

## The State of Israel: “Peace is the only option”

### Państwo Izrael: „Pokój jest jedyną opcją”

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**Abstract:** After the Shoah and with the establishment of the State of Israel, the question of war and peace has become a real dilemma for Jews. The massacre perpetrated by the Palestinian terrorist organisation Hamas on 7 October 2023 has led to a collective (re)traumatisation of Jewish society in Israel and around the world. The long-term consequences are unpredictable, but are already being felt. It is against this background that Rabbi Walter Homolka describes the Jewish problem of war and peace in the State of Israel, from Jewish emancipation in Europe to the settlement of Eretz Israel and the founding of the state in 1948 to the present day: from the question of a just war to the challenge of achieving a just peace.

**Keywords:** conscription; ethical values in combat; just warfare; massacre of October 7; non-violent conflict resolution; peace movement; proportionality of means; self-defense

**Abstrakt:** Po Shoah i powstaniu państwa Izrael kwestia wojny i pokoju stała się dla Żydów prawdziwym dylematem. Masakra dokonana przez palestyńską organizację terrorystyczną Hamas 7 października 2023 roku doprowadziła do zbiorowej (ponownej) traumatyzacji społeczeństwa żydowskiego w Izraelu i na całym świecie. Długoterminowe skutki są nieprzewidywalne, ale już teraz odczuwalne. Na tym tle przedstawiono historię walki Żydów o wojnę i pokój w państwie Izrael, od emancypacji Żydów w Europie, poprzez osadnictwo w ziemi Izraela i założenie państwa w 1948 roku, aż do dnia dzisiejszego: od kwestii sprawiedliwej wojny do wyzwania osiągnięcia sprawiedliwego pokoju.

**Słowa kluczowe:** pobór do wojska; wartości etyczne w walce; wojna sprawiedliwa; masakra 7 października; pokojowe rozwiązywanie konfliktów; ruch pokojowy; proporcjonalność środków; samoobrona

It is an irrefutable fact that the loss of Jewish sovereignty in 63 BC, when Pompey integrated the Hasmonean state as a client kingdom into the Roman Empire after the siege of Jerusalem, meant that Jewish forces did not wage war for a good 2,000 years until the declaration of independence of the State of Israel in 1948. One might cite the Jewish-Roman War (66-73) and the failed Bar Kochba revolt of 132-135/36 as exceptions; in both cases zealots attempted to restore the independence of Judea, but these insurgencies ignored the question of just warfare and the Jewish ideal of peace. Undoubtedly, there is no systematic Jewish ethics of just war that would in any way resemble what emerged as the doctrine of the just war in Christian churches<sup>1</sup>. Such a doctrine was first outlined by Aurelius Augustine (354-430) in his *Reply to Faustus the Manichaean*, based on the works of Cicero and the Greek Stoics. Subsequently, Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) took this initial outline to a next level in his *Summa Theologica*, systematizing it into a three-criteria doctrine that would define how warfare would be viewed for the foreseeable future. In II-II, q. 40, “De bello”, he outlines these three criteria for a justifiable use of armed forces: legitimate authority, just cause, and right intention. The aim of warfare must be the restoration of peace. These Christian teachings on just war found their way into political philosophy in modern times, as seen in Hugo Grotius’ *On the Law of War and Peace* (1625).

## I. Conscription as a path to Jewish emancipation

The question of what rules apply to Jews as soldiers in war only arose in Europe during the emancipation process, when the discussion was about whether Jews should be allowed to serve in the army and under what circumstances. As the idea of nationhood grew stronger in Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries, the willingness to defend their country of residence was considered a civic duty. Jews saw this as a means to prove their loyalty and gain equal rights and citizenship. In the 19th century, Jews dispelled any halakhic concerns about Jews joining the army by referring to the Talmudic maxim *dina de-malchuta-dina*, “The law of the land is law”. 1788, Austria was the first country to draft its Jews into the national army by law. During the Wars of Liberation from Napoleonic dominance between 1813 and 1815, Jews in Prussia were called up for military service for the first time and eagerly participated in this campaign to show that civic equality would be granted. Military service became the epitome of patriotism and belonging for Jews, but their loyalty was repea-

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<sup>1</sup> The rabbinic discussions about the conditions for a just war mostly referred to Deuteronomy 20 and remained without practical relevance in times when there were no Jewish belligerents.

tedly questioned, as demonstrated by the French Dreyfus Affair of 1894. They were often denied the ability and willingness to serve as soldiers in wartime and were rarely granted the rank of officer. By 1911, only 21 older Jewish reserve officers in the Kingdom of Prussia had been promoted before 1885. The most prominent example of the army's anti-Semitic attitude was the case of the liberal politician and Foreign Minister of the Weimar Republic, Walther Rathenau (1867-1922), who was not accepted into the officer corps despite his upper-class background.

The German example makes it clear that an originally Jewish discussion of a justified, and indeed just, war was not in keeping with the times as long as military service was a civic commitment to the respective fatherland, with no sovereign Jewish state existing. Jews were usually denied the ability and willingness to serve as soldiers in the event of war, further compounding their marginalisation.

## 2. Self-defense demands military objectives

Jewish armed self-defense in Europe was a late development, despite attacks on Jews and expulsions dating back to the Crusades. It was not until the pogroms in Kishinev (Chişinău, Moldavia), then Russia, of 1903, that Jews developed a strong sense of the necessity of armed self-defense. In 1904, the poet Haim N. Bialik (1873-1934) powerfully lamented the passivity of the pogrom victims in his poem "In the City of Slaughter" and called on Jews to unite in self-defense, which led to the formation of armed Jewish groups. These groups were able to at least partially contain the violence during the second pogrom in October 1905. But the most striking example of Jewish self-defense is undoubtedly the militant Warsaw Ghetto Uprising during the Shoah, in April 1943. This uprising, led by the Jewish Combat Organisation, *Żydowska Organizacja Bojowa*, or ŻOB, had already been founded on July 28, 1942, in response to the German *Großaktion*, the Great Liquidation Action. Another underground organization, founded at the beginning of 1943, was the Jewish Military Union, *Żydowski Związek Wojskowy* or ŻZW (cf. Engelking and Leociak 2001).

Norman Solomon refers to Rabbi Menachem Ziemba, or Zemba (1883-1943) in connection with the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising (Solomon 2005, 304). On the 14<sup>th</sup> of January 1943, Ziemba officially endorsed the uprising by declaring martyrdom (*kiddush ha-shem*): "We must resist the enemy on all fronts. [...] Sanctification of the Divine Name manifests itself in various ways. [...] In the past, during religious persecution, we were required by the law [of Halakhah] 'to give up our lives even for the least essential practice.' In the present, how-

ever, when we are faced by an arch foe, whose unparalleled ruthlessness and program of total annihilation knows no bounds, the Halakhah demands that we fight and resist to the very end with unequalled determination and valor for the sake of Sanctification of the Divine Name” (Kalish 2007, c. 506).

Even before a Jewish state was established, a philosophy and theology of peace had already developed in *Eretz Yisrael*, the Land of Israel. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935), the Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi during the British Mandate period, insisted that Jewish settlement in the land should only take place by peaceful means (cf. Solomon 2005, 305). However, with the continuous influx of Jews in the second half of the 19th century, the concrete threat of violence there also made it necessary for Jews to protect themselves. Already in the 1860s the Prussian rabbi Zwi Hirsch Kalischer (1795-1874) had called for the settlers to organise militarily-trained guard teams, combining agricultural work with defense against attacks (Haußig 2003, 224). In August 1929, anti-Jewish massacres in Hebron and Safed, and violent riots by the Arab population in Jerusalem, Jaffa and Gaza, further fueled this movement (cf. Fraser 2021, 65). These events boosted the right wing of Zionism and the paramilitary militia *Hagana* (“the defence”) and shook the association *Brit Shalom* (“Peace League”), which was co-founded in 1925 by Martin Buber (1878-1965). The association sought to promote Jewish-Arab understanding and was also joined by Samuel Hugo Bergmann, Ernst (Akiva) Simon and Judah Magnes. However, *Brit Shalom* ceased its work in 1933. The reform rabbi Judah Leon Magnes (1877-1948), the first president of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, founded the successor organisation *Ichud* (“Unity”) in 1942. In his opening speech for the academic year 1929/30, Magnes declared: “One of the greatest cultural duties of the Jewish people is the attempt to enter the promised land, not by means of conquest as Joshua, but through peaceful and cultural means, through hard work, sacrifices, love and with a decision not to do anything which cannot be justified before the world conscience...” (Gartner and Efron 2007, 354).

The peace work of these two organisations which promoted a two-state solution was always struggling against the prevailing currents of the time and had no lasting success. Another crucial event was an anti-Jewish pogrom in Baghdad, Iraq, in June 1941, the *Farhud* (“forcible dispossession”) the first riot of this kind in the 2,500-year history of Mesopotamian Jewry.

Until the mid-1930s, the Zionist leadership in Palestine allowed only defensive action and adhered to its policy of *havlaga* (“restraint”), despite the Arab riots of 1920, 1921, 1929 and 1936. Then, in the 1930s, the concept of “purity of arms” (*tohar ha-neshek*) emerged. This demanded a minimum of force in achieving military objectives and the distinction between combatants and non-combatants.

The fundamental realities shaping Jewish life today include the experiences of trauma and dreams – the murder of the European Jews in the Shoah and the revival of a state in Israel – and the flight or expulsion of around 900,000 Jews in the Arab world, from Iraq to Morocco, after the founding of the state of Israel in 1948.

On the 12<sup>th</sup> of April 1948, just before Israel declared its independence on the 14<sup>th</sup> of May 1948, Rabbi Leo Baeck (1873-1956), President of the World Union for Progressive Judaism, signed an appeal for cooperation in Palestine with Albert Einstein. This appeal was directed against extremism on both, the Jewish and Arab sides, and appeared as a letter to the editor in the *New York Times*. "We believe that any constructive solution is possible only if it is based on the concern for the welfare and cooperation of both Jews and Arabs in Palestine. (...) The undersigned plead with all Jews to focus on the one important goal: the survival and permanent development of the Jewish settlement in Palestine on a peaceful and democratic basis, the only basis that secures its future in accordance with the fundamental spiritual and moral principles inherent in the Jewish tradition and essential for the Jewish hope" (New York Times 1948).

### 3. The Spirit of the Israel Defense Forces

According to Daniel F. Polish the Jewish author who had written most extensively about war was the Polish-born Rabbi Shlomo Goren (originally Gorenchik, 1917-1994), the first Chief Rabbi of the Israel Defense Forces, both a Torah scholar and an army veteran. He responded to the objection that war is not appropriate for Judaism, that war and issues of spirituality and morality should not be opposites, stating "The Torah of Israel teaches us, and its prophets inculcate in us, that we do not separate between those who carry the flag of morality and spirit and those who carry the flag of physical liberation, even by means of war and conquest. All the great ones of Israel, its teachers, and its spiritual leaders in ancient times integrated power and spirit in their souls. These men of spirit displayed immense courage in the face of adversity, standing strong against the enemies of Israel and its oppressors. The integration of the sword and the book is a continuous thread in Jewish history, not just in the period of the Bible, but also afterwards in the period of the Hasmoneans and after the destruction of the Second Temple in the period of the second revolt in the days of Bar Kochba, R. Akiva, R. Simeon bar Yohai and his friends" (Polish 2021, 32).

According to Polish, Goren's concern was the creation of a modern corpus of Jewish law and ethics relating to war and the army. In his numerous writings

on the subject, “Goren virtually rules out the permissibility of discretionary wars – at least until the Messiah comes. At the same time, he argued forcefully in favour of defensive wars” (Polish 2021, 32), but only defined them very narrowly: “For if we are attacked by an enemy, there is certainly no need for any authority to respond with war that has arisen in order to defend ourselves, nor is it about this matter that there is need to prove that [it is a defensive war] is in effect also at the present time, for the Torah story has said, ‘if someone comes to slay you, slay him first’ (Berakhot 58 and parallel sources). And the Torah did not differentiate between the time of the Temple and the present time, nor between saving many people and saving the individual, for whoever can save [another] must save [him] because of ‘do not stand idly by the blood of your fellow’ as we have explained several times...” (Eisen 2017, 213).

In times of danger, when lives and land are under threat from neighbours, the big question is what values the Israeli Defense Forces follow. The IDF’s Code of Ethics, which was first drafted in the 1990s, unequivocally declares: “IDF servicemen and women will use their weapons and force only for the purpose of their mission, only to the necessary extent, and will maintain their humanity even during combat. IDF soldiers will not use their weapons and force to harm human beings who are not combatants or prisoners of war, and will do all in their power to avoid causing harm to their lives, bodies, dignity and property” (IDF 2001).

The IDF’s basic values are based on four pillars:

- “Defense of the State and its residents: The purpose of the IDF is to protect Israel and its independence and ensure the security of its residents.”
- “Patriotism and loyalty to Israel: Patriotism and commitment and devotion to the State of Israel and its people are at the very core of service in the IDF.”
- “Human Dignity: The IDF and our soldiers are obligated to protect human dignity. Every individual is of inherent value, regardless of their ethnicity, religion, nationality, gender or status.”
- “Statehood: The IDF is the people’s army, the State of Israel’s military, subject to the law and government of the State of Israel. IDF soldiers will operate with their mission, the IDF’s values and the security of Israel as their priority. They will operate with integrity, practicality and presentably” (IDF 2001).

The Israeli historian, philosopher and religious scholar Aviad Kleinberg (born 1957) comments on the changed situation following the founding of the state: “Jews were fighting the wars of the Lord in the synagogues and in the religious academies. All that had now changed. Like secular Zionists, religious



Zionists were fascinated with physical power, but they added to it a religious aura. The IDF was an instrument of God and war [...] was a privileged expression of the Holy Nation's march through history" (Kleinberg 2009, 618).

#### **4. Towards a theory of war and peace from today's Jewish perspective**

In 2012, Rabbi Elliot N. Dorff (born 1957), Professor of Jewish Theology and Rector of the American Jewish University, presented a definitive theory of war and peace from today's Jewish perspective, which also provides a clear yardstick for evaluating the operations of the Israeli Defense Forces. He sets out the following justifications for going to war:

1. *War sometimes must be fought.* The Jewish concepts of both God and people understand them as sometimes making war.
2. *Although conquest of territory justified war in the past, now only self-defense and avoidance of idolatry are acceptable reasons to go to war.* Some wars will be clearly defensive in nature, but with the rise of terrorism, guerilla warfare, and hidden nuclear bombs and other weapons of mass destruction, sometimes the claim of the need to go to war for purposes of self-defense may be much harder to prove.
3. *Self-defense may include pre-emptive strikes when the bellicose intention of the enemy is clear.* This was certainly the case when Egypt's Nasser blocked the Straits of Tiran and publicly engaged in extensive saber-rattling in the days before the Six Day War; it proved not to be the case in President George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq to destroy the weapons of mass destruction that were supposed to be there but were not.
4. *Jews should fight only in those wars that they are likely to win.* This is a clear derivation from the demand to preserve our life and health as the property of God.
5. *War should be avoided if at all possible; peace must be actively sought.* This is articulated not only in a Rabbinic source that says this explicitly, but also in all the prayers and hopes of the Jewish tradition for a world without war. This is a culture that accepts war when necessary to defend oneself and honors those who succeed in that task, but not one that glorifies war as the way to prove a man's masculinity and a nation's power (Dorff 2012, 660f).

Dorff is unequivocal that lives must be spared in war, prioritising one's own life and that of comrades. Nature and the environment must never be

harmd by acts of war, which explicitly forbid rape, torture, humiliation and injury.

The Israeli population is fundamentally characterised by the Jewish hope for comprehensive peace. This means far more than the absence of war. Mordechai Bar-On (1928-2021), a former colonel in the Israeli Defense Forces and a leading figure in the extra-parliamentary peace movement in Israel, has closely tracked its evolution since 1949, from triumphalism after the 1967 Six-Day War to disillusionment after the Yom Kippur War in 1973, when it became clear that military strength alone would not make the country invulnerable. This realisation led to the peace agreement with Egypt in 1979 and explains the protests of thousands of Israelis against the Lebanon campaign in 1982.

## 5. The Israeli Peace Movement

When he was awarded the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade in 1992, the Israeli writer Amos Oz (1939-2018) formulated very clearly “The peace movement in Israel is neither pacifist nor a Western European or American import of the Sixties. The West Bank and Gaza are not Vietnam and Afghanistan. Israel is not South Africa, and the Israeli-Arab conflict has little in common with imperialist or colonial histories. The peace movement in Israel is an expression of the humanistic and universalistic aspects of Zionism and Judaism” (Oz 1992, 9). Critics like the German-French-Jewish political scientist Alfred Grosser (1925-2024) have repeatedly accused Israeli governments of not dealing with the Palestinians in accordance with their own values (cf. Grosser 2009).

The *Shalom Achshav* movement (“Peace Now”) was founded in 1978 and was led by Uri Avnery (1923-2018), Abie Nathan (1927-2008), Matti Peled (1923-1995) and Shulamit Aloni (1928-2014). In the struggle for a settlement with the Arab side, these spokes people faced a strong political bloc that had been characterised by uncompromising persistence since Golda Meir (1878-1968). This position is associated with politicians such as Menachem Begin (1913-1992), Avigdor Lieberman (born 1958) and Benjamin Netanyahu (born 1949).

After the Camp David accords in 1978 and the peace agreement with Egypt, the breakthrough to peace seemed within reach under Yitzchak Rabin (1922-1995). In the speech he gave shortly before his assassination, Rabin said on the 4<sup>th</sup> of November 1995 in Tel Aviv:

I was a military man for 27 years. I fought as long as there was no chance for peace. I believe that there is now a great chance for peace, and we must take advantage of it for the sake of those standing here, and for those who are not here – and they are many. I have always believed that the majority of the people want



peace and are ready to take risks for peace. Your presence here today, along with many others who did not attend, is a testament to this shared desire for peace and a firm opposition to violence. Violence is incompatible with the foundations of Israeli democracy and must be unequivocally condemned and isolated. This is not the path of the State of Israel. In a democracy, differences of opinion are inevitable, but the ultimate decision will be made through democratic elections, as evidenced by the 1992 elections, which provided us with the mandate to take the actions we are currently taking and to persevere with this course. [...] This is a difficult and painful course. For Israel, there is no path without pain, but the path of peace is preferable to the path of war. I say this as a former military man, current Minister of Defence, and someone who sees the pain of the families of IDF soldiers. For them, for our children, and for our grand children, I demand that this government explore every avenue to achieve a comprehensive peace (Rabin 1995).

Rabin's assassination in 1995 closed a window of opportunity that only reopened eight years later with the hardliner Ariel Sharon (1928-2014). In December 2003, he presented the unilateral withdrawal plan from the Gaza Strip and parts of the West Bank, known as the Sharon Plan. Under the terms of this plan, all settlements in the Gaza Strip and four in the West Bank were to be dismantled. However, due to Sharon's illness in 2005, the process of reconciliation with the Palestinians was halted.

## 6. Halakhah contains the core for today's ethical considerations

Ethical considerations are central to the development of Jewish and Israeli laws of war. In 1993, the eminent rabbi, Moshe Reuven Zemer, demonstrated in his book *Halakhah Shefuyah* (English title: *Evolving Halakhah*) that Jewish religious law contains the core of renewal and can offer us relevant answers to difficult ethical questions today (Zemer 1993). This renowned liberal legal scholar's seminal work challenges conventional halakhic reasoning by delving into the nuances of warfare. In the cases he discusses, including the justification of violence against women and children, he contrasts the humanistic approach of Rabbis Abraham Yitzhchak Kook, Ben-Sion Usi'el, Ovadiah Joseph, Chaim David Halevi and Shlomo Goren with the more chauvinistic approach of Rabbis Shaul Israel, Shimon Weiser, Avraham Avidan, Yaakov Ariel and Zvi Yehuda Kook. The specific cases that these halakhic decision makers commented on are now history, but the ethical questions remain topical.

Zemer highlights that Shlomo Goren quotes Maimonides on the question of why King David was not allowed to build the Jerusalem Temple: David had fought against idolaters but was not worthy to build the Temple because of his cruelty. He concludes: "From the case of King David one may draw an *a for-*

*tiori* inference about the national leaders and military commanders of our own day” (Zemer 2003, 223).

Rabbi Reuven Kimelman concludes that there is a continuous thread running from the biblical ordinances to medieval reflections and modern practice. He states that an army that legitimately fights back against an aggressor cannot destroy the lives of the civilian population: “The warrior is the enemy, not the noncombatant civilian. A just war does not justify unjust acts. There must be a consonance between means and goals. If peace is the goal, the reality of war must be shaped by a vision of reconciliation between warring populations. In this sense, education for peace is an integral part of military engagement” (Kimelman 2023, 228)

## 7. Without peace, there is no future

I have intended to provide a comprehensive overview, highlighting the idealism, commitment, joy and pain that Jewish thinkers have fought for and continue to fight for today. *Shalom* is central to Jewish thought, so the conflict between pacifism and defense is a dominant topic in Israeli society (cf. Homolka 2025).

Scholars and activists have divergent views, just as medieval scholars did, about war. In his essay “Ambivalent Normativity: Reasons for Contemporary Jewish Debate over the Laws of War”, George R. Wilkes confidently describes the ambivalence that arises from the twofold realization that, on the one hand, the textual basis for all the competing approaches to justice and peace in Judaism is unclear, and that, on the other hand, geographical, denominational and political differences entail very different approaches to a renewal of Jewish norms for the governance of war and peace (cf. Wilkes 2012). The result is an emerging body of literature that puts a specifically Jewish view of war on the map and underlines the importance of a new discussion on the subject. Jewish norms should be applied to questions of peace and war. To quote Wilkes: “The burgeoning body of literature on Jewish approaches to war asserts that, because of this, there is a need for renewed debate over Jewish approaches to war, and in spite of this, Jewish norms must apply to war” (Wilkes 2012, 78). He cites the works of J. David Bleich, Murray Polner and Stefan Merken as well as Michael Walzer as excellent introductions for this task (cf. Bleich 1977-1989; Walzer 2006; Polner and Merker 2007). Walzer also asserts that the Jewish tradition is a unique and valuable source of reflection on war, emphasising the human context in which war is waged (Walzer 1977, 168). Given the evolution of Judaism’s stance on peace, the primary objective today is clearly not to vanquish the adversary through divine intervention. Instead, it

is to cultivate peace in the spirit of God, a goal that can only be achieved within a society that upholds justice and non-violence as its guiding principles. However, mechanisms for non-violent conflict regulation between people and states are repeatedly disregarded.

The massacre by the Palestinian terrorist organisation Hamas on the 7<sup>th</sup> of October 2023 has led to a collective (re)traumatisation of Israeli society, the long-term consequences of which are currently not even remotely foreseeable. Even after this Black Shabbat, the Israeli writer David Grossmann (born 1954) has not given up hope of a new beginning: "Peace is the only option" (cf. Grossmann 2024).

It is clear that without peace, there is no future and no way from Noah's Flood back into Paradise. The Midrash Tanchuma (Tsav 3) states: "Although wars are written about in the Torah, they are written about for the sake of peace."

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