

Destroying Our Self-Destructive Power

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As religious leaders we turn to our sacred traditions to inform our thinking on the great moral issues we face as individuals and nations. Nuclear weapons and the threat of nuclear war is an anathema to any right thinking human being who is concerned about the future of humanity, our planet and its fragile ecosystem. Nuclear weapons represent the potential power to not only inflict massive damage but also to reverse creation and make our planet or vast sections of it uninhabitable. Emblazoned on the wall of this great body are the words of the Hebrew prophet Isaiah " And he shall judge between the nations and reprove many peoples, and they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift the sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore." The destruction of all weapons and the cessation of all war is a primary goal of the visionaries who created the United Nations. The Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai bids us go further than Isaiah. He writes:

Don't stop after beating the swords into plowshares, don't stop! Go on beating and make musical instruments out of them.

Whoever wants to make war again will have to turn them into plowshares first.

While these may seem like utopian dreams as we survey the geopolitical landscape we are acutely aware of the devastation that conventional weapons can cause. Once again I turn to the poet Amichai.

The Diameter of the Bomb

The diameter of the bomb was thirty centimeters
and the diameter of its effective range about seven meters,
with four dead and eleven wounded.
And around these, in a larger circle
of pain and time, two hospitals are scattered
and one graveyard. But the young woman
who was buried in the city she came from,
at a distance of more than a hundred kilometers,
enlarges the circle considerably,

and the solitary man mourning her death
at the distant shores of a country far across the sea includes the
entire world in the circle.
And I won't even mention the howl of orphans
that reaches up to the throne of God and
beyond, making
a circle with no end and no God.

This is tragedy of a conventional bomb. It is limited in scope and destruction but a single death is like the shot heard around the world. Then how do we comprehend the devastation of nuclear war. We must be cognizant of the fact that there are no limited nuclear wars.

Back in 1982 during the Cold War the Central Conference of American Rabbis adopted a resolution on entitled Bilateral Nuclear Arms Freeze and Reduction. It reads in part:

The Central Conference of American Rabbis expresses its extreme concern over the potential for destruction to our civilization that a nuclear war poses. A nuclear war, even a "limited" one, would result in death, injury, and disease on a scale without precedent. Civil defense and medical treatment would be totally inadequate. Our traditions speak to us of Sakanat Nefashot, the danger of exposing ourselves to health hazards; Bal Tashchit, the abhorrence of willful destruction of the environment; and Yishuv Ha-arets, the betterment and guardianship of the earth. Inspired by the prophets, we raise our voices....

These values of preventing danger to life and wanton destruction and promoting the betterment of life and the guardianship of the earth should cause us to raise our voices once again.

Let us be clear – Nuclear weapons are immoral; therefore we must work together to eliminate them.

The values of bal tashchit preventing wanton destruction must remain upper most in our minds. The images of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are indelibly implanted in my mind's eye. The rules of war as set forth in Deuteronomy "When you lay siege to a city for many days, battling against it in order to capture it do not destroy its trees, wielding the ax against them, for from them you do eat and you may not cut them down. The ancient Hebrews with what now seem like primitive weapons set rules to limit their own destructive power.

Finally I want to turn to story of Noah and the flood. Rabbi Irving Greenberg wrote in an article "The Dialectics of Power" that when God viewed the destructive power of the flood he relinquishes the use of unlimited destructive power forever.

The Bible teaches that God, having been angered by uncontrolled human evil, unleashed unlimited destructive power and created a flood that wiped out humanity. Then the Divine itself came to recognize that unleashing such power was no longer tolerable or acceptable. It is unacceptable because such power is dangerous to all of life, and using that kind of power or even threatening to is a total violation of respect for life. Therefore, God initiated a covenant limiting God's power; even God cannot be entrusted with absolute power.

We humans now possess the unlimited power to destroy all of creation and send the world back into chaos. The rainbow after a storm is supposed to remind us of God's promise never to bring a mabul mayyim a flood of water to end the world as we know it. When nuclear weapon goes off there is a mushroom cloud and a rainbow but it is not the rainbow which assures that after the storm hope remains. It is a rainbow of destruction shattering our hopes and dreams for a better tomorrow. God may have relinquished the power to destroy the world now we have the power to turn cosmos in to chaos to reverse creation but we have not. We can unleash a Mabul esh a flood of nuclear fire. This is morally unacceptable. Therefore we must work assiduously to dismantle every nuclear arsenal and prevent proliferation. It is time to beat our nuclear swords into plowshares and not stop beating until they are musical instruments.