Between the Bible and the Holocaust: Three Sources for Jewish Perspectives on Mass Destruction

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In the previous chapter, Reuven Kimelman offers a broad survey of how Jewish ethical reflection on war, both *halakhic* and modern, relates to weapons of mass destruction.¹ By invoking the traditional halakhic principles on when and how wars may be fought, Kimelman is claiming, so I understand, that moral reasoning relating to conventional wars provides a relevant framework for constructing an ethical position on unconventional wars in which WMD are employed. Such an argument casts doubt on the need to distinguish within Jewish military ethics between conventional and unconventional wars. The prohibition against the possession and use of WMD or restrictions on their use would, in this view, be derived from the same ethical principles that apply to the use of military power of any kind.

If my reading of Kimelman’s position is correct, then I disagree with his approach. My premise in this chapter is that the ethical basis on which questions of possession and use of WMD must be examined is significantly different from the ethics of conventional warfare.² Conventional war ethics, which Kimelman uses as a starting point for his discussion, is devoted to examining the morality of war at two stages: before the war, when the legitimacy of declaring war is considered (*jus ad bellum*), and during the war, when the proper methods of fighting are evaluated (*jus in bello*). Yet the principal ethical concerns in a war in which WMD are employed arise, in my opinion, neither before nor during the fighting but in the aftermath of such a war. More precisely, the major moral issue is the likelihood that in a war in which WMD are used, the outcome of even a just war (as defined by the two traditional sets of criteria) is likely to be catastrophic. The ethics of WMD therefore lie beyond the regular ethics of war. The principal questions are not, What is a just war? or What behavior is justified during battle? Rather, the relevant question is, Is there any conflict that justifies the threatened or actual use of weapons of mass destruction?

In attempting to answer this question, I broaden Kimelman’s presentation by elucidating perspectives from three traditional Jewish sources that
emerged parallel to the halakhic tradition. Clearly, the prospect of mass
destruction perpetrated by human hands was not a real possibility for the
halakhic authorities. Accordingly, I suggest that we redirect our attention
to other sources of Jewish consciousness, to myth, imagination, and living
memory – in addition to theology. Bringing in these sources alongside the
halakha literature allows us to form a more complete Jewish ethics regarding
the questions of this book.

The first source I examine is the idea of the Day of the Lord and its
related images in the conceptual world of the Bible, including the image of
God as warrior and the idea of holy war. Passages relating to the Day of the
Lord include descriptions of total annihilation of the enemies of Israel and
prompts the question: Do these descriptions provide religious sanction for
mass destruction?

The second source that I discuss might be called the rabbinic interpre-
tations of the rainbow covenant, the covenant God makes in the book of
Genesis following the mass annihilation of the flood. The rainbow covenant
is the first mythical precedent that negates the possibility of mass destruc-
tion. I present a number of interpretations associated with the covenant’s
negating role and with the idea of human responsibility for the continuation
of humanity’s existence.

The third source is the imprint left on the Jewish people by their ex-
perience of genocide during the Holocaust. I explore the extent to which
the Holocaust shapes the modern Jewish ethic of war and, in particular, its
influence on Jewish thinking on total war.

TOTAL DESTRUCTION AND THE IDEA OF THE DAY OF THE LORD

The literature on war and its justification recognizes a number of well-known
distinctions as a basis for ethical conduct: the distinction between combat-
ants and noncombatants, the distinction between those who have the ability
to defend themselves and those who do not, the distinction between the
front line and civilian areas, and so forth. Yet when one examines the char-
acteristics of war contained in biblical descriptions of the Day of the Lord, it
seems that such distinctions are irrelevant to this type of war. Indeed, in this
type of war, total annihilation and destruction are not only not disqualified,
they are enjoined.

Biblical passages relating to the Day of the Lord suggest a point of time
in the future when God is expected to punish the wicked and justice will
triumph. The term “Day of the Lord” occurs as a key phrase in nine prophetic
passages, and in others it appears in some slightly varied form.

The notion of a future war that will take place on the Day of the Lord
must be considered first and foremost in the context of the intrabiblical
tension between two distinct political yearnings. Two approaches regarding
the nature and identity of the governmental rule expected at the end of days
appear in the Jewish Bible, the rule of the House of David and, alternatively, the rule of the Lord himself. The differences between these political aspirations stem, in effect, from two messianic conceptions that may be derived from the Bible: restorative messianism and utopian messianism. Restorative messianism is founded on the biblical assertion that King David and his successors were selected by God to reign over Israel until the end of generations, hence they have a right to rule and to maintain this rule. In contrast, the idea of the Day of the Lord produces in the utopian messianic framework a longing for the tangible appearance of the deity in history. The term “Day of the Lord” is the figurative designation for the date on which the omnipotent deity will literally display his unparalleled grandeur and power. On that day he will demonstrate his dominion over the earth through heroic and powerful deeds, beginning by overcoming his enemies. Accordingly, the prophets describe it in dismal terms: “The day of the Lord is one of darkness and not light.” It will be a day of war, calamity, and the Lord’s revenge over his enemies. From that point on will begin the Lord’s rule on earth.

Scholars suggest a number of possible origins for the idea of the Day of the Lord. The most widely accepted explanation is that it derives from prophetic ideas of holy war dating back to the appearance of the ancient Israelites in Canaan at the end of the thirteenth century B.C.E. The cataclysmic destruction wreaked by God on the world at the end times, according to this view, is closely related to the idea that God commanded the Israelites of that period to annihilate their enemies in wars of conquest and vengeance. God was believed to reveal his will in battle, and therefore the battle itself was called a “Day of the Lord.” All of the activities and operations relating to the battle were acts of holiness. The rally to battle required sanctification by the priestly class; integral to conducting the war was the taking out of the Ark of the Covenant, accompanied by fasts, public gatherings, sacrifices, and other rituals. The descriptions of war that accompany the references to the Day of the Lord are therefore grounded in and themselves lend support to a national belief that the Lord goes to war along with the Israelites, that their war is his war, and therefore the enemies of Israel are also enemies of the Lord himself.

If God is perceived as a “warrior,” then war becomes an arena of divine revelation. Battle maneuvers become not only political moves between rival parties but evidence of divine presence and power. Military victory or defeat assume religious significance and are understood as proofs of divine intercession in human affairs. The end of war entails not just the vanquishing of the enemy and the destruction of his power, but also the elimination of “unholy” ideas and practices. Such total war can be justified as reflecting the complete and omnipotent rule of God. Perceiving war as theophanous also explains the apparent absence of ethical considerations and limits in many biblical passages describing the
wars of the ancient Israelites. Human actions committed at the behest of God transcend discernible ethical limits.

Likewise, the descriptions of the future war on the Day of the Lord are descriptions of total destruction and calamity. The anger of the deity (in Hebrew, Ḥaron-apollo, literally, “the anger of his nose”\(^{17}\) is devoid of mercy and subject to no constraints:

And I will requite to the world its evil. . . . All who remain shall be pierced through, all who are caught shall fall by the sword. And their babies shall be dashed to pieces in their sight, their homes shall be plundered. . . . Their bows shall shatter the young; they shall show no pity to infants, they shall not spare the children.\(^{18}\)

The stroke of divine annihilation does not distinguish between warrior and child, between attacks on natural resources and human beings.\(^{19}\) In fact, a theophanous conception of war removes the necessity to provide an ethical accounting of military actions, since theophany is beyond the normative and the ethical.

Indeed, “God’s wars” as described by the Bible pose some obvious challenges to ethical intuition. For this reason, perhaps, the theophanous concept of war underwent an ideational metamorphosis in the world of Jewish rabbinical thought after the destruction of the Second Temple (70 C.E.) and was effectively rejected as a paradigmatic model of postbiblical war ethics.

Kimelman’s overview of the early Jewish sources makes clear at the outset that the rabbinic discussions treated war not as an expression of divine power but as a political phenomenon subject to normative evaluation. The very categorization of wars into mitzvah (commanded), reshet (permitted), and asurah (prohibited)\(^{20}\) in fact subjects all justifications and acts of war to the authority of earthly halakhic institutions, the king (the political authority) and the Sanhedrin (the spiritual-religious authority).\(^{21}\) The total and indiscriminate destruction of holy war was suppressed in favor of Deuteronomic concepts of limited war, such as the prohibition against axing fruit trees during a siege,\(^{22}\) or later ideas, such as the halakhic requirement that the population of a besieged town be allowed an escape route.\(^{23}\)

Did the “halakhization” of war root out the theophanic conception of war from traditional Jewish consciousness? Not entirely, because remnants of the holy war concept are evident in a number of streams of Jewish thought considered relatively marginal to the rabbinic mainstream. For example, there are many theophanic expressions of war among the cultic and apocalyptic movements of the Second Temple period,\(^{24}\) in the writings of the Judean desert cult,\(^{25}\) or in later eschatological writings such as the Book of Zerubbabel.\(^{26}\) An expectation that the Day of the Lord may not be far off links these disparate elements.

A conceptual analysis of these writings is beyond the scope of this chapter, but it is important to mention that they all adopt, to some extent, a dualistic approach: All of humanity is divided into two opposing camps, “us” versus
“them,” or in the terminology of the Qur’anan texts, the “children of light,” who are the faithful, versus the “children of darkness,” who belong to the kingdom of evil.²⁷ It can thus be said that while the theophanic concept of war was rejected by the rabbinic mainstream, it remained current in the world-view of counterparties and messianic trends espousing a dualistic view that drew clear lines between those protected by the deity’s compassion and the “others” sentenced to total annihilation.

A dualistic view by nature tends to emphasize existing differences through the amplification of such differences and the creation of a typology based on the contrast between them. For example, from a dualistic standpoint, the distinction between body and soul is understood as representing a series of religious differences of far-reaching significance. The body is external, material, bestial, sinful, and mortal. In contrast, the soul is internal, spiritual, divine, sublime, and eternal.²⁸ A similar phenomenon occurs when the dualistic approach is applied in the ethical realm. Here the tendency to identify the differences between “us” and “them” with the basic opposition between good and bad, justice and evil, children of light and children of darkness is readily apparent.

This tendency toward opposing and significant typology has indeed proven seductive and convincing time and again. The moral vocabulary of dualism has frequently transformed political conflicts into something “greater” or “higher,” into struggles for “our survival” that require “their destruction.” Once this binary logic is adopted, all the distinctions that really matter, those that paradoxically illuminate our common humanity, are set aside. It is then but a short step to set aside the ethical intuition that says in war we must distinguish between soldiers and civilians, between those who can defend themselves and the helpless.

Messianic expectations and dualistic approaches may be identified in marginal strands of Jewish thinking throughout the centuries of exile. Since the nineteenth century, the Zionist movement has encompassed a few ideologies that were inspired, to some extent, by versions of traditional messianic world-views. Most of them did not claim that reestablishing the state of Israel necessarily involves reviving the biblical obligation to conquer the land associated with concepts of holy war. Nevertheless, there are some radical nationalist groups today, such as Gush Emunim, who are inspired by the analogy between the Zionist project and the conquest of Canaan by the ancient Israelites. Dualistic views about the Israeli-Arab conflicts and calls to adopt the Bible and the biblical concepts of war as grounds for military action are prominent in the ideology of such groups. They identify themselves with the soldiers of Joshua and David and claim that the Israeli Defense Forces are indeed God’s army on earth.²⁹

To summarize this section, the possibility of mass destruction is not entirely absent from the Jewish consciousness. Conceptions of war embodied in biblical descriptions of the Day of the Lord not only confirm the
possibility of total destruction, but also view it as an expected historical goal. The sources that describe this idea and enumerate its details may therefore even encourage this expectation. The biblical strand that conceives war as a theophany raises it above ethical limitations. Although this concept was blatantly rejected in halakhic tradition, dualistic approaches that ignore the individuality of people preserved both this conception of war and its related descriptions of total destruction.

THE FLOOD EPIC: SYMBOLIC MEANINGS OF THE RAINBOW COVENANT

In contrast to the Day of the Lord, the biblical epic of the flood may be used as a symbol or ideational paradigm for the formulation of a Jewish stance against the development and possession of WMD and in favor of a commitment to prevent mass destruction. Indeed, as Kimelman notes, the rainbow is the symbol of the Jewish nuclear-freeze movement.

The biblical flood story was unique – in contrast to the flood stories familiar to us from the ancient Near East – in its emphasis of two motifs: first, the representation of the flood as divine recompense for human evil, and second, the divine covenant promising that total destruction of human beings and other living things will not occur again. A significant portion of the ethical readings of the flood story in fact emphasizes the first point, that God purified the earth from human corruption but saved Noah and his family because of their righteousness. At the same time, in medieval biblical commentary, we find another ethical reading of the flood story, one that sees it as constituting a normative source of human obligation to prevent mass extinction.

As is well known, the biblical narrative ends with the revelation of divine insight that mass destruction such as the flood ought not to be repeated:

And the Lord said to Himself: “Never again will I doom the earth because of man, since the devising of man’s mind is evil from his youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living being, as I have done...”

This insight is then formalized in the eternal covenant made by God, symbolized by the rainbow in the sky, which serves as a periodic reminder of the covenant’s validity:

I will maintain My covenant with you: never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth... I have set My bow in the clouds, and it shall serve as a sign of the covenant between Me and the earth... When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures, all flesh that is on earth.

The medieval commentators on this passage grappled with a number of questions stemming from it: Who is bound by this obligation? What is its
content? And how does the rainbow symbolize this obligation? They offered at least two symbolic understandings of the rainbow covenant that bear on human responsibility for preserving life: the rainbow as a symbol of reconciliation and self-limitation of power, and the covenant itself as a mutual obligation of God and humankind to ensure the existence of the world and the continuation of all life on earth.

The shape of the rainbow is reminiscent of an ancient weapon, the warrior’s bow. Because of this, it has frequently served as a symbol of battle and armament or as an indicator of power and victory. Indeed, in ancient Near Eastern mythology, the rainbow represented the weapon of the gods, and its appearance in the heavens was understood as signifying victory of the gods in their cosmic battles.\(^{34}\) In a similar fashion, in the world of biblical images, the bow appears as the deity’s weapon of war, by means of which he punishes humans for their sins.\(^{35}\) Yet its signification of a covenant here, at the end of the biblical story, evokes not victory or surrender, but instead peace, reconciliation, and abdication of the power of destruction.\(^{36}\)

In this spirit, rabbinic commentators from the Middle Ages developed an intriguing interpretive tradition for this symbol, which retains the martial connections of the rainbow image while reworking them into a message of peace and reconciliation embodied in the rainbow covenant. One such example is that of the thirteenth-century writer Nachmanides:

Now, commentators have said concerning the meaning of this sign that He has not made the rainbow with its feet bent upward because it might have appeared that arrows were being shot from heaven, as in the verse, And He sent out his arrows and scattered them on the earth.\(^{37}\) Instead He made it the opposite of this [with the feet bent downward] in order to show that they are not shooting at the earth from the heavens. It is indeed the way of warriors to invert the instruments of war, which they hold in their hands when calling for peace from their opponents. Moreover, [with the feet of the bow being turned downward towards the earth, it can be seen] that the bow has no rope upon which to bend the arrows.\(^{38}\)

Nachmanides thus specifies two ways the rainbow symbolizes God’s reconciliation with his creation.\(^{39}\) First, just as human fighters indicate their intent to cease war by inverting their bows in a way that no longer threatens the enemy, so God promises humanity peace by suspending the rainbow in the sky upside-down relative to the earth. Second, because the feet of the rainbow are planted in the earth, it lacks the string to shoot arrows and is therefore a useless weapon. Again, the symbolism is that God has relinquished both the intent and the means to war against humanity. He is disarmed forever.\(^{40}\)

According to such interpretations, the deity’s promise after the flood illuminates an ethic of peace distinct from the usual warrior’s code. God’s will is manifest not only in the destruction-filled arena of battle, but also in the call to peace and reconciliation. The deity as warrior not only takes
revenge on his enemies with anger and terror, but also calls them to peace, dismantles his weapon, and vows that his omnipotent strength will never again be directed toward his creation. Thus, the rainbow covenant opens the doors to a theology of omnipotent power limiting itself.

Can this theology be transferred to the human realm? Can human beings likewise derive an ethic of reconciliation and disarmament while holding in their hands the awesome destructive power they have acquired?

Clearly, a theology of reconciliation and self-limitation can give rise to an ethical obligation through the basic religious norm of *imitatio dei*. It is this kind of claim that stands at the base of the positions referred to by Kimelman. For example, when Rabbi Irving Greenberg claims that the flood story teaches us that even God rejects the power to destroy humanity, he is implicitly stating that the religious obligation of *imitatio dei* requires human beings to abjure the means of annihilation.  

Alongside the reading that views the rainbow as a theological symbol of reconciliation, another rabbinical reading may be found that holds the rainbow covenant to be a direct and binding source for human obligations. The author of this interpretation, Solomon Astruc, was a rather obscure Barcelonian scholar from the second half of the fourteenth century. But his novel reading of the rainbow covenant not only extricates its symbolic meaning from the system of military images, but also interprets the obligation to prevent additional destruction as a mutual obligation of God and human beings.

The intention is that if they sin and merit annihilation, I will remember the covenant between Myself and you, to protect the world in its entirety, and this is the rainbow that points to the upholding of the house that is built upon it. Alternatively, the rainbow being half a wheel is symbolic of the continued existence of the world. When a covenant is made [Heb., krt, lit., “cut”], the object is cut into two, and he, the Blessed One, took half the wheel – i.e., half the world – and gave the other half to mankind. And just as the half in his hand shall continue to exist, so shall that in the hand of man continue to exist. . .

Here also two interpretations of the symbolic meaning of the bow are offered. The first interpretation identifies the convex shape of the rainbow with an arch that supports a building. The appearance of the rainbow symbolizes that God’s covenant is intact and thus the integrity of his creation is assured.

The second interpretation of the rainbow is related to the symbolic meaning of the circle as representing completeness and harmony. The complete circle, composed of two half-circles or bows whose ends touch, represents the complete structure of the universe. As such, its division into two bows signifies that the rainbow covenant is not only a unilateral commitment of the deity but a delegation and recognition by God of humanity’s equal responsibility to protect the world. God directly endows humanity with joint
responsibility for preserving life, according to this interpretation, by giving it one-half of the full circle.

These interpretations broaden the theological meaning of the flood story and view it as a basis for the human obligation to uphold the world and protect it from annihilation. This interpretive line corresponds, of course, with other standpoints presented by Kimelman, such as that of Rabbi Bradley Artson, who opposes the very possession of WMD, even for purposes of deterrence, based on what he sees as the biblical conception of humanity’s mission – the preservation of creation.

**MASS DESTRUCTION AND LESSONS OF THE HOLOCAUST**

No survey of sources informing Jewish consciousness on the ethics of WMD would be complete without a consideration of the mass killing of six million European Jews (one-third of the Jewish population in prewar Europe) during the Holocaust. As can be seen in Kimelman’s overview, the experience of the Holocaust can operate in two opposite directions. On the one hand, there are those who view the Holocaust as a living and tangible reminder of the catastrophic results of the possession and use of the means of mass destruction. On the other hand, the terror of such an experience may lend support for justifications of nuclear armament as a means of deterring and preventing the recurrence of this event.

I would add to Kimelman’s discussion the observation that a national experience such as the Holocaust not only raises new ethical considerations and claims, but also creates an ethical context quite different from a purely hypothetical position. The central considerations of the ethics of war in the philosophical literature pertain to defense and attack, and the standard applied is that of fairness. The Jewish experience with mass destruction during the Holocaust introduced an additional aspect to the system of moral evaluation. This element produces a fundamental change in the nature of ethical logic as a whole and in the morality of the use and possession of WMD in particular. This consideration is that of survival. It is based on the distinction between defending the group’s interests versus defending its very existence. In this moral universe, questions of fairness in the use of force give way to the basic necessity of ensuring continued existence.

I am not claiming that the logic of survival exists today only in Jewish consciousness. Survival mechanisms exist in all groups with a collective identity, and they are certainly more active among political groups that face a real threat to their existence or their identity. However, I believe that the experience of the Holocaust sharpened Jewish national sensitivity to survival mechanisms and created a survival instinct grounded in the sense that threats to Jewish national existence are quite real. This consciousness has been intensified and solidified among many Israelis (and among many
non-Israeli Jews) by the prolonged Israeli-Arab conflict. The plan for the destruction of the Jewish people devised and implemented under the Third Reich and the goal of destroying the Jewish state expressed by many Arabs are viewed as part of the same continuum.

The heightened sense of insecurity among Israelis explains not only Israel’s arsenal of WMD, but also the complete public silence (and the support or acceptance that this silence conveys) surrounding this development. An examination of the moral issues raised by the absence of public debate or the silencing of such a debate are beyond the aims of this chapter. I would only note that in a political situation of violent military confrontation, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the lack of a public debate on WMD could actually remove the option to use WMD as a military response. In the minds of many Israelis, mass killing using chemical, biological, or nuclear devices is not that different in result from mass killing through crude terrorist attacks. WMD and terrorist attacks both employ unconventional combative means aimed indiscriminately at innocent civilian populations. In both cases, the roles of front line and home front are inverted, and in both instances, ethical intuition rejects this type of attack as a legitimate means for achieving political ends. While WMD may normally be viewed as supranational and terrorist attacks as subnational, for those with an increased consciousness of survival, the similarities between them make them part of a continuum that ranges from the death camps of Europe to the feeling of vulnerability and random death in Israel today.

It could be argued then that if Israelis were to open a public debate on WMD at a time of actual and threatened mass terror attacks, some political groups would probably demand that the Israeli government respond to such terrorism using WMD. The fact that such demands are not being made today is largely attributable to the societal consensus that all discussion of WMD lies outside the boundaries of public discourse in Israel. So, at a time when Israeli (and not only Jewish) society is vulnerable to terrorist attacks, the absence of a public discourse regarding WMD serves to restrain their use. This conclusion will come as a paradox to those who argue that democracies may be trusted not to employ such terrible weapons.

Finally, I end my observations by briefly discussing the ideas of one of the most important Jewish thinkers of the post-Holocaust period, the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1906–95). Levinas’s thought places the concepts of the “other” and of “responsibility” at the foundation of ethics, and ethics itself at the foundation of ontology and epistemology. Interpreters of Levinas identify a relationship between his placing of ethics above any other realm of consciousness and his personal experience as a Holocaust survivor.

With regard to the ethicality of WMD, one of the foundations of Levinas’s ethics, the “phenomenology of the face,” should be noted. This idea relates to the ancient Jewish concept of human dignity (Heb., kvod ha-adam).
Levinas’s concept constitutes an improvement on and expansion of the biblical theme of man’s creation “in God’s image,” the basis for the interpretive claim of some kind of likeness between man and the deity (imagio dei). This idea, developed in the first centuries of the common era in rabbinic circles, made the similarity between humans and God into a guiding principle for a number of halakhic norms. For example, the explanations for the prohibition on murder maintained that an attack on a human being, the iconic representation of the deity, constitutes an attack on the divine presence.

In this spirit, Levinas seeks to direct our attention to the primordial and familiar situation of seeing the face of the other. Seeing the other’s face, Levinas suggests, creates a situation in which our shared humanity bursts forth and supersedes any other identity. Gazing into the face is first and foremost to stand opposite the humanity of the other. “[T]he relation to the face is straightaway ethical. The face is what one cannot kill, or at least it is that whose meaning consists in saying: ‘thou shalt not kill.’”

The face is what one cannot kill. Symbolic of this perception is the custom in some cultures and countries to cover the faces of both the executioner and the condemned, so that the natural aversion to killing that emanates from beholding the human countenance may not impede the execution:

> The first word of the face is “Thou shalt not kill.” It is an order. There is a commandment in the appearance of the face, as if a master spoke to me. However, at the same time, the face of the Other is destitute; it is the poor for whom I can do all and to whom I owe all. And me [sic], whoever I may be, but as a “first person,” I am he who finds the resources to respond to the call.

In the spirit of Levinas’s thought, I would argue that any suggestion of the possible use of WMD arises from the impersonalization of the battlefield – from the avoidance of the face of the other – that steady technological advances have made possible over the past two centuries. The grave ethical flaw inherent in rationalizing the firing of missiles with unconventional warheads stems, according to this perspective, from the very attempt to ignore the face of the enemy, to ignore the prohibition on murder glaringly obvious when one stops to see that the enemy has a face.

CONCLUSION

From the three sources I have examined above, we see possibilities for both accepting and rejecting human control over the means of mass destruction. The biblical passages regarding the idea of holy war seem to offer divine sanction for annihilation, but traditional rabbinic understanding limits such destruction to a past whose repetition is forever foreclosed. The memory of the Holocaust creates a strong Jewish aversion toward even contemplation of
mass destruction, but at the same time it lends acceptance to the acquisition of WMD as a deterrent – so that “never again” will Jews be defenseless in the face of genocide.

But on the whole, and as demonstrated best in readings of the rainbow covenant, the thrust of Jewish interpretations of these sources seems to point toward the rejection of the means to cause mass destruction and the archaic identification of the deity’s power with military force. The Jewish tradition offers no single or conclusive answer to the question. Is there any conflict that justifies the threatened or actual use of weapons of mass destruction? Yet I would suggest that the religious background reinforces the basic, intuitive obligation we feel to prevent or remove hazards to the continuation of human existence.

The march of reason and progress has transferred to human hands many capabilities that were once considered the exclusive domain of the divine. Technological evolution has given us the power of mass destruction. We have no choice but to assume the responsibility that comes with the power. The responsibility to ensure the preservation of human life, once considered God’s prerogative, is now truly our own.

Notes

The author thanks Jessica Bonn for her help in translating this paper from Hebrew.

1. For the most part Kimelman presents the positions of religious authorities living and working in the United States and the United Kingdom. The silence of Israeli halakhic authorities on this subject is typical of the silence of Israeli society as a whole, a matter that I address below.

2. This is also the position of Michael Walzer: “Nuclear weapons explode the theory of just war. They are the first of mankind’s technological innovations that are simply not encompassable within the familiar moral world.” Michael Walzer, Just and Unjust Wars (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 282.

3. By the terms halakha and “halakhic,” I refer to the mainstream of rabbinical Judaism since the destruction of the Second Temple (70 C.E.) until today. The basic character of this stream is its legalistic attitude toward the religion, namely, the identification of the religious commandments as legal duties and of worship as fulfillment of those duties. The basic canonical compositions of the halakhic tradition are the Mishnah (edited around 220 C.E.) and the two Talmudim – the Palestinian Talmud (edited around 400 C.E.) and the Babylonian Talmud (edited around 500 C.E.).

4. The possibility of mass destruction was never an actual option that the halakhic authorities had to allow or forbid. Closely related biblical precedents, like the case of a town condemned for idolatry (ir hanidachat; see Deuteronomy 13:13–19), were never discussed as actual but only as theoretical and hermeneutic issues. In fact, there is a very early saying that the case of ir hanidachat never occurred in the past and will never occur in the future, meaning that it is only a theoretical case (Tosefta Sanhedrin, 14:1). For more on this, see Moshe Halbertal, Interpretive
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6. Isaiah 2:12, Ezekiel 30:3, Zechariah 14:1–9. The Day of the Lord idea continues into the New Testament. See Luke 17:24; 1 Cor. 1:8, 5:5; 2 Cor. 1:14; 1 Thes. 5:2; 2 Peter 3:11–12; Rev. 16:14. Christian interpreters continue to debate the precise chronology and relationship of the Day of the Lord to uniquely Christian end-time events, such as the battle of Armageddon, the Rapture, Tribulation, and the Second Coming of Jesus. See Martin Cook’s discussion of Christian dispensationalism in Chapter 16 above.
7. Restorative messianism wishes to restore the glory of the past and utopian messianism hopes for a better future, more perfect than even the glorious past. The former is more rational and desires to bring the present reality to perfection, while the latter expects radical changes with the coming of the messiah. This phenomenon of the tension between two polarized messianic conceptions – restorative and utopian – has been discussed by Gershom Scholem, The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality (New York: Schocken, 1995).
8. 2 Samuel 7 and 23:3–51.
9. 2 Samuel 22:44–51; Psalms 2 and 18: 44–51. The term “messiah” derives from the act of crowning kings by anointing (Heb., ms-h) them. David is thus called “Messiah” in 2 Samuel 22:51.
10. Scholars of the Bible and the ancient Near East have emphasized the uniqueness of the idea of the Day of the Lord in the prophetic literature and have pointed out that it does not appear in the subsequent literature that is external to it. See Meir Weiss, “The Origin of the ‘Day of the Lord’ – Reconsideration,” Hebrew Union College Annual 37 (1966): 29–60.
12. Descriptions of the Day of the Lord by the prophets abound. Those that emphasize total annihilation are found in the following verses: Isaiah 13:6–13 and chap. 34; Ezekiel 30:3–6; Obadiah 15; Joel 3:4, 4:14; Zephaniah 1:17–18, 2:3.
14. See Numbers 31, Deuteronomy 20, Joshua 8–12, 1 Samuel 15.
15. See, for example, Judges 5:26–27.
17. This expression, incidentally, is used to convey religious fanaticism in the Bible and in the literature of the Hasmonean period (second century B.C.E.). See the act of Pinhas (Numbers 25:1–9); descriptions of Mattithias as defusing the divine anger (Heb., Mesaleq-haron-af; Hasmoneans I 2:15 and onward); and even
the mishnaic description of the town condemned for idolatry (Mishnah Sanhedrin 10:6).

19. “And on the day of the Lord’s sacrifice . . . their wealth shall be plundered and their homes laid waste. They shall build houses and not dwell in them, plant vineyards and not drink their wine. . . . That day shall be a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of calamity and desolation, a day of darkness and deep gloom, a day of densest clouds. . . . Their blood shall be spilled like dust, and their fat like dung. . . . In the fire of his passion the whole land shall be consumed; for He will make a terrible end of all who dwell in the land” (Zephaniah 1:8–18).

All biblical quotations are from A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures according to the Traditional Hebrew Text (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985).


21. This displacement is also evident in the types of spiritualization of biblical war descriptions found in the Midrash and the Talmud. For example, the means of battle were interpreted as prayers and supplications (Onkelos translation of Genesis 48:22; Tanhuma Beshaloth, chap. 9). Descriptions of the biblical warriors were interpreted as descriptions of the sages “discussing the war of Torah” (Babylonian Talmud Hagigah 14a; Babylonian Talmud Megilla 16b). Military commanders were likened to sages and heads of the Sanhedrin; see Aviezer Ravitzky, “Peace: Historical versus Utopian Models in Jewish Thought,” in History and Faith: Studies in Jewish Philosophy (Amsterdam: J. C. Gieben, 1996), 31–32.


23. See Kimelman’s discussion in Chapter 19 above, under “The Conduct of War.”


25. For example, the War Scroll (from the Dead Sea Scrolls) teaches us that the cult members were expected to take an active part in upcoming battles, which would lead to the “end of days” period. Characterizations of these battles’ results are astonishingly similar to the descriptions of the biblical Day of the Lord. The evil forces will be driven to extinction and the victory of the cult members will be absolute, confirming them to be the true Israelites. See Philip R. Davies, “War of the Sons of Light against the Sons of Darkness,” in Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls, ed. Lawrence H. Schiffman and James C. VanderKam (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 965–68.

26. This book is dated to the first half of the seventh century. It expresses the messianic expectation of the Jews in the land of Israel at the end of the Persian kingdom and on the eve of the Islamic conquest (638 C.E.).

27. On the great affinity between the dualistic approach of members of the Judean desert cult and early Christians, see David Flusser, Judaism and the Origins of Christianity (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1988), 23–74. In the Book of Zerubbabel, descriptions of the future war are based on a dualistic division between the faithful and those primed for entry into the religion, on the one hand, and
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those fated for doom, on the other: “Now the folk that will be assembled about him will be divided into two categories, one consisting of notorious sinners marked out for perdition, the other of people who have mended their ways in order to enter the faith.” Quoted in Saadia Gaon, The Book of Beliefs and Opinions, 7:6, trans. Samuel Rosenblatt (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1948), 305–306.


31. Indeed, in various versions of the Babylonian epic, the flood is not a punishment for the sins of humanity but the response of the god Anûlî to the noise of humans, which disturbed his rest. In addition, it lacks the motif of the covenant and the symbol of the rainbow. See Shin Shîf and Jacob Klein, In Those Distant Days: Anthology of Mesopotamian Literature in Hebrew (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1996), 88–130 (H).


34. For example, in Babylonian tradition, it is told that the god Marduk hung his bow in the sky after he conquered Tiamat, goddess of the seas, in battle.

35. “Are you wroth, O Lord . . . that you are driving your steeds, your victorious chariot? All bared and ready is your bow” (Habakkuk 3:8–9). “The sun and the moon stood still in their habitation at the light of your arrows as they sped, at the flash of your glittering spear. You tread the earth in rage, you trample nations in fury. You have come forth to deliver your people, to deliver your anointed. You will smash the roof of the villain’s house, raze it from foundation to top” (Habakkuk 3:11–13). See also Abarbanel commentary on these verses: “All the ancients call the sparks of the sun arrows, and the sun, God’s bow, since the sparks are emitted by the sun as an arrow from the hero’s bow, and in them will cause the existence and the non-existence on earth.” Yitzhak Abarbanel, The Complete Abarbanel Commentary (Warsaw, 1862), 32 (H).

36. See the interpretation of Genesis 9:13 by Shmuel David Luzzatto, who claimed that the symbolic meaning of the rainbow in the Bible is quite different from its meanings in the ancient Mesopotamian world: “The ancient nations believed that it [the rainbow] is the messenger of the gods (Iris), and spewed excessive nonsense on the matter. The Torah purified the matter from spoil, defect, and damage, and repaired it in a manner that would be useful and not damaging. It also appears to me that it is likely that the ancients divined and second-guessed by the rainbow, i.e., that it hinted at the future and functioned as the gods’ messenger. The Torah set aside all this by saying that it is only a sign that there will not be another flood. We also found that the ancient poet Homer said that the rainbow symbolized war and storm, and here the divine Torah shows these distortions to be false by saying the rainbow is the sign of a covenant of peace.” Shmuel David Luzzatto, Commentary on the Pentateuch, trans. into Hebrew by Pinchas Schlesinger (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1965), 50 (H).
37. Psalms 18:15.
40. This symbolic interpretation was prevalent among thirteenth-century Jewish scholars. For Germany, see Hezekiah Ben Manoah (Hezkuni), Commentary on the Pentateuch (Jerusalem: Rav-Kook Institute, 1944), 121 (H). For Spain, see Bahya Ben Asher, Commentary on the Pentateuch (Jerusalem: Rav-Kook Institute, 1981), 46 (H).
41. See Kimelman, Chapter 19 above, under “Opinions of Authorities.”
42. Other than the fact that he authored two biblical commentaries, we know very little about Astruc. See Encyclopaedia Judaica, 7:336.
43. En-Solomon Astruc, Midrashei ha-Torah, ed. Simon Eppenstein (Berlin: Mekizei Nirdamin, 1899), 13 (H).
44. In the world of the Bible and in ancient Mesopotamia, there were two types of covenant. One type is of an obligatory nature, such as the Sinaitic covenant, and the other is a covenant of promise, such as those promises given to Abraham and David. See M. Weinfield, “The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East,” Journal of the American Oriental Society 90 (1970): 184–203.
45. Levinas’s influence on French philosophers, such as Jacques Derrida, is considerable. Although during most of his life he was virtually unknown in Israel, his impact on Jewish intellectual circles in the United States and Israel has become clearer in recent years.
47. Levinas himself was skeptical of the term “phenomenology of the face,” which was applied by others to his thought. He objected to it because “phenomenology describes that which is visible,” while his idea of seeing the face transcends any sensory experience or perception. Emmanuel Levinas, Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 67. For a more detailed exposition, see Emmanuel Levinas, Totality and Infinity, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1999), 187–247.
49. “In the access to the face, there is certainly also an access to the idea of God.” Levinas, Ethics and Infinity, 92.
51. For example, see the homiletic interpretation on the arrangement of the heavenly tablets delivered to Moses: “How were the Ten Commandments arranged? Five on the one tablet and five on the other. On the one tablet was written: ‘I am the Lord thy God.’ And opposite it on the other tablet was written: ‘Thou shalt not murder.’ This tells us that if one sheds blood, it is accounted to him as
though he diminished the divine image. To give a parable: A king of flesh and blood entered a province and the people set up portraits of him, made images of him, and struck coins in his honor. Later on, they upset his portraits, broke his images, and defaced his coins, thus diminishing the likenesses of the king. So also if one sheds blood it is accounted to him as though he had diminished the divine image. For it is said: 'Whoso sheddeth man's blood...for in the image of God made He man'” (Genesis 9:6). *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, trans. Jacob Z. Lauterbach (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1933), 2:262.

52. Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 81.
53. Ibid., 89.