

## **‘Torah’ Perspective on Blood Rituals and War**

**(A Textual Presence of the Concepts and Practices, their Historical Evolution and the Contemporary Relevance)**

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### **Abstract**

Within the Hebrew-Jewish tradition, there were strict prohibitions against certain practices and rites that were commonly observed by other Semitic peoples. These included Blood rites and rituals, which are recorded throughout Jewish history. The act of consuming blood was among the sins believed to have contributed to the destruction of Jerusalem. In fact, in one instance Moses took the blood from a sacrifice and threw it upon the people proclaiming, ‘Behold the blood of the covenant.’ This idea of using a blood rite to cleanse a place where violence had occurred can be seen in various phases of Jewish History and Old Testament age. Unfortunately, these instances also seem to establish a foundation for violence and a warrior mentality among adherents which has been justified in many Biblical Versus and Books like of *Judges* and *Deuteronomy*. Biblical war often refers to “Yahweh war” meaning the war of God of Israel. In the Hebrew Bible, God may be referred to as the “man of war”. The War laws are developed considerably later in Rabbinic interpretation. A great collection of War poetry is found in Hebrew scripture and much of it consists of hymns of praise and thanks for God’s protection of Israel and

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victory over Israel’s enemies. Book of *Psalm* contains fragments of a series of war songs or pieces of war poetry. The main focus of the article is to explore the instances of blood rituals, violence mentality, war appreciation poetry and war practices beginning from the era of ancient Hebrews in Palestine, its historical evolution until the age of Old Testament and its contemporary relevance.

**Keywords:** Hebrews, Jews, Blood Rituals, War, Old Testament

### **Introduction:**

#### **The Temple Age**

The Solomon Temple served as a unifying symbol for the scattered Jewish community throughout inhabited regions. Each year, Israelites from all corners would flock to this central location for both religious and business purposes. From a young age, Hebrews engaged in worship by offering sacrifices to their gods, with animal sacrifice being a significant aspect of this practice. To display their tribal unity, the "Coffin of the agreement"<sup>1</sup> was placed before them during these offerings, cementing its role as an emblem of temple rites. Even Prophet Dāwūd (A.S) followed this tradition during his worship. Following the destruction of Jerusalem, animal blood cults also emerged.<sup>2</sup>

This demonstrates that the Temple remained a hub for offerings, particularly those involving sanctified animal blood which held a special societal and religious status and was deemed taboo to consume or waste on distasteful rituals or practices. According to Royden Keith Yerkes, “The blood of the animal had been used for distasteful prophylactic and

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<sup>1</sup>A box full of oral teachings of prophets, written law and Israelite religious agreements.

<sup>2</sup>al-Masīrī, Abdul Wahhāb, *Mawsū‘at al-Yahūd wal-Yahūdiyyah wal-Sahyūniyyah* (Egypt: 1999), vol:4. P: 554.

apotropaic rites and purposes. The body was not fit for food; it might be burned on an altar or pitched into the sea; it was taboo.”<sup>3</sup>

### **Hebrew-Jewish age**

In the Hebrew-Jewish tradition, a number of practices and rites known to other Semitic peoples were forbidden.

There is a story of a victory over the Philistines, after which “the people flew upon the spoil, and took sheep and oxen and calves, and slew them on the ground; and the people ate them with the blood.”<sup>4</sup>

This was so disturbing to some that they conveyed the matter to Saul who lectured them against the practice.

According to Ezekiel, eating blood was one of the reasons Jerusalem had been destroyed.

“You eat flesh with the blood, and lift up your eyes to your idols, and shed blood; shall you then possess the land?”<sup>5</sup>

The verse of Deuteronomy, “Only be sure that you do not eat the blood; for the blood is the life, and you shall not eat the life with the flesh”<sup>6</sup> contains that the prohibition against such practices was not always abided by, as can be seen from various instances. One example of this is mentioned by Dr. Yūsuf Hinā Nasrullah in reference to the Tālmūd, which states that on Passover Day Jews were commanded to slaughter a non-Israelite person and present their blood to their gods. The Jews were known to dispose of the blood in different ways, including using a hot

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<sup>3</sup>Royden Keith Yerkes, *Sacrifice in Greek and Roman religions and early Judaism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Son, 1952), p: 203.

<sup>4</sup> I Samuel, 14:31-35.

<sup>5</sup> Ezekiel, 33:25.

<sup>6</sup> Deuteronomy, 12:16, 23.

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needle-shaped barrel to pierce a living body until it bled out and the person died. This was seen as entertainment by some. .<sup>7</sup>

A Jewish historian Josephus (95 A.D.) has described that Jews were not only sufficed drinking blood but also ate meat of that dead body (offering) on Passover Day. “The Passover festival known as *Pesach* is the festival of the Exodus par excellence, although it is also an agricultural festival associated with barely harvest. *Pesach* lasts for seven days in Israel and for eight days in the Diaspora. The most outstanding feature of *Pesach* is the prohibition on eating or even possessing any form of leavened bread.”<sup>8</sup>

He wrote that when the Greek emperor Antonius IV (174B.C) became ruler, he entered Jerusalem after conquest. Upon entering, he found a Greek arrested, to whom the Jews offered rich foods to keep him healthy. Why? So that the emperor would carry him out to the forest to be sacrificed for drinking his blood and eating meat on Passover day. But the emperor was kind enough to release him.<sup>9</sup>

### Old Testament age

The Old Testament, which is so clearly against eating blood, makes elaborate requirements for disposing of the blood of animals used for sacrifice. Blood as a religious ritual has been narrated through the entire O.T whose textual exploration can throw light upon the mind of ancient *Hebrews*. *Hebrews* and *Jews* have codified the elaborate use of blood for pre-sacrificial purification more specifically than any other people.

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<sup>7</sup>Muhammad Zia ur Rahmān, *Dirāsāt fil-Yahūdīyyah wal-Nasrāniyyah wa-adyānil Hind* (Riyādh, Saudiyyah,: Maktabatur Rushd, 2003), 2th edition, p:242.

<sup>8</sup>Alan Unterman, *Jews, their religious beliefs and practices* (London and New York: Routledge, university of Manchester, 1989), p: 188.

<sup>9</sup>Yūsuf Hinā Nasrūllāh, *Al-kanz al-marṣūd fī qawā'id al-Talmūd*(Beirut, Lebanon: 1968), p: IX.

Blood from the sacrificed animal is sprinkled upon the worshipper<sup>10</sup> and on the new priest at the time of his consecration.<sup>11</sup> It is "sprinkled" before the sanctuary,<sup>12</sup> around the altar,<sup>13</sup> on the altar,<sup>14</sup> at the base of the altar,<sup>15</sup> on the side of the altar,<sup>16</sup> on the horns of the altar,<sup>17</sup> before and on the "mercy-seat,"<sup>18</sup> and sprinkled or poured on a burning sacrifice.<sup>19</sup>

Here are some more examples of blood uses;

- 1) The phrase "blood of the covenant" occurs twice in the tradition of the establishment of Yahweh's covenant with the people. The following verse throws light upon how Yahweh established it by Moses;

"And Moses took the blood and threw it upon the people, and said, 'Behold the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words.'<sup>20</sup> And once to recall the fact that such a covenant was established by blood.<sup>21</sup>

- 2) The blood used at the sanctification of a priest is called the 'blood of consecration' as Book of Exodus says:

"You shall take the other ram; and Aaron and his sons shall lay their hands upon the head of the ram, and you shall kill the ram, and take part of its blood and put it upon the tip of the right ear of Aaron and upon the tips

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<sup>10</sup> Exodus, 24:8.

<sup>11</sup> Leviticus, 8:36.

<sup>12</sup> Numbers, 19:4.

<sup>13</sup> Exodus, 29:16.

<sup>14</sup> Ezekiel, 43:18.

<sup>15</sup> Leviticus, 4:7.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 5:9.

<sup>17</sup> Exodus, 29:12.

<sup>18</sup> Leviticus, 16:14-15.

<sup>19</sup> 2 Kings, 16:15.

<sup>20</sup> Exodus, 24:8.

<sup>21</sup> Zech, 9:11.

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of the right ears of his sons, and upon the thumbs of their right hands, and upon the great toes of their right feet, and throw the rest of the blood against the altar round about. Then you shall take part of the blood that is on the altar, and of the anointing oil, and sprinkle it upon Aaron and his garments, and upon his sons and his sons' garments with him; and he and his garments shall be holy, and his sons and his sons' garments with him.”<sup>22</sup>

- 3) At other place OT narrates that only a blood rite can cleanse a place in which a murder has been committed.

“You shall not thus pollute the land in which you live; for blood pollutes the land, and no expiation can be made for the land, for the blood that is shed in it, except by the blood of him who shed it.”<sup>23</sup>

- 4) Another verse describes how OT places a great deal of value on the sacredness of blood as it cleanses an altar, a house from leprosy and makes new preachers.

“Thus he shall cleanse the house with the blood of the bird, and with the running water, and with the living bird, and with the cedar wood and hyssop and scarlet stuff.”<sup>24</sup>

### **War and Violence in Old Testament**

The Bible contains only a few formal laws associated with war; these laws were developed considerably later in Rabbinic interpretation. During the war, it was believed that God protected his people from harm. Because the deity appears so prominently in the Bible, war is often referred to as the

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<sup>22</sup> Exodus, 29:19-21.

<sup>23</sup> Numbers, 35:33.

<sup>24</sup> Leviticus, 14:52.

“Yahweh war,” the war of God of Israel. The Hebrew Bible describes God as the “man of war”(ish milhamah).<sup>25</sup>

God is consulted before engaging in war <sup>26</sup> and certain burnt offerings are made before engaging in battle to entreat the assistance of God. <sup>27</sup>God himself fights for Israel.<sup>28</sup> The Bible even records a battle cry in Judges 7:18: “For God and for Gideon.”<sup>29</sup>

### **Types of war and war ideologies**

In Judaism, there are essentially two types of war. However, a thorough examination of Jewish history reveals numerous theories on war that shed new light on discussions surrounding violence in Judaism. First, we will explore the different forms of war, followed by an examination of various war ideologies:

#### **I- Obligatory War (Milhemet Mitzvah)**

According to Judaism, it is permissible to engage in a war for self-defense. This can also include launching a preemptive attack if an attack from an enemy is anticipated. Some explanations from the Bible suggest that any attempt to capture land in Israel justifies an obligatory war.<sup>30</sup>

#### **II- Discretionary War (Milhemet Reshut)**

This type of war is fought with the goal of expanding Israel's borders beyond those outlined in the Bible. According to Jewish scholars, the Sanhedrin - a High Court consisting of seventy-one judges - must

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<sup>25</sup> Exodus, 15: 3.

<sup>26</sup> Judges, 20:18, 23.

<sup>27</sup> Jeremiah, 6:4; Micah, 3:5.

<sup>28</sup> Exodus, 14:14.

<sup>29</sup> Susan Niditch, “Ideologies of war”, Encyclopedia of Religion and War, Gabriel Palmer-Fernandez (ed.) (New York London: Routledge, 2004), p: 181.

<sup>30</sup>Dr. Muhammad Imtiaz Zafar, Violence, Terrorism and Teachings of Islam (Islamabad: Higher education commission, 2006), p: 36.

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carefully consider and approve this kind of war. Thus, there are certain wars that are considered legitimate and even mandatory, and it is important for Jews to discern when it is appropriate to wage such a battle and when it is time for peace.<sup>31</sup>

### Ideologies of war

Susan Niditch has recorded Jewish Ideologies of war in *Encyclopedia of Religion and War*. She says that The Hebrew Bible preserves a number of views of war as follow:

1. **The Ban:** "devote to destruction," It is ban or Haraam, which is perhaps the most troubling war ideology in the Hebrew Bible. In war, the Ban is believed to be a command from God, which requires all enemies, as well as sometimes their animals, to be slaughtered and burned "a whole burnt offering to God."<sup>32</sup>
2. **The Bardic Tradition:** the Bardic tradition reflects courage, daring and skill of warriors. War is described as men's sport<sup>33</sup> in which operates a code of fair play. Men should fight their equals in skill.<sup>34</sup>
3. **Tricksterism:** It is a war ethic of the oppressed, who must use deception to improve their lot. No guilt is attached to the enemy's death. Tales of Samson,<sup>35</sup> Ehud<sup>36</sup> and Jael <sup>37</sup> exemplify this ideology.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p: 36.

<sup>32</sup> Deuteronomy, 13:16.

<sup>33</sup> 2 Samuel, 2:14.

<sup>34</sup> 1 Samuel, 17:43.

<sup>35</sup> Judges, 14:15.

<sup>36</sup> Judges, 3:12-30.

<sup>37</sup> Judges, 4-5.



4. **Expediency:** The ideology of expediency justifies using any degree of cruelty in order to achieve victory in battle.<sup>38</sup>
5. **Nonparticipation:** On the other hand, the belief in nonparticipation stems from the Biblical tradition that portrays God as capable of saving Israel through miraculous means. In this perspective, human beings are not required to engage in battle, as it is expected that Yahweh himself will use violence and cause bloodshed against the enemy.<sup>39</sup>

This is evident through numerous war scenes depicted in the Old Testament, where specific teachings about fighting with enemies can be found. It can be argued that there are more verses about war than peace, such as in *Exodus* where Moses' people, the sons of Levi, carry out a killing program under the guidance of God. Then Moses stood in the gate of the camp, and said,

"Who is on the Lord's side? Come to me." And all the sons of Levi gathered themselves together to him. And he said to them, "Thus says the LORD God of Israel, 'Put every man his sword on his side, and go to and fro from gate to gate throughout the camp, and slay every man his brother, and every man his companion, and every man his neighbor. And the sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses; and there fell of the people that day about three thousand men.'"<sup>40</sup>

This establishes the significance of the text for anyone interested in sacred violence.

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<sup>38</sup> 2 Samuel, 8:2.

<sup>39</sup> Susan Niditch, "Ideologies of war", *Encyclopedia of Religion and War*, p: 240.

<sup>40</sup> Exodus, 32: 26-28.

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P. Partner suitably described the Book of Daniel as ‘a kind of meditation upon Holy War that was supposed to show secret things and to predict the execution of divine judgment.’<sup>41</sup> We find some other books on war ethics but the most famous ones are *Judges* and *Deuteronomy*.

### **Deuteronomy: The book of war**

Deuteronomy contains a lot of war proclamations that help us in understanding the Jewish way to fight a war. Judaism orders its followers to abide by Biblical values even while fighting a war. When the time for war has arrived, Jewish soldiers are expected to abide by specific laws and values. Only in Deuteronomy, that is considered the *book of war*, several commands have been witnessed regarding war. Here is the summary of some rules:

1. Only courageous people should fight a war having faith in God, and who do not have such belief should not show intention.<sup>42</sup>
2. Peace offer should be made to the infidels of the city.<sup>43</sup>
3. If the city refuses the offer of peace, the males are put to the sword, the females and small children are to be taken captive.<sup>44</sup>
4. Food trees may be cut down in prosecution of the blockade.
5. But in the cities of these peoples that the LORD your God gives you for an inheritance, you shall save alive nothing that breathes.<sup>45</sup>

### **War poetry in the O.T**

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<sup>41</sup>P. Partner, *God of Battles: Holy Wars of Christianity and Islam* (London: Harper Collins, 1997), p: 16.

<sup>42</sup> Deuteronomy, 20:1-9.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 20:10.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 20:13-15.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 20:16.

A great collection of poetry is found in Hebrew scripture and much of it consists of hymns of praise and thanks for God's protection of Israel and victory over Israel's enemies. Perhaps the most famous is the "Song of the Sea" of Exodus 15. God throws Pharaoh and his chariots into the sea. The "Song of Deborah" in Judges 5 is a victory poem recounting the destruction of "the kings of Canaan." Psalm 68 contains fragments of a series of war songs or pieces of war poetry.

### **A Contemporary Jew's View Point on killing**

Israel Shahak is a rare Jew indeed and his book is essential reading for anyone interested in the problem of the Jews. His book *Jewish History, Jewish Religion: The Weight of 3,000 Years* is all the more important for being a document by an acknowledgeable Jew, about the beliefs and behaviour of his fellow Jews. He was born in Warsaw in 1933, Shahak spent a portion of his childhood in the concentration camp in Belsen, from which he immigrated to Palestine in 1945. He grew up in Israel, served in the Israeli military, and became a chemistry professor. Like all Israelis, he became fluent in Hebrew. He cites the Jewish teachings regarding homicide:

"According to the Jewish religion, the murder of a Jew is a capital offense and one of the three most heinous sins (the other two being idolatry and adultery). Jewish religious courts and secular authorities are commanded to punish, even beyond the limits of the ordinary administration of justice, anyone guilty of murdering a Jew... When the victim is a Gentile, the position is quite different. A Jew who murders a Gentile is guilty only of a sin against the laws of Heaven, not punishable by

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a court. To cause indirectly the death of a Gentile is no sin at all.”<sup>46</sup> Mircea Eliade took a step forward and said that ‘The mass suicide at Masada in 74 CE and other mass suicides in Europe during the Middle Ages were considered in this light.’<sup>47</sup>

The ultimate act of *Kiddush Hashem* is that a Jew will be prepared to sacrifice his life rather than transgress any of three cardinal sins: Idolatry, committing certain sexual acts, or committing murder.

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### **Conclusion**

In the light of above description one can understand that the bloodshed and killing gentiles is not any explicitly forbidden phenomenon in the Jewish interpretations of the O.T. Rather, there are a large number of Talmudic Teachings, Rabbinic Law and scholarly opinions supporting the view that it becomes a moral obligation on some occasions. It carries morality and the committed person becomes blameless. Furthermore, it is evident through numerous war scenes depicted in the Old Testament, that there are more verses about war than peace. The Bible contains only a few formal laws associated with war which were developed considerably later in Rabbinic interpretation. Discretionary War (*Milhemet Reshut*) is fought with the goal of expanding Israel's borders beyond those outlined in the Bible. A great collection of poetry is found in Hebrew scripture and much of it consists of hymns of praise and thanks for God’s protection of Israel

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<sup>46</sup>Israel Shahak, *Jewish History, Jewish Religion: The Weight of 3,000 Years* (U.K: Pluto Press, 1994), chapter no:1. retrieved on August 20, 2009 from <http://engforum.pravda.ru/showthread.php?t=250610>

<sup>47</sup> Suicide in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol: 14, p: 126.

and victory over Israel's enemies. To conclude the discussion in one sentence is that a Jew who murders a Gentile is guilty only of a sin against the laws of Heaven, not punishable by a court. To cause indirectly the death of a Gentile is no sin at all.



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