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War is hell—but which side is God on?

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“I’ve seen thousands of men lying on the ground, their dead faces looking up at the skies,” Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman told the Michigan Military Academy graduating class in June 1879. “I tell you, war is Hell!”

The Civil War general, who is considered one of the earliest advocates of “total war,” in which everything is fair game including attacks on civilian infrastructure and resources, surely could not have imagined how hellish war would become 140 years later. He also could not have imagined how widespread war would become in the world.

In his world, wars happened, but they were not ubiquitous in any sense, did not run concurrently, and did not go on for interminable periods of time.

Today, war is a fact of life in the world and “thousands of men lying on the ground” has been replaced by millions, and includes women and children, as well as men. Some 600,000 people died in the war Sherman fought in. Over 100 million people—civilians as well as military—died in the 20th century’s two World Wars, Korea and Vietnam combined. Wars are being fought today in Afghanistan, Yemen, Syria, South Sudan, and Ukraine, with over a million dead so far and with no end in sight on any front. Civil war may break out at any time in Nigeria, Cameroon, and Venezuela. War between the United States and Iran remains a looming possibility, and could involve other nations, including Saudi Arabia and Israel, as well as several U.S. allies in Europe. If Hizbullah ever succeeds in carrying out a terrorist attack here, we could expect the United States to bring that war home to Lebanon. And, of course, Israel is in an unending war against Hizbullah, Islamic Jihad, and Hamas.

In virtually every conflict, God is invoked by those who start the war, and by those who claim they are merely carrying out God’s will by fighting to stop it. Either way, everyone, it seems, knows God’s mind when it comes to war. They have no interest, however, in actually following what God actually has to say.

Those who “know” that God “opposes” war are quick to note that all humans are created in God’s image (see Genesis 1:26-27). Thus, to maim or kill a fellow human is to commit sacrilege against God’s very own likeness. God said as much to Noah after the Great Flood (see Genesis 9:6).

After Cain kills Abel in Genesis 4, God confronts Cain with the words, “your brother’s bloods cry out to Me,” rather than “your brother’s blood.” From this we learn that one who destroys a single individual it is as if that person destroyed an entire world (see Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5).

God, in fact, hates killing so much, so the argument goes, he even tried—unsuccessfully—to keep humans or animals from killing for food (see Genesis 1:29-30). This changed after the Great Flood, but only because God recognized that human nature is baser than He hoped, forcing him to make some concessions and set new rules.

God’s aversion to killing for food, however, never changed. This is brought home in Leviticus 17:3-4, where we are told that a person who kills an animal for food without some kind of sacred justification, ”blood shall be imputed to that man; he has shed blood….” The late 19th century founder of rabbinic moralist moralist, Samson Raphael Hirsch, put it bluntly. Killing an animal for no “sacred” purpose, he wrote, “is to be taken as murder.”

As for killing animals with a sacred purpose, the Torah suggests that sacrifices were yet another concession on God’s part. His preference, we are led to believe (and as Maimonides, the Rambam, argues in several places), was prayer.

To all this, add God’s aversion to killing in general. We see this in the laws God gave prohibiting murder, severely restricting the taking of human life in general, and otherwise protecting the sanctity and dignity of the human being. Thus, “there can be no doubt” where God stands.

It is a pretty persuasive argument, but only if we disregard everything in the Torah that says the opposite.

For example, while God said “You shall not murder” (see Exodus 20:13), He did not issue a blanket ban on killing. Only moments after proscribing murder, God makes clear that a distinction exists between murder and manslaughter (see Exodus 21:13). Then, in Exodus 22:1-2, He asserts that a difference exists between justifiable homicide and cold-blooded murder. God does not like violence and bloodshed, that is true, but He also is a realist.

As for war, it was God, after all, who literally sank the advancing Egyptian army at the Red Sea. “The Lord is a man of war,” Moses declared at the time (see Exodus 15:3-4). Only weeks later came the war against Amalek, an unbelievably cruel enemy. When it ended, we are told that “the Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation.” (See Exodus 17:9-16.) Later on (Deuteronomy 25:17-19), we are told that God’s war with Amalek was ours to carry out: “You shall blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven.”

God also tells the Israelites of the Exodus that they must make war on the seven nations that populated Canaan at the time, although this law was limited to those nations and no longer applies. (See the Babylonian Talmud tractate Yoma 54a and Rambam’s Mishnah Torah The Laws of Kings and Their Wars 5:4.) Nevertheless, it is hard to make a case that God is anti-war when He Himself mandates some conflicts.

Based on all the Torah says on either side, Jewish law deduces that only two kinds of war are acceptable: the obligatory war and the discretionary, yet divinely sanctioned, one.

The discretionary war that has no sanction is an “illegal war.” David’s war of conquest against Syria may have been one such (see Sifre to Deuteronomy, Piska 51). At least some of the wars currently being fought fall under this category, no matter what its combatants claim. There are no “rules of engagement” for an illegal war because there should be no engagement at all. Any deaths that occur in the course of such a war are considered to be outright murder.

The Talmud explains the two legitimate categories (see BT Sotah 44b) in this way: “The wars waged by Joshua to conquer [Canaan] were obligatory…, [while] the wars waged [with divine sanction] by the House of David [to complete the conquest of Canaan which Joshua failed to do] were discretionary….”

Regarding the obligatory wars, the eternal war against Amalek is also included, since it is mandated by the Torah. That would seem to shut down the possibility of obligatory wars in our day, since neither the Canaanite nations nor Amalek exist any longer. Rambam, however, includes as obligatory a war waged to fend off an attacking army (see MT Kings 5:1). Elsewhere, he refers to the defensive war as a “commanded” one, in an effort to distinguish it from the “obligatory” war. Ostensibly, he bases this on Numbers 10:9, which recognizes the need to “go to war in your land against an enemy who oppresses you.”

Pre-emptive strikes against an enemy who poses a credible and somewhat immediate threat falls under Rambam’s definition of a defensive war.

That leaves us with the halachic rules of engagement. Rule No. 1 requires that the enemy be offered more than enough serious chances to “make peace,” as required by Deuteronomy 20:10. Rambam, in MT, Kings, 6:1, claims that this is a requirement in both sanctioned wars, but others disagree with him as far as obligatory wars are concerned.

The second rule, as Rambam formulates them, is that once an enemy is surrounded, there must be a way left open for innocent civilians and even faint-hearted combatants to escape (see MT, Kings, 6:7), something severely lacking in modern wars and even, perhaps, in Sherman’s idea of “total war.” Sadly, Rambam offers no suggestion on how such a rule can be made practical.

The third rule is to leave standing the fruit-bearing trees of the enemy, as demanded by Deuteronomy 20:19—a law violated when “scorched earth” is part of the war plan. Says Rambam, “anyone who breaks utensils, tears garments, destroys buildings, stops up a stream, or ruins food with destructive intent (derech hash’chatah) transgresses the command….” (See MT Kings 8 and 10.) Obviously, only that which is used as cover for aggression is fair game. There is no question, however, that this rule is being violated in every current war as in past ones.

“War is hell,” Sherman said, without understanding just how hellish war can be. Even though some wars are necessary, however, it should be obvious that, at least the way wars are fought these days, God would agree with him.

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