

"VIOLENCE"

Jewish Insights Into An Un-Jewish Theme

In recent years, months, and weeks, the violence that lies latent at the heart of the American character has begun to surface. The recent spate of assassinations has brought into the open and into real life the celebration of violence in American myth and folklore. In hypnotic fascination, as if we were watching what has been previously but a bad dream suddenly turned into real life, we have seen the myth of the cops-and-robbers game and the cowboys-and-Indians battles transformed into the reality of political and social violence.

Of course, it is true, as many commentators have told us, that we must see the problem in perspective. Violence is not a particularly American quality. The killing in our days in Biafra and in Indonesia, the mutual slaughter of the supposedly peaceful Indian Hindus and Pakistani Moslems, and the wholesale massacres in Nazi Germany, were just a few instances of the universal phenomenon of violence. Furthermore, it is not just now that Americans have learned the art. Attempts had already been made on the lives of Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and Harry S. Truman. But the successful assassinations of Kennedy and King and Kennedy do bring the whole problem into sharper focus. And we must admit that it is no tribute to us that it is just now that we have become concerned with the problem. It seems that we have, all of us, indulged in the national sport of sweeping unfavorable aspects of American

life under the national rug, and that is why violence failed to attract our attention when the Ku Klux Klan was on its great rampage of pillage and murder.

Yet, whether it is universal or specifically American, new or old, the recent assassinations of important people in American life represent a tragic and serious blot on our civilization and society. It is a reminder to us that we should never desist from pondering and attempting to eliminate or diminish violence.

Today I wish to speak about the problem not as a psychologist or a sociologist, but as a Rabbi, presenting a few Jewish insights into violence, an un-Jewish theme.

For violence certainly is an un-Jewish phenomenon. Interestingly, there is no single Hebrew word that adequately translates the word "violence." The nearest to it is the Hebrew hamas, which has both a narrower and broader signification than "violence." That the whole idea is un-Jewish is attested to by our Haftorah of this morning, which concludes on the triumphant spiritual note: lo be'hayyil ve'lo be'koah ki im be'ruhi amar ha-Shem Tzevaot, "For not by power nor by might but by My spirit, sayeth the Lord of Hosts."

This idea is carried over into traditional Jewish typology. The Jew is represented by Jacob, whom the Bible describes as a yoshev ohalim, literally, a tent-dweller, but which in Jewish tradition becomes the eternal student. At the same time, Esau is a man of tzayyid, the hunter, the man of blood lust, the one whom his father recognized

as a man of violence when he told him: ve'al harbekha tiyeh, "and by thy sword shalt thou live." Just as Esau, the father of the Western nations, is a man of pillage and battle, so is Ishmael the father of the Arabs, a man of brutal insensitivity. The Torah describes him as pere adam, a wild man, whose hand is in everyone else, and against whom everyone else's hand is set.

This same Jacob, father of the Jewish people, while blessing his other children before his death, expressly resented two of his sons who had indulged in violence. Concerning Simeon and Levi, the old patriarch said, "Simeon and Levi are a pair," kelei hamas mekhoretehem, normally translated as: the instruments of violence are their habitation (or, their kinship). The last word of the Hebrew is puzzling and by no means certain. The Rabbis, however, interpret the word in a manner which sheds light on the entire theme of hamas or violence. According to this interpretation, Jacob said, concerning the kelei hamas (weapons) that Simeon and Levi used to destroy Shechem: gezulim hem be'yedkhem, they were stolen by the brothers, they did not belong to them. Le'mi hem re'unim, le'Esav she'makhar et ha-bekhorah -- for whom are weapons of death more appropriate? -- for Esau, who sold his birthright. The word mekhoretehem comes from the root M-KH-R which means "to sell," and thus refers to Esau. When a Jew takes up weapons, he is indulging in an un-Jewish theme; he is appropriating what is more in accord with the character of an Esau.

Despite this, it would not be correct to say that Judaism subscribes to pacifism. It does not go to the other extreme. That is why Jewish law gives the courts the right to impose mitat bet din,

capital punishment. That is why the Halakhah teaches that ha-ba le' hargekh, hashkem ve'harego, one may kill in self-defense. And Judaism knows of milhemet mitzvah, a "just war," one which may be fought either for self-defense or because of divine command. In Biblical history there are even political assassins whom we cherish, such as Jael, who did away with Sisera, the enemy of Israel. Judaism recognizes that in an imperfect society we must sometimes employ violence against the criminal and the enemy in order to prevent him from killing the innocent.

The question of when to accept and when to condemn violence is therefore a sensitive and delicate one. It was the same Jacob who, according to the tradition, was confronted by this very dilemma. Of Jacob we read, as he was preparing for the confrontation with Esau (which he expected to be a bloody one), that ve-yira Yaakov me'od va-yitzer lo, "and Jacob was sorely afraid and it distressed him." Why the repetition, both "afraid" and "distressed?" The Rabbis say: Jacob was afraid shema yehareg, lest he be killed, and distressed shema yahareg, lest he have to kill Esau. Neither of these alternatives appealed to him very much. Not to employ violence meant possibly to submit to death; to use violence went against his whole nature and all his ideals. On the one hand, pacifism leads to the entrenchment of a permanent tyranny. On the other hand, to approve of violence means to embrace murder and corruption as accepted facts of the social order.

Hence, Judaism can approve of violence only in the most restricted form. That is why, although it legislated mitat bet din, it kept capital punishment down to a minimum. Thus, R. Akiva and R. Tarphon declared that had they been members of the Sanhedrin, they never would have put a man to death. Although the Halakhah does not agree with them, it nevertheless tells us that a court which passed the death verdict once in seven years (according to others, once in seventy years) was known as a tyrannical or bloody court. Thus too, although Judaism recognized the milhemet mitzvah or just war, it permitted it only in the case of self-defense; otherwise the king had to receive the consent of the entire Sanhedrin. Also, the prophetic ideal, the whole Jewish vision of the perfect society, was one in which universal peace would prevail. This was more than a projection into the future; it affected contemporary practice as well. Interestingly, the Halakhah declares that under usual conditions it is forbidden to carry on the Sabbath. Nevertheless, this prohibition does not cover takhshitin, ornaments or jewelry. But this dispensation excludes one type of ornamentation which is forbidden on the sabbath: that which comes in the shape of a sword or a spear, for Sabbath is primarily a day of peace, and war violates the entire spirit of the Sabbath. Shabbat is a time that we anticipate the prophetic ideal of the Messianic age, and we must outlaw all symbols of violence on such a day.

Furthermore, Judaism is suspicious of the vigilante.

Violence, it is true, must sometimes be used to curb or punish violence -- but only with the utmost care. The Midrash tells us that after Cain murdered Abel, the first instance of human violence, the birds and the beasts gathered about Cain in a kind of kangaroo court. They cried for vengeance. But then the Almighty noticed that in this zoological Sanhedrin there also appeared the serpent -- and then God denied them their wish, and declared that whoever killed Cain would himself be punished. Why so? Because, contemplating the serpent, God realized that he was not concerned with the blood of Abel that was spilt, but with the blood of Cain that was not. He was disguising his blood lust as a passionate call for justice (R. Abraham Chen, in his "Be'Malkhut Ha-yahadut").

So that Judaism requires a sense of balance, and where violence is unavoidable it must be legally restricted and restrained, and it must be employed only by responsible, decent, and moral people. That is why I would prefer to translate that verse from our Haftorah, lo be'hayyil ve'lo be'koah ki im be'ruhi amar ha-Shem Tzevaut, as meaning that strength and power by themselves are improper and that only when they are utilized in the spirit of the Lord of Hosts can they prove acceptable to the Jew. (Compare the interpretation by the Gaon of Vilna of the verse in Proverbs, Shekker ha-hen ve'hevel ha-yofi, ishah yirat ha-Shem hi tit'halal. This does not mean that charm is always deceitful and beauty is always false, but that these qualities are reprehensible only in a woman who is not pious; but ishah yirah ha-Shem hi tit'halal, if a woman fears the Lord, then she should be praised

as well for her charm and her beauty.) It is because violence always carries with it the danger of spreading, that the members of the Sanhedrin, who alone were empowered to pass the death penalty, had to be people of impeccable moral stature, and even then the death sentence could be issued only when the Sanhedrin convened in the Temple itself, so as to impress them with the gravity of their decision. Jewish law in our time too reveals the same bias. The Shohet or ritual slaughterer, who is empowered by the Law to spill blood, though it be but animal blood, must be a God-fearing man. Indeed, the Jewish code of law places higher requirements of piety upon the shohet than it does upon a rabbi.

Applying this principle to American life, it appears that the first thing we must do is to get guns and all other lethal weapons out of the hands of minors and maniacs. How weird, how grotesque, that in 1968 this great country, which pretends to be the leader of the civilized world, still does not have an adequate gun control law, and that apparently the will of the great majority of our people threatens to be frustrated by the lobbies in Congress. If Congress should fail this week to pass a decent gun control law, democracy will have proved a failure, our law makers nothing more than common criminals, or, at best, a collection of rural primitives, and our whole country utterly insane. The excuse that such weapons are necessary for hunters or sportsmen is totally inadequate. As Jews we ought to outlaw any hunting in the first place, whether or not it leads to violence against man. The failure to curb illicit dealing in weapons

of death will mean that the culture of this country, which has always prided itself on drawing upon the so-called Judæo-Christian tradition, but which also carries with it a pagan strain, will finally have resolved the tension between its two cultural ancestors, Jacob and Esau, in favor of the latter. We will have opted for that verse which describes Esau, ve'al harbekha tiyeh, "and by the sword shalt thou live," except that the "live" part will be questionable.

Violence, for Jews, means more than the destruction of the life of the victim alone. According to the Mishnah in Sanhedrin, the word for "blood" in Hebrew can be singular (dam) or plural (damim). When God charged Cain with the murder of Abel, He said to him Kol demei ahikha, "the voice of the bloods of thy brother cry out to Me from the earth." Why the plural? The Mishnah answers, that with his act of violence, Cain had spilled damo ve'dam zariyotav, both the blood of his brother and the blood of untold generations which might have sprung from Abel's loins.

In the same vein, we can understand the statement of the Sages that kol ha-shofekh damim mema'et et ha-demut, "whoever spills bloods, diminishes the Image," he detracts from God in Whose image man was created. Here too we notice the plural, damim. Why so? Because violence implies spilling the blood of the victim, and, as it were, spilling the blood of the One in Whose image man was created (R. Mosheh Haggiz, in his "Eleh ha-Mitzvot").

If we, therefore, in the United States continue to countenance the subtle incitement to violence in our communications media, in TV

and radio and cinema, we will be responsible not only for the victims, but we shall also destroy the soul of our country and diminish its image. For too long now we have been upsetting the equilibrium between the extreme poles of censorship and licentiousness by opting for a policy that "anything goes." The tension between the two ideas has been resolved in favor of the latter. We have permitted murder and mayhem on TV, in our literature, and in our movies. Our literary critics have proved irresponsible; they have identified sadism with realism, and realism with art, making an aesthetic out of violence. We have taken the chaotic cruelty of the jungle and transformed it into ordered brutality, properly programmed and systematically scheduled for given channels -- and then we reward the authors with Oscars and Pulitzers. I do not favor a puritannical restrictive censorship over communications media, but I do believe that our liberalism has become a bit too doctrinaire and unresponsive to the realities of society and the perils it faces.

Finally, the problem of violence is not only of concern to the potential assassin or his intended victim, it is a matter for each and every one of us, even the most serene and non-violent.

Permit me to explain. The generation of the flood was destroyed because of various sins, and one of them was hamas, which is generally translated as "violence." In context, however, the Sages preferred to define hamas more narrowly as gezzel, robbery. Thus, when the Lord pronounces doom upon that generation by saying, "The end

of all flesh has come before me, for the earth has become full of hamas," Rashi explains that this means that the verdict of universal destruction was issued specifically because of the sin of gezzel, robbery.

Yet, our Rabbis did not accept this as a perfect identity. They saw a fine distinction between hamas and gezzel. The latter term refers to robbing a man of property that is shaveh perutah, worth at least a penny, whereas the term hamas refers to violently taking from a man that which is pahot mi-shaveh perutah, worth less than a penny.

What the Sages are saying, I submit, is that from a moral perspective violence is not purely a matter of murder or grand larceny; it begins with and consists of petty crime, the guarded insult, the murder of a man by little bits. In the eyes of God and ^Torah, hamas or violence is not only a matter of the dramatic assassination that makes the headlines, but it is as well the thousand little assaults that we perpetrate every day against our neighbor's sensitivity, a friend's ego, a mate's peace of mind, a parent's dignity, a child's self-respect, a colleague's self-worth, a competitor's equal opportunity. Practically and legally, there is a difference between shaveh perutah and pahot mi-shaveh perutah; but morally and spiritually there is not. Every time we smirk at a human being, we spill a drop of his blood; every time we utter a cutting and unkind remark, we kill the victim a little bit; whenever we humiliate another person, we do violence to his self-image.

A human beth din can punish only for gezzel, for violence of a larger proportion, that which is shaveh perutah. But the Almighty can despair of man and utter judgment upon the world even for hamas, even for pahot mi-shaveh perutah, even for those who kill another human being not all at once but in little tiny bits.

In the words of Isaiah (11:9) "they shall not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain;" and when shall this vision of non-violence be realized? -- "for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" -- when people will learn and live ^Torah, when in the spirit of the Lord of Hosts, we will strive for the knowledge of God rather than for might or power, when we will learn to respect the inviolate dignity of God's creatures.

To paraphrase the same prophet Isaiah (60:18), "violence shall no longer be heard in Thy land, nor desolation nor destruction within Thy border; for in the place of Thy defensive walls will be the salvation of the Lord, and in the place of Thy protective gates shall be the praise of Almighty God."