar about to be felled. “Cruel indeed is the god of the Hebrews,” Father said. Then he turned on his heel and left the room.

III. Purim Judaism

7. Deuteronomy 25:17-19

זי זְכוֹר אֶת אֲשֶׁר־עָשָׂה לְךָ עַמְלֵק בְּדַרְדֵּר בְּצֵאתְכֶם מִמִּצְרָיִם: יח אֲשֶׁר קָרָךְ בְּדַרְדֵּר וַיִּזְנֹב בְּךָ כְּלֹה־נַחֲשָׁלִים אַחֲרֶיךָ וְאַתָּה עָנָף וַיִּגָּע וְלֹא גָרָא אֱלֹהִים: יט וְהָיָה בְּהִנָּיִחַ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֶלְהִיךָ אֶלְהִיךָ מִכָּל־אֲיִבֶיךָ מִסָּבִיב בְּאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר יְהוָה־אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לְךָ נַחֲלָה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ תִּמְחָה אֶת־זֵכְרָ עַמְלֵק מִתַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם לֹא תִשְׁכַּח:

(17) Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt— (18) how, undeterred by fear of God, he surprised you on the march, when you were famished and weary, and cut down all the stragglers in your rear. (19) Therefore, when your God grants you safety from all your enemies around you, in the land that your God is giving you as a hereditary portion, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!

8. I Samuel 15: 2-3,

ב כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת פְּקֹדֹתַי אֶת אֲשֶׁר־עָשָׂה עַמְלֵק לְיִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר־עָשָׂם לוֹ בְּדַרְדֵּר בְּעֵלְתוֹ מִמִּצְרָיִם: ג עַתָּה לֵךְ וְהִכִּיתָה אֶת־עַמְלֵק וְהִחַרְמְתֶם אֶת־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר־לוֹ וְלֹא תִחַמְלֶם עָלָיו וְהִמַּתִּיתָ מֵאִישׁ עַד־אִשָּׁה מֵעַלְל וְעַד־יוֹנֵק מִשּׁוֹר וְעַד־שֶׁה מִנֶּמֶל וְעַד־חֲמֹר:

(2) “Thus said the LORD of Hosts: I am exacting the penalty for what Amalek did to Israel, for the assault he made upon them on the road, on their way up from Egypt. (3) Now go, attack Amalek, and proscribe all that belongs to him. Spare no one, but kill alike men and women, infants and sucklings, oxen and sheep, camels and asses!”

ז וַיִּשָּׂא אֶת־עַמְלֵק מִחַוִּילָה בּוֹאֵת שׁוֹר אֲשֶׁר עַל־פְּנֵי מִצְרָיִם: ח וַיִּתְּפֹשׂ אֶת־אַגַּג מֶלֶךְ־עַמְלֵק חִי וְאֶת־כָּל־הָעָם הַחֲרִים לְפִי־חָרֵב: ט וַיַּחְמַל שְׂאוֹל וְהָעָם עַל־אַגַּג וְעַל־מֵיטֵב הַצֹּאן וְהַבָּקָר וְהַמְּשֻׁנִּים וְעַל־הַכְּרִים וְעַל־כָּל־הַטּוֹב וְלֹא אָבּוּ הַחֲרִימָם וְכָל־הַמְּלֹאכָה נִמְבָּזָה וְנִמְסָ אֶתָּה הַחֲרִימוֹ:

(7) Saul destroyed Amalek from Havilah all the way to Shur, which is close to Egypt, (8) and he captured King Agag of Amalek alive. He proscribed all the people, putting them to the sword; (9) but Saul and the troops spared Agag and the best of the sheep, the oxen, the second-born, the lambs, and all else that was of value. They would not proscribe them; they proscribed only what was cheap and worthless.

9. Esther 3:1, 8:5, 8:11, 8:13, 9:5, 9:12-13, 9:16 , 9:20-23

א אחר | הדברים האלה גדל המלך אחשוורוש את המן ברהמדתא האגגי וינשאהו וישם את כסאו מעל כל השרים אשר אתו :

(1) Some time afterward, King Ahasuerus promoted **Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite**; he advanced him and seated him higher than any of his fellow officials.

ויתאמר אם עלה המלך טוב ואם מצאתי חן לפניו וכשר הדבר לפני המלך וטובה אני בעיניו יכתב להשיב את הספרים מחשבת המן ברהמדתא האגגי אשר כתב לאבד את היהודים אשר בכל מדינות המלך :

“If it please Your Majesty,” she said, “and if I have won your favor and the proposal seems right to Your Majesty, and if I am pleasing to you—**let dispatches be written countermanding those which were written by Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite, embodying his plot to annihilate the Jews throughout the king’s provinces.**

אשר נתן המלך ליהודים אשר בכל עיר ועיר להקהל ולעמד על נפשם להשמיד ולהרג ולאבד את כל חיל עם ומדינה הצרים אתם טף ונשים ושללם לבז :

(Letter can be written) to this effect: **The king has permitted the Jews of every city to assemble and fight for their lives; if any people or province attacks them, they may destroy, massacre, and exterminate its armed force together with women and children, and plunder their possessions—**

פתשגן הכתב להנתן דת בכל מדינה ומדינה גלוי לכל העמים ולהיות (היהודיים) [היהודים] [עתודים] ליום הזה להנקם מאיביהם :

The text of the document was to be issued as a law in every single province: it was to be publicly displayed to all the peoples, **so that the Jews should be ready for that day to avenge themselves on their enemies.**

ויכו היהודים בכל איביהם מכת חרב והרג ואבדו ויעשו בשנאייהם כרצונם :

So the Jews struck at their enemies with the sword, slaying and destroying; they did to their enemies as they wished.

ויאמר המלך לאסתר המלכה בשושן הבירה הרגו היהודים ואבד חמש מאות איש ואת עשרת בני המן בשאר מדינות המלך מה עשו ומה שאלתו וינתנו לה ומה בקשתו עוד ותעש :

the king said to Queen Esther, “In the fortress Shushan alone the Jews have killed a total of five hundred men, as well as the ten sons of Haman. What then must they have done in the provinces of the realm! **What is your wish now? It shall be granted you. And what else is your request? It shall be fulfilled.**”

וַתֹּאמֶר אֶסְתֵּר אִם־עַל־הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב יִנָּתֶן גַּם־מָחָר לַיהוּדִים אֲשֶׁר בְּשׁוּשַׁן לַעֲשׂוֹת כְּדַת הַיּוֹם וְאֵת עֲשָׂרַת בְּנֵי־הָמָן יִתְּלוּ עַל־הָעֵץ:

“If it please Your Majesty,” Esther replied, “let the Jews in Shushan be permitted to act tomorrow also as they did today; and let Haman’s ten sons be impaled on the stake.”

וַיִּשְׁאַר הַיהוּדִים אֲשֶׁר בְּמִדְיָנוֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ נִקְהָלוּ וְעָמְדוּ עַל־נַפְשָׁם וְנוֹחַ מֵאֲבִיבֵיהֶם וְהָרוּגוּ בְּשֵׁנָאֵיהֶם חֲמֵשָׁה וּשְׁבַע־עֶשְׂרִים אָלֶף וּבְבָזָה לֹא שָׁלְחוּ אֶת־יָדָם:

The rest of the Jews, those in the king’s provinces, likewise mustered and fought for their lives. They disposed of their enemies, killing seventy-five thousand of their foes; but they did not lay hands on the spoil.

וַיִּכְתֹּב מְרֻדְכַי אֶת־הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וַיִּשְׁלַח סְפָרִים אֶל־כָּל־הַיהוּדִים אֲשֶׁר בְּכָל־מִדְיָנוֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחֲשֻׁרוּשׁ הַקְּרוּבִים וְהַרְחוּקִים:

Mordecai recorded these events. And he sent dispatches to all the Jews throughout the provinces of King Ahasuerus, near and far,

לְקַיֵּם עֲלֵיהֶם לַהֲיוֹת עֲשִׂים אֵת יוֹם אַרְבָּעָה עָשָׂר לְחֹדֶשׁ אָדָר וְאֵת יוֹם־חַמֵּשָׁה עָשָׂר בּוֹ בְּכָל־שָׁנָה וְשָׁנָה:

charging them to observe the fourteenth and fifteenth days of Adar, every year—

כַּיְמֵים אֲשֶׁר־נָחוּ בָהֶם הַיהוּדִים מֵאֲבִיבֵיהֶם וְהַחֹדֶשׁ אֲשֶׁר נִהְפָּדוּ לָהֶם מִיָּגוֹן לְשִׂמְחָה וּמֵאֲבָל לַיּוֹם טוֹב לַעֲשׂוֹת אוֹתָם יְמֵי מְשֻׁתָּה וְשִׂמְחָה וּמְשָׁלַח מְנוֹת אִישׁ לְרֵעֵהוּ וּמִתְּנֹת לְאֲבִינָיִם:

the same days on which the Jews enjoyed relief from their foes and the same month which had been transformed for them from one of grief and mourning to one of festive joy. They were to observe them as days of feasting and merrymaking, and as an occasion for sending gifts to one another and presents to the poor.

וְקִבְּלוּ הַיהוּדִים אֶת אֲשֶׁר־הִחֲלוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת וְאֵת אֲשֶׁר־כָּתַב מְרֻדְכַי אֲלֵיהֶם:

The Jews accordingly assumed as an obligation that which they had begun to practice and which Mordecai prescribed for them.

10. Avi Sagi “The Punishment of Amalek in Jewish Tradition: Coping with the Moral Problem,” *Harvard Theological Review* 87:3 (1994) 323-46

Can the sword, considered so worthless, become the instrument for exterminating a real, concrete nation? (Moshe) Amiel (1883-1946), aware of these problems, concluded that ‘the view of Judaism is that the prosecution cannot turn into the defense, evil cannot be extirpated by evil means, terror cannot be eliminated from the world through the use of counterterror.’ The war against Amalek is waged with the book --- ‘Write this for a memorial in a book (Exodus 17:14) --- and the blotting out of Amalek is not meant as their physical destruction.

... the obligation to blot out the memory of Amalek should not be understood literally: “Because ... it is written ‘let sins be consumed out of the earth’ and not ‘let the sinners.’ ... And as for Amalek too, the Torah stresses mainly ‘the remembrance of Amalek’ when Amalek turns into a memory, a culture, a lofty ideal, a sublime notion. ... It is this remembrance of Amalek that we are commanded to blot.”

11. Uri Zvi Greenberg (1896-1981) – Holy of Holies

Translation by Rachel Korazim and Levi Morrow

- Let me feel your body, my son. Your clothes are coarse woven fabric, my son, soldiers’ wear. A rifle on your shoulder.... Hurrah to you, my son. Until we arrive to Jerusalem, my son,

- Yes, mother And when we get to Jerusalem, my son, the royal sanctuary City of kings... oh... not even on Shabbat, will you change These clothes, my son. Once, I wanted to see you always dressed in silk, I do not want that anymore.

- As you say, Mother.

- And always with the rifle, my son.

- Amen, Mother

- And even when the Redeemer comes and nations beat their swords into plowshares and throw their guns into the fire— Not you – no, my son, not you!

- No, mother.

- Lest the goyim rise again and amass iron. Lest they rise again and we shall not be ready
As we were not ready until now... oh!

- Your words are holy, Mother,

...

- All the Jews who have fallen to gentile swords are brought on the wind Jerusalem-ward, to the Western Wall and from there to the cave of David our king and from there they are gathered in... until the coming of Shilo — —

I answer the heavenly voice and cry out:

- Holy, Holy, Holy! Mine forever, like my mother: This Western Wall and this cave: Of David our king on Mount Zion: Jerusalem, forever and ever: Amen

IV. Between Pesach and Purim

12. Yeshayahu Leibowitz, "After Kibiyeh," *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State* (Harvard University Press, 1995), 185

Kibiyeh, its causes, implications, and the action itself are part of the great test to which we as a nation are put as a result of national liberation, political independence, and our military power - for we were bearers of a culture which, for many generations, derived certain spiritual benefits from conditions of exile, foreign rule, and political impotence. Our morality and conscience were conditioned by an insulated existence in which we could cultivate values and sensibilities that did not have to be tested in the crucible of reality. In our own eyes, and, to some extent in those of others as well, we appeared to have gained control over one of the terrible drives to which human nature is subject, and to abhor the atrocities to which it impels all human societies - impulse to communal murder. While congratulating ourselves upon this, we ignored, or attempted to ignore,

that in our historical situation such mass-murder was not one of the means at our disposal for self-defense or for the attainment of collective aspirations. From the standpoint of both moral vocation and religious action, exilic existence enabled us to evade the decisive test. Attachment to the *Galuth* (Diaspora) and the opposition of many of the best representatives of Judaism to political redemption within historic reality was, in no small measure, a form of escapism reflecting the unconscious fear of such a test - fear of the loss of religious - moral superiority, which is easy to maintain in the absence of temptation and easy to lose in other circumstances.

However, values are precious to the extent that their realization is difficult and easily frustrated. This is the true religious and moral significance of regaining political independence and the capacity to deploy force. We are now being put to the test. Are we capable not only of suffering for the sake of values we cherish but also of acting in accordance with them? It is easy to suffer physically and materially and even to sacrifice one's life for their sake. This requires only physical courage, which is abundant to a surprising degree in all human communities. It is much more difficult to forego, out of consideration for such values, actions which promote other prized ends - legitimate communal needs and interests. The moral problem becomes acute when two good inclinations clash. The overcoming of an evil inclination by a good one is difficult but not problematic....

It is very easy - and therefore hardly worthwhile - to express moral reservations about acts of violence and slaughter when one bears no responsibility for defending the community in whose cause such acts are perpetrated.

...

Only the decision of one who is capable of acting and on whom rests the responsibility for acting or refraining from action can pass the genuine test of morality. We, the bearers of a morality which abominates the spilling of innocent blood, face our acid test only now that we have become capable of defending ourselves and responsible for our own security. Defense and security often appear to require the spilling of innocent blood.

This moral problem did not arise in connection with the war we conducted for our liberation and national restoration. True, we used to see war as the "craft of Esau", but it

was repulsive only to the extent that it was made into a way of life in the sense of "by the sword shall you live" (Gen. 27:40). But war, often enough, is one of the manifestations of the social reality, an inseparable part of it so long as messianic redemption has not occurred. **We accept war - without enthusiasm or admiration, but also without bitterness or protest - just as we accept many repulsive manifestations of human biological reality. In declaring our will to live as a real historic nation - not a meta-historical and metaphysical one - we took upon ourselves the functions of national life we had shunned when we were not bound by the tasks and concerts of normal national existence.** By the logic of history and of moral evaluation, our war of independence was a necessary consequence of our two-thousand year exile. **Only one prepared to justify historically, religiously, or morally the continuation of the exilic existence could refuse to take upon himself the moral responsibility for using the sword to restore freedom.**

Therefore, in our religious-moral stocktaking, we neither justify the bloodshed on the war (in which our blood was spelled no less than that of our enemies) nor do we apologize for it. **The problematic issues concern the manner of conducting that war, which goes on to this very day, and what is to be done after this war will be over. It is a difficult and perplexing problem: once the "craft of Esau" has been granted legitimacy, the distinction between the permissible and the forbidden, between the justified and the blameworthy, is very subtle - it is like that "handbreadth between heaven and hell". We must constantly examine whether we have transgressed and crossed that fine dividing line.**

We can, indeed, justify the action of Kibiyeh before "the world". Its spokesmen and leaders admonish us for having adopted the method of "reprisal" - cruel mass punishment of innocent people for the crimes of others in order to prevent their recurrence, a method which has been condemned by the conscience of the world. We could argue that we have not behaved differently than did the Americans, with the tacit agreement of the British, in deploying the atomic bomb: America saw herself in the fourth year of a war she had not initiated, and after the loss of a quarter of a million of her sons, facing the prospect of continued war in the style of Iwo Jima and Okinawa for an unforeseeable period of time. This fear led to the atrocity of Hiroshima, where 100,000 civilians, mostly women and children, were killed in one day to bring about the quick termination of this nightmare. We, too, are now in the sixth year of a war that was forced upon us and continues to inspire constant fear of plunder and murder. No wonder that border settlers

and those responsible for their life and security overreacted and reciprocated with cruel slaughter and destruction.

It is therefore possible to justify this action, but let us not try to do so. Let us rather recognize its distressing nature. There is an instructive precedent for Kibiyeh: the story of Shekhem and Dinah. The sons of Jacob did not act as they did out of pure wickedness and malice. They had a decisive justification: "should one deal with our sister as with a harlot?!" The Torah, which narrates the actions of Simeon and Levi in Shekhem, adds to the description of the atrocity only three words (in the Hebrew text) in which apparently it conveyed the moral judgment of their behavior: "and came upon the city unawares, and slew all the males". "The sons of Jacob came upon the slain, and spoiled the city, *because they had defiled their sister*" (Gen. 34:25, 27). Nevertheless, because of this action, two tribes in Israel were cursed for generations by their father Jacob.

Although there are good reasons and ethical justifications for the Shekhem-Kibiyeh action, there is also an ethical postulate which is not itself a matter of rationalization and which calls forth a curse upon all these justified and valid considerations. The Shekhem operation and the curse of Jacob when he told his children what would befall them in the "end of days" is an example of the frightening problematic ethical reality: there may well be actions which can be vindicated and even justified - and are nevertheless accursed.

Citation of this example from the Torah does not reflect belief in the uniqueness of the "morality of Judaism". It does not imply that the action is forbidden *per se* as Jews. It is intended to indicate that the action is forbidden *per se*. **"The morality of Judaism" is a most questionable concept - not only because morality does not admit a modifying attribute and cannot be "Jewish" or "not Jewish"**. The concept is self-contradictory for anyone who does not deliberately ignore its religious content.

There is, however, a specifically Jewish aspect to the Kibiyeh incident, not as a moral problem but an authentically religious one. We must ask ourselves: what produced this generation of youth, which felt no inhibition or inner compunction in performing the atrocity when given the inner urge and external occasion for retaliation? After all, these young people were not a wild mob but youth raised and nurtured on the values of a Zionist education, upon concepts of the dignity of man and human society. The answer is that the events at Kibiyeh were a consequence of applying the religious category of

holiness to social, national, and political values and interests - a usage prevalent in the education of young people as well as in the dissemination of public information. The concept of holiness - the concept of the absolute which is beyond all categories of human thought and evaluation - is transferred to the profane. **From a religious standpoint only God is holy, and only His imperative is absolute. All human values and all obligations and undertakings derived from them are profane and have no absolute validity. Country, state, and nation impose pressing obligations and tasks which are sometimes very difficult. They do not, on that account, acquire sanctity. They are always subject to judgment and criticism from a higher standpoint.** For the sake of that which is holy and perhaps only for its sake - man is capable of acting without any restraint. In our discourse and practice we have uprooted the category of holiness from its authentic location and transferred it to inappropriate objects, thus incurring all the dangers involved in such a distorted use of the concept. This original sin of our education appears already in our Declaration of Independence. Its use of the expression "the Rock of Israel" in the concluding sentence reflects a fraudulent agreement between two sectors of the public, which is to the credit of neither. The secular nation and state adjusted the sense of this term at its convenience, and used it to bribe the religious minority. The latter did not refuse to accept the bribe, even though it recognized the hypocrisy implicit in the use of this sanctified epithet. The "Rock of Israel" invoked by King David and by the prophet Isaiah, and incorporated in the benediction following the reading of Shema in the Morning Prayer, is not an attribute of Israel but is above Israel and transcends all human values and manifestations, personal and collective. The "Rock of Israel" of the Declaration of Independence is immanent in Israel itself. It is the human essence and might of Israel; Israel as manifested in the history. The use of the term from the Bible and the prayerbook to designate values of our consciousness, feeling, and the forces motivating our national-politic activity leads people to transfer the connotations of holiness, the absolute normative force associated with this term, to these human values. If the nation and its welfare and the country and its security are holy and if the sword is the "Rock of Israel" - then Kibiyeh is possible and permissible.

This is the terrible punishment for transgressing the stringent prohibition: "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain". The transgression may cause our third commonwealth to incur the curse of our father Jacob.