

Warriors, Prophets, Peacemakers, and Disciples

*A Call to Action in the Face
of Religiously Inspired Violence*

RABBI MELISSA WEINTRAUB

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Imagine the gay pride parade in Jerusalem, 2005. A pageant of colliding worlds: jubilation and violence, ecstasy and anger, ostentation and fear.

Thousands of gay and straight supporters from all over Israel stream through the major thoroughfares of the holy city. Most appear representative of down-to-earth Jerusalem gay culture: moms and dads attending strollers, straight allies and friends. A visible minority has come in from Tel Aviv for the occasion—flamboyant drag queens decked in rainbow flags and thongs and little else, chanting antireligious and anti-occupation slogans in the same breath. Some parody religious Jews openly; a few women don the religious dress of the ultra-Orthodox—with fake beards and long black coats—and carry signs saying, “Make war, not love.” One of them chants into a megaphone in English, “Two, four, six, eight, God is good, God is great!”

And on all sides, a sea of Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox protesters—forcefully stemmed by riot police and barricades—some dropping stink bombs and hurling urine; others shouting derogatory slogans about homosexuality, immorality, and AIDS: one managing to break through the blockades to stab and wound three participants before being whisked away. “I acted in God’s name,” he later told police interrogators. “I came to murder on behalf of God.”

I walked on the periphery of the parade, between the participants and the protesters, carrying signs with sayings from the Talmud.

“*Kvod ha-briot docheh lo ta’aseh*,” said one of my signs. “Concern for human dignity trumps all other religious obligations.” Discard all of our teachings—the Talmudic Rabbis assert—set aside our very authority, and the way of life it is meant to preserve, before humiliating another human being. For the human being is created in the image of God—and God is at stake in human relations, harmed and violated through acts of cruelty or degradation. *To shame or insult another human being, created in God’s likeness, is to shame and insult none other than God.*

I was surprised when a religious protester offered this in response: “Exactly! Whose side are you on?” *Kvod ha-briot docheh lo ta’aseh*. “Concern for human dignity trumps all other religious obligations,” and these people are publicly degrading their bodies in shameless nakedness—parading their abhorrent immorality through the streets of the holiest city on earth. The human being is created in the image of God, and God is at stake in human relations, harmed and violated through acts of degradation. *To shame and insult the human body, created in God’s likeness, is to shame and insult none other than God.*

This interpretation of my sign threw me, to say the least. I had come thinking my mission was obvious: to interject a bit of subversive, redemptive confusion into everyone *else’s* tidy schemes by championing gay rights in the language of faith. I had come to vex the assumptions of the religious protesters and (primarily) secular participants alike. To demonstrate to the religious that values like “tolerance” and “welcoming diversity” could be anchored in religious values and texts. And to demonstrate to the secular that religion could be a force for compassion and social inclusion and not only repression.

But I suspect I walked away as confounded as anyone I encountered.

“*Whose side are you on?*” The perplexity and vulnerability of this question has become the headline of my personal call to action—and my charge to all those who wish to mobilize Judaism and other world religions for the sake of healing and peace-building in the face of religiously inspired violence.

We must be Gibborai Torah—Exegetical Warriors.

We must be Nevi’im—Prophets.

We must be Shomrei Shalom—Peacemakers.

And we must be Talmidim—Disciples.

We Must Be *Gibborai Torah*—Exegetical Warriors

The Jerusalem Talmud claims that “the Torah may be expounded with forty-nine arguments by which something may be declared unclean and forty-nine arguments by which the same thing may be declared clean.” Explains Rabbi Yannai: “Had the Torah been given in the form of clear-cut decisions, the people of Israel would have had no leg to stand on” (Jerusalem Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 84b).

What purpose for human agency and creativity—implies the Talmud—if not to struggle and compete over the eternal question of how best to live? Had we been granted unequivocal guidelines for conduct—what good are our complex and groping minds in the negotiation of truth, the quest for meaning, the imperfect assertion of will?

So, instead, we were given this great, amorphous book to ground our unending, irresolvable battles over meaning, morality, legitimacy, and desire.

I have seen many throw up their hands in the face of this interpretive pluralism and indeterminacy. “If I can make an argument for gay rights drawing from Jewish tradition, and someone else can turn around and make an equally valid argument *against* gay rights, what’s the point? I have my sources, and he has his. Why engage in this project at all?”

Why indeed. The director of a leading Israeli human rights organization once told me that she believed she would have no audience for materials anchoring human rights in Jewish values. *No audience for*

anchoring human rights in Jewish values in the Jewish state! For this we wandered two thousand years?

I told her: “Your resistance is self-fulfilling. If a human rights organization in Israel frames its arguments exclusively in the terms of *secular* and *international* law, and *ignores* the insights and principles of *Jewish* law, it *predetermines* its audience. Publish articles about proportionality, combatant/civilian distinctions, and collective punishment in Jewish tradition; integrate your reports on beatings and home demolitions with Jewish teachings on the renunciation of guilt by association; the passionate protection of the innocent; and the absolute abhorrence of violence and punitive revenge.”

As I continue to tell my colleagues, the Rabbis of the Talmud vigorously engaged in this kind of wrestling over the meaning of our tradition. Take the penultimate psalm in *Tehilim*, the book of Psalms, which pleads for divine involvement in military victory and revenge:

Let the faithful exult in glory ...
with praises to God in their throats
and two-edged swords in their hands,
to impose retribution upon the nations,
punishment upon the peoples,
binding their kings with shackles,
their nobles with chains of iron
executing the doom decreed against them. (Ps. 149:5–9)

A midrash transposes the context for these verses from the battlefield to the *Beit Midrash* (the House of Study), where Rabbis vie ferociously over their various interpretations of Torah. In a commentary that deftly integrates three militaristic passages from Psalms, the Song of Songs, and the book of Numbers, the midrash declares: “[What does the Torah mean by] ‘Expert in war’? (Cant. 3:8) Namely, in the battle of Torah, as it says: ‘The Book of the Wars of the Lord’” (Num. 21:14) (*Numbers Rabbah* 11:3).

What are “the Wars of the Lord”—*Milhamot Hashem*—the Torah’s version of “holy war”? They are, according to the midrash, battles over the interpretation of tradition, the exegetical rivalry that determines the truths each generation will tell, the manner in which each

generation will live. What does it mean to be expert in war, a two-edged sword in one’s hand? It is to become a *gibbor Torah*, a hero or soldier of Torah, to engage in the hermeneutical jousting and play over which the Talmudic Rabbis achieved their notoriety.

I have taught this text as an example of the ways the Rabbis systematically displaced the Torah’s martial traditions by either reframing them as figurative or retrojecting them into the distant past. But one student challenged me: “This text is hardly de-valorizing violence! It is, rather, glorifying it—recognizing the harsh, verbally violent atmosphere of the *Beit Midrash*. It bespeaks recognition that the project of negotiating our tradition is a semiviolent one—and celebrates this process in all its gruesome messiness.”

What does it mean to serve as a *gibbor Torah*, an expert in the battle of Torah? Even that, apparently, is a matter of interpretation.

But whether this text is or is not valorizing violence, it is *certainly* lauding—well before the postmodern era—the complex, fraught, and necessary give-and-take of a tradition elastic enough to accommodate multiple truths and sensibilities, and the refusal of this tradition to settle into univocal, dogmatic assertion. “‘Behold, My word is like fire,’ declares the Lord, ‘and like a hammer that shatters rock’” (Jer. 23:29). Comments the Talmud: “As a hammer [stroke] scatters many sparks, so a single Scriptural passage yields many senses” (Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 34a).

Our malleable tradition will always be fought over—that is what makes it immortal. Precisely because it *does not* take sides—because it contains “many senses,” and will always be used both by those who are “with” us and by those who are “against” us—we must become “expert in war,” enter into the fray, armed to the hilt and alive with our consciences, our exegetical tools, and our religious commitment. Precisely because we cannot monopolize our tradition, we must battle over its meaning with all our souls and might—neither ceding it to those who disagree with us, nor skimming it to seek superficial religious confirmation of our preexistent views. Rather, we must forcefully weave our values out of the fabric of our living traditions so that any Torah-loving traditional Jew might also, on some level, be compelled to wonder whose side we are on, and whether our truths just might also be his or her own.

We must be exegetical warriors.

We Must Be *Nevi'im*—Prophets

When we simply *know* which side we are on, *we must be prophets*.

I'd like to ask you to picture another difficult scene.

This is the hardest scene for me to conjure up, and I do so with trepidation. Why tell *this* story—why air our foulest communal laundry? Why not rather disseminate stories of Jewish nobility and goodness? My answer: to be a prophet (and we *must* be prophets), we must tell our most troubling stories, and not only our most heroic ones.

So I will now pull up the curtain on one of the most troubling scenes I have confronted as a contemporary Jew.

An interdenominational group of twenty rabbinical students is walking down *Shuahada* Street in the Jewish section of Hebron.

The street is hauntingly still—a veritable ghost-town of deserted shops, with little evidence of the bustling Arab marketplace that surged here just a few years ago. Your eyes are drawn to graffiti slogans spray painted in Hebrew on the sealed shop doors. *Death to Arabs. Muhammad is a pig. Revenge.* Groups of extremist, national-religious Jews pass you in their cars, periodically slowing down, rolling down their windows to leer at you. Perceiving you as foreign diplomats or journalists, or worse yet, Jewish Leftists, a few of them menacingly toy with their guns. Two Druze border policemen trail behind you, uninvited, in their Jeep; they follow you, glued watchfully to your every move, wherever you turn. When the Jews reach for their guns, they draw *their* guns protectively in return.

Flash to a scene down the street—an elementary school with bright-eyed kids giggling and playing ball in the courtyard. Murals of hearts, trees, and butterflies decorate the sky-toned walls. On closer glance, something strange emerges. A number of internationals, unarmed but in uniform, are standing guard. They are Europeans and Americans, you are told, here to accompany Palestinian children to and from school every day, to protect them from the bands of Jews that lie in wait to ambush the children on their walk.

Inside the school, you watch a video of one such attack. Jewish children and their parents, their tzitzit dangling, their *payos* flying in the wind, waiting at the bottom of the steps you've just ascended, fists clenched, stones, garbage, and bags of feces in hand. Palestinian little

girls ducking and screaming as the stones, kicks, and blows land. A few Israeli soldiers observe the scene nonchalantly without interfering. Fariel abu Haikal, the daughter of the fiery headmistress who just welcomed you with sage tea, appears in the video, her face streaming with blood. She turns to one of the soldiers: "Do you see?" she pleads in Hebrew. "I see," he says, then puts his hand over the camera, apparently so that no one else will.

After watching the video, someone in the group asks the headmistress how often this happens. "Not *every* day," she responds. "Most often they come on Saturday afternoons, on the Sabbath, after they're done praying, and whenever there's a Jewish festival."

I loathe, I spurn your festivals, I am not appeased by your solemn assemblies.... Spare Me the sound of your hymns, and let Me not hear the sound of your lutes. But let justice well up like water, righteousness like an unfailing stream. (Amos 5:21–24)

We must be prophets. And to be a prophet—to confront the ugliness in one's *own* community as well as the beauty it eclipses—is to be at once heartbroken and full of hope.

I am heartbroken because I have stared into the most noxious and shameful corners of my own community—and witnessed the tradition that shapes my daily activity and prayer used to defend brutality toward little girls walking home from school.

And I am also full of hope, because, in the last two years, more than 350 Jewish religious leaders have journeyed to Palestinian communities through a program I cofounded called Encounter (www.encounterprograms.org). And I have watched innumerable on-the-spot shifts in perspective as participants have gained exposure to hitherto unknown realities, renegotiated perceptions of "self" and "other," struggled with emotions of pain, rage, shame, and fear, and sought constructive channels of response.

I am heartbroken because I see how easy it is to condemn and disown the violence of our extremists, and how much more difficult to acknowledge the more structural ways we sabotage prospects for living in a peaceful world. How we create and maintain grievances that—

while not justifying or explaining away extremist violence *against* us—help trigger and fuel it.

And I am full of hope because I know growing numbers of Jewish leaders who will not be sold on hypocrisy and party lines, even when it means criticizing the acts of our coreligionist brothers and sisters—not just preaching tolerance, but actively countering *intolerance* where it rears its head in our name.

We must be prophets.

We must lead the way in both word and deed, holding ourselves accountable for our communities' contributions to the stalemate and injustice all around us.

Too many of my Palestinian colleagues and friends are petrified to speak out against their own militants and extremists intent on torpedoing every prospective avenue out of the morass. Too many of my Christian colleagues and friends condemn the evils of the Israeli occupation without taking responsibility for Christian implication in violence—historical and contemporary—in conflict situations throughout the world. And too many of my Jewish colleagues and friends think the extremists and peace-saboteurs are all on "*their*" side, while we are to be forever exonerated for our own destructiveness by our perceived perennial victimhood. Too many of my fellow Jews have been sold on the blame-assigning myth of "no partner for peace" and its companion strategy of unilateralism, and thereby hardened to the good faith and reasonable unmet needs of the human beings over whom we continue to rule.

We must help our communities to engage in the holiest work of the religious life, and the apex of the Jewish calendar: *teshuvah*. Repenting through self-examination, truth-telling, and remorse; restoring our betrayed potential for harmonious living; turning inward to again turn outward, toward our fellow human beings and toward God.

We must be gibborai Torah, exegetical warriors, who will battle for *our* religious values, truths, and readings of tradition.

We must, at times, be nevi'im, prophets, willing to proclaim our truths where they matter most, where they break hearts and bring hope.

And in this battle over the destiny of our tradition, we must be *Shomrei Shalom*, guardians of peace.

We Must Be *Shomrei Shalom*—Guardians of Peace

A few years ago I heard Rev. Gene Robinson—the first openly gay bishop of the Episcopal Church—give a stunning presentation at a Fellowship of Reconciliation conference, the gist of which was: wage reconciliation, not war.

What is this "reconciliation" that Rev. Robinson called on us to wage? *Not right thought or belief, not winning, but rather the restoration of relationship*. Do you know the difference—challenged Rev. Robinson—between activism and reconciliation?

Activism assumes that our cause is worthy and in service of justice, but ultimately demands victory of *our* "good" over *their* "evil." Reconciliation is not about "us" and "them," or "good" and "evil," but rather about *respect* and *relationship*—the attempt to reunite with the estranged. It is about asking ourselves how we will treat each other in the struggle. It is not about being nice or liking one's enemies, but about treating them with infinite honor and respect. "That is hard enough to do with those we love," Robinson acknowledged. It is all the more difficult with those by whom we have felt dishonored, let alone our "real enemies."

But the religious challenge before us remains: *can we find a way to prostrate before the God in each and every human being?* Can we part ways and divide property in a way that ensures relationship afterward? Can we bite our tongue rather than say the thing that might score us points in the debate and salvage our pride, but damage our relationships?

I would like to share two unlikely people, besides Rev. Gene Robinson, who have modeled peacemaking for me.

The first: an Israeli man named Yisrael who once helped me to move several boxes of books while I was in the process of writing an article for Rabbis for Human Rights—North America, arguing for the prohibition of torture in Jewish law. Yisrael and I got to talking about the work of Rabbis for Human Rights as well as the medieval legal commentaries I had just been immersed in. It turned out that he was a national-religious settler and a Kahanist—meaning that he subscribed to the philosophy of Meir Kahane that the deportation of Palestinians is the only possible solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. And you better believe he had passages from the Talmud to back him up. But—

exegetical warrior that I strive to be—I had some passages on hand for my point of view as well. As his van pulled up to my Jerusalem apartment, he said matter-of-factly, “You know, I don’t see things the way you do, but—if my Rav and wife will permit it—I’d love to learn some Torah with you. I have to admit I’m hoping that if we do, you’ll come around to agreeing with me, but if not, that’s okay too.”

The second: Sheikh Talal Sidr, one of the founders of Hamas, who, when deported to Lebanon in the 1990s, heard the voice of Allah come to him in the middle of the night and say: “You’ve been a warrior for blood. Now become a warrior for peace.” Sheikh Sidr was tragically incapacitated by a stroke before bringing his message to complete harvest. But last year—in fulfillment of a promise he made just before his stroke—his children, grandchildren, and close associates welcomed twenty rabbinical students into their living room. After hummus and cardamom coffee, Muslim and Jewish prayers, chitchat and exchanges of gifts, Sheikh Sidr’s children, grandchildren, and associates conveyed, in a roundabout fashion, a message difficult but critical for our group to hear: *separate the sin from the sinner*. Hamas is a complex, multifaceted organization. The individuals that choose for various reasons to affiliate with Hamas, whether now or in the past, are complex, multifaceted individuals. And the switch from “terrorist” to “fighter for peace” is less dramatic and unlikely than one might think.

We must be *shomrei shalom*, guardians of peace, as receptive as we are prophetic, as compassionate as we are censuring, knowing the potential in our brothers and sisters, redemptive in our critique.

We must see the individual faces of our adversaries *within* and *beyond* our communal gates, never allowing the overgeneralizing gaze of propaganda to dim our curiosity about each singular person before us, in his or her mixed emotions, latent possibilities, and flux. We must remember that making room for another’s point of view, suffering, and needs denies no measure of our own, and will, in fact, create more room for our needs and views as well.

We must talk to *everyone*, and I mean *everyone*, knocking down every door with an invitation to conversation and exchange, remembering Gene Robinson’s teaching that *peacemaking* is not about “us” and “them,” or “good” and “evil,” but rather about *respect* and *relationship*—the attempt to reunite with the estranged.

Facing the religious protesters at the gay pride parade, facing Jewish and Palestinian extremists in Hebron, facing my own rage and fear in these settings, I ask myself: Can I be an exegetical warrior, a prophet, *and* a peacemaker all at once? Can I find ways to assert my readings of Jewish tradition and the call of my conscience without contributing further to the demonization and polarization afflicting North America and Israel, as well as many other parts of the world?

Can I *choose sides*, carry my banners, march in my parades, and declare my solidarities as dictated by my conscience and my faith—and still listen vigilantly to those who stand on the other side of the picket line, with an open mind and a ready heart, with curiosity and attention as well as arguments, questions as well as answers?

Can I be not only an exegetical warrior, a prophet, and a peacemaker, but also a *Talmidah*, a disciple, ready to admit my confusion, and journey out beyond my rehearsed scripts and habituated thinking into the unpredictable encounter with the other?

We Must Be *Talmidim*—Disciples

Whose side am I on when I crusade for human dignity at a gay pride parade?

Whatever meanings we attribute to our traditions, we are not in control. As exegetical warriors and prophets, we will try to mediate the meanings of our texts. But try as we might to manage them, our unruly texts will resist us, and speak in ways we cannot dictate or anticipate. And our interlocutors and adversaries, *especially if we really listen*, will surprise us, overflow our expectations, and initiate us into the holy threshold of uncertainty.

On Encounter trips—as we bring Jewish leaders to Palestinian communities, usually for the first time—we tell participants that our greatest hope as organizers is that each of them will walk away confused about something they thought they knew.

And it shall come to pass in the Fulfillment of Days ...
They shall beat their swords into plowshares
And their spears into pruning hooks. (Isa. 2:2, 4)

And on that day, we will turn to each other in confusion, and say, *Wait! Whose side are you on? Are you with us or against us? Should we identify or dis-identify with each other? Are we antagonists, or compatriots? Who are you, we, I, us, and them anyway?*

On that day, we will meet over the text, and ask: how *do* we share and learn and battle over our traditions, our ancient ways of ordering death, desire, and chaos? And the ensuing confusion will open something in us—something closed and rigid will come unhinged—and we will sense, through our encounter, how much we don't know; how sweeping and great reality is; how much more expansive than our special interests, our campaigns, and our sense of right and wrong.

We will *not* forego our shrewd exegetical warrior, our stinging prophet, or our compassionate peacemaker. We will *not* (God forbid!) shrink into detached relativism or defeated nihilism! But we will also be *Talmidim*, disciples, aspiring toward our visions and marching in our parades while keeping in mind how utterly small we are, however on the cusp of understanding, and never quite there. We will ask, not only, Whose side are *you* on? And whose side am *I* on? But also, what Heaven includes us, what God loves us both? And what can we learn from each other that will befuddle and enlighten us still more?

We will wrestle with each other as warriors. We will challenge each other as prophets. We will prostrate before each other as guardians of peace. We will learn from each other as disciples. And old traditions will be kept. And new traditions will be born. And peace and justice will reign. *Lo yisa goi el goi herev, lo yilmedu od milhama.* "Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they study war any more."

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Plotting the Middle Path to Israeli-Palestinian Peace

The Role of American Jews

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Many American Jews have long been in the vanguard of progressive politics in the United States. The traditional Jewish impulse toward social justice—rooted in our texts, manifested in our political and social history, and shaped by the great questions of the modern day—has compelled American Jews to the forefront of the contemporary world's definitive struggles, a modern response to the imperative to work toward *tikkun olam*, repair of a broken world. The establishment of unions, the civil rights movement, the fight for women's rights—each of these chapters in American history found Jews disproportionately leading the battle and persevering in the face of enormous difficulty.

For at least the first two decades of Israel's existence, support for the Jewish state was considered part and parcel of the progressive Jewish agenda. Zionism was one of many national liberation movements to come to international attention in the wake of World War II, its ethical and egalitarian aspirations—to become, as its first prime minister David Ben-Gurion described, "a light unto nations"—enshrined in Israel's Declaration of Independence:



**RIGHTEOUS
INDIGNATION**
A JEWISH CALL FOR JUSTICE

Edited by
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