

When all else **FAILS**

The world in which we live often stands at odds with the timeless values of the Torah and the prevailing atmosphere of violence and utter disregard for human life and property which have come to be the norm everywhere is certainly no exception | BY ROBERT SUSSMAN



FOLLOWING THE RECENT PITTSBURGH MASSACRE, Hashem yikom damam (may Hashem avenge their blood), debate raged in the US over whether Jews should begin carrying and training with firearms as a “deterrence” to future such incidents, Hashem yerachem (G-d have mercy).

So, it’s worthwhile to discuss, what is the Jewish approach to violence?

“YOU COULD HAVE KILLED SOMEONE!”

When Yaakov was about to meet up with his brother, Eisav, who he feared wanted to kill him and who was approaching with

an army of 400 men, the Torah tells¹ us, “And Yaakov was very afraid and distressed.” Rashi explains that Yaakov was “very afraid” that he would be killed and “distressed” that he would kill others. In other words, Yaakov feared not only the possibility of being killed, but also – and even more so – he feared that he would be placed in a position where he might have to kill others.

Rabbi Shimshon Dovid Pincus recalls that, when he was a young man, he once had a traffic accident during which the car that he was driving flipped over. Thank G-d, he only suffered a few minor

cuts, but, nonetheless, he was admitted to the hospital. A police officer came to investigate what had happened and Rabbi Pincus explained that he was a new driver and he had lost control of the car.

A week later, he saw his Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Yoshe Ber Soloveitchik of Yeshivas Brisk in Israel and, like the police officer, the Rosh Yeshiva wanted to know what had happened. Again, Rabbi Pincus described in detail what had transpired. The sharp response from Rav Yoshe Ber made a tremendous impression on Rabbi Pincus: “Oy, you could have killed someone!” Take note,

the Rosh Yeshiva did not respond, “You could have been killed,” but rather, “You could have killed someone!”

Rabbi Pincus couldn’t help but marvel and contrast this response of Rav Yoshe Ber with that of the police officer, whose role it was to guard human lives. When he had explained what had happened to the police officer, the response was simply, “Ah, okay,” as though that settled everything in the police officer’s mind. Rav Yoshe Ber, on the other hand, looked at Rabbi Pincus like he was meshuga (mad). How was it possible that a Jew could find himself in a situation where he was liable to kill another human being?! So why don’t we react like this? Why isn’t our initial reaction a fear of killing others?

STEEPED IN VIOLENCE

We live in a generation in which violence rules at every turn. We find so-called “entertainment” in seeing the latest movies filled with scene after scene of graphic and intense violence, the more realistic the better – vivid images of people getting assaulted, maimed, murdered, raped, etc – all within stories of revenge, payback, and fantasy. The atmosphere around the world is full of violence. And, as we saw, for example, with the recent French yellow jacket movement, when people feel that their rights have been denied, they immediately threaten with unrelenting violence until their demands are met. If someone should humiliate or demean another person, immediately that person will raise his hand and react with violence, sometimes to the point of bloodshed. Road rage has become normal and even expected. This is what happens today in the world. Someone spits on a person and the response is to take his head off! We need to stop this erosion and not drift after this atmosphere of violence

“OY, YOU COULD HAVE KILLED SOMEONE!”

that exists in the world, because the view of the Torah regarding the use of violence – even the smallest amount of violence – is completely different to what we see in the world around us.

JUST KILL HIM!

The Torah tells us that when Yaakov arrived at the house of Lavan and he saw his future wife, Rochel, he immediately “raised his voice and cried”. Rashi explains why Yaakov was crying: “Because he came empty-handed, saying, ‘Eliezer, the servant of my grandfather, Avraham, brought with him nose rings, bracelets, and other precious items, and I don’t have anything in my hands.’” Why did Yaakov arrive empty-handed? Because Yaakov’s nephew, Eliphaz, had been commanded by his father, Eisav, to pursue his uncle and kill him. Eisav hated Yaakov, believing that Yaakov had “stolen” “his brochas” from their father, Yitzchak. Eliphaz, however, having grown up on the lap of his grandfather Yitzchak, struggled to fulfil the instruction of his father, knowing it was wrong. Yaakov told him, “Take what I have; a poor person is considered like a dead person.” In other words, Yaakov explained to Eliphaz that if he took everything that Yaakov had, he could honestly tell his father that he had “killed” his uncle, leaving Yaakov for dead.

Eliphaz came with the intent to kill Yaakov. The rule is: if someone comes to kill you, you can kill him first. Yaakov was much stronger than Eliphaz. When Yaakov encountered Rochel by the well, where she was waiting to give water to her father’s sheep, Yaakov singlehandedly lifted the incredibly heavy stone that covered the well. Rashi explains that the

Torah wanted to teach us about Yaakov’s tremendous strength, noting that, for Yaakov, lifting the stone off the well was like removing a cork from a flask. So, we see that Yaakov really did not need to surrender to Eliphaz and give Eliphaz all of his property; he could have simply killed Eliphaz! So, why didn’t he?

THE ABSOLUTE LAST RESORT

While it’s true that if someone comes to kill us we can kill him first, that shouldn’t be our first choice. In fact, far from it – it should be our absolute last resort. Only after a person has considered every other possibility and it appears that there’s simply no other way for him to save himself, should he even raise a hand against another human being! Even though it entailed having him yield all of his property, it was better that Yaakov should be rendered wretchedly poor than that he should kill another person.

For us, this question – why didn’t Yaakov just kill Eliphaz? – is very troublesome. What do you mean?! Someone comes to kill you, kill him! Because, by us, killing is the first option that we think of. But, in truth, it needs to be the last one. We must do everything in our power to never raise a hand against another human being, and certainly not kill someone.

HANDS DOWN

Some will argue that there is a distinction between killing someone and just causing someone harm, but it’s really not so simple. We have to be careful with the money of another person and not cause damage to it. Why? The Torah teaches us that the money that belongs to someone is like his soul. In several places our Sages stress that the theft of money from someone is actually comparable to taking the person’s soul. When speaking on an employee’s wages, the Torah uses² the following language, “... give [a labourer] his wage...for he is a poor man, and upon it [ie. his wage] he bears his soul...”

Rabbi Chaim Vital would say over

“ONLY AFTER A PERSON HAS CONSIDERED EVERY OTHER POSSIBILITY AND IT APPEARS THAT THERE’S SIMPLY NO OTHER WAY FOR HIM TO SAVE HIMSELF, SHOULD HE EVEN RAISE A HAND AGAINST ANOTHER HUMAN BEING!”



“LIFE HAS BECOME WORTH NOTHING, AND OTHER PEOPLE’S MONEY ALSO HAS NO VALUE IN OUR EYES.”

about his Rebbe, the Ari HaKodesh, that before the Ari would daven mincha, he made sure to pay all of the people that worked for him that day, saying, “How can I show my face before G-d and hold the soul of my fellow in my hand.” A coin that belongs to someone, this is a piece of the person’s soul – holding, taking, or damaging that coin is like holding, taking, or damaging the soul of one’s fellow, and all the more so when it comes to raising a hand against a person. Jews always knew: raising a hand against another person is the very last resort.

CONCERN FOR LIFE

Rabbi Yechezkel Sarna, a talmid of the Alter of Slabodka, was the Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivas Chevron during the 1929 Chevron Massacre, in which Arabs slaughtered 24 bochurim from the yeshiva, among many other Jews. At the time of the incident, an English police officer was present and people begged him, “Do something!” But, the police officer did nothing. When the Arabs rioting began to hit him also, this English police officer fired a single shot into the air and everyone scattered. Several years later, someone said to Rabbi Yechezkel, “The bochurim of the yeshiva need to be armed. If there had been a bochur with a gun and a single bullet – there would not have been all of the rioting!” Rabbi Yechezkel said, “Let there be pogroms and so on, but a bochur will not have a gun!”

In the world in which we live today,

who can comprehend such an attitude? Today, the concern for human life is almost non-existent [think abortion (which can now even be accomplished by simply taking a pill within the first 50 days of pregnancy), euthanasia, etc.]. We travel in a hurry, so often distracted as we drive, going around without thinking and the unspeakable, irreversible harm that we can potentially cause. Life has become worth nothing, and other people’s money also has no value in our eyes.

The Torah doesn’t change. Raising a hand, or even a curse, was always the last resort – so were Jews accustomed to behave in all generations. A Jew didn’t have a sharp word go out from his mouth, let alone a curse, and even more so raise a hand or, worse, do harm to another person. The possibility of killing Eliphaz did not even occur as an option to Yaakov, as his father, Yitzchak, said, expressing his uncertainty as to who was standing before him, not sure if it was Yaakov or Eisav: “The voice is the voice of Yaakov, but the hands are the hands of Eisav.” A Jew doesn’t use his hands – hands are for Eisav. In the world in which we live, we need a lot of reinforcement to grasp this message, to know how important the matter is.

AN AWESOME POWER

Why is it so serious to curse, or to harm, and certainly to kill another human being, especially another Jew?

The prophet Isaiah (55:9) says, “As the

Heavens are high above the earth, so My ways [ie. Hashem’s] are above your ways and My thoughts are above your thoughts.” There is Elokim (G-d as referred to by His name that indicates that He is All-Powerful) and there is man. There is the world of G-d and there is our world. The Torah, however, reveals to us that we live in Hashem’s world and that we were created “btzelem Elokim” – in the image of G-d, of Elokim.

This tiny creature called man is, in fact, comparable to G-d. How so? The power that man carries in his hands, it is a G-dly power. It’s hard to appreciate just how the word Elokim expresses this concept of G-d being All-Powerful. Are we able to imagine for ourselves the power of Elokim?! The Torah says to man: you must know that you are created in G-d’s likeness; there is in your hands an awesome power!

A POWERFUL LESSON

We find a significant illustration of this in Tanach³ (the Hebrew Bible). Dovid HaMelech (King David) was fleeing from his son, Avshalom. In a display of tremendous chutzpah, Avshalom had crowned himself king, usurping the throne from his father, Dovid. Shmuel HaNavi (Samuel the Prophet) tells us, “King Dovid came to Bachurim and there was a man who went out from the family of Shaul [who was king before Dovid], whose name was Shimei ben Geira, and he went out cursing [Dovid]. He threw stones at Dovid. All of Dovid’s servants and the entire nation and all of his soldiers were at his right and at his left.”

The Rambam and the Shulchan Aruch pasken (rule halachically) that one who rebels against the king is deserving of the death penalty. Shimei ben Geira had the audacity to not only curse and throw stones at the king, but to insult him, saying, “Get out, get out! Man (who has committed) bloodshed! Evil man! Hashem is paying you back for your crimes against the House of Shaul, whose throne you took and He is giving the throne to your son, Avshalom!” The chutzpah of Shimei ben Geira is, quite simply, stunning. Did Dovid “steal” the throne? Shmuel HaNavi coronated Dovid king in accordance with Hashem’s instruction!

One of Dovid's soldiers, Avishai ben Tzuriya, queried why this man, this "dead dog", as Avishai called him, was being allowed to curse Dovid and asked permission from Dovid to cut the man's head off. But Dovid HaMelech pushed off the suggestion, saying, "What is this to you son of Tzuriya?" (ie. you think you understand everything that goes on in the world?)

Dovid did not let anyone kill Shimei ben Geira and our Sages explain⁴ that, several generations later, when it was decreed and sealed in Heaven that the entire Jewish people should be killed and destroyed, along came Mordechai – a descendant of Shimei ben Geira! – and abolished the decree. If Avishai had cut off Shimei ben Geira's head, there would not be a Jewish people, there would not be a world, there would not be anything. [So too, the Ben Ish Chai writes regarding the episode previously discussed with Yaakov and Eliphaz that Yaakov saw via ruach hakodesh (Divine inspiration) that Onkelos HaGer, who was responsible for recovering the forgotten

Aramaic translation of the Torah⁵, would descend from Eliphaz.]

Even though according to the law it was apparently permissible to kill Shimei, King David said: No! Don't be so fast to cut off heads! Look at what rests in a single act of killing a person; look at the devastation and destruction that can come from it. This is the power of Elokim!

TANKS A LOT

Imagine placing a three-year-old child inside of an armoured tank. Before you do so, you obviously warn him a thousand times: "Listen, darling, you have an enormous power in front of you; no matter what happens: don't push any buttons." Hashem says to man: know that you are like a three-year-old child who does not understand anything, and with one small act you are liable to destroy every Jew in the world. So, don't push any buttons! Don't raise your hand! Don't open your mouth! Be careful with every action that you take.

This is why Jews never raised their hands and didn't open their mouths to curse, because it's simply impossible to know what the result will be and the enormous damage that we may cause. Don't be so fast to curse; don't be so fast to take action. Jews suffer all of the hardships in the world, but the last thing that they should do is to touch someone – in his soul, in his honour, and in his money. That's how Jews have always lived, and so also how we should conduct ourselves today.

In the violent world that we live in, we need to be very strong and know the truth that a Jew never raises his hand or acts violently because he fears the enormous power inherent in his every deed and word.

Based on Tiferes Shimshon Al HaTorah Bereishis (Parshas Vayishlach) 

¹Bereishis 29:11

²Devarim 24:15

³Shmuel 2 16:5-10

⁴Megillah 12b

⁵See Megillah 3a

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