

# Ethics of Our Fighters

## A Jewish View on War and Morality





Shlomo M. Brody

**ETHICS  
OF OUR  
FIGHTERS**

A JEWISH VIEW ON  
WAR AND MORALITY

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A Jewish View on War and Morality*

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*Dedicated to the memory of my beloved father*

*Prof. Baruch Brody z"l*

ברוך אלתר בן הרב אליעזר זאב ומרים גיטל

*whose thought inspired this book  
and whose memory accompanied the writing of each page*

*Dedicated to the memory of*

**Dr. Baruch Brody z"l**

Distinguished Ethicist  
Communal Leader  
Cherished Friend

*Wesley & Carole Ashendorf*

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*Irving Rotter*

*Wayne & Laura Yaffee*

*In loving memory of*

**Rabbi Nachum and Sara Muschel ז"ל**

**Dr. Joseph Muschel ז"ל**

*by Esther and Moshe Muschel  
& Family*



לעילוי נשמות אבותינו ומורינו

יעזק עבי בן יעקב ולאה ז"ל

שאול גרשון בן חיים שמואל ואיטה חיה ז"ל





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# Introduction

## A STORY ONE HUNDRED YEARS IN THE MAKING

Several years ago, I invited one of Israel's most eminent philosophers to speak to a group of students in Jerusalem about the Israel Defense Force's code of ethics. At the end of his talk, one of the women asked how Jewish thought might impact military behavior. The philosopher, himself not religiously observant but quite knowledgeable in Jewish sources, sharply responded, "What could Judaism possibly teach us about military ethics? The laws of *eshet yefat to'ar*, regulating how to take a captive foreign woman as a wife? We're better off without it."

This book is my response to my student's question.

In fairness, the philosopher was onto something. Classic Jewish sources do not speak at great length about the ethics of warfare. After all, because of their political situation, Jews were not active in military affairs for many centuries. We have extensive literature about proper moral behavior. But books like *Ethics of our Fathers* contain nothing about the ethics of our fighters. And when you dig back deep into the Bible and antiquity, the military behavior can sometimes be quite ferocious, indistinguishable from other nations in those times.

Nonetheless, over the last one hundred years, rabbis and other Jewish thinkers have developed profound thoughts about war and ethics. That legal and theological corpus takes in a range of issues – from conscription, to the ethics of going into battle, to military tactics, to the making of territorial compromises for peace, and more.

Yet these writings are not so well known. They are generally written in Hebrew for a rabbinic audience. It almost always does not relate to the broader ethical categories found in general philosophical literature. And it displays limited interest in contributing to global discourse. That is quite regrettable. For many of these scholars were implicitly in conversation – or in debate – with others writing about similar developments in geopolitics, international law, and ethics.

Judaism, it turns out, has much to say about these topics. It just never joined the conversation. This book is meant to change that.

Yet as much as this is a book about ethics, it is also a story. It tells the tale of how Jews were confronted anew with the moral challenges of warfare. After many centuries of not fighting, Jews were once again on the battlefield. This confrontation forced them to articulate a Jewish political worldview that protected communal interests but also reflected Jewish beliefs. These values drew in part from teachings of classical Jewish texts but also drew lessons from the experiences of Jewish history. Following many centuries of powerlessness, Jews needed to ask: What does it mean to fight as a Jew?

The answers given to this question would help shape, and be shaped by, the pivotal historical moments of the last one hundred-plus years: World War I, the creation of the League of Nations and the United Nations, the bombing of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and Dresden, the Holocaust, the establishment of Israel, multiple Israeli-Arab wars, intifadas, 9/11, the “war on terror,” and so forth. Some of the events discussed in the book are well known, others less so. Yet they all played a critical role in helping Jews, and Judaism, to formulate an ethical worldview on military dilemmas.

This book draws from philosophical, historical, and rabbinic literature to articulate a holistic perspective on the ethical dilemmas of warfare. It is the first attempt in Hebrew or English to present a systematic Jewish perspective on military ethics. It is rooted in traditional sources of Jewish ethics yet remains intelligible to a general reader. For this reason, the chapters are organized thematically in a way that will be familiar to any reader of the many contemporary works on military ethics. The events depicted are largely in chronological order, but we’ll sometimes jump back and forth in history to sharpen the argument.

The insights are relevant not only to Jews and to Jewish thought but to key issues facing contemporary military strategists in general. The worldview emerging from Jewish sources can help guide anyone thinking about military ethics today.

Throughout, I've tried not to force Jewish thinking into compliance with standard models in the discipline of military ethics. The sources must be studied on their own terms before drawing broader conclusions. Instead, by placing rabbinic writings in dialogue with secular philosophical discourse, I hope to present a systematic worldview that is at once distinctly Jewish and more broadly insightful.

The positions taken in the coming chapters draw deeply from the insight of rabbinic luminaries and Jewish thinkers. Yet this book is not a summary of their positions. Instead, it's the story of how these thinkers grappled with new moral dilemmas and my attempt to utilize their insights toward building a holistic worldview about military ethics. Different readers, looking at the very same sources and stories, will undoubtedly come to different conclusions on particular issues. I hope, however, the general moral framework proposed to tackle ethical military dilemmas will be compelling. At the very least, it should spark a conversation about how Judaism can speak to the pressing moral dilemmas facing Jews and all peoples around the world.

#### **A BRIEF OUTLINE**

The first part of the book will focus on the responses of rabbinic writers to some of the major ethical concepts that arose during the period between World War I and World War II and its immediate aftermath. Those issues include pacifism, total war, international legal governance, civilian immunity, and contractarianism. These initial rabbinic writings addressed the complex moral legacy left by the Bible and a broader discussion as to whether conventional military norms can hold up to ethical scrutiny. We'll try to show that Judaism offers a sophisticated moral framework that takes into account several central values in approaching ethical dilemmas.

The rest of the book, covering events from 1940 to 2014, depicts and analyzes Jewish perspectives on the classical distinctions within just-war theory that dominate contemporary discourse on military ethics:

namely, the conditions that justify going to war (known in philosophical literature as *jus ad bellum*) and behavior in war (known as *jus in bello*).

In part 2, we'll focus on salient incidents in early Zionist military history that discuss the classic criteria necessary to go to war: just cause, probability of success, competent authority, and so on. In these debates, legends of ancient Jewish history like Masada and the Bar Kokhba rebellion suddenly come back to life.

Part 3 will discuss whether self-defense wars require the other side to take the first shot, or whether countries can launch preemptive or preventative strikes. Examples here will be drawn from pivotal decisions Israeli leaders made to go to war between the years 1956 and 1982. We'll also draw on the more recent experience of the United States and other countries, with a particular focus on the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan within the broader "war on terror."

Part 4 will concentrate on how we are supposed to fight once the war has started. These issues have gained prominence in recent years as bloody scenes from Gaza, Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere raise questions of "proportionality" and "civilian immunity." We'll show how these terms have been misused and stress how balancing different moral values is the only way to fight well and act nobly.

Most books today on military ethics draw on examples from warfare conducted by the Jewish state. One hundred years ago, that possibility would have been unfathomable to our story's protagonists. For our first protagonist, in fact, it would have been a nightmare. Let the story begin.

*Part I*

# Judaism Confronts War





## *Chapter 1*

# World War I and the False Promise of Pacifism

### **WAR AS IDOL WORSHIP: RABBI TAMARES AND THE HORRORS OF WORLD WAR I**

In 1920, a rabbi of the small village Milejczyce, today located in Poland, looked back on the alleged progress made in Europe since the Enlightenment. Reason and wisdom had advanced to remove many evil beliefs, superstitious idiocy, and immoral idolization. Yet one idolatrous idea survived and had ruined everything: war. Europe had left in place “that idol that is known as ‘The Homeland’ together with its worship known as ‘War.’”<sup>1</sup> This false god had now desolated the world’s most advanced continent and left its national homelands in tatters.

Rabbi Aaron Samuel Tamares (1869–1931) was certainly not the only person who, looking back upon World War I, would reject utterly the morality of warfare. Tens of millions had been killed or wounded in a great conflict whose causes were not entirely clear and that had dramatically failed to fulfill its promise to become, in a phrase popularized by the American president Woodrow Wilson, “the war to end all wars.” Beyond the geopolitical chaos, the war had also left behind a moral shambles as many grappled with what had been done to them – or by them.

## *Ethics of Our Fighters*

Winston Churchill, who served Britain as both a military officer and a government minister during the war, mordantly itemized the material and civilizational wreckage:

The wounded died between the lines: the dead moldered into the soil . . . . Bombs from the air were cast down indiscriminately. Poison gas in many forms stifled or seared the soldiers. Liquid fire was projected upon their bodies. Men fell from the air in flames, or were smothered, often slowly, in the dark recesses of the sea . . . .

When all was over, Torture and Cannibalism were the only two expedients that the civilized, scientific, Christian states had been able to deny themselves, and these were of doubtful utility.<sup>2</sup>

Neither faith nor reason, but only usefulness, had restricted the means of Europe's self-mortification.

How did a civilization built on the great principles of both reason and faith descend into such depravity? The injuries of the war had fallen on all Europeans. Yet Jews were also the objects of specifically antisemitic actions and frequently accused of supporting the "other" side, whichever that might be. Already in early 1915, with the advance of the Russian army on the Eastern Front, Jews had been ordered from their homes in Polish, Ukrainian, and other specified areas within the Russian "Pale of Settlement." By 1917, as many as one million Jews had been expelled and left to the mercies of rapacious soldiers and citizens.<sup>3</sup>

In 1915, the Yiddish writer and demographer S. Ansky (Shloyme Zanvl Rappoport) was sent from Petrograd by the Relief Committee of Russian Jewry to distribute aid to Jewish refugees. He reported that hundreds of thousands of Jews in the Galician region (today in Western Ukraine) were "enclosed within a ring of fire, blood, and steel. They were cut off and at the mercy of frenzied and violent soldiers and Cossacks who attacked them like packs of wild animals."<sup>4</sup> Some seventy-five hundred Jews lived in the town of Sadigure. All of the women, except for a group hidden by a non-Jewish pharmacist, had been raped over three days in September 1914.

In a battered synagogue now serving as an infirmary for Russian soldiers, An-sky found a Christian icon occupying the place in the holy ark normally reserved for Torah scrolls. "I couldn't tear my eyes from the sight of this terrible sacrilege, this desecration of both religions," he wrote. "The brutal hand of a crazed soldier had exacted the same revenge from God that he had from man."<sup>5</sup>

### **JEWISH SOLDIERS FIGHTING FOR COMPETING HOMELANDS**

To be sure, many Jews were far from passive observers in this war, with unprecedented numbers serving as active soldiers on both sides in World War I: more than a million in Allied forces and 450,000 in the armies of the Central Powers.<sup>6</sup> Some, particularly from places like Turkey (Central Powers) or Russia (Allies), had been impressed into service by rulers they didn't like. Elsewhere, like in Austria-Hungary, Jews fought out of patriotic gratitude for their relatively safe position in that monarchical realm. Internal factors also played a role among Jewish soldiers, as many sought to wreak vengeance on the Russians, who earlier in the century had committed pogroms in places like Kishinev and Odessa.

In some places, military service was deemed an act of religious duty. Rabbi Moshe Shmuel Glasner of Hungary denounced draft dodgers who claimed that service in the army would preclude a religious lifestyle. To his mind, the obligation to follow the laws of the state demanded not only paying taxes (*damim* in Hebrew) but also risking one's blood (also *damim*). If such national service entailed violating Shabbat and other commandments, so be it.<sup>7</sup>

Rabbis in Allied countries agreed. Rabbi Joseph Hertz, the chief rabbi of Britain, praised Jewish servicemen and regularly condemned those who shirked their combat duties, especially if they did so in the name of religion.<sup>8</sup> A French rabbi declared in April 1915:

Ah! my brothers, we glorify the martyrs of faith, those who have suffered all the tortures and have sacrificed their lives for the integrity of their religious belief. Love of the homeland: is that not also a religion? To die for one's homeland, is that not the same as to die for one's God?<sup>9</sup>

Such rabbinic declarations no doubt also served to rebut the claim of many antisemites that Jews were mere fair-weather residents of their countries.

Mass Jewish enlistment in World War I marked a turning point in a two-hundred-year rabbinic debate regarding the moral status of warfare among nations and the particular issue of Jews soldiering for their host countries. The question emerged after the French Revolution when Jews were first allowed to join their host forces. Partly because of the difficulty of observing ritual laws while serving, many rabbis were opposed to such participation. Yet recognizing that it was often not a matter of choice, like in Czarist Russia, they frequently confined themselves to advising enlisted soldiers in the observance, to the extent possible, of dietary and Shabbat laws. Later, one well-known scholar, Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan (1839–1933), would even write a popular handbook for Jewish soldiers that included, *inter alia*, ethical urgings to avoid the trap of sexual temptation.

More fundamentally, and long before World War I, many rabbis spoke out against the wanton bloodiness of warfare, particularly when not undertaken out of self-defense. Proactive belligerence, in their view, especially but not solely when directed against civilians, flagrantly violated the commandment “thou shalt not murder.”<sup>10</sup> To this was added the fear that Jewish soldiers on one side might be killing Jewish soldiers on the other side, a trope common in Jewish literature throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>11</sup>

During World War I, this predicament became particularly salient. The dilemma highlighted conflicting duties as Jews perforce asked themselves: Which are the true brethren whom I’m willing to die for? Or to put it another way, who are emphatically not my brethren so that I’d be willing to kill them?

One rabbi, struggling to find a legal precedent for such killing, took refuge in general counsel: “The obligation devolves upon every God-fearing individual to labor on behalf of world peace so that innocent blood not be spilled throughout the world and that warfare will desist.”<sup>12</sup> That’s fine advice, but of little help to a young Jew deliberating whether to enlist or to flee.

As we’ve seen, however, other authorities did not confine themselves to such well-meaning but bland remedies. In addition to Rabbi

Glasner in Germany and Rabbi Hertz in England, many, particularly but not only in the Reform movement, positively embraced army service as a path toward integration. Within traditionalist Orthodox circles, an earlier major figure, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch of Frankfurt (d. 1888), praised those who in general fully dedicated themselves to their “Fatherland.” Beyond following the laws of the state, R. Hirsch wrote, it was a religious precept (mitzva)

to be loyal to the state with heart and mind, loyal to the kings, to guard the honor of the state with love and pride, to strive with enthusiasm wherever and whenever you can so that the nation’s institutions shall prosper so that every aim which your country has set as its national goal shall be achieved and furthered.<sup>13</sup>

This obligation, R. Hirsch asserted, held true even when the state made harsh demands, including sacrificing one’s life to defend it. In the nineteenth century, many Jews applied this approach to military service, just as many more would do in the following century with regard to fighting in World War I.

#### **KILLING IN THE NAME OF GOD? THE CASE FOR PACIFISM**

After the Great War, patriotic talk of the “Fatherland,” clothed in religious rhetoric, was seen by many as gravely misguided. One critic, a friend of Rabbi Tamares, was the philosopher Hillel Zeitlin (1871–1942). Zeitlin grew up in a hasidic community in Russia but later abandoned his observant life for the world of philosophy, ultimately becoming a popular writer with a superior reputation in Jewish literary circles.

Then, after World War I, Zeitlin re-embraced religion and became an innovative mystic and theologian. In a treatise written “to the nations of the world,” he lambasted all of the warriors who, in his words, had taken the name of the Lord in vain:

Nations fight nations, brothers spill blood like water, and in the hour of killing and bloodletting they shout out in the name of God! They desire God to help them stab in the heart their

brethren and fellow human beings, to denigrate and decimate His creatures!<sup>14</sup>

Nothing, to Zeitlin's mind, was more antithetical to the divine will than this wholesale destruction.

In truth, even during the war, many Europeans already recognized that it was uniquely horrible and completely unnecessary. Why didn't it stop earlier? <sup>15</sup> R. Tamares had his own answer to the much-debated question. Europe was spiritually decrepit. The great political ideas of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including nationalism and socialism, had birthed bloody revolutions and oppressive new regimes. R. Tamares had little faith that new institutions like the League of Nations and the Hague tribunals could prevent the false gods of nation and war from demanding human sacrifices on the altar of their cause.

What the world needed, R. Tamares concluded, was nothing less than a spiritual counter-revolution, one that would fill the earth with the knowledge of the Lord and His central teaching that all human beings were created in His image. Only thus could humanity be brought to understand that war was never justified, thereby fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy that "nation shall not lift up sword against nation."<sup>16</sup>

To Rabbi Tamares, then, there was only one answer: pacifism. Broadly speaking, pacifism affirms that war is always wrong and that there is always a better alternative: no solid moral grounds exist on which to justify war, and mass killing for political reasons can never be condoned. In support of their cause, proponents of pacifism usually adduce three major arguments:<sup>17</sup>

1. The negative *consequences* of fighting always outweigh the benefits (the "consequentialist" argument).
2. War violates the *basic duty of justice*, which is not to kill humans (the "intrinsic" or "deontological" argument).
3. Wartime *behavior* is a vice that contradicts established norms of human excellence (the "virtue" argument).

If many pacifists combine more than one of these arguments in their thinking, R. Tamares, for his part, invoked all three. First, he believed

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that violence, even for the sake of justice, would ultimately lead to more violence (the “consequentialist” argument). Citing the history of European political revolutions, he asserted:

The strategy of these revolutions, the answering of evil with evil, is questionable. It may succeed, but on the other hand, it is just as likely to aggravate the original evil. And even when it does succeed, it is only a short-lived palliative. This we have seen clearly in every land where freedom was seized forcibly by nationalist revolutions: In no time at all the plague of despotism erupted in the flesh of the body politic – just as before.<sup>18</sup>

Violence is self-normalizing. Even when undertaken for a seemingly just cause, violence creates a world in which the political order legitimizes the use of force, which will ultimately be employed in an unjust cause or executed unjustly.

More integrally, R. Tamares writes, the Bible expresses a fundamental repulsion to the very idea of murder (the “deontological argument”). It’s just wrong to shed blood, the soul of man. Bloodshed also corrupts our own souls, for when we use our fists or our weapons, even in self-defense, we ultimately transform our character, rendering ourselves incapable of distinguishing right from wrong (the “virtue” argument).<sup>19</sup>

Thus, warfare, wrong in its own right, further corrupts both society and its members. Indeed, after having participated in the Fourth World Zionist Congress in 1900, R. Tamares soon left the movement on the grounds that Zionism would ultimately become just another form of nationalism that would distort Judaism’s core message. The one true territory of the Jews was the kingdom of the spirit.

To his philosophical and theological reasoning, R. Tamares added a psychological motivation for his pacifism: his experience, as a child, observing a non-Jewish neighbor mourning the loss of her son in the Russo-Turkish war. “The fallen soldier’s mother wept bitterly at the news – and the little Jewish boy wept with her. From that moment on, the boy’s consciousness was consumed by an awareness of the depravity of war.”<sup>20</sup>

Such experiences, we might pause to note, have done more than any intellectual argument to inspire pacifists over the course of

centuries. After the horrors of World War I, several American Reform rabbis flirted with the idea of adopting a principled, movement-wide pacifist position.<sup>21</sup> And their example can be multiplied many times over. Although some ultra-Orthodox anti-Zionists shared his disdain for Jewish militarism,<sup>22</sup> R. Tamares is the Orthodox rabbinic figure who espoused pacifism most clearly.

### **THE BIBLICAL CASE AGAINST PACIFISM: KILLING IS SOMETIMES A MORAL DUTY**

R. Tamares's worldview is seductive but not compelling; in fact, it's even dangerous. There can be no doubt that Judaism aspires to a world in which warfare will cease; such is the eschatological vision in the prophecies of Isaiah, Micah, and others. These prophecies, along with other passages in the Bible, have inspired many peace initiatives in history. Nonetheless, it would be very hard to argue that the Bible condemns all warfare.

Central biblical heroes, from Abraham through Moses, Joshua, and David, led or fought in battles ordained or blessed by God. To soldiers going to war, the high priest would give a rousing invocation: "Let not your courage falter! Do not be in fear . . . For it is the Lord your God who marches with you to battle for you!"<sup>23</sup> Biblical prophets also foresaw the occurrence of great armed clashes before justice and peace would descend on the world.

Indeed, the prophet Micah, while envisioning an era of peace in which people "shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks," also anticipated the violent downfall of the enemies of the Jews: "For I will give you horns of iron and provide you with hooves of bronze – and you will crush the many people."<sup>24</sup> Warfare will be eliminated by the end of days, but it remains necessary to bring that utopia to life.<sup>25</sup>

Pacifists argue that it is an intrinsic duty not to shed blood – "thou shall not murder" [means "thou shall not kill," with no exceptions]. The philosopher Elisabeth Anscombe notes that pacifists fail to distinguish between shedding *innocent* blood and shedding *any* human blood.<sup>26</sup> It may be wrong to spill wantonly and with malice the blood of those who have done nothing to forfeit their right to live; but guilty aggressors



are in another category altogether, having committed acts so heinous as to warrant, and demand, retribution. The Talmud teaches this point regarding a biblical verse about an intruder: “If the thief is seized while tunneling, and he is beaten to death, there is no bloodguilt in his case. If the sun has risen on him, there is bloodguilt in his case.”<sup>27</sup> The talmudic Rabbis, reading the two sentences in reverse order, explain the passage as follows: if it is as clear as daylight that the thief intends no violence, one may resist the burglar but not kill him; otherwise, he may be killed with impunity, following the legal principle “If one comes to slay you, kill him first.”<sup>28</sup>

Philosophers offer their own formulations of this same principle, but the underlying logic is similar and clear: it is both unreasonable and unfair to deny to victims of aggression the ability to protect their liberty through the use of counterforce; to the contrary, aggressors forfeit their rights against the violence of others.<sup>29</sup>

This same idea is applied to national conflicts in a biblical passage about the warrior Jephthah. Rehearsing the history of relations between the Israelites and the Ammonites, Jephthah exclaims that, whereas Israelites previously fought Ammonites in a legitimate struggle over territory, the current Ammonite king has crossed the line into an aggressive war against Israel. “I have done you no wrong,” Jephthah asserts, “yet you are doing me harm and making war on me. May the Lord who judges decide today between the Israelites and the Ammonites.”<sup>30</sup>

Leading seventeenth-century thinkers on the morality of war like Hugo Grotius and John Locke cited this verse to ground a right and even a duty of national self-defense.<sup>31</sup> Of course, humans will not always agree on who is the victim and who the unjust aggressor; the biblical passage cited above leaves God as the ultimate arbiter. Yet the moral principle is unmistakable: victims of unjust aggression are not only entitled but morally obligated to defend themselves, even at the cost of killing their attackers.

#### **NOT BY MIGHT AND NOT BY POWER? STRENGTH AS A VIRTUE**

To be fair, R. Tamares’s argument that violence is a vice was extreme but has some roots in post-biblical rabbinic thought. Some sages sought to

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promote alternative notions of courage and bravery in the era after Jews lost sovereignty and became far removed from the battlefield. Already in biblical times, Moses himself warned against victorious Israelite warriors arrogantly declaring, “My own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me,” instead of assigning ultimate credit for military success to God’s special providence for His people.<sup>32</sup> Declares the psalmist:

Through You we gore our foes; by Your name we trample our adversaries. I do not trust in my bow; it is not my sword that gives me victory. You give us victory over our foes!<sup>33</sup>

Similarly for the prophets: “Not by might and not by power, but through the spirit of the Lord” are salvation and redemption earned.<sup>34</sup> Thus, when David slays Goliath without the aid of sword or spear, he proclaims not himself but God to be the Lord of the battlefield and the deliverer<sup>35</sup> – even as the Bible informs readers of David’s adulatory welcome home by the fawning masses.<sup>36</sup>

In later rabbinic literature, however, bravery is modeled mainly through examples of self-restraint and the rescue of others, rather than traditional martial prowess. Thus, in midrashic lore, King David is quoted as defining courage in terms of saving a person drowning in a river or fallen at the bottom of a pit.<sup>37</sup> Elsewhere, in collections of proverbs and aphorisms, rabbinic Sages answer the question, “Who is brave?” by naming one who controls his passions, turns his enemy into his friend, or, again, saves a person from drowning. “The true warriors are warriors in Torah,” they declare.<sup>38</sup> *Ethics of our Fathers* doesn’t just ignore the ethics of our fighters but seems to downplay fighting altogether.

Taking another tack, the Rabbis suggest that biblical references to weapons can be reinterpreted symbolically as allusions instead to the power residing in, and unleashed through, the wisdom of scholars. This image they apply to David himself, called in the Bible a man of valor and war but now reenvisioned as one who excelled in the give-and-take of religious intellectual discourse. By contrast, actual warfare is the way not of the virtuous but the wicked, encapsulated for the Rabbis in the

figure of Esau, the Bible's archetypal nemesis.<sup>39</sup> As R. Tamares would put it, "We strive for [real] manhood... the study of Torah."<sup>40</sup>

Early secular Zionists scorned this rabbinic notion of virtuous passivity as rendering Jews easy prey to their oppressors. The Ukrainian-born writer Micha Yosef Berdichevsky (1865–1921) mocked the ignominy of a nation that, priding itself on a lofty ethical culture, was wholly unable to defend itself from marauders.<sup>41</sup> In the wake of a shattering 1903 pogrom in the Bessarabian capital of Kishinev, the towering Hebrew poet Hayim Nahman Bialik (1873–1934) penned "In the City of Slaughter," a searing condemnation of the local Jewish men, putative "heirs of the Hasmoneans," who hid in latrines and pigpens rather than defend their families from rape and pillage. "Crushed in their shame, they saw it all; they did not stir or move. ... Perhaps, perhaps, each watcher had it in his heart to pray: a miracle, O Lord – and spare my skin this day!"

In truth, Bialik himself had privately documented several cases of resistance and self-defense in Kishinev, complicating his portrait of male cowardice.<sup>42</sup> In general, moreover, the broader historical record is more complex than his or other Zionists' narrative of Jewish submissiveness in exile.<sup>43</sup> In medieval Europe, for example, crusaders and others came up against occasional acts of resistance and Jewish self-defense. In Iberia, the outstanding poet and scholar Shmuel (Samuel) HaNagid, also known by his Arabic name of Ismail ibn Nagrela (993–1055), served as vizier to the caliphs Habbus and Badis of Granada and saw battlefield action as the commander of a Muslim army. "If you lack the power to pay back the cruel," he wrote in one short poem, then try to "forget what they did to your image; but perhaps you're a hero and *can* get revenge; then atone for their sins with your courage."<sup>44</sup>

Still, Diaspora Jews often suffered from their relative powerlessness and dependency on the mercy of others. Even if the rabbinic virtues of scholarship and peace did not always lead to passivity, much Jewish lore remained dominated by stories of martyrs. Traditionalists saw them as exemplars of self-sacrifice, but Zionists saw them as models of vulnerability. In reaction, Zionists looking to Jewish history for confirmation of their own activism sought models in antiquity other than those elevated by the Talmud.

For instance, the talmudic Rabbis do not mention the Maccabean rebellion against the second-century BCE Seleucid empire in their account of the Hanukka holiday. They assert that the festival was established to commemorate the rededication of the Temple and the miracle of a cruse of oil lasting eight days. For the Zionists, by contrast, Judah Maccabee and his brothers were military heroes. Similarly lionized were both the fighters who took their own lives in the siege of Masada (73 CE) rather than submitting to Roman captivity, and the participants in the failed Bar Kokhba rebellion against Rome (132–135 CE).

As none of these stories had been elaborated upon in classical rabbinic literature, Zionists turned instead to the Greek writings of the Jewish-Roman historian Josephus, and especially to the much-reworked Hebrew version of his *Wars of the Jews* in the tenth-century *Yossipon*. Reprinted over the centuries in many languages and forms, that medieval retelling was mined by proto-Zionist figures like Rabbi Yehuda Alkalai, Berdichevsky, and others for exemplars of how Jews once did and should once again comport themselves in the world. One of those early Zionists, the Polish-born David Grün (1886–1973), would change his family name to Ben-Gurion after a central protagonist in that book.<sup>45</sup>

The core argument advanced by Zionists like Ben-Gurion and many others – that when Jews are vulnerable to attack, powerlessness is not a virtue but a vice – was and remains irrefutable. But does this mean that physical power and might must inevitably become idolized, as in Greek mythology, or turned into supreme values? The danger of feting warrior culture motivated R. Tamares's argument that the real heroes of the Bible were the prophets, not the kings.<sup>46</sup> The truth is more complex, however: kings who fought just wars are praised in the Bible as loyal servants of God; those who defended their people against the Goliaths of the world are called virtuous.

Missing from R. Tamares's and later pacifists' worldview, in short, is the possibility of incorporating physical strength and courage into a broader moral framework, thereby enabling an understanding of how, in what circumstances, and with which safeguards power can be rightly and even heroically used to forward a just cause.<sup>47</sup>

**THE EVIL CONSEQUENCES OF PACIFISM: GANDHI,  
BUBER, AND THE NAZIS**

Nazi persecution of the Jews tested commitments to the consequentialist argument for pacifism: that violence just begets more violence. Is violence always just a temporary cure that will lead only to more violence? Certainly it would be a blessing if everyone in the world would abandon warfare. Yet, as was repeatedly the case in the twentieth century, inaction in the face of evil is not only a grave moral failure of protecting the innocent; it also rewards aggression and invites further despotism. Sometimes one must utilize power to stop violence.

In the 1930s, this essential moral principle lay buried or repressed as many citizens and leaders of Western democracies, still traumatized by the horrific carnage of World War I, preferred appeasing Hitler and ignoring his expansionist aims.<sup>48</sup>

One Jew who did learn the moral value of resistance, albeit tardily, was the famed German philosopher Martin Buber (1878–1965). In the early days of World War I, he celebrated the outbreak of hostilities as an opportunity for Germany to manifest its “historic mission” by exporting its superior values to a benighted world. He also saw an opportunity for Jews to reinvigorate their Judaism by displaying self-sacrifice for this great cause and thus becoming fully integrated into the German people (*volk*). It was regrettable, Buber thought, that individual Jews would be enlisted on opposite sides of the battlefield. Nonetheless, it was better to fight for one’s convictions than look on passively. We Jews, he wrote, “will no longer need our motto, ‘Not by might but by spirit,’ since force and spirit shall now become one for us. *Incipit vita nova!* [The new life begins!]”<sup>49</sup>

Buber was strongly criticized by some of his friends for overly stressing values like manliness and sacrificial courage in the face of the war’s already rampant violence. But he, putting his words into deeds, even tried, unsuccessfully, to volunteer for the German army.

By 1916, Buber had become disillusioned with the war. Afterward, while remaining a Zionist, he demonstrated his newborn fear of the violent tendencies of nationalism by helping to found Brit Shalom (Covenant of Peace), a group advocating for a binational state in

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Palestine. Forced to leave Germany following increased Nazi hostilities, he ultimately emigrated to Palestine in 1938 where he continued to advocate for Jewish-Arab coexistence.

Yet despite his pacifist leanings, even Buber recognized that sometimes force is necessary for self-defense. In 1938–39, as Hitler’s tanks were already rumbling in Europe, a few Zionists sent a letter begging Mahatma Gandhi to support their quest for a Jewish state as a haven from the Nazis. Gandhi greatly disappointed them. While acknowledging Hitler’s “wanton” antisemitism, Gandhi insisted on a pacifist response:

If there ever could be a justifiable war in the name of and for humanity, a war against Germany, to prevent the wanton persecution of a whole race, would be completely justified. But I do not believe in any war.

What then should the Jews do? Gandhi suggested that each of his correspondents stand tall and practice civil disobedience, challenging his German persecutors to “shoot me or cast me in the dungeon.” As for the Jews in Palestine, they should try to convert the Arab heart through passive nonviolent resistance (*satyagraha*, in Gandhi’s coinage) and “offer themselves to be shot or thrown into the Dead Sea without raising a little finger against [the Arabs].”

One can imagine the alacrity with which both Nazis and many Arabs would have accepted this offer to dispose freely of the Jews. Buber undertook to rebut Gandhi’s assertions directly. Describing his activism for peace, he nevertheless emphasized that absolute pacifism would necessarily allow evil to triumph:

I cannot help withstanding evil when I see that it is about to destroy the good. I am forced to withstand the evil in the world just as the evil within myself. I can only strive not to have to do so by force. I do not want force. But if there is no other way of preventing the evil destroying the good, I trust I shall use force and give myself up into God’s hands.<sup>50</sup>

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Pacifism, in effect, allows the strong to defeat the good. Its belief in the *absolute* evil of war, to the point where counterforce of any kind, in any circumstance, is utterly shunned, allows evil to triumph. Rabbi Tamares was fearful that nationalism had become a form of idolatry, sacrificing all other goods and values for the sake of the nation. Absolute pacifism, too, can become a form of worship that sacrifices the just on the altar of its ideals.<sup>51</sup>

That little was done to initially resist Hitler and defend Europe from his terror poignantly proves Buber's conclusion. Among the victims of the Holocaust was the philosopher Hillel Zeitlin, the friend of R. Tamares whom we met early on, killed in the Warsaw Ghetto while, it is said, wrapped in his prayer shawl and phylacteries. R. Tamares himself died in 1931. His wife and two of their daughters were murdered in Treblinka, but four other children had fled to Palestine before the war and survived, thanks to the Zionism that their father scorned. One daughter, Rikva Perelis, became a leading researcher of the Jewish resistance movements in the Warsaw Ghetto and elsewhere.

Jews had learned the high cost of being defenseless.<sup>52</sup>