

Honest Together, Stronger Together:

How Jewish Text Can Be Perverted To Justify Violence

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Not long after 9/11, I was invited to offer the invocation at a weekly Rotary Club gathering in a community where I used to live. The program was presented by a supposed expert on the Koran – not a Muslim, mind you – who quoted chapter and verse from Islam’s holiest scripture to demonstrate that Islam, at root, teaches hateful violence, particularly toward Christians and Jews. What I lacked in knowledge of Koran I possessed in chutzpah, and I rose to object. Our shared scripture – the Holy Bible of ancient Israel, which Christians hold sacred as the Old Testament – includes similar passages, calling for the annihilation of enemy peoples.

One text came instantly to mind: I Samuel 15. King Saul is commanded to destroy the Amalekites completely – man, woman, and child, and even the beasts. Saul nearly completes the task, but thinks he can do God one better by taking the Amalekite king captive rather than killing him. Saul is consequently stripped of the throne and worse. Future tormentors of the Jewish people are said to have descended from that spared Amalekite king. Saul’s mercy, then, is the cause of all the Jewish people’s subsequent suffering. The message is clear: We must utterly destroy our enemies, and even those who might be our tormentors in the future.

Admittedly, the Amalekites are not innocent. Other passages, though, communicate God’s command that idolaters and their houses of worship be utterly destroyed; nothing shall remain. My seminary professors would joke: “This isn’t a text for interfaith Sabbath.”

But here we are, at an interfaith gathering, and I’m telling you about sacred Jewish scripture that can easily be utilized to justify tormenting others.

Naturally, ancient Israel started this Abrahamic penchant for speaking ill of unbelievers. Our predecessors were polytheists. One nice thing about pagans is that they tended to be tolerant: They worshiped so many gods, they couldn’t object to one more. On the other hand, once a people is convinced that its God is the one and only, then anybody who believes differently is a heretic – by definition, an idol worshipers.

An important Israeli book illustrates today's point: The misuse of sacred text to justify violence. In *Killing a King: The Assassination of Yitzhak Rabin and the Remaking of Israel*, Dan Ephron describes the Jewish legal category of *rodeph*, a person is in hot pursuit, seeking to kill you. You are required to kill that person, if necessary to save your own life. Extremist Orthodox rabbis in Israel perverted that legitimate teaching, declaring Rabin to be a *rodeph*. They taught that the Prime Minister's plan to conclude a two-state peace plan with the Palestinian people threatened Jewish life, so he had to be stopped. Two brothers, Yigal and Haggai Amir internalized that lesson, conspiring to assassinate Rabin, successfully killing not only the Prime Minister but the Oslo peace process with him.

Similar justification was offered by those who applaud Baruch Goldstein, the brutal murderer who took the lives of 29 Muslims at prayer, some as young as 12, wounding 125 more, at Hebron's Cave of the Patriarchs – the traditional final resting place of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Leah and Jacob – a site holy to both Jews and Muslims. To Goldstein, Jews could only be safe if all Arabs were transferred from the land between the Mediterranean and the Jordan, reminiscent of those biblical injunctions to rid the land of non-believers.

All that being said, none can argue that violence inspired by Jewish text has caused death and destruction on the scale of the Holocaust or the Crusades, 9/11 or the Syrian Civil War. We are small in number. We have rarely held power. Our people has had an army for only 70 of the last 2000 years. Indeed, for most of those 2000 years, the rabbis eschewed any attempt at a military solution to Jewish problems, pointing instead to texts like the one in Zechariah, which teaches, "Not by might, nor by power, but only by God's spirit" shall right prevail.

Even as we acknowledge today that each of our traditions includes texts which lend themselves to misuse that encourages violence, let us rejoice, too, that the central and potentially dominant teachings of our faiths preach peace and understanding. Today, as we answer the call to be brutally honest about our own traditions, may we employ that truth-telling to seek a better future together.

Amen.