



the rabbinic call for human rights

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A NATIONAL CALL for MORAL REVIVAL

MILITARISM, THE WAR ECONOMY, THE PROLIFERATION OF WEAPONS OF WAR: TREATMENT OF VETERANS, EDUCATION AND OUR NATIONAL PRIORITIES

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Our topic here is priorities. On a national scale, what might a Jewish ethic of prioritization look like if applied to a nation's budget? Or on a smaller scale: In light of these sources, are we allowed to spend more on arms than on teachers?

I. OUR RELATIONSHIP TO WEAPONS

A. Mishnah Shabbat 6:4

In general, one is not permitted to carry anything in the public domain on Shabbat. Here, the rabbis debate if there may be an exception for weapons.

A man may not go out with a sword, nor with a bow, nor with a shield, nor with a round shield, nor with a spear. If he has gone out [with any of these] he is liable for a sin offering. Rabbi Eliezer says: They are ornaments for him. But the Sages say: They are nothing but a disgrace, for it is said, "They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore" (Isaiah 2:4). ...

לא יצא האיש לא בסוף, ולא בקשת, ולא בתריס, ולא באלה, ולא ברמח. ואם יצא, חייב חטאת. רבי אליעזר אומר, תכשיטין הן לו. וחכמים אומרים, אינן אלא לגנאי, שנאמר (ישעיה ב) וכתתו חרבותם לאתים וחקייתיהם למזמרות, לא ישא גוי אל גוי חרב ולא ילמדו עוד מלחמה.

B. Commentary of Rabbi Ovadia of Bartenura (Jerusalem, 15th-16th c.)

"They shall beat their swords into plowshares:" If [weapons] were ornaments, they would not be nullified in the future.

וכתתו חרבותם לאתים. ואי תכשיטין נינהו לא יהיו בטלים לעתיד:

How does the Mishnah here understand weapons? Are they the same as any other product? Can they be considered as such?

The legitimacy of the defense industry is predicated, in part, on a perception of the weapons produced as being tools of "defense" necessary in a dangerous and violent world. If society were such that wearing a sword were as innocuous as wearing a watch, would that change our understanding of the nature of weapons?

C. Babylonian Talmud, *Avodah Zarah* 15b

One should not sell them either weapons or accessories of weapons, nor should one sharpen any weapon for them, nor may one sell them either stocks or neck-chains or ropes, or iron chains — neither to idolaters nor Samaritans [a rival group to the Israelites].

אין מוכרין להם לא זיין ולא כלי זיין
ואין משחזיין להן את הזיין ואין
מוכרין להן לא סדן ולא קולרין ולא
כבלים ולא שלשלאות של ברזל אחד
עובד כוכבים ואחד כותי

Here the Talmud does not forbid the production or sale of weapons, but it does forbid selling weapons and their accessories to certain groups of people (“neither to idolaters nor Samaritans”). In general, Jewish concern with who purchases something relates to either the potential of that product to be used in a forbidden religious manner (like wine to be offered to an idol) or the sale of a product that is already forbidden for a Jew to use (like unkosher food). Why might these two categories matter? Do weapons fit this paradigm? How might this view of weapons apply to the mass production of weaponry and participation in the international arms trade?

II. THE ROLE OF VIOLENCE AND WAR IN SOCIETY

A. *Shulchan Aruch, Choshen Mishpat* 421:13

You are allowed to defend yourself, but the response must be measured; where it is possible to use moderate means but he chooses to inflict serious injury, he is guilty.

ומיהו צריך אומד אם היה יכול
להציל עצמו בחבלה מועטת וחבל
בו הרבה חייב

The *Shulchan Aruch* here teaches that self-defense still requires a measured response. Is that idea limited only to the actual amount of force utilized in the moment? How might we read this text more broadly and in a society-wide context?

B. *Chayei Moharan* 546 (Biography of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, written c. 1810-1830)

[Our master] said that many of the foolish practices of earlier generations, which they would do through error and confusion, are now gone. For instance, idol worship through child sacrifice to Molech and so on, many foolish practices that were done in earlier generations and now are no more. He would make fun of the wise and say to them clownishly that they are great and wise indeed, that they invent and research in their wisdom how to make astounding weapons that can kill thousands of souls in a single instant. Could there be greater foolishness than that, to destroy and kill many souls [scot] free?!

וְאָמַר שֶׁכָּבֵר נִתְבַּטְּלוּ כַּמָּה שְׁטוּתִים מִן
הָעוֹלָם מֵה שֶׁהָיוּ תוֹעִים וְנִבְּוִכִים בְּדוֹרוֹת
הָרֵאשׁוֹנִים, [כְּגוֹן עֲנִינֵי עֲבוֹדוֹת זָרוֹת שֶׁהָיוּ
שׁוֹחֲטִים בְּגִיחָם לְמַלְאָךְ וְכִיּוֹצֵא, עֲנִינֵי שְׁטוּתִים
הָרַבָּה שֶׁהָיוּ בְּדוֹרוֹת הָרֵאשׁוֹנִים] וְעָכָשׁ
נִתְבַּטְּלוּ הָרַבָּה שְׁטוּתִים. וְעַדֵּין טְעוּת זֶה
וּמְבוֹכָה זוֹ שֶׁל מְלַחְמוֹת לֹא נִתְבַּטְּלוּ. וְהָיָה
מִתְלוֹצֵץ מִן חֲכָמֵיהֶם וְאָמַר בְּלִשׁוֹן לִיצְנוּת
שֶׁהֵם חֲכָמִים גְּדוֹלִים וְחוֹשְׁבִים וְחוֹקְרִים
בְּחֻקֵּיהֶם אֵיךְ לַעֲשׂוֹת כְּלֵי זֶיַן נִפְלָא שְׁיֻכַּל
לְהַרְג אֲלָפִים נִפְשׁוֹת בְּפִעַם אַחַת. וְכִי יֵשׁ
שְׁטוּת יוֹתֵר מִזֶּה לְאַבֵּד וּלְהַרְג נִפְשׁוֹת רַבּוֹת
בְּחִנָּם :

In the 19th century the production and nature of weapons of war was changing dramatically. What is Rebbe Nachman's view on the application of science to the production of weapons? How do his thoughts relate to the view of the Mishnah in *Shabbat*?

III. SETTING SOCIETAL PRIORITIES

A. Babylonian Talmud, *Bava Batra* 21a

... Joshua b. Gamala came and ordained that teachers of young children should be appointed in each district and each town, and that children should enter school at the age of six or seven. ...

[ש]בא יהושע בן גמלא ותיקן שיהו מושיבין
מלמדי תינוקות בכל מדינה ומדינה ובכל
עיר ועיר ומכניסין אותן כבן שש כבן שבע...

How does the Talmud consider the communal responsibility to educate children? Is it an option?

B. Rabbi Shlomo Goren, Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Israel, “The Doctors’ Strike in Light of Halacha,” 1983.

Thus, the concrete question arises again whether the doctors’ community has the right to leave the hospitals and not to respond to the calls of the sick, even when their [financial] claims are just and their salaries are low. It is true that the government carries the responsibility for the health of the community, and not the doctors, who are not enslaved to anyone...

Therefore, the government cannot free itself from its responsibility towards the sick, because it is responsible for the health of the people, and not the doctors.

הקונקרטי, האם ישנה רשות לציבור הרופאים לנטוש את בתי החולים ולא להיענות לקריאות החולים, גם כאשר טענותיהם צודקות ושכרם מקופח? נכון שהממשלה נושאת באחריות על בריאות הציבור, ולא הרופאים, שאינם משועבדים לאף אחד...

ולכן אין הממשלה יכולה להשתחרר מן האחריות שלה כלפי החולים, משום שהיא אחראית לבריאות העם ולא הרופאים.

Here Rabbi Shlomo Goren is addressing (in the context of a national health system) the ability of doctors to go on strike. In making his argument, he focuses on the responsibility the government holds for the “health of the community,” and that even in the face of a strike there is no running away from that responsibility. How might this apply to our society and the decisions our government makes regarding allocations of funds to defense vis a vis healthcare or other social programs?

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