

## **Shabbat *Bemidbar* 5784**

### ***“War! What is it Good For?”***

#### **Rabbi Jonathan E. Blake**

At the height of the Vietnam War, American radio stations were blasting Edwin Starr’s “War”: *“War! What is it good for? Absolutely nothing!”*

A blistering cover of the original recorded by the Temptations a year earlier, “War” became a runaway hit, holding the number one spot on the *Billboard* charts for three weeks in the summer of 1970.

*“Say it again: War! What is it good for?”*

We ask, as we mark eight months of war.

We ask on behalf of our hostages.

We ask on behalf of the Israeli people, still reeling from the physical, sexual, and emotional violence inflicted on October 7th.

We ask for the sleepless Israeli parents with children in Gaza, in the North, in the West Bank, in all the places we tourists dare not go.

We ask for the more than 100,000 Israelis still displaced from their homes, for the residents of the northern towns burned by incendiary rockets fired by Hezbollah just this week.

We ask for the Palestinian civilians in Gaza killed and maimed and displaced from their homes, for the hungry and the thirsty, the sick and the frightened, whom Hamas has victimized by making the people of Gaza its human shields, by stealing their food and water and medicine and fuel, and, above all, their hope.

We ask for the Jewish students for whom this war has become an inescapable fact and feature of collegiate life, abused with hate speech, accused of genocide. Kids who just want to hang out with their friends and drink beer and even attend classes or study in the library free from harassment.

We ask alongside the growing number of Israelis who are tired of this war, sick and tired of politicians whom they do not trust to prosecute this war. We ask alongside the tens of thousands of Israelis who protest every week, begging their government to shift focus from bombarding Rafah to bringing hostages home.

*“War! What is it good for?”*

This is a reasonable question to ask, eight months into a terrible war.

It is, however, a difficult question to answer.

We turn to the Jewish tradition. Our prayer book is a love song to peace. *Oseh shalom bimromav*--“May the One who makes Peace in the heavens bring peace upon us”; *Shalom rav al Yisrael am’cha*-- “May a great peace come upon Your people Israel”; *Sim shalom, tovah u’vracha*-- “Grant peace and goodness and blessing....”

If the *Siddur* were all we had, you’d probably conclude there is no place for war in the Jewish tradition. But the Torah, TaNaKh, Mishnah, Talmud, and Midrash, the collections of Rabbinic teaching and storytelling, the annals of Jewish history and codes of Jewish law, all make clear that war is not only sometimes permissible, but even, sometimes, imperative.

The Torah itself provides conditions for going to war and the rules governing military conscription, exemption, and ethical conduct in war. This week’s Torah portion, *Bemidbar*, opens the Book of Numbers with a census of the Israelites, mustering them tribe by tribe in the Sinai Desert for a planned invasion of the Promised Land. Military conscription, at least for the men, was part and parcel of being numbered among the Israelite ranks.

שָׂאוּ אֶת־רֹאשׁ כָּל־עֵדֹת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמִשְׁפְּחֹתָם לְבַיִת אָבֹתָם בְּמִסְפָּר  
שְׁמוֹת כָּל־זָכָר לְגִלְגָּלְתָּם:

*Take a census of the whole Israelite company [of fighters] by the clans of its ancestral houses, listing the names, every male, head by head.*

מִבֵּן עֹשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וּמַעְלָה כָּל־יֵצֵא צָבָא בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל תִּפְקְדוּ אֹתָם  
לְצַבְּאֹתָם אֶתְּהָ וְאֶהֱרֹן:

*You and Aaron shall record them by their groups, from the age of twenty years up, all those in Israel who are able to bear arms (Num. 1:1-2).*

The Book of Numbers describes how, over the course of their wilderness journey, a debilitated band of escaped slaves will be rehabilitated as a fighting force to be feared by Israel's enemies.<sup>1</sup> It leads to Deuteronomy, in which Moses readies the troops for combat, straight on to the Book of Joshua, a logbook of the military campaign against the Canaanites.

Wars are, of course, fought for numerous reasons, among them economic, political, and territorial; wars are fought over ideology and religion, and, yes, sometimes out of revenge.

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<sup>1</sup> In this way the Book of Numbers presages the oft-stereotyped transformation of the image of the Jew in the 20th century, from the feeble *bocher* bent over his books in some decrepit *shetl yeshiva* of Europe to the tan and muscular Israeli wielding his military rifle with pride, or the young pioneer dredging swamps and building *kibbutzim*, planting vegetables at dawn and dancing the *hora* at night. This transformation, cartoonishly exaggerated and trafficking in stereotypes though it may be, nevertheless passes through the crucible of War. It is war, more than peace, that defines and unifies a people around a purpose. I say this not to glorify war but to help us understand its purpose and power: even on October 8th, 2023, Israelis understood no less than Americans understood on September 12th, 2001 that even given other clear military aims, we would have to go to war to restore our wounded pride and purpose as a nation.

Judaism designates two primary categories of war: *Milhemet Reshut*, or discretionary war, in other words, a war that you *may* fight; and *Milhemet Mitzvah*, or commanded war, a war that you *must* fight. (Literally, a war that is a *mitzvah* to fight.)

Rashi<sup>2</sup> and Maimonides<sup>3</sup>, writing in the 12th Century, defined *Milhemet mitzvah* as a defensive war that one fights only in response to an already-launched attack.

The Sages are divided over how to categorize wartime operations designed to *prevent* an enemy from attacking. The Meiri, writing in France in the 13th century, concludes that “one can launch a preemptive strike against an enemy amassing forces on a border,” which he considers “sufficiently defensive to be categorized as a *Milhemet Mitzvah*,”<sup>4</sup> a war of obligation.

In sum, the more a war can be seen as defensive, the more likely Jewish tradition will classify it as obligatory; the more offensive or expansionist, the more likely to be classified as discretionary.

At *no time* does Judaism give permission to conduct war wantonly, without regard for civilian life, not in the traditional

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<sup>2</sup> Commentary to *Bavli, Sotah* 44b.

<sup>3</sup> *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Melakhim* 5:1.

<sup>4</sup> Commentary to *Bavli, Sotah* 44b.

literature, nor in the ethical code of the IDF known as *Tohar Ha-Neshek* or “Purity of Arms.”

But principle and practice are not the same thing and in the frenzy and chaos of war, bright lines blur; decisions are made without good intelligence; and terrible suffering is inevitably inflicted on non-combatants.

This is a grievous fact of war, but it is neither unusual nor even necessarily immoral. War is not a war crime. The morality of war is not measured in the proportionality of body count between one belligerent and another, but rather in the proportionality of the effectiveness of wartime measures taken, against the identified military objectives.

The Allied invasion of Normandy on June 6th, 1944—eighty years ago yesterday—resulted in somewhere between 4,400 and 10,000 Allied casualties and an estimated 4,000 to 9,000 German casualties. But no one evaluates the merit, or morality, of that invasion this way. How many Allied lives were worth sacrificing in order to defeat the Nazis? How many German lives? These questions are strictly rhetorical.

What to do about the War in Gaza? This is not a rhetorical question. It is also one without any easy answers.

There are reasonable people advocating for the war to continue until Israel’s aims have been accomplished; and

there are reasonable people—including a growing number of Israelis—who believe that a cease-fire and exchange of hostages, followed by longer-term efforts to eradicate Hamas's fighters and its political leadership, would be the way to go.

There are reasonable people who would point out that even with tens of thousands dead in Gaza, a two-to-one combatant to civilian ratio of wartime dead is better, in fact more humane, than any other urban war of the modern era, noting as well that no other army has ever had to fight a jihadist militia that intentionally puts its own civilians in harm's way.

Indeed, we would note that since coming to power in 2006—the same year tonight's Chai Society inductees joined the temple—Hamas has done exactly one thing, which is to prepare for October 7th, by training tens of thousands of fighters in land-, air-, sea-, and cyber-warfare; diverting vast resources into building massive infrastructure for launching and asymmetrical war; all while brainwashing the children of Gaza to become Islamofascist martyrs devoted to the cause of eliminating Israel.

There are also reasonable people who would point out that further pulverization of Gaza only makes it easier for Hamas to raise up a next generation of jihadists sworn to Israel's destruction.

There are certainly plenty of reasonable people—especially Israelis—who do not trust Netanyahu and his bedfellows to represent the interests of the Israeli public.

And most reasonable people agree that this war will not truly end until a political roadmap, not a military one, is developed and implemented.

What is *not* reasonable, I would submit, is excoriating the war as a “genocide,” or celebrating the perpetrators of October 7th, or harassing Jewish people for the “sin” of being Jewish, or calling for “Palestinian liberation” when what is meant is not an end to Palestinian suffering in Gaza and the West Bank, but the elimination of Israel.

What is not reasonable is incessant hectoring about Israel’s war in Gaza without a scintilla of moral outrage over the half a million human beings who perished in the Tigray War which consumed Ethiopia just two years ago; or the more than a half a million dead in the Syrian Civil war of the last decade; or the more than 150,000 killed in war in Yemen, also lying in freshly dug graves, coupled with another 227,000 dead of famine; or, for that matter, the dead of the Russian-Ukrainian war, now also well into six figures after more than two years of fighting. Protest war all you like, but at least know what you’re protesting, and why you choose to protest only *this* war, especially given the ample menu of bloodshed on offer from just the last few years.



Judaism is in fact not a *pacifist* tradition, meaning “the belief that any violence, including war, is unjustifiable under any circumstances, and that all disputes should be settled by peaceful means.” Judaism is *not* pacifist, even though it *is* deeply and thoroughly peace-loving.

Jewish history, Jewish text, Jewish morality, and Jewish lived experience at this very moment, all offer an answer to the question, “War! What is it good for?”

That answer is *not*, “Absolutely nothing.”

From the Sinai Desert to the Normandy Beaches, from June 6th, 1944 to October 7th, 2023, to this day, eight months later—the only reasonable answer is this:

***War is only good for anything when every alternative is worse.***

*Shabbat Shalom.*