

# JUDAISM AND VIOLENCE

*by Rabbi Berel Wein*

The tribe of Levi distinguishes itself in this week's parsha by responding to the call of Moshe: "Mi laHashem ailie" - "Let whoever is for God rally and come together around me." The tribe of Levi, Moshe's tribe and his relatives, answer the call. The frightful sight of the Jews in the desert, still fresh from the revelation at Sinai and the acceptance of God's Torah, now dancing around the golden calf calls for drastic action. And the tribe of Levi therefore goes amongst its fellow Jews in a violent attempt to destroy the golden calf, its instigators and its ideas and beliefs. Thousands of Jews are killed by the tribe of Levi in this encounter. Moshe, in his final words to Israel, will thank the tribe of Levi for their courage and sacrifice in this incident. However the tribe of Levi, because of this violent incident once again runs the risk of being labeled as perpetual purveyors of violence. The words of Yaakov echo in the ears of the Jewish people: "...Shimon and Levi...the instruments of violence are their wares in life." But the antidote to Levi's apparent penchant for violence, justified as it may be, was also prescribed by Yaakov: "I will divide them among the children of Yaakov, I will scatter them amongst Israel." Moshe now takes the tribe of Levi and elevates it to the perpetual service of God and Israel. The tribe will own no land in the Land of Israel, it will not be mobilized for the armies of Israel, it will be dependent upon the largesse and the goodness of its fellow Jews for material support. Now, it will put aside the sword and take up the pen. It will serve in the Temple and it will be the teachers and scholars of Israel. Thus it will be defanged from its propensity to do violence and its ability to easily slay others.

Levi's streak of violence came from a holy and just source. Levi tells Yaakov: "Shall we allow our sister to be treated as a prostitute?" Moshe sees no nice way to stem the tide of idol worship which is about to engulf Israel because of the presence of the golden calf in its midst. Judaism is not pacifism at all costs. Justified use of self-defense is a cardinal Jewish value. Levi's sense of justice and self-sacrifice are admirable traits. But the use of violence to achieve one's ends, even if those ends are in themselves justifiable and necessary, inevitably leaves scars on the spirit and soul of Israel. Levi can only be saved, so to speak, by channeling its motivation, daring, self-sacrifice and devotion to the causes of God and Israel into a more holy mode and spiritual occupation. Thus, at the moment of Levi's and Israel's greatest crisis, when Levi's violence saves the day and arrests the wave of idolatry, Levi is removed from the front line and becomes a special, holy, elevated tribe. The words of the prophet Zecharia were said directly to the tribe of Levi, and through them eventually to all of Israel: "Not by might nor by strength shall you prevail, but only through My spirit, says the Lord of Hosts." Rambam states that any human being can become a member of the tribe of Levi, metaphorically

speaking, by trusting only in God and devoting one's self to His service and cause. Apparently, this is the true antidote to becoming a violent society.

Shabat shalom.

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