

# CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP



## HERE IS THE KNIFE AND THE FIRE, BUT WHERE IS THE KOHEN FOR THE SACRIFICE?

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

Imagine the Akeidah with a twist: Avraham brings Yitzchak to a kohen for the Akeidah. But only Avraham hears the angel cry out “Do not send your hand forth toward the lad, and do not wound him!”

Wilfred Owen famously used an Akeidah counter-history to comment on World War I:

When lo! an angel called him out of heaven,  
Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,  
Neither do anything to him. Behold,  
A ram, caught in a thicket by its horns;  
Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.  
But the old man would not so, but slew his son,  
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.

Owen apparently believed that the war was volitional for all sides; what prevented a permanent armistice was each side’s willingness to allow their children’s death before their own real or imagined dishonor.

Anti-war activists tend to believe that Owen’s point is true of all sides in all wars. I disagree. Some wars are fought for much better reasons, for example to preserve human life against genocide, or to preserve human freedom against tyrants.

Owen’s metaphor is not even true of all false or unjustified wars. They may be fought for reasons other than pride, for example greed or power. Using pride as a catch-all motivation for unjustified violence is not more compelling than saying that money is the root of all evil.

Crucially, the same war can be fought for different reasons by different parties: some for pride, some for better motivations, some for worse. Moreover, parties with the same motivation may be on opposite sides, and parties with opposite motivations may be on the same side. Being on the side of truth and justice does not guarantee being on the side of the saints nor even the angels. For example, I think it was morally correct for the US to supply trucks for the defense of Stalingrad even though Stalin was a monster with no compunctions about killing millions for the sake of personal or national pride.

Sending one’s children to war against even the worst of causes is a kind of akeidah, and worse: your choices can no

longer affect whether they live or die, no matter how clearly you perceive that G-d wants them to live. The worst of causes include the desire to kill some, many or all Jews because they are Jews; to deny by force the reality of Jewish history, which necessarily includes the Jewish connection to the Land of Israel; and to deny the Jewish people self-government and the means of self-defense against those who wish to kill them. Jews in the Diaspora with no children in the IDF owe impossibly large debts of gratitude to the incredible Yitzchaks fighting our battles against these worst of causes, and to their families.

Yet Owens’ challenge cannot be ignored in any war, even if one is fully confident that the other side’s cause is profoundly evil. I want to offer two pieces of Tanakhic evidence for this proposition.

The first is the story of the Concubine of Giv’ah in Chapters 19-21 of Sefer Shoftim. In that narrative, it is more than clear that the side of Binyamin is wrong. They are protecting the perpetrators of a horrific gang rape and murder. So before the first battle of the war, the alliance of tribes attacking Binyamin asks G-d: “Who shall go up first for us to war with the children of Binyamin?” G-d answers: “Yehudah shall go first”. The attack resulted in Binyamin killing twelve thousand soldiers. Other than that, there was no military effect.

The tribes cry, and they ask G-d: “Shall I continue to approach war with the sons of Binyamin my brother?” G-d replies: “Go up toward him”. The second attack results in Binyamin killing 18,000 more, leading to a shortage of combat soldiers.

This time the tribes fast in addition to crying, and they bring animal sacrifices. It’s not clear what mechanism they used to ask G-d before, but their agent is now Pinchas ben Elazar ben Aharon HaKohen, the famed zealot who personally killed Zimri and Kozbi. He stands before the Ark throughout the fast, asking: “Shall I continue to go out to war with the children of Binyamin my brother, or shall I refrain?” G-d replies: “Go up, for tomorrow I will give him into your hands”. Someone – perhaps Pinchas – devises a strategy with a costly gambit that takes advantage of Binyamin’s growing

overconfidence. The city of Giv'ah is utterly destroyed, and the tribe of Binyamin is nearly wiped out.

My question has always been: Why did Binyamin triumph in the first two battles, if their cause was evil? Why does G-d encourage the other tribes to go to their deaths in battle?

Rashi gives the obvious answer:

אכל לא בהנו לשאול אם לנצח אם לינצח,  
ובאחרונה שבהנו, אמר:  
"עלו, כי מחר אתנו בידך"

(The first time), they did not examine and ask whether they would triumph or not;

the last time, when they examined, He said:

"Go up, for tomorrow I shall give him into your hands."

The difference between the first and third questions is stark. But Rashi does not address the second question.

Also: Rashi frames the initial flaw as failure to ask whether or not they will triumph. But they don't ask that explicitly even the third time! Mahari Kara's formulation seems more precise: "Because they assumed they would win, they did not ask whether to go to war with the sons of Binyamin or whether to refrain". The fundamental error was assuming that G-d would grant them victory simply because the opposing cause was evil.

Mahari Kara's formulation lets us recognize that the second question reflected a vast improvement. They fasted, thus at least gesturing toward self-examination. They asked 'whether' rather than 'how'. The only difference between the second and third question is the "or not". They couldn't yet bring themselves to articulate the negative.

But it is vitally important in the midst of a war, even in the midst of a war obvious evil, to be able to religiously articulate the question of whether there are alternatives. It is equally important to recognize that the answer may be that there are no viable alternatives, even though winning may be costly. (The absence of alternatives may itself deserve reflection, but demonstrating that requires a more extensive analysis of the story than fits here.)

My second piece of Tanakhic evidence is the threefold repetition of G-d's horror at child sacrifice in Yirmiyahu. Here are the instances:

Yirmiyahu 7:31:

וּבָנוּ בְמִזְבְּחֵי אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים לְשַׂרְף אֶת־בְּנֵיהֶם וְאֶת־בָּנוֹתיהֶם בָּאֵשׁ  
אֲשֶׁר לֹא צִוִּיתִי וְלֹא עָלְתָה עַל־לִבִּי:

They built the shrines of the Tophet that are in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to burn their sons and daughters in fire something I never commanded and never arose in My heart.

Yirmiyahu 19:5:

וּבָנוּ אֶת־בְּמִזְבְּחֵי הַבַּעַל לְשַׂרְף אֶת־בְּנֵיהֶם בָּאֵשׁ עֲלֹת לַבַּעַל אֲשֶׁר לֹא־צִוִּיתִי וְלֹא  
דִּבַּרְתִּי וְלֹא עָלְתָה עַל־לִבִּי:

They built the shrines of the Baal to burn their sons in fire as wholly-burnt offerings to the Baal something I never commanded and never spoke of and never arose in My heart.

Yirmiyahu 32:35:

וּבָנוּ אֶת־בְּמִזְבְּחֵי הַבַּעַל אֲשֶׁר בְּגֵיא בְּנֵי־הַנֶּחֱם לְהַעֲבִיר אֶת־בְּנֵיהֶם וְאֶת־בָּנוֹתיהֶם  
לַמִּלְכָּה

אֲשֶׁר לֹא־צִוִּיתִים וְלֹא עָלְתָה עַל־לִבִּי לַעֲשׂוֹת הַתּוֹעֵבָה הַזֹּאת . . .

They built the shrines of the Baal that are in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to pass-through their sons and daughters to the Molekh something I never commanded them and never arose in My heart, to do this abomination . . .

On Taanit 4a, Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmeni in the name of Rabbi Yonatan identifies "never arose in my heart" as a reference to Akeidat Yitzchak. (Sifri Shoftim 148 more powerfully cites this from R. Yosay quoting his son Eliezer.)

Why is it necessary for Yirmiyahu to emphasize again and again that we must not learn from the Akeidah that G-d ever, even for a moment, intended Yitzchak to be sacrificed? I suggest that he must be countering a powerful *yetzer hora*, the whisper that if G-d loves sacrifices, He must love greater sacrifices more. (Deborah Klapper suggests that Yirmiyahu's contemporaries may have rooted this argument in the Akeidah.) In Owens' terms: because sacrificing for G-d is a legitimate source of pride, we may find it shameful to consider alternatives that seemingly require less of us.

This is our correct and devastating critique of Hamas, and perhaps of Palestinian nationalism more generally; that they choose to sacrifice their own children rather than acknowledging realities that conflict with their pride. But Yirmiyahu teaches that Jews, like all human beings, have a *yetzer hora* that draws us to Molekh-worship. *Davka* in the midst of war it is essential that we listen carefully just in case there is a prophet, or an angel, pointing to another choice. *Davka* in the midst of war it is essential that we tolerate advocates for other choices just in case they turn out to be prophets or angels. Yet as responsible human beings we must also recognize that the alleged alternative is often a mirage.

*Shabbat shalom!*