

SHALOM CARMY

*Is Religion a Primary
Cause of War?
An Essay in Understanding
and Self-Examination*

Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed (Genesis 32:7).

Rashi: Afraid, lest he be killed; distressed, lest he kill others.

And they were afraid, saying one to another,
what is this that God has done to us?

(Genesis 42:28)

There have always been as many plagues as wars in history; yet always
plagues and wars take people equally by surprise.

(Albert Camus, *The Plague*)

Oliver Sacks' recent memoir *Uncle Tungsten* contains a glimpse of the Zionist meetings that occasionally took over his parents' home: "raised voices, endless argument, passionate poundings of the table." These left the young Sacks with a deep and abiding distaste for politicking of every sort, which he regards as "noisy and intrusive and bullying." Excepting those who relish the dust and heat of contentiousness for its own sake, few would disagree with him. The vexed

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questions of religion and politics, and their intersection even more so, are rarely settled through debate.

Thus to attempt a reasoned discussion of the common imputation that traditional religion is guilty of more than its fair share of the violence that wracks our world, and that has been a ubiquitous feature of our world from time immemorial, would seem to be an exercise in futility. Religious individuals, for whom serving God is the only absolute telos, will not abandon their convictions and commitment merely because the religious imperative, at times, conflicts with our most cherished (but not absolute) aspirations and ideals. That our religious beliefs are, at times, conducive to attitudes opposed to those ideals, and that this occasionally leads individuals and groups to act, feel and think in a manner contrary to the teachings of religion, does not suggest to us that those beliefs are false, but instead alerts us to the need for self-criticism and self-examination. If our beliefs are false, as our adversaries maintain, that is already a good enough reason, from their perspective, to reject them. Any further suspicion that the practical consequences of those beliefs are useless or dangerous can only confirm and intensify the initial disdain or disbelief.

But if it is wearisome and exceedingly unpleasant to pound the table in the hope of winning an argument, it is not a waste of time and energy to further one's own efforts to understand. For my own edification, within the confines of a short essay, I hope to elucidate the often-heard claim that religion is a primary cause of war. Such clarification probably will not overturn entrenched, cherished outlooks, but should offer both secularists and theists an occasion for reflection and self-examination.

II

“It would have been impossible, at a time when the neighbors were all like wolves, that only Israel refrain from war, for then the others would have gathered and eradicated them. Moreover, it was necessary for them to cast their fear on the barbarians through harsh conduct, but with the hope of bringing humanity to the state that it ought to reach.”¹ These words of R. Kook seem as good a summary as any of the Jewish attitude to war. Halakhah permits war in certain circumstances, and even commands it in others. Yet the eschatological goal, even if it cannot be achieved without bloodshed, has always been the reign of peace, when “one nation shall not bear the sword against another, and they will study war no more” (Isaiah 2:3). At a practical level, Halakhah no

longer recognizes the conditions under which elective war (*milhemet reshut*) is permitted, so that the only organized violence allowed is self-defense. So strong is the aversion of traditional Judaism to the sword that many secular Zionists consequently despised it as the product of a Galut mentality. Traditional Judaism, R. Eliyahu Henkin happily confessed, indeed looked at the Biblical period as “floating in air,” spiritualizing the battlefields where secularists basked in recollections of ancient martial virtue. If R. Henkin is too quick to pass over the abiding theological pertinence of the Biblical record, he is surely more accurate than his adversaries, religious or secular, in assessing the overall orientation of normative Judaism.²

The Christian centuries were not significantly freer of the scourge of war than the pagan era that preceded them. Apologists for classical Christianity take credit for the doctrine of just war, which lays down the conditions in which war is justified and legislates the behavior permitted once war has begun. But the Christianizing of Europe did not transform human nature: the perennial causes of violence continued to hold sway, and allegiance to the prince of peace did little to restrain those for whom war was a way of life.

At times religious differences were themselves the occasion for the outbreak of hostilities, though one may wonder whether religion was the cause or merely an excuse for war. How easily worldliness takes advantage of religious strife is nowhere more evident than in the so-called wars of religion, which were generally driven by the same political and economic motives that would have applied had religion not been a factor. Try, for example, to explain the line-ups of the Thirty Years' War, as it wends its way back and forth across Europe, from the conflict over the nomination of Ferdinand of Austria to the Bohemian throne in 1618 to the Swedish siege of Prague in 1648, in terms of the religious affiliations of the combatants: you might as well infer the composition of a major league baseball team by looking up the birthplaces of the players. It is no doubt disappointing that Christendom honored its ideals mainly in the breach. Compared to its modern successors, however, Christian war was a humane, limited affair. The spread of biblical religion thus probably provided some constraint on human aggressiveness.

The modern age of warfare begins in the aftermath of the French revolution. It is characterized by slaughter on a massive scale and by the breakdown of traditional inhibitions about the conduct of war. The great lovers of bloodshed in the past two hundred years have all been great haters of traditional religion. Napoleon, who thought nothing of

sending millions to their death, and prudent as he was ruthless, may not have proclaimed the destruction of religion as his primary goal, as did the architects of the Reign of Terror that paved the way for his rule, but did little to disguise his contempt for religious institutions and beliefs. It is impossible to exaggerate the uncompromising enmity of the 20th century titans of mass murder—Hitler, Stalin, Mao—towards traditional supernatural beliefs.

From these ABC's of modern history to that veritable amen corner of enlightened liberalism, the letters to the editor section of the *New York Times*. Here a writer decries the readiness of young Muslims to die violently in the hope of entering Paradise. He is frightened by the "fact that fanatic religious dogma filled the vacuum and provided a *raison d'être* for aimless, desperate Palestinian youth, where secular, rational thought might have provided a more useful form of patriotism. . . . The cult of death wins over the love of life."³

Exactly which generic secularist men of politics does the pious correspondent hold up for emulation by the Palestinian youth? Who are the leaders who swayed the desperate (and not so desperate) multitudes in the past two centuries? Hitler and Stalin? Che Guevara and Fidel Castro? Has he forgotten, or did he never know, that Chairman Arafat and Saddam Hussein of the militantly secularist Ba'ath Party, among others, never conformed their statesmanship to the teachings of the Koran? Has it occurred to him that people who believe that there is something in this world more important than economic status or national honor are less likely to murder others indiscriminately for the sake of these dubious benefits than people who have been taught that one's conceptions of self-interest or ethnic pride or social justice are absolutes and override traditional moral constraints?

It is unfair to pillory remarks made in a brief letter to the editor, especially when the author presumably does not anticipate criticism. What intrigues me is the fact that such statements can be asserted as if they were truisms, flying in the face of so much recent history. Why do secularists make such allegations, and why do they go so often unchallenged? More urgently: how can our own religious, moral and intellectual growth benefit from studying their assumptions and learning from their critique?

III

There are, of course, explanations of the imputation that religion bears major responsibility for wars that attribute intellectual bad faith to the

secularists. There is enough truth in such suspicions to warrant consideration, though not enough to make religionists easy. Accusing religion of fomenting war is obviously good propaganda for secularism. This technique was perfected by the spin-doctors of Communism, who pounded many tables in support of the thesis that there is no real difference between traditional religion, bourgeois democracy, and Nazism.

Despite all that has happened, the influence of this kind of reflexive cultural and political orientation is not negligible in the academy and among the cultural elite. One reason is that assailing religion deflects uncomfortable attention from the romantic attraction that many enlightened people feel for the most brutal tyrants. The excitement of Emerson's encomium to Napoleon, which commemorates the dead psychopath as a representative of democracy, "the agent or attorney of the middle classes," "the subverter of monopoly and abuse," disliked by the "rich and aristocratic," hated by "the dull and conservative classes... the foolish old men and old women of the Roman conclave," only to end with a sigh of regret that "inevitably . . . this champion . . . proposed to himself simply a brilliant career, without any stipulation or scruple concerning the means,"⁴ foreshadows the tendency to minimize or apologize for the atrocities of "progressive" hooligans that pervades contemporary sophisticated discourse. As in so many areas, the gentle sage of Concord anticipates the spiritually enlightened opinion of today.

The modern age was the age of great secular ideologies, of which national or ethnic aggrandizement and social revolution are the greatest. The identity of secular modern people is often bound up with some of these dreams, and even more so with the hope that accompanied the dreams. To blame the ideologies for the darkness and evil of our times is thus to judge oneself deluded; blaming God, by contrast, confirms one's secular identity as a badge of psychological and moral health. Instances of the phenomenon are ever near at hand. An Israeli historian explains why his own secular academic community has fastened on Yigal Amir's religious professions and ethnicity while downplaying the nationalistic convictions that would seem more intimately correlated to his choice of murder as self-expression:

More than any explanatory framework, this is an ideological construct meant to perpetuate the enlightened self-image identified with secularism. It was more convenient to attack the assassination on a religious basis, "the man wearing the kippa," than on the nationalistic basis. For if the cause is religious, the necessary conclusion is that one must develop a "secular" identity. . . . If, however, the cause is nationalistic, even if it is

the case that most of its adherents are religious, what must be developed against it is an anti-nationalistic outlook. In this context that means first and foremost an outlook that assigns value to the realization of Palestinian rights. Such an outlook could be the basis of shared activity for the religious and those who are not observant.⁵

Yet there is more to the secularist position than a biased misrepresentation of the facts. There are at least two ways of restating the claim that can be formulated without, in any fashion, disputing the reality sketched above. Producing these implicit lines of reasoning may help us to understand what is at stake.

IV

Traditional religious thinkers often define the most reprehensible ideologies as pseudo-religions. They are, in the deepest sense, not godless but idolatrous. Their false god may be the state or the party, nation or class, the belly or the self-image, even a positive moral value misguidedly worshipped as an absolute and consequently distorted. The secular disillusioned liberal may often be closer to us on this matter than either side admits. The liberal recognizes the ardor and conviction in traditional religion and in the movements we regard as pseudo-religions. The liberal notices how easy it is for the tyrant or the demagogue to conscript the devotion inculcated by traditional religion and to harness that passion to his own nefarious purpose. She notices how cheerfully some clergymen lend their voices and pulpits to the excesses of right and left, seizing on the opportunity to preach what the congregation wants to hear and the clergyman enjoys hearing himself say. For the religious individual, the hijacking of religion for a dubious secular agenda is painful. Whether or not the secular liberal understands this, she doesn't care. From her standpoint it seems that all ardor in the service of transcendent ideals is fanaticism. When Eisenhower called the memoir of his mission *Crusade in Europe*, he was speaking in secular terms. Critics would object that no struggle should be called a crusade. A safe, tolerant world is one in which the lure of the messianic has been silenced forever and human beings are no longer impelled by larger than life moral or religious ideas to take up arms.

On this account, the consistent liberal must recoil from systematic aggression regardless of the ideal it is intended to further. One cannot confine condemnation to the ideals of faraway cultures of whom we know nothing, or the claims of moral codes we disapprove of on other

grounds. Let us consider a familiar and extremely bloody modern Western war one of whose ostensible aims seems, in retrospect, to have been morally justified. The issue that precipitated the American Civil War was lucidly stated by the supreme leader of the victorious side:⁶ “Both sides deprecated war; but one of them would *make* war rather than let the nation survive; and the other would *accept* war rather than let it perish.” At a deeper level, Lincoln goes on to say, slavery was the ultimate cause of secession.

What justifies waging a major war to preserve a political arrangement, the Union, absent some larger than life conviction about the destiny of the American Republic, remains a bit mysterious, though Lincoln articulated a defense in his Gettysburg Address. From a universal moral perspective, the restraint and eventual abolition of slavery is obviously a worthy goal. But, as an eminent historian writes: “For every six slaves who were freed, approximately one soldier was killed; for every ten white Southerners who were held in the Union, one Yank or Reb died. A person is entitled to wonder whether the Southerners could not have been held and the slaves freed at a smaller per capita cost.”⁷ Was the outcome really worth the butchery?

A pacifist would be certain the war was wrong, on principle, even at a fraction of the cost. Most hard-headed practical people, loath to cede their judgment to religious dogma, would dutifully run through some cost-benefit calculations, and end up agreeing with the pacifist, like most of the 45% of the Northern electorate who voted against Lincoln’s reelection, knowing that it meant drinking the cup of war to the bitter dregs.

Fully aware of the enormous price exacted by his policy of preserving the Union, Lincoln, delivering his Second Inaugural, despite the war’s inexorable progress towards a triumphant conclusion—an occasion custom-made for a politician’s self-congratulation—chose not to “point with pride” or otherwise vindicate his policies. Instead he rested his case on Psalm 19:9:

Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bondman’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said “the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether.”

The young prairie scoffer, who never subscribed to any Christian sect, was now the President who went out of his way (when he went to church at all) to attend the Washington church that preached the most rigorous Calvinist doctrine, and who was widely criticized for injecting

God into public discourse, in a manner unprecedented in earlier American public life.⁸ And what a terrifying religion he extracted from his Bible!

My purpose here is not to defend the Civil War, or to recreate Lincoln as an impeccable theologian. His statement about the judgment of God is a given of Orthodoxy, one of which we need to be often reminded. Yet there is a fatalistic streak in his pronouncements that is not wholly satisfactory, and this fatalism allows him to sidestep the moral question about the war. The challenge to the secularist who blames larger than life ideals for the persistence of war is that Lincoln fits neither the stereotype of the wild-eyed Ayatollah nor that of the desperate youth whose empty head is filled with fanatic dogma, and whose life could have been made useful through a timely dose of secular, rational thought. It is hard to demonize Lincoln's peculiar piety, not only because his figure and legacy have come to loom so large in the Western, democratic world, but also because his religious convictions, however horrifying, cannot be blamed on youthful brainwashing or impracticality or immaturity. (In this, of course, he is more typical than most secularists know.) Lincoln's religion is terrifying because reality is terrifying and forced him to think terrifying thoughts.

The senseless slaughter of modern warfare can give birth to a philosophy far more sanguine than Lincoln's conception of a merciless divine judgment. Listen to a teacher and judge of masterly intellect and eloquence addressing peers and students:

I do not know what is true. I do not know the meaning of the universe. But in the midst of doubt, in the collapse of creeds, there is one thing I do not doubt, that no man who lives in the same world with most of us can doubt, and that is that the faith is true and adorable which leads a soldier to throw away his life in obedience to a blindly accepted duty, in a cause which he little understands, in a plan of campaign of which he has no notion, under tactics of which he does not see the use.

The confident skepticism of these words assures us that this is no mad mullah haranguing barefoot tribal youth. We are not in the paradise-promising courtyard of some primitive *madrashah*. It is springtime at Harvard, and the speaker is Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., who has already ascended from his distinguished professorship of law to his unequalled judicial career, to be capped by thirty years on the Supreme Court of the United States.⁹ No longer venerated uncritically in liberal circles today, he is still a towering figure in the secular pantheon, "with a capacity to mold ancient principles to present needs, unique in range

and remarkable in prophetic power” (to cite Franklin Roosevelt’s eulogy for him). More important for us: Holmes is perhaps the most unrelenting secularist among America’s leading intellectual-political lights. He stands for hardheaded pragmatism, fully emancipated from Christianity, untouched by lingering aftereffects of religious training.

The secular gospel Holmes preaches is the unadulterated cult of death. The Civil War that led his commander-in-chief to speak of the horrors of divine justice incubated in Holmes a very different faith. Like most of us, Holmes is a member of the materially comfortable classes. Hence the selfish passions of war—plunder, power, rage and rape—that formed the soldier’s faith in days of yore, cannot suffice. Nor can he believe in truth and transcendent meaning, the higher passions that rightly or wrongly inspired idealistic (or ideological) warriors—justice, national predominance, preserving the Union or abolishing slavery. Dismayed that “the aspirations of the world are those of commerce,” haunted nonetheless by the instinctive aristocratic conviction that there is a grandeur to human existence that is above the routine of getting and spending, bereft of any sense of transcendent purpose, he is abandoned to reheated chivalry and nihilistic adoration for the blind waste of human life. Like a religious believer he understands that a life is not worth living if one is not willing to die for it, but he strives to avoid the obverse truth: it is not worth dying for a life that is not worth living. Hence he is not above comparing the “divine” message of war with that of sport: “If once in a while in our rough riding a neck is broken, I regard it, not as a waste, but as a price well paid for the breeding of a race fit for hardship and command.” Secular, rational thought has filled the vacuum and provided a *raison d’être* for this cultivated, desperate Harvard eminence, where religious dogma might have provided a more useful, sober form of patriotism.

V

Another interpretation of the secularist conviction that religion is at fault for the prevalence and virulence of war runs as follows: Granted that the traditional religions preach the virtues of peace, does not the persistence of war prove their exponents hypocritical or their doctrines impotent? This criticism often disguises resentment against religion on other grounds, but in itself it does not reflect revulsion against religion as much as a sense of profound and bitter disillusionment.

Jews and Christians insist that their tenets and their way of life

would lead to a redeemed world if only they were put into practice. But they are not, and so purely religious responses to the outrage of war and violence are insufficient. Words of wisdom, religious discipline, the grace of God, may offer a path of moral redemption for highly devoted individuals and small groups. The human collective, however, goes on unconverted and largely unaffected. In the real world, the unaided benign spirit does not overcome the dumb flesh and the evil cunning spirit. The selfish desires of material acquisitiveness and aggrandizement, the twisted passions of destructiveness and spite, attracted to evil for its own sake, are intransigent and incurable. Religion may not be responsible for creating hell on earth. With the possible exception of radicalized Islam (whose forerunners and mentors in terrorism and indiscriminate slaughter, let us not forget, are secular political chiefs) no religious movement has come close to matching the horrors of nationalist and socialist saviors. But religion does not prevent violence any better than the secular ideologies, and since religion doesn't help, it is worse than useless to us, as it perpetuates our misery by deflecting society from more realistic sources of salvation.

Contemporary political theorists have identified secular factors that promote peace. Following Kant's essay "Perpetual Peace," they have observed that republican government puts power in the hands of people who have more to lose than to gain from military adventures. Economic prosperity, the mutual dependencies of commerce, and the memory of modern war's destruction, have made war obsolete among the nations of the West, even between old enemies like France and Germany, where moral and religious suasion accomplished nothing. Let the rest of the world beat its fancy words into electric fans, and its Bibles into ballots, and they too can look forward to progress and tranquility.

All this is correct up to a point. Material inducements get more reliable political results, in the short run, than calls to repentance and religious renewal. As Jews, we should be particularly appreciative of any mechanism that makes war or civil upheaval less likely. With the passage of generations, one hopes that peace will become habit-forming, and the whole mentality that encourages violence will wither away.

At the same time, this post-ideological secular optimism is not without its blind spots, even at the practical psychological plane. An old criticism of liberalism is that it risks ignoring the deeply rooted nature of the demonic vices—those that cannot be ascribed to ordinary self-interest. Another problem is that comfortable Westerners in general, and liberals in particular, often regard our civilized behavior as a mark

of virtue, as if we had outgrown selfishness and bellicosity, when in fact we have simply been lucky not to have known hunger, let alone starvation, or serious deprivation. In our hearts we know the truth, and few of us would want to be tested. But the rest of the world is not so fortunate, nor can we be certain that our own smugness will be forever spared.

At bottom, however, the deep flaw in anti-ideological secular liberalism is that it remains secretly addicted to the promise of some intellectual or technological invention, some scheme that will save us from ourselves. A recent study of the colossal irresponsibility displayed by 20th century intellectuals, ends with the following warning:

Tyranny is not dead, not in politics and certainly not in our souls. The age of the master ideologies may be over, but so long as men and women think about politics—so long as there are thinking men and women at all—the temptation will be there to succumb to the allure of an idea, to allow passion to blind us to its tyrannical potential, and to abdicate our first responsibility, which is to master the tyrant within. . . . If an historian really wants to understand the *trahison des clercs*, that is where he, too, must look: within.¹⁰

In faulting religion for failing to solve human problems, the outlook we are examining misses the essence of religious devotion. As we have seen, peace and non-violence are important Jewish ideals (though not absolute imperatives). We believe that the day will come when the prophetic vision will be realized. We welcome secular processes that contribute to peace, whether their effects are temporary or, we hope, abiding. Our absolute goal, however, is *avodat Hashem* (the service of God), and our understanding of the human condition entails that there is no genuine felicity for the human race without obedient communion and partnership with God. External historical events and developments may facilitate our turning to God, but cannot replace it. That is why Judaism, which denies self-interestedness as a moral doctrine, is skeptical of it as a psychological account as well. Even if secular mechanisms could free us of the threat of war forever and establish us securely in an earthly paradise, our souls would not be at peace. This debate about the nature and destiny of man was dramatized in Dostoevsky's "Grand Inquisitor" story.¹¹ The Inquisitor believes that ordinary utilitarian happiness is what people really want, and all they are capable of. To the degree that a person is attracted to the Inquisitor's vision, he will be impatient not only with religion, but with the burden and uncertainty of political freedom as well. Here too, theist and humane, self-aware secularist may discover common ground, or at least common anxiety.

VI

Now for several areas in which we are tempted to misinterpret our own religious convictions and beliefs, with dire consequences for our own spiritual lives and for those who look at Judaism from the outside:

Menachem Begin called chapter 4 of his memoir *The Revolt* “We Fight Therefore We Are,” implying that the act of fighting, at that time, was not only necessary but defined his identity and that of his comrades. I do not mean to reproach Begin. If ever in history there was a nation for whom the experience of fighting for survival was a psychological necessity, it was the Jewish people after the Holocaust. The Irgun conducted its insurgency in a responsible manner, and in accordance with the ethical standards of belligerency (with the possible exception of Deir Yassin). We should resist the outrageous comparisons of Irgun actions with the contemporary terrorism that targets civilians. Yet there is psychological and moral danger in defining one’s primary identity in terms of violence and defiance of others. (Perhaps this is why Prime Minister Begin told an interviewer, thirty years later, that the slogan had outlived its usefulness.) The natural, and under exceptional conditions, heroic enterprise of self-preservation is not identical with *avodat Hashem*. It is a symptom of distortion and spiritual poverty when such preoccupations take over our institutional and personal religious life.¹²

God’s ways are not always our ways. The believer in a living God cannot take it for granted that God judges our cause righteous, or that He is deaf to the prayers of our adversaries. Even our father Jacob, to whom the Almighty had promised assistance, was anxious about the outcome of his encounter with Esau.¹³ To be of good courage and overcome fear when faced by the enemy is a commandment according to Rambam.¹⁴ To assume that we are worthy of His unqualified support and that He cannot show favor to our enemies (even when our cause is righteous) is not the fulfillment of a commandment. Too much certitude about the operations of Providence (alias the radical nationalist’s “destiny,” alias the Marxist’s “historical dialectic,” alias the progressive’s “progress”) is the mark of the idolator. One reason that Lincoln’s religiosity rings authentic is that he recognizes the inscrutability of God: “Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other. . . . The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully.” After the excesses of the previous century, after all the shameless manipulation of ideals, including religious ideals, such humility is more important than ever.

We have criticized the yearning of modern men and women to submit to some impersonal principle or scenario of temporal deliverance, based on rationality or technology that will lift the age-old burden of personal responsibility from our agonized shoulders. Religion is not in the business of providing the external fix. There is no technique that can substitute for the submissive yet creative personal relationship to the *Ribbono shel Olam*, the passionate and arduous road of obedience and repentance. Few of us, however, always avoid the temptation to think of religious observance as a routine method of wheedling boons out of the deity, or as a formula for mental health, or a recipe for social harmony, independent of our own personal responsibility and initiative. If we cannot recognize and resist this tendency, it is our own spiritual loss; in addition, we are not in a position to complain when secularists engage in equivalent maneuvers.

VII

R. Yohanan came upon the son of Resh Lakish, who was studying the verse: “Human folly perverts his way; his heart frets at God (Proverbs 19:3).” R. Yoḥanan asked: Is anything written in Scripture that is not hinted in the Torah? He answered: Is it not hinted in the Torah? Does it not state: “And they were afraid, saying one to another, what is this that God has done to us? (Genesis 42:28).” (*Ta’anit* 9a)

At first blush, the verse in Proverbs is referring to the person who suffers the effects of his own folly, and blames God rather than accepting responsibility. This is indeed how Rashi interprets, in his commentary to Proverbs. Is it truly the case that Joseph’s brothers blamed God instead of themselves? Hadn’t they already confessed (as Maharsha observes): “Indeed, we are guilty for our brother . . . therefore this trouble has befallen us?” (Genesis 42:21) Apparently it is possible to acknowledge sin without being wholly free of resentment towards God.

Perhaps it is this consideration that leads R. Yosef Kimḥi to propose an alternative (and in my opinion complementary) reading of the verse. He translates the word *yiz’af* (“he frets”) not in the sense of anger and resentment, but as signifying alienation from God. Man acts foolishly, and then sullenly withholds his prayer from the Almighty.

Looking back at the unparalleled systematic murderous record of the 20th century, it is not hard to discern the anger of those debased by their own folly and sin, who then exculpate themselves and their culture by pointing an accusing finger at God. Once having seen through one kind

of self-deception, it is easy for the religious to succumb to another—the illusion that because we do not blame God for the vices and evils of our society, because we even resignedly confess our own guilt, we have no further responsibility to enter into a more intimate relationship of action and prayer with Him. Let us not deceive ourselves that any impersonal regimen or formula, secular or halakhic, can guarantee our salvation, temporal or spiritual. In the end it is up to us to restrain the impulse to violence, exercising it only when it is truly justified and for the right motives. The genuinely honest study of Torah and the persistent improvement of our characters through ethical conduct and self-examination may not prevent horrors, but will make it a bit harder to perpetrate them. Without assurance that spiritual discipline and prayer alone can transform the world, we can do our best to put our own lives and desires in order. It is the aim of the present essay to create an alternative to the raised voices and poundings of the table by which cleverness all too often drowns out truth, a space for sober, prayerful, penitent reflection on these troubled matters that so vex our social and private lives.

Notes

1. *Iggerot ha-Reiyah* I, #99 (p. 100)
2. *Kitvei Ha-Gaon Rabbi Yosef Eliyahu Henkin*, Volume I, *Lev Ivra*, 123, “The Study of Bible in Sanctity and Bible As History.” Unfortunately, the lead article in *The Rabbi’s Letter* for July 2002, on “Rav Henkin ztz”l on Eretz Israel and Medinat Yisrael,” is devoted almost entirely to the largely moot question of whether religious Jews should recognize the government of Israel, as R. Henkin held, despite his opposition to the establishment of the State, ignoring completely his harsh words about the glorification of military prowess, on both religious and pragmatic grounds.
3. *The New York Times Magazine*, (July 14, 2002), 8.
4. Quotations are from Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “Napoleon,” which first appeared in his book *Representative Men*. Even more adoring 19th century portraits by major post-Christian men of letters can be found in Thomas Carlyle’s *On Heroes and Hero Worship*, on the reactionary side, and in William Hazlitt’s *Life of Napoleon*, for the progressives.
5. A. Raz-Krakotzkin, “The Rabin Heritage: Secularism, Nationalism and Orientalism,” in *Zikkaron be-Mahaloket*, ed. Lev Grinberg (Beersheba, 2000), 89-108, p. 95.
6. Abraham Lincoln, “Second Inaugural Address,” in *Selected Speeches and Writings* (Library of America, 1992), 449-450.
7. David Potter, *Lincoln and His Party in the Secession Crisis* (Baton Rouge, 1962), xli.
8. On the theological background and general reception of the Second Inaugural, see Ronald White, *Lincoln’s Greatest Speech: The Second Inaugural* (New York, 2002).
9. Quotations from “A Soldier’s Faith,” in *The Mind and Faith of Justice*

Holmes: His Speeches, Essays, Letters and Judicial Opinions, selected and edited by Max Lerner (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1943) On Holmes' speeches on war and their reception, see G. Edward White, *Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes: Law and the Inner Self* (Oxford, 1993) 75-86. Louis Menard, in his best-selling *The Metaphysical Club* (New York, 2001), alludes to Holmes' "cynical pleasure in the spectacle of personal wishes being subordinated to community will," which he contrasts with John Dewey's "benign pleasure" in such subordination (p. 411). Unfortunately, his lengthy treatment of Holmes' military service and his later attitude to war spares the reader the full flavor of the remarks we have cited.

10. Mark Lilla, *The Reckless Mind* (New York, 2001), 216.
11. F. Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Book 5, chapter 5.
12. For a catalogue of spectacular distortions, see Yitzchak Blau, "Ploughshares into Swords: Contemporary Religious Zionists and Moral Constraints," *Tradition* 34, 4 (2000): 39-60.
13. See *inter alia* Mizrahi to Rashi, Genesis 32:8, *Zelach* to *Berakhot* 4a and 32a.
14. *Hilkhot Melakhim* 7:15 and *Sefer ha-Mizvot*, Negative Commandment 58. According to Ramban's enumeration, fearlessness is a divine promise, not a command.