

CHAPTER 4

RELIGION AND VIOLENCE IN THE JEWISH TRADITIONS

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THIS essay presents the traditional violent themes in religious Judaism as they appear in sacred texts, rites, customs, and chronicles. It offers a survey of the components of Jewish religion relating to violence while analyzing and illustrating their development and influence throughout history.

Religious tradition is a reservoir of ideas and symbols, norms and values, information and moods handed down from generation to generation and stored in written and oral texts or objects, available for contemporary cultural, social, or political use. Tradition is not just a fixed rigid body inherited from the past, a fossil imposing itself on passive consumers of tradition. It is a vital and open-ended organism that lends itself to a wide variety of understandings and manipulations.

Jewish tradition preserved a harmony among countless interpretations, homilies, metaphors, sayings, ethical teachings, legends, and testimonies, which together constituted the material contained within the Aggadic (homiletic) and normative components of the Talmud, Midrash, Halakha, and Kabbalah. This included a fair number of categorical, embellished, and provocative statements that, in their wider contexts, were considered acceptable despite their problematic nature. All these sacred texts provided a wealth of ideas that proved crucial in the tradition's survival. They can be said to contain everything: arguments, on all their variants, including their opposites. This reservoir, limited but large, was harnessed by a wide range of ideological leanings and historical requirements. It also legitimated a vast array of interests and moral stances by providing them with a "traditional"

authority. This included an abundance of materials that supported religious violence and an abundance of materials that opposed it.

Religious violence is, firstly, violence sponsored or performed by individuals or groups who self-define and are identified by those around them as religious. Secondly, these actors account for their violence in a religious language, invoking religious symbols and referencing religious norms and values.

The case of Jewish violence is especially complicated since Judaism is characterized by a close relationship and a substantial overlap between religious association and ethnonationalist ties, akin to the ethnic nationalism that characterizes Tibetan Buddhism, Tamil Hinduism, Shintoism, and Sikhism. In Christianity and Islam, religious affiliation does not necessarily involve attachment to any particular nation or ethnic group. In contrast, affiliation with the Jewish religion implies affiliation with the Jewish people and vice versa. For more than three millennia, until the late eighteenth or nineteenth century, it was difficult to differentiate between the religious and the “tribal” components of Jewish identity. In the modern era, however, this tight linkage was disentangled. With the disintegration of the traditional, basically medieval, Jewish community, new Jewish phenomena emerged, including Jewish secularism, on the one hand, and varieties of Jewish religion, on the other hand. Though one cannot be a religious Jew without belonging to the Jewish people, the vast majority of contemporary Jews are not religious, let alone Orthodox. Consequently if, before, the term *Jewish violence* was sufficient to describe our phenomenon and by definition referred to a complex of both religious and ethnonationalist violence, the recent two centuries require us to distinguish between two types of Jewish violence: secular Jewish violence, which is mainly associated with Jewish nationalism (i.e., Zionism), and religious Jewish violence, on which this chapter focuses.

Our intention in the following pages is not to depict Judaism as a violent tradition nor is it our intention to portray Judaism as a nonviolent tradition. The reality is far more complex, as it is in all religious traditions. Jewish tradition includes an abundance of material that has clearly violent implications but also a profusion of materials that support a nonviolent ethic. Jewish religious motifs are as apparent in the past and present struggle against Jewish violence as they are in justifying such violence. Most contemporary observant Jews have no violent tendencies and in today’s Jewish world there are religious figures and movements dedicated to opposing violence. Many of these actors justify their peace-seeking positions by means of religious ethics and base their resistance to animosity and aggression on sacred texts.

We begin our survey by tracing the violence in Jewish tradition to its roots in biblical prescriptions and descriptions (the second and third parts, respectively). In the chapter’s fourth part, we explore how postbiblical interpretation and mediation blunted the Bible’s violent elements by discussing the motif of zealotry, exemplified in the Bible by the acts of Phinehas. Our survey then traces the development of the violent tradition from the four great revolts that occurred from 2 BCE to 2 CE, through the composing of the extracanonical books (the fifth part), to the

compilation of the Talmud (the sixth part). In the seventh and eighth parts of this chapter, we discuss the violent implications of two religious elements that are distinct and central in the Jewish legacy: mysticism and messianism. We conclude with a critical assessment of the nonviolent tradition attributed to medieval and early modern Judaism (the ninth part).

BIBLICAL PRESCRIPTIONS FOR VIOLENCE

The most fundamental element in the Jewish cultural reservoir, its very axis, is the Hebrew Bible. The Bible provides a rich source of antviolent themes, humanist ideals, and descriptions of idyllic peace and justice. At the same time, the Bible, like its counterparts in other ancient Near Eastern civilizations, is a remarkably militant text that includes an extraordinary range of aggressive themes and models, often confusing and contradictory. Violence is evident in the image of God, his treatment of humanity, the manner in which he demands to be worshiped, and the rules he sets forth for social control. Violence is also apparent in the chronicles of the Israelites, replete with war, genocide, and internecine conflict, as well as in prophecies that envision a turbulent end of times.

The violence inherent in the Hebrew image of God is particularly significant because the divine serves as a model for human emulation (*imitatio dei*). The Hebrew God is a “Lord of Hosts”, vengeful and militant. He ruthlessly kills individuals, annihilates groups, and punishes humanity with plagues, brutal wars, and natural disasters. He also commands killing on a “chauvinist” basis: His chosen people are instructed to implement his fury against inferior peoples that are accursed from the moment of their inception, like the Ishmaelites, Moabites, Ammonites, and Edomites.

The implications of God’s wrath are both direct and indirect: God is wrathful, and he commands others to do violence on his behalf. Since he is a model of emulation, his exemplar permits or even requires mimetic violence, as exemplified by Phinehas. At the same time, violence committed in the name of God and in emulation of God can absolve the perpetrator of agency and responsibility.

Violent divine discrimination is twofold: God is intolerant toward lesser peoples but reserves his most extreme expressions of fury for the people he holds to the highest standard. His entire relationship with Israel, even in its ideal form, is based on the ritualization of violence: It begins with Abraham’s “Covenant between the Parts” (*brit bein habetarim*), which involves a dismembering of animals, continues with the covenant of circumcision (*brit milah*), and ends with the cultic butchering, eating, and burning of animals in the Jerusalem Temple (*korban*). God requires constant sacrifice. Sacrificial offerings, ranging from sheep, bulls, and doves to wine, grains, and incense, were offered at regular festivals, as thanksgiving, after birth or disease, as atonement for sin, in fulfillment of vows, or as a voluntary deed.

The ritual slaughter industry in Jerusalem was vast, requiring colossal administrative, architectural, and economic machinery. But it also undergirded a prohibition on human sacrifice, the likes of which had occurred in the valleys around Jerusalem. Prebiblical memories of child sacrifice to Moloch survive in the ominous tales of the sacrifice of Isaac and the story of Jephthah’s daughter.

In prohibiting human sacrifice, homicide, and even the consumption of blood, the Bible places limits on violence. At the same time, the divinely ordained procedures designed to prevent crime, including violent crime, involve violence as a form of social control. The Bible commands capital punishment as a reprisal for violent acts such as murder, negligent homicide, brutality against parents, rape, and kidnapping. But it also requires capital punishment for sexual crimes (ranging from incest and bestiality to adultery) and for a long list of religious offenses (worshiping false gods, desecration of the Temple, blasphemy, desecration of the Sabbath, and witchcraft). The response to minor violent crimes is violent as well, in accordance with the *lex talionis* principle of “an eye for an eye.”

BIBLICAL DESCRIPTIONS OF VIOLENCE

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Beyond prescriptions for violence, the Bible abounds in descriptions of violence. Key historical moments in the chronicles of the Israel stand out in their carnage. The Exodus begins with Egyptian genocide against the Israelites, features the retaliatory killing of a violent Egyptian by Moses as its turning point, culminates in the ten plagues (including genocide against the Egyptians), and ends in the drowning of Pharaoh’s army in the Red Sea to the rejoicing of the Children of Israel. There follows the conquest of Canaan by Joshua, including the destruction of Jericho and Ai, the enslavement of the Gibeonites, the defeat of the Amorites, and the destruction of Hazor, all aided by divine intervention. Once settled in the land, the Israelites follow judges and kings in a sustained campaign against neighboring ethnic groups, including the Aramites, Moabites, Midianites, Amalekites, Ammonites, and, their most threatening rivals, the Philistines. These conquests are accompanied by a sustained struggle against idolatry, exemplified in the Prophet Elijah’s massacre of four hundred priests of Ba’al. The period of peace and flourishing under King Solomon is brief: Civil wars, conquest by regional empires, and exile follow. Even in exile, the Jews suffer but also sanction violence, as described in the book of Esther.

The brutal wars that assume a central role in the Bible are regulated by laws of war that prohibit particular tactics but also compel ruthless killing. Deuteronomy 20, for example, prohibits surprise attacks and requires sparing women and children in wars outside Canaan. But it suspends these constraints in wars against the six peoples of Canaan (the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites), in which none may be spared. Wars against these groups were regulated

by the laws of the ban (*herem*), in which all the spoils of war were dedicated to God. Refusal to abide by these strictures, as in the case of Achan, prompt swift retaliation. Famously, King Saul loses his crown and his sanity for his refusal to execute the Amalekite king, a task that the Prophet Samuel promptly completes on his behalf.

The war against the six peoples of Canaan bore distinctly religious characteristics. The confederacy of tribes made a sacred commitment to participate in it. Combatants, their weapons, and their camp were consecrated. This purity was prompted by virtue of God's presence in the midst of the camp and by a perception of the enemy as unclean and contaminating. In battle, the Israelites were accompanied by the arc of the covenant, priests equipped with trumpets, and temple vessels. The victims and loot were "consecrated to destruction," gifts to God akin to sacrifices in gratitude for victory. While composed in the context of an existential struggle and confined to a particular time and space, the virulent hostility towards neighboring groups depicted in the scriptures beckoned the reader to relive and reimplement ruthless enmity in every passing generation, as epitomized in the commandment to "remember what Amalek did to you."

Even the rare moments of peace in the Bible's historical account are interwoven with brutality. The origins of man, depicted in the early chapters of Genesis, involve betrayal, expulsion, pain, multiple homicides, and the annihilation of all living things by means of flood. The Hebrew patriarchs engage in theft, deceit, abduction, and physical combat; conduct war; commit incest; and attempt fratricide and infanticide. The latter is of particular significance, because Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son by divine edict, the *akedah*, supplies a model for Jewish martyrdom in later ages.

In the Bible, civil conflict also pits Israelites against one another as rival kings, clans, tribes, cities, and the two kingdoms, Judea and Israel, struggle for supremacy. For example, in Judges 19–21, a Levite avenges the rape and murder of his concubine by his Benjaminite hosts by hacking the concubine's corpse into twelve pieces and sending the sections throughout the territory of Israel. This macabre call to arms prompts a civil war in which the other tribes nearly exterminate the tribe of Benjamin.

The Bible, thus, offers an infinite yet paradoxical repertoire from which true believers can draw precedents, inspiration, and virtual blueprints for violent activity. The *herem* offers a script for violence but tempers the laws of war. The active role played by God in war suggests the feebleness and even innocence of the combatant, but the Bible's historical account emphasizes his pervasiveness and brutality. At times, the Bible glorifies war as a chivalrous game in which warriors prove their cunning and courage. At other times, it prophesies an end to war. These prophetic scenarios for the end of times can be equally shocking. Isaiah, Micah, Zechariah, and Jeremiah may envision a distant future devoid of arms, poverty, and aggression. But, on closer reading, these prophecies of global peace result from the death, devastation, or enslavement of the enemy. Apocalyptic visions are suffused with bloodshed, torture, and the annihilation of entire populations. Only the winners enjoy relief from fighting.

Even innocuous passages from the prophecies have received interpretations that are charged with intolerant implications. For example, Ezekiel 34:31 states: “And ye my flock, the flock of my pasture, are men [*adam*].” The Talmud interprets this quote to signify that “You [Israel] are called Man and gentiles are not called Man” (Talmud, Baba Me’zia 114b). A statement in the Mishnah that expresses unconditional love toward all humans received similar treatment. “Beloved is man, for he was created in God’s image” (Avot 3:17) was interpreted by several leading rabbis as referring to Jews only. In his commentary on this passage of the Mishnah, the sixteenth-century rabbi Judah Loew of Prague argued: “Though it says ‘Beloved is man’ this does not include all of mankind, because the sages said ‘You are called man and gentiles are not called man.’”

COPING WITH THE VIOLENT IMPLICATIONS OF THE BIBLE

Judaism has distanced itself from the Bible by placing interpretation (the Oral Torah) as an intermediate between itself and the Bible (the Written Torah). With the passage of time, this interpretation assumed primacy. The Talmud, intended as an exegesis of the Bible, became its substitute. The essence of Judaism became the interpretation and application of the Bible to historical realities. This involved a neutralization of the Bible and a defusing of any embarrassing and complicating segments that encumbered this adaptation to changing circumstances. Thus, Judaism is at one and the same time a religion in which the Bible is crucial and a different religion that developed after the Bible was sealed, canonized, yet rendered less relevant with the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and the Jewish exile from the holy land. In the absence of a kingdom, a territory, or priesthood, the wars of the Bible, its sacrifices, and other violent elements lost their validity as a model for emulation.

Interpretation and mediation have blunted the Bible’s violent elements. Biblical violence experienced the same process of castration as biblical eroticism did: Both underwent symbolization, spiritualization, and ritualization. The foundation of postbiblical religion, which forms the core of Jewish tradition, is a product of the systematic effort to “deviolence” the ancient Israelite inheritance. The rabbinical treatment of zealotry in the Bible is instructive of this process.

Numbers 25 narrates the paradigmatic case of zealotry. While the Israelites were camping in the desert of Moab before crossing the Jordan River on the way to Canaan, they whored with Midianite women, and worshiped a pagan deity. This double sin angered God who ordered Moses to hang the wayward Israelites, but Moses did not dare to confront the people. At that point, a prominent Israeli aristocrat challenged the divine power, transgressing both the sacred law and the authoritative leadership by committing an outrageously wicked act of blasphemy:

He had sex with a local princess while worshiping the local gods. The act took place in public, near the Tabernacle. In reaction, God punished his people with a plague that caused the death of thousands. However, Moses and the judges did nothing to stop the scandalous situation. In contrast to the impotence of established authority, a man named Phinehas took the initiative and slew the mixed couple. His impulsive brutal action, committed out of true belief, appeased God, thus stopping the plague.

Phinehas's zealotry was rewarded highly. He was granted God's covenant of peace and the high priesthood was guaranteed for him and for his descendants. According to this biblical precedent, zealotry is defined as religious violence aimed against those who are perceived as opposing the divine will, particularly by violating the boundaries of the collectivity and thus threatening its identity. From this formative religious moment on, zealotry in general, and Phinehas's zealotry, in particular, were sanctified. For more than two thousand years, Phinehas and his zealous act have been a quintessential ideal of monotheistic religious virtuosity. His epic deed became a morally, if not legally, binding precedent among Jewish and Christian devotees.

Yet the text can be read in many different ways, as the Judeo-Christian record has shown. It can be read literally as an incontrovertible precedent calling for brutal action. It can also be interpreted critically, a move that necessitates a great deal of creative sophisticated religious rationalization. Between these exegetical alternatives lies a vast array of resourceful maneuvering.

Phinehas had embarked on his deadly mission without any official license, ignoring all legal procedures. Yet he was not sentenced even after the fact. Zealotry amounted to undermining authority, law and order, thus threatening anarchy. It threatened to harm the very religiopolitical culture whose banner it bore. The traditional Jewish handling of the Phinehasic issue, developed through hundreds of years of exilic rabbinic life, is a qualified and reluctant attempt to diffuse the sting of zealotry.

Over the course of generations, the Jewish zealotry tradition has become mostly subterranean or marginal, while the antizealot tradition became the dominant traditional culture. The religiopolitical leadership sought to avoid presenting zealotry as a guiding ideal lest it endanger the status of traditional authority, threaten the internal integration of the collectivity, and endanger its ability to cope with its external environment.

These mixed feelings are reflected in the Palestinian Talmud, which argues that Phinehas and his zealot act are contrary to the rabbinic spirit (Jerusalem Talmud, Sanhedrin 27:2). The Mishnah rules that a person who "copulates with a Syrian (Gentile) woman . . . zealots are permitted to hit [i.e., kill] him" (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin, 81b). At the same time, the traditional convention is to effectively annul this rabbinical decision by introducing this passage into the peculiar category of "this is religious law but the rabbis do not so instruct" (*halakha ve'ein morin ken*). The ruling regarding zealotry is one of those rare cases referred to

in the Oral Torah in which there is a general consensus about the legitimacy of a certain behavior in principle, but it is modified by the fear that license for such behavior would be expanded beyond acceptable bounds.

The sages demanded that zealotry should be enacted in a public place, witnessed by many. A zealous act witnessed by less than ten people was regarded a punishable crime. The sages also placed time constraints on the act. Zealotry is a matter of a clear-cut specific moment. The sages declared religious violence that is initiated a few seconds too early or terminated a few seconds too late to be illegitimate. Thus the distance between the most elevated zealous act and sheer murderous criminality is miniscule but, nevertheless, critical. The Talmud contends that a zealot who approaches religious authorities to ask for their advice and sanction should not be granted such a license: "The one who comes to consult, they do not approve" (*ha'ba lehemalech, eyn morin lo*). Zealotry has to be an individualist and spontaneous act. A person who commits religious violence can be defined as a zealot only in retrospect, never beforehand. The Talmud also sets a terminal time limit on the act: Had Phinehas killed the couple after their bodies had parted, the act of killing would have been considered illegal and liable for punishment. Furthermore, had the would-be victim reacted quickly enough to kill Phinehas, he would have been found innocent. Seconds suffice to turn an exemplary deed into a despicable act.

Between the Torah and the Halakha, on the one hand, and the implementation of the precepts derived from them, on the other hand, thick strata of rabbinical interpretation qualify and refine the law based on changing historical circumstances. The interpretation, rationalization, adaptation, and application of Phinehas's zealotry are representative of the rabbis' sustained effort to disarm violent motifs in the Bible. This marks the transformation of the ancient Israelite cult to what became known as rabbinical Judaism, represented in modern times mainly by Jewish orthodoxy. This old-new religion, basically an exegetical enterprise, became the crux of Judaism's distinct religious tradition.

It is contained in a corpus that can be divided into four parts. The first, and least important, is the extracanonical books. The second consists of the writings of the sages, starting with the Mishna and continuing with the Halachik and Aggadic elements in the Talmud, composed between the second and the sixth centuries CE. The third consists of the medieval heritage that includes explanatory reading of the Torah (e.g., Rashi), Halachik rulings (such as responsa and treatises, including those by Saadia Gaon, Maimonides, and Joseph Karo), theology and philosophy (e.g., Nachmanides, Yehuda Halevi, and Judah Loew of Prague), and mystical writings (particularly the Zoharic and Lurianic Kabbalah). The fourth component consists of rabbinical writings in recent centuries and in modern times, mostly Halakha (notably Chafetz Haim, Chazon Ish, and Ovadia Yosef) and *Machshava*. The latter combines simplified versions of theology and politics, moral-didactic teaching (*musar*), and mysticism (prominently, work by Abraham Isaac Kook and his son Zvi Yehuda Kook).

A LEGACY OF REBELLION AND DESTRUCTION

In the period between second century BCE to the second century CE, the Jewish community in the Land of Israel experienced four great revolts: the Hasmonean Revolt against the Seleucid Empire (167–160 BCE), the Great Revolt (66 CE–73 CE), the Revolt of the Diasporas (also known as the Kitos War, 115–117 CE), and the Bar Kokhva Revolt (132–136 CE) against the Roman Empire.

These four revolts shared three characteristics. First, all exhibited a clear nationalist component in addition to their religious facet. All occurred against the background of a Jewish striving for overthrowing foreign occupation and establishing political sovereignty and religious autonomy. Second, each revolt was suffused with a messianic spirit. Third, in all revolts, violence was directed not only against a foreign occupier, as part of a liberation struggle, but was also inwardly directed, aimed at political and religious deviants or collaborators who were not sufficiently radical. During the Hasmonean Revolt, much of the bloodshed was directed at Hellenisers, seen as undermining both the ritual and the ethnic purity of Judaism. During the Great Revolt, the Sicarii assassinated many who rejected their suicidal stance of combat without restraint against all odds.

Due to the excessive violence of these rebellions, particularly the inwardly directed violence, and because they ended in military, political, and religious catastrophes (primarily the destruction of the Temple and exile), they are remembered as traumatic events in Jewish historiography. After all, the violence resulting from repression of these revolts exceeded by far the violence initiated by Jews. Of the Bar Kokhva rebellion, for example, the Jerusalem Talmud notes that the Romans “went on killing until their horses were submerged in blood to their nostrils” (Ta’anit 4:5). As a result, traditional Judaism has a deeply ambivalent attitude toward each of these episodes, which tend to be condemned or repressed and forgotten. The Masada episode, at the culmination of the Great Revolt, was absent from Jewish chronicles until it was rediscovered by Zionists. Bar Kokhva was initially perceived not only as a national savior but as a veritable messiah (hence his name, son of the star). But after the failure of his revolt, the sages described him as “Bar Koziba” (meaning both “son of a lie” and “son of disappointment,” i.e., a false messiah), until his image was rehabilitated by Zionists.

The period of the revolts was a period in which Jewish violence was conspicuous and consequential. At the same time, this period was distinguished not merely by its disastrous violence but by virtue of being the only such episode in Jewish history. No less significant than its occurrence was the systematic effort by the guardians of Jewish traditions to relegate this interlude to oblivion or to regard it with loathing, from the period of the sages until the modern era.

This period, in which the last books of the Bible were written, the centuries before the Common Era, was a tumultuous period of changing governments, wars, civil wars, rebellions, the destruction of the Temple, and exile. All were momentous events in ancient Israel, upheavals of geopolitical, national, and religious

dimensions. It seems that different varieties of Judaism existed side by side in this period in the Land of Israel and its surroundings. One of these Judaisms was the Pharisee movement that ultimately prevailed to imprint itself on Jewish tradition, which in retrospect was considered the most authentic and legitimate and which found its expression in the writings of the sages. Another movement was to eventually become Christianity. In the range between the two, a variety of movements provided textual innovations in response to the decline of the Jerusalem-centered priestly cult.

Several of these more-or-less Jewish books were excluded from the scriptures due to theological resistance or because they were completed after the sacred writings were sealed. Some of these texts have been lost, some survived only in Greek translation, and some were only recently discovered. For these reasons, this literature has had a negligible influence on later Jewish worldviews and on Jewish behavior, but the apocrypha and other documents from this period can testify to the moods prevailing in this revolutionary period. The status of these documents, in particular their representativeness and influence, continues to be hotly debated. The Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered in the 1940s and 1950s, offer a dramatic example. The texts are replete with violence, concentrated particularly in the scroll about the "War of the Sons of Light against the Sons of Darkness." This scroll offers a detailed Manichean account of a brutal confrontation in the future between Israel and a coalition of nations that will result in redemption.

The expressions of violence in texts from the Second Commonwealth period take one of two literary forms: apocalyptic visions and mythohistorical accounts. The prophecies, such as the books of Enoch, Ezra, and Baruch, are reminiscent of the catastrophic visions of the biblical prophets, such as the book of Daniel and the New Testament prophets, such as the book of Revelation. Among the mythohistorical accounts, Jewish tradition respects but has not canonized the books of Maccabees, which describe the Jewish rebellion against Seleucid rule in Judea. These two books are our most important source about this period. First Maccabees, a Hebrew text addressed to local Judeans, is sympathetic to the rebellion's leaders, the Hasmonean priestly family, who strain for ritual purity and national militancy, emphasizing heroic zealotry. Second Maccabees, written in Greek and addressed to Jews in the Diaspora, tends to be more critical of the revolt. It argues that it was not an inevitable clash between two cultures but unnecessary bloodshed caused by corrupt and alien parties.

These texts have also offered behavioral models for later Jews, in particular Zionists. This includes the most gruesome incident of Jewish martyrdom: the legendary tale of the woman and her seven children who are willing to undergo horrific torment and, ultimately, painful death rather than agree to consume pork. The narrator comments: "Most admirable and worthy of everlasting remembrance was the mother, who saw her seven sons perish in a single day, yet bore it courageously because of her hope in the Lord" (2 Maccabees 7:24). Sure enough, generations of schoolchildren in Israel have been taught to revere this woman as a symbol of Jewish courage and dignity.

THE ORAL TORAH AND RABBINIC RULING

Present day orthodoxy is a Judaism that is centered on the Halakha. It inherited, fostered, and developed the normative ritual code from traditional Judaism, which now regulates its way of life. The Halakha dictates how a Jew is to behave in any situation. Orthodox doctrine considers the source of these laws to be divine and regards the laws as having been transmitted to the Jewish people in a revelatory act at Mount Sinai. The laws were initially recorded in the Written Torah (i.e., the Hebrew Bible, particularly the Pentateuch). The Oral Torah is a sequel and interpretation of the Written Torah. Officially, the Oral Torah is slightly inferior to the Written Torah in holiness and authoritativeness but in practice it replaces and supersedes the Written Torah.

The writings of the sages and the Halakha combine elements from different sources with different agendas, expressing various schools, periods, and places. Nonetheless, future generations, including contemporary Orthodox Jews, conceived of these as made of one cloth. Moreover, they are organically bound with the great pillars of the medieval and early modern Halakhic literature.

The number of rabbinical rulings has grown exponentially over time. Generations of rulings, rendered generally as answers (*responsa*) to questions from community members analyzed the commandments and adapted them to the changing situations with which Jews had to contend. In this manner, the rabbis compiled a rich corpus covering almost every conceivable topic. Thousands of compendiums have since collected, reworked, and updated these rulings.

The oral law, in general, and the Halakha, in particular, are not merely an exegesis of past writings but also a foundation for future writings, an infrastructure for a new Judaism that would have to survive unknown circumstances. The Bible, composed in ancient times, had to be adapted for a people without a temple, a homeland, territorial concentration, a shared language, independence, or politics. The oral law can be seen as Judaism's adjustment project to thousands of years of life in exile. To so adjust, the Oral Law and the Halakha had to suppress nationalism and repress messianism. This also involved a sublimation of the Bible in an effort to supervise and qualify the violence of Judaism, until it could no longer be expressed. This denationalizing and demessianism required the severing of the Gordian knot between religion and territory and religion and politics. Thus, the sages emphasized the sanctity of the Land of Israel and its ritual significance over its historical significance and its function as a sovereign base. In the first four or five centuries of the Common Era, the counterviolent trend may well have been one current among others, perhaps not even the primary current. Only later on, given the exilic reality, did this current prove to be the most adaptive. It alone prevailed and became identified with Jewish tradition.

The sages used several strategies in order to curb the violent elements of Judaism, particularly those hidden in the religion's national and messianic aspect. First, Jewish tradition underwent a fundamental theological transformation: It transferred the

focus of responsibility to the heavens and placed sovereignty exclusively in the hands of God. The Jewish collective and the individual were absolved of the need to take an active role in history. Second, Jewish fate was reinterpreted: The failure of rebellions and exile were presented as a divine punishment for transgressing religious law, “because of our sins” (*mipney chata’enu*) as evident in the *musaf* prayer that Jews continue to recite on holy days. This allowed the believer to come to terms with his circumstances and to turn his efforts to contemplation and ritual and away from politics. Since persecution was divinely ordained, failure to submit to God’s instruments (the Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks, or Romans) merely invited further suffering and delayed redemption. The focus of conflict shifted away from military clashes between Jews and their enemies and to the tension between Israel and God. Here, Israel’s power lay in the opposite of self-determination: in negating power, subjecting itself to God, and repenting.

Changes in religious conceptions were accompanied by changes in Jewish identity that had implications for violence. A clear example was the revolution in the masculine image in Judaism. The biblical hero, who worked the land, administered the state, and participated in combat was gradually replaced with the man of books and the man of faith. The great virile conquerors underwent near effeminization: Joshua became a Torah scholar, and David became the head of a yeshiva. From now on, their distinction was wisdom and piety. An exemplary expression of this revolution can be found in the tale of an emperor who asked a rabbi: “Who is a hero?” According to the Mishnah, the rabbi replied: “He who conquers his lust” (Avot 4:1).

A parallel twist occurred in stories about the Bible and the Second Commonwealth. The emphasis shifted from physical to spiritual force and from the political to the miraculous. The Passover *Hagadah* retold the Exodus as deliverance by divine hand in which Jews were passive participants and Moses, the Bible’s charismatic leader, was completely absent. Similarly, the Chanukah epic ceased to be about a war in which the weak cunningly and courageously overcame Seleucid troops equipped with elephants, as reported in First and Second Maccabees. The Talmud transformed this military account into a story about the miracle of the small pot of oil. Here, as in the rabbinical treatment of Bar Kokhva, the rabbis strove to ensure that violent legacies would not lead to risky imitation.

This new Jewish stance also led to significant Halakhic innovations, including a moderation and restraining of the laws of war. The Halakha suggested that the launching of war involved prudence and caution. It distinguished between mandatory war (*milkhemet mitzvah*), which was essentially defensive, and discretionary war (*milkhemet reshut*) that could be launched only with permission from the Sanhedrin (the parliament of seventy-one sages) and with the support of the high priest. Since both the Sanhedrin and the priesthood had been dissolved, some argued, these conditions precluded war altogether.

Other Halakhic changes related to the regulation and humanization of war. It was said that even Amalek must be offered peace conditions before attacking. Maimonides, for example, ruled that one cannot surround a city from all sides

but only from three sides so that the enemy can escape. Nachmanides prohibited pillaging the enemy's livestock and property. Judah Loew of Prague ruled that one could not harm civilian bystanders.

At the same time, the sages placed limits on violent criminal penalties. Though the list of capital offenses in the Bible was long, in practice the death penalty was enacted only under the most extreme circumstances and only after particularly complex legal procedures, so much so that Rebbi Elazar ben Azariah regarded a court that executed one criminal in seventy years as a "murderous court." Maimonides stated that it is better to set a thousand criminals free than to punish a single innocent man.

KABBALAH AND MYTHOLOGY

Analyses of the traditional sources of Jewish violence tend to focus on the Bible and the Halakha while ascribing a significantly lesser role to the mystical or moralistic literature. Yet even these disregarded texts have shaped the ethos of Jewish believers, particularly in the modern era. Like any religious mysticism, the Kabbalah deals with the secret of the divine and the wonders of creation and of man. Mysticism seeks to create an unmediated link between the believer and his God and to arrive at a knowledge of a reality that is both sublime and internally hidden. This reality is authentic, while apparent reality is only its symbolic reflection.

The roots of Jewish mysticism lie in the Second Commonwealth era. It flourished in the Middle Ages, both in the Land of Israel and in the Diaspora, in parallel to Jewish philosophy, its rival and complement. Because of its esoteric and individualist tendency and its preoccupation with higher realms, mysticism is usually associated with the tendency to withdraw from worldly matters, with an indifference and alienation toward the surrounding environment or a striving toward harmony with the environment. Consequently, the Kabbalah has a naturally quietist and conciliatory dimension. At the same time, the Kabbalah has a facet that can lead to worldly activism and even to Jewish violence.

Jewish mysticism can be divided into two currents. The ecstatic Kabbalah focuses on meditative procedures to create a direct contact with God. This type of Kabbalah has a prophetic and an occult aspect, which can gravitate to practical Kabbalah. The second type of Kabbalah is theosophical. It develops an elaborate theological system to intimately and profoundly know God, his environment, deeds, and plans. For hundreds of years, the ecstatic Kabbalah has been linked to violent rituals that have a clear magical element. This violence is neither central nor prominent in the Kabbalah, but it is a noteworthy offshoot of this tradition. These rituals include complex cultic procedures aimed at affecting the well-being of individuals and groups, such as rituals that can cause material and physical harm, even death. The best known of these is the secret spell Lashes of Fire (*pulsa dinura*),

rumored to be in use even today by Israeli political activists who wish to neutralize opponents.

More surprisingly yet are the subtle and effective implications of theosophical Kabbalah for Jewish violence. First, the Kabbalah gives rabbinical Judaism vitality by introducing a mythical component to what is otherwise an intellectual and legalistic tradition. The Kabbalah overflows with mythology, in the strict sense of the word: the epic exploits of the divine. Second, the Kabbalah offers tools for theurgy, the ability to influence God and manipulate the heavens. The Kabbalah does so by supplementing the halakhic practice with *kavana*, a concentrated awareness of the mystical implications of one's normative actions. With *kavana*, the believer can redeem the divine and thus redeem the world. The Kabbalah makes possible an activism pregnant with religious energies. It presents historical reality as a mirror and integral component of a larger cosmic drama in which the Jew and the people of Israel can play a vital role.

The two most influential Kabbalistic texts are the Zohar, composed in thirteenth-century Spain, and the Lurianic Kabbalah, composed in Galilee in the sixteenth-century. The Zohar allows the reader to become thoroughly acquainted with the nature of God and to fathom the secrets of the universe by means of the ten *sefirot*, emanations of the divine that create and sustain the world. Of the many interesting ideas in the Zohar, the most relevant to Jewish violence is the distinction between the exalted Jew and inferior non-Jew. The Zoharic tradition treats the Jew as unconditionally and undeniably holy whereas the gentile is of low moral standing, regardless of his behavior. The Jew draws from the divine light whereas the gentile is impure, beastly, corrupt, and sinister. This dehumanization of non-Jews makes them potential targets of Jewish violence.

The Lurianic Kabbalah can be read as confirming this discriminatory attitude toward gentiles and can be exploited to back calls for violence against non-Jews. For example, according to the Lurianic myth of *berur* ("selection"), evil achieves its reign over human existence and can struggle against the divinity and harm humans by capturing sparks (*nitzotzot*) in shells (*kliḥot*). Whereas divinity is the sole supplier of life energy, evil, the essence of matter, has no independent source of power. It draws its vitality from its hold on holiness, which is the substance of the sparks. The devil can only exist by joining the divine source, taking it hostage by stealth or force and drawing it out. Rescuing the sparks from the grasp of matter is the key to destroying the powers of evil. There is no repair (*tikkun*) for heaven and earth without a clear selection between the emissaries of good and evil. This esoteric account has been read as identifying the sparks with Jews and the shells with gentiles, whose force derives entirely from their hold on Jews. Destroying the gentile will release the Jew from captivity, will eliminate chaos (*tohu vavohu*), and will restore order to the world.

The Lurianic Kabbalah has an even greater impact on violence by virtue of linking mysticism with messianism. This mystical messianism is suffused with national ideas and symbols that encourage the believer to become an agent for change. For these and other reasons, this Kabbalah is particularly popular and has impacted

multiple facets of Judaism, including normative Halakha, the seventeenth-century Sabbatian messianic surge (discussed ahead), and eighteenth-century Hassidism. It has many followers among religious Jews in Israel, particularly those of Middle Eastern origins.

According to Luria, at the root of all evil and chaos was a primal event, the breaking of the vessels (*shvirat kelim*), a cataclysmic cosmic rupture. Overcoming this catastrophe requires repair (*tikkun*), which means redeeming the divine and the world, in particular Israel. This process is not merely cosmic in which good and evil struggle over the future of the universe but delegates a seminal role for the individual Jew. Redemption does not occur of its own accord but requires human awakening from below (*itaruta diletata*) through the improvement of religious behavior. This unites the mystical and the messianic goals: perfecting the world (*tikkun olam*). It creates an overlap between the redemption of God and the cosmos from a state of fragmentation, the redemption of the nation from its exile, and the redemption of the individual Jew’s soul. This is an activist and protonationalist approach that places responsibility on each and every Jew and on the Jewish people as a whole. The Jews’ task is to usher in the Messiah by separating from the gentiles and discarding them. They do so by fulfilling the commandments of the Torah in a focused matter that leads to awareness of their deeper significance, a penetration of the heavens and their manipulation. A particular mystical-messianic power is ascribed to the commandment to conquer the land and settle in it. Thus the forceful treatment of Palestinians has cosmic significance.

The atmosphere of mystery and awe that surrounded the Kabbalah, in addition to the explicit rabbinical ban on the study of the Kabbalah, limited its circulation. Only in certain periods did the preoccupation with the Kabbalah become relatively widespread. In these periods, it underwent concretization and simplification. This occurred in the seventeenth century, when the trauma of the expulsion from Spain created fertile ground for redemptive ideas.

MESSIANIC IDEAS AND MESSIANIC MOVEMENTS

Messianism is one of Judaism’s most important contributions to the Western heritage. This motif is not to be found in a distinct corpus of sacred books or in a particular genre of Jewish thought. Rather, it is manifested in a broad variety of sources that have infused Jewish tradition throughout the ages. Judaism conceived of messianism, developed it, and spread it. Judaism has also done its best to restrain messianism and neutralize it of its revolutionary and aggressive elements. Even the sages of the first centuries of the Common Era espoused messianism while proclaiming it to be detrimental “to awe” (of God) “and love” (of man).

As in other religions, Judaism displays an affinity between messianism and violence. The books of Isaiah and Daniel, the apocrypha, the legends of the Talmud, the Kabbalah, and even current prophecies envision the end of days in apocalyptic terms. It is difficult to think of historical incidents of acute messianism that did not degenerate into violence. In Jewish history, the variable intervening between messianism and violence is nationalism. The rebellions of the Second Commonwealth are prime examples of outbursts of Jewish national messianism that involved violence.

As a rule, with the exception of several brief episodes, Jewish tradition has treated messianism with ambivalence. It praised the messianisms of the past and future but deplored present-tense messianism. Excessive messianism would endanger the existing order, make tradition superfluous, undermine the authority of the Halakha and the rabbis, and undercut political power. An example for this attitude is the famous Talmudic assertion that “There will be no difference between the current age and the Messianic era except for [our emancipation from] subjugation to the [gentile] kingdoms” (Berachos, 34b). Maimonides interpreted this as a bold claim to defuse the explosive revolutionary and miraculous element of messianism and turn redemption into a normal political process. At the same time, Judaism took care to maintain messianism on the back burner because it recognized that a measured and contained drive was necessary for sustaining religious vitality.

Exilic quietism was interrupted by messianic incidents that are mere historical curiosities, as in the case of Shlomo Molcho (a sixteenth-century Portuguese Marano and mystic who is recorded in Jewish historiography as a “pseudo-Messiah”). The famous exception that problematizes the linkage between messianism and violence is the seventeenth-century Sabbatean movement. This was a particularly intensive messianic outburst that lasted two years and swept much of Judaism, from the Middle East to Europe. Yet the movement provoked no violence at all. The Turkish sultan was threatened by Sabbatai Sevi’s “kingdom” and arrested the messiah, but the enthusiasm that seized hundreds of thousands of Jews from all sectors of society was contained within the bounds of religion and did not cross the line into social and political unrest. It most certainly did not manifest as rebelliousness and violence. Sabbatai alone was assigned the burden of realizing redemption while his followers were expected only to focus on his personality and deeds by means of faith and rite. It is tempting to hypothesize that the presence of a figure that personifies the messianic urge releases the followers from the burden of activism.

The Sabbatean movement was echoed in several movements in the century after its decline, such as the Frankists. Their messianism became more esoteric and antinomian over time, until it lost all political and activist potential. A final element of Sabbateanism appeared in yet another great historical Jewish movement, the eastern European Hassidism of the eighteenth century. This movement was also messianic, but its messianism was curbed by displacing mundane religious energies into the soul.

The paradox of messianic quietism in the Middle Ages is even more surprising in light of several characteristics of Jewish messianism. First, both the redeeming

agent and the redeemed unit are not the individual but the collective, namely the Jewish people. Second, redemption occurs not merely on the spiritual level but first and foremost on the historical level. Both characteristics distinguish Jewish messianism from its Christian counterpart and grant it a national-political quality. Even at its most fanciful, when it conjectured the redemption of God and the cosmos, Jewish messianism maintained a nucleus of Jewish territorialism and sovereignty. The fulfillment of the messianic vision, in all its variants, posited the ingathering of the exiled in the Land of Israel and the establishment of an independent state that will guarantee security, affluence, and dignity for Jews. It can be said that the Jewish conception of redemption always contained a proto-Zionist element.

In regard to the human role in God's redemptive plan, Jewish scholars tended to adopt an intermediate stance. Although redemption is up to heavenly forces, man has a role to play, be it minor. Human behavior is not a sufficient but a necessary condition. Human involvement is limited to ethical and ritual behavior at some times and necessitates historical action at other times. Religious behavior that contributes to redemption can be limited to the fulfilling of commandments and the strengthening of faith, or it can necessitate an involvement in the social and political order. The latter involvement risks being interpreted as a signal of distrust in divine providence. Consequently, activism is trivialized and minimized as an effort to "merely" hasten the pace of redemption, as a trial of determination to signal to the divine that one is deserving of redemption, or as a mechanism of selection that sets apart those willing to take action into their own hands. Yet, even though it fulfills a minor role, human participation in the dynamics of redemption is often violent.

Human intervention in the messianic process can take on a paradoxical character. When belief in messianic determinism is particularly strong and the redemption is particularly imminent, when redemption is practically behind the door, logic dictates passive waiting with full trust in the divine. Ironically, it is precisely then that the believer loses his patience and violently bursts through the door in a manner that tends to be cruel and deadly. When the messianist is active in history, his action tends to be assertive precisely because he is playing a role in a divine process, feels omnipotent, is released from ethical restraint, and can overcome all political hurdles. After all, the responsibility for his actions is not truly his. These conditions create the perfect storm for messianic violence.

In Jewish history this has occurred two times, separated by two millennia: once in the period immediately before and after the destruction of the Temple and once in the last four decades. The most resourceful and dominant Jewish revival movements in recent times are the overtly messianic movements Gush Emunim, the Lubavitch Hassidism (Chabad), and, to a lesser extent, the Breslav Hassidism. All three contributed substantially to the remessianization of religious Judaism and all involve right-wing militant ethnonationalism. Members of the first have been implicated in violent acts whereas members of the latter two movements seem to sympathize with and even admire perpetrators of Jewish violence.

Several idioms related to the messianic tradition involve catastrophic eschatology that is unavoidably violent. The pangs of the Messiah (*chevley mashiach*, often also *ikvata demeshicha*) refer to the period that precedes the realization of the full redemption, typically characterized by a radical deterioration in religious and political conditions. This concept suggests that the messianic process is not necessarily linear but involves digressions, regressions, and most importantly, a dramatic crisis just prior to the consummation of the process. This catastrophe has a moral-spiritual and a physical-historical aspect. The pangs of the Messiah can take the form of heavy wars involving Israel. There are those who seek such a war to ensure redemption in their time.

The messiah from the Davidic branch is the idyllic messiah whose appearance signals the End of Days. He is the embodiment of harmony and peace. Some Jewish traditions claim that his reign is preconditioned by a different messiah, "Messiah, son of Joseph" (*mashiach ben yoseph*), a man of war, who fiercely fights for the fulfillment of redemption. According to the Talmud (Sukkah 52a–b), as interpreted in the rabbinical apocalyptic literature, only his death in battle opens the opportunity for the arrival of the Davidic messiah.

Redemption is a matter of timing. Its date is clouded in mystery and dread. This tormenting uncertainty can be overcome by anxiously searching for hints (*simanim*) in regard to the definite time and by calculating the end of days (*chishuvey kitzin*). On occasion, this search can escalate into taking impatient action to provoke the appearance of these indices. For example, those who read Jeremiah's prophecy that "evil begins from the North" (1:14) as a precondition of messianic timing find a degree of comfort in Israel's armed confrontations with Syria and Lebanon.

The War of Gog and Magog (the equivalent of the Christian Armageddon) is the ultimate military clash between Jews and the nations that hate Israel and seek to conquer Jerusalem. After great suffering and sacrifice, the Jews will be victorious and will usher in the full redemption. Any identification of a contemporary military confrontation with the War of Gog and Magog might encourage certain Jews to support the war enthusiastically and take great risk in the certain knowledge that the end will involve victory and redemption. The Jewish messianic tradition describes this war as a day of judgment (*yom ha'din*) on which all accounts will be settled. This will be a day of darkness, suffering, blood, and death but also a day in which justice will prevail.

When messianic Jews lose their patience, they seek at all costs to change reality in order to force it to match their vision. A different strategy to fulfill the vision is to turn it from a future aspiration to a present reality by declaring that the current order, as it stands, is a redeemed world. Both approaches are potentially dangerous from the religious establishment's point of view. It is no coincidence that orthodox authorities are deeply concerned about the realization of the dream held high by their followers. Rabbinical authorities, from ancient times to this day, have fought every messianic phenomenon by declaring it to be a false messianism as soon as

it manifests itself. In addition to endangering traditional religion and conventional morals, which are rendered obsolete by the messiah, there is also a danger of violence. Believers experience a dissonance between their internal reality, which acknowledges redemption, and external reality, which they experience empirically, that is abundant with the characteristics of an unredeemed world. The frustrating gap between these levels of consciousness has to be bridged without reservations, even violently if necessary.

1,800 YEARS OF NONVIOLENCE?

Between the suppression of the Bar Kokhva Revolt and the modern era, most Jews settled in the European and Middle Eastern diasporas as a minority that survived by virtue of Christian and Muslim tolerance. This relative peace was interrupted occasionally by violence against Jews. The survival of Jewish communities, let alone their well-being and prosperity, depended on curtailing violent initiatives. Gradually, this nonviolence transformed from an existential expediency into a religious principle.

In the Middle Ages, the effort to curb violence was accompanied by a parallel effort to neutralize messianism, gradually distance Judaism from the written Bible (the Torah) in favor of the Oral Torah (the Talmud), condemn violent episodes, and reduce the nationalist elements associated with Jewish violence, such as territory and sovereignty, to a symbolic level. For example, rituals and memories of the holy land, such as prayer eastward, came to replace immigration and settlement. Techniques for neutralizing the threat of activist messianism include spiritualization, ritualization, and co-optation.

A well-known example is that of the “three oaths.” At the origin of this principle is a verse in the Song of Songs: “I adjure you, O maidens of Jerusalem, by gazelles or by hinds of the field: Do not wake or rouse love until it please!” (2:7). The Babylonian Talmud invokes this verse and relates that God made the Israelites swear to “not ascend the wall,” traditionally understood as a prohibition against mass immigration to the Land of Israel. The second oath is “not rebel against the nations of the world,” interpreted as a command to refrain from politics and violent activism. Many quote a version of these oaths that imposes an additional prohibition: “Do not press the end,” abstain from coercing God to bring the redemption before its preordained time.

In this protracted exilic period, which provided the roots of religious Judaism as we know it today, violence was rare and a tradition of victimhood developed. But in this same period, new canons, customs, and rituals developed that undoubtedly had a grain of violence in them. The two most prominent examples are the *Passover Haggadah* that was compiled over the course of the Middle Ages and Purim celebrations that drew on the book of Esther. The reader will be familiar with the

ceremonial Seder meal in which religious Jews repeat the line from the *Haggadah* “Pour out your wrath on the nations that refuse to acknowledge you—on the peoples that do not call upon your name. For they have devoured your people Israel.” Participants sing hymns of victory accomplished through cruel acts of violence against Egyptians (which are often identified with contemporary villains). They also recount with triumphalism each of the ten plagues with which the Egyptians were afflicted, including the killing of their firstborns.

The violence in Purim celebrations takes two forms. The first, not unlike Passover, revolves around a ritual reading of a biblical text, the book of Esther, which expresses superiority over gentiles, hatred, and a great deal of verbal violence. Readers rejoice at the hanging of Haman, the villain of the tale, with his ten sons at gallows intended for the hanging of Jews. The second element is a carnival atmosphere that may have led on occasion to modest physical violence against gentiles.

The prototypical medieval carnival involved not only the overturning of fortunes, which is a central principle of this holiday, but the upending of all social hierarchies and categories. This reversal found expression in the donning of costumes and in the commandment to consume alcohol until one cannot distinguish friend from foe. But this carnival atmosphere also confined aggression in time and space (such as the synagogue, on one particular day of the year). The same emancipating subversiveness that enabled measured expressions of Jewish violence during Purim also contributed to restraint during the rest of the year and thus bolstered the existing social order in which Jews were passive and subordinate.

There is a clear gap between the Halakhic, theological, and ceremonial preoccupation with violence and the ability to actualize that violence. It is precisely the certain knowledge that violence cannot be exercised that gave free reign to violent fantasies. One can speculate that the textual and ritual acting out of violence betrays impotence as an overcompensation for the inability to take violent action.

Three final comments conclude this discussion of Jewish quietism and bring to a close our survey of violence in Jewish tradition. First, there is some evidence of violence directed by Jews against other Jews in the context of social control. This violence relates primarily to rabbinical rulings designed to penalize deviants in the community by means of humiliation or excommunication. A conspicuous example is the struggle against informers, particularly in periods of Jewish persecution in Europe. The community’s fear that its autonomous social and economic arrangements would be exposed to the authorities and the Christian environment led it to view informers as one of its greatest menaces. Ashkenazi communities often circumvented Jewish legal institutions when dealing with informers (categorized as *moser* in Halakhic law). On rare occasions, Sephardic communities condemned informers to death, with the assent of Christian rulers. The most common and effective control mechanism was the herem that, in distinction from its biblical namesake, was akin to an excommunication. This banishment was proclaimed in a terrifying ceremony and was experienced as a particularly violent measure, given the precarious nature of Jewish life outside the community.

Second, the ancient Jewish tradition of “sanctifying the name of God” (*kiddush ha’shem*) reached its apex during the Middle Ages. This martyrdom tradition developed in response to extreme acts of violence directed against Jewish communities, such as the slaughters of the Crusades. As part of this tradition, Jews murdered their families or committed suicide to avoid conversion. These defiant acts contained a measure of aggressiveness toward the Christian perpetrator, perhaps even an internalizing of the perpetrators’ aggressiveness. Medieval Jewish and Christian martyrdom traditions influenced each other in mutual and cunning ways. Several elements of the medieval Jewish martyrdom tradition diffused from Christian models of martyrdom and assimilated them until they appeared to be authentically Jewish. Such martyrdom was violent not merely by virtue of the aggression directed toward oneself and one’s family. The martyr also snatched the prerogative of killing from his opponent, thus appropriating mastery over his own death. Finally, by undergoing a noble death that sanctified the name of God, the martyr provoked the divine to avenge his death, unleashing God’s violence against his opponent.

Third, the medieval period saw the emergence of a Jewish tradition of victimhood. For long and formative periods in history, Jews were targets of violence by non-Jews, as exemplified by forced conversions and expulsions in fifteenth-century Spain, nineteenth-century pogroms in Russia, and so forth. This violence tended to be lethal and was driven by ideological-religious (mostly Christian) justifications in addition to an economic and political logic. Moreover, it was directed against Jews as a collective, affiliated with a particular ethnic and religious group. In the two millennia in which Jews were victims of anti-Semitism and its violent derivatives, an elaborate tradition of Jewish victimhood emerged.

The issue of victimhood is particularly conspicuous in the post-Holocaust era. Contemporary Jewish life takes place under the shadow of the most extreme case of anti-Jewish violence, the Shoa. Jewish collective memory and collective identity as victims of violence has two implications. On the one hand, it has led Jews to be acutely aware of issues concerning violence, leading to toleration and moderation. On the other hand, a distinct minority of Jews use their own victimhood as a license to inflict violence on others by way of compensation or revenge.

Thus, to the two parallel and complementary Jewish traditions, violence and antiviolence, one should add another Jewish tradition, that of victimhood. These three traditions can be viewed as an integral triangle, each corner of which has a dialectical relationship with the other two.

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