



## A Light Unto the Nation: Sharing A Jewish Ethic with America

Irving Greenberg

**T**he catastrophe inflicted by terrorists on September 11 has driven home a fundamental moral lesson of the Holocaust — the ethical centrality of power.

The incredible expansion of power (military, scientific, economic, etc.) in contemporary life has broken the balance of power between aggressors and victims. Unlimited oppression is now possible. We must, therefore, amass sufficient power for potential victims to defend themselves successfully.

This is a moral revolution: the only serious moral code is an ethic of power — how, when, and why to exercise force. The shift can be described simply: One gives up purity and innocence — for power is corrupting — in return for effectiveness in upholding the highest value, life.

Jewry must explain this revolution to America. Practicing an ethic of powerlessness in the face of all-powerful evil constitutes abdication of moral responsibility. It may even constitute collaboration with evil, for as the Talmud says, “one who shows mercy to those [evil people] who deserve harshness [to stop them] will end up showing harshness [allowing evil to attack] to those [good people] who deserve mercy.”

As the attack on the Twin Towers shows, the perpetrators will use force

without limit against civilians and innocents seeking to maximize the loss of life in order to terrorize people into submission. The bio-terrorism scare reflects the recognition that if the radicals could, they would kill hundreds of thousands, even millions. This threat can only be addressed by the use of force and a universal hunt for the terrorists until they are stopped. Holding back because of anti-war sentiments or letting monetary considerations dominate — such as the scrimping on airline security — constitutes a cheapening of life.

An ethic of power binds two poles — the ideal and the real — in dynamic interaction. The classic Jewish goal of life’s triumph is the ethical standard. The ethical principle is that force is never self-justifying; it must operate in service of the good, indeed, of the highest good. This gives primacy to life saving (*pikuach nefesh*), especially by establishing a world that respects the infinite value, equality, and uniqueness of every human being.

The ethical tension begins with our imperfect world, where evil forces operate. Defensive war is morally necessary to stop evil and prevent mass murder. The guiding principle is to use no more power than necessary, to give priority for life-sav-

ing (*pikuach nefesh*), and to minimize civilian casualties. This even includes taking some casualties of one’s own to avoid indiscriminate slaughter.

The Administration is gearing up for war, but many Americans hesitate or recoil from new ethical dilemmas. American Jews can help by sharing the hard-earned lessons of Jewish life in the past half century, especially experiences drawn from life in Israel. The lessons would include:

1) Evil must be confronted thoroughly and with force sufficient to defeat it. To appease is shortsighted and, as the September 11 events show, futile. Similarly, establishing a coalition in which terror sponsoring states can join with no significant change of behavior could preserve terrorism to strike another day, could be read as a signal that there is no cost for harboring terror, and could discourage moderate Islamists from making the needed but excruciatingly difficult choice to go with a Western/humanist orientation over the drive toward radicalization.

2) The best, most realistic ethical options should be articulated, drawing on Israel’s hard-earned moral model: a) However painful, preventive assassination of terrorist leaders is preferable to mass attacks and

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way of life." The emotional associations those words elicit obfuscate the impossibly abstract nature of the assertion. Millions of Americans stand, flag in hand, never thinking to ask the most basic and obvious questions: Which freedoms? For whom? What about our way of life could possibly affect distant cultures and economies so adversely?

With these Presidential words — these simplified concepts of hatred — every American feels attacked. With these words, no one is offered appropriate information about the roots of the conflict or the nature of the struggle. Yet Americans are supporting this war, sending our sons and daughters, and promising billions of dollars in funds. Tirelessly, the Administration and the media inundate Americans with visual images that proclaim: to do less is to sully the muddy graves of the World Trade Center victims; to do less is to cowardly ignore this danger to our homeland.

Perhaps the most shameful line the Administration has generated is "this is not a war against the Afghan people." We know that civilian Afghans will bear the brunt of the war. We are patiently told to learn the difference between *intended* loss of civilian life (the WTC), and *unintended* (though anticipated) loss of civilian life (Afghanistan).

## The Future Looks Bright

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population transfers, otherwise needed to quell terror. b) Reducing legal loopholes and using controlled force (but not torture) to procure needed information on imminent attacks from detained terrorists is acceptable. c) Responsible censorship and voluntary limits on the flow of information for security purposes should not cripple a free press/media or override the functioning of multiple (opposition) political parties. d) Avoid generic stereotyping of Arabs and acknowledge distinctions between Islamic followers while using legitimate profiling as one tool to prevent terrorist attacks.

The September 11 attacks ended the period when U.S. Jews could imagine that they would live in peace, safely with their children, while Israel twisted in the wind of terror and violent Intifada alone. Recognizing that danger is universal, the correct response is to intensify travel and social/educational links to Israel —

Certainly Judaism has long recognized distinctions between accidental and intentional injury and death. However, these distinctions apply to legal responsibility *after the fact*. *Before the act*, the Administration announced its decision to precede on a course that, of practical necessity, incurs 'unintended' loss of innocent life.

We have been told that we are "at war," and the implication is made that innocent lives are thus expendable — especially of those people who are not American, not Jewish or Christian, and not the family down the block. We must demand that President Bush call death, death — whether it occurs at home or abroad. We must educate ourselves against the inundating media spin. Only then do we have a chance to discover what our rock-bottom ethical questions in this crisis are and begin to address them appropriately.

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## Words on Words

Next month *Sh'ma* inaugurates a new column — *Words on Words*. With simple words, God created the world. All words, however, are not so easily understood. Dr. Joel Hoffman will explore the origins and meanings of simple and complex words.

to share fate, comfort, and learn from each other.

Similarly, American Jews must explain why the need to form a coalition should not lead to pressuring Israel to make concessions without cessation of the Intifada/violence. Such a reward for terrorism would rebound to hurt America. It will take inner courage and identification with Jewish destiny for American Jews not to be tempted into silence or distance themselves from Israel when Bin Laden's false claims that America is being attacked because it is allied with Israel are voiced. Standing up will be the expression of the unity of Jewish people and its shared fate. Ironically, I believe that it might ultimately reopen a serious possibility of a negotiated peace for Israel.

*Rabbi Irving "Yitz" Greenberg is President of Jewish Life Network. Author of The Jewish Way, he has written extensively on post Holocaust theology, the ethics of power, and pluralism.*