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**Judaism and Islam:
Terrorism as Seen Through the Lenses of the Two Semitic Religions**

My first wish is to see this plague of mankind, war, banished from the earth.

-George Washington

“I do not know if God is on our side, but I hope we are on His side.”

-Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War

It is interesting that Islam, one of the three great monotheistic religions based upon “The Book,” is often closely associated with terrorism while Judaism and Christianity are not. Although there certainly have been terrorists who were Jewish or Christian, the phenomenon has not gained support within those two religions as it has within radical elements of Islam, and even elements that are not considered radical. While some, particularly Muslims, often point to persecution, discrimination and humiliation as the *raison-d’etre* of Islamic terrorism, both Jews and Christians have also experienced persecution etcetera and have rarely if ever accepted terrorism as a legitimate form of resistance. Even in the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, there have been very few Christian-Arab terrorists: most if not all have been Muslims or secular. One reason this might be the case is misinterpretation of statements in the scriptures that make some Muslims believe that terrorism can be condoned and even demanded by their religion. If so, then it is interesting to note that though closely related to Islam, Judaism (and Christianity) are not often interpreted to moralize terrorism. It was explained why Christianity condemns terrorism during a class presentation and it is now the goal of this paper to compare Jewish and Islamic experience and theology in an attempt to explain why some can use religion to condone terrorism while others use it to demand condemnation of terrorism and violence.

Before beginning, a definition of terrorism must be established for the purpose of this piece. For this paper, I will use terrorism to refer to any act of violence that is perpetrated with the intent to spread terror in order to further a political or religious cause. It can further be understood that while not all terrorism specifically intends to kill innocents, (defined as unarmed, un-uniformed civilians) terrorism often results in such innocents being killed. This is a necessary line of reasoning because if murder of innocents is to be considered part and parcel of terrorism, than one we can better understand why religions take such a strong position on the issue.

The first teaching necessary to understand Jewish thoughts on terrorism is the sixth of the Ten Commandments: Thou shall not killⁱ as stated in Exodus 12: 1-17 & Deuteronomy 5: 6-21. This basic requirement was specified as the first of the 5 “thou shall not” commandments in order to highlight its importance, and is considered a very basic tenant Judaism as well as Christianity. However, it is also considered a basic tenant of Islam: “anyone who murders any person who had not committed murder or horrendous crimes, it shall be as if he murdered all the people (5:32).”ⁱⁱ Since both religions seem to have such a statement condemning murder, this than cannot be the reason that some are able to interpret Islam in such a way that condones violence while Judaism does not seem to have any such reasoning. In fact, it seems to openly preclude either religion from participating in any activity that involves deadly violence. Yet nations that are considered

religious states: IE the Jewish State of Israel ⁱⁱⁱ and the Islamic Republic of Iran ^{iv} have standing armies that have in the past been used to kill. Thus, an exception to the rule must exist.

The second Jewish teaching provides just such an exemption. It is “derived from Deuteronomy (22:26): *Habah l'hargecha hashken l'hargo* – ‘If someone is coming to kill you, rise against him and kill him first.’ (This law applies equally to someone coming to kill someone else -- you're obligated to kill the murderer in order to save his intended victim).”^v This statement offers the singular exception to the rule stated above that says thou shall not kill. This law seems to recognize the human instinct for self-preservation and condones it in religious text. This modification also opens an important loophole in an otherwise air tight, unambiguous statement that otherwise completely forbids murder for any reason, because it opens to interpretation what “if some is coming to kill you,” could mean. Further, if there is one loophole in an otherwise absolute statement, perhaps there will be other reasons that this law can be ignored or violated.

Like Judaism, Islam offers a similar teaching that opens a comparable loophole in the Islamic teaching not to murder. "You shall not kill any person - for God has made life sacred - except in the course of justice. If one is killed unjustly, then we give his heir authority to enforce justice. Thus, he shall not exceed the limits in avenging the murder, he will be helped." (17:33).^{vi} Just as in Judaism's exception, this ambiguity causes issues such as who decides what is just or justice. This teaching seems to recognize the human emotion of a desire for revenge, and lends religious sanctity to acting on this desire. While the two teachings are not identical, with Judaism's being a proactive commandment to prevent any known attempted murder, and Islam's being a reactive teaching, both offer excuses for why an otherwise unconditional law is no longer unconditional. Yet neither teaching offers a reason why components of Islam might condone terrorism while Judaism condemns it. Both exceptions state that a person may only kill those that are attempting or have successfully committed murder themselves. They do not then allow for terrorism, because terrorism targets random civilians in an attempt to further a political cause, neither to protect nor to extract justice from a very specific person or persons for a past wrong doing. Terrorists (those who commit a terrorist act) further habitually pick random objectives in order to be most effective in spreading terror in their message-specific populations by furthering that idea that one can not know who or what will be the next target to get hit. Therefore, terrorism does not fit into either religious exception to the law of “thou shall not kill.”

The third teaching is the story of Moses leading the Hebrews across the Sea of Reeds (the Red Sea) to safety as told in the Book of Exodus, Chapters 14 and 15.^{vii} As proven by the popularity of Disney's animated picture, *The Prince of Egypt*, the story is nearly universally known today, and is considered one of the most important in Judaism because it is retold annually during the Holiday of Passover. It tells of the Hebrews, who were given leave by Pharaoh Ramses II in order that they should attain freedom after 430 years of slavery. However, Pharaoh changed his mind and decided to either force the Hebrews to return to bondage in Egypt or to butcher them. When the Hebrews reached the Sea of Reeds, the chariot driven army of Pharaoh encircled them. Miraculously, there was a Divine intervention and the waters of the Sea of Reeds parted, allowing the Hebrews to cross to safety. When the army of Pharaoh attempted to cross, the waters crashed down and drowned them.^{viii} When combined with the commandment, “Thou

Shall not kill,” this story provides an example of a time when it is acceptable to murder. For it is not certain Pharaoh would have killed the Hebrews, perhaps he only wanted to re-enslave them. No one can ever know exactly what went through Pharaoh’s mind at that time. Due to this obscurity, this story can be used to prove at the least that a very proactive defense can be taken in order to protect life, and at the very most that either the preservation or the attainment of freedom is another valid reason to violate the commandment that another’s life can never be taken.

Yet this story is also shared by both faiths. As previously mentioned, it appears in the Book of Exodus as well as in any book that directs the Passover Holiday Seder of the Jews. It also appears in the Koran, “10:90 We took the Children of Israel across the sea: Pharaoh and his hosts followed them in insolence and spite. At length, when overwhelmed with the flood, he said: "I believe that there is no god except Him Whom the Children of Israel believe in: I am of those who submit (to Allah in Islam)." ix Since this story is shared between both faiths, the lesson is also shared and further can explain parts of the world-view held by both Jews and Muslims, but cannot be used to explain why some followers of Islam condone terrorism while their none of their Jewish counterparts do not.

In spite of the many shared stories, there is an anecdote that goes along with the preceding story just told that is uniquely Jewish. It comes in two forms, but is not shared with the followers of the Muslim tradition and can perhaps be considered one of the major reasons that there is a difference in the outlooks of these two religions. The story is a Midrash, meaning that it is a story that is not written in the Bible but is used along with the Bible in order to provide further explanation, highlight the moral or as in this case, teach another moral. The first version of the story is this. When

“the Egyptians drown in the Reed Sea...the angels on high (broke) into jubilation, (sic) only to be sternly rebuked by God: ‘The works of my hands are sinking into the sea and you want to sing (B.T. Sanhedrin 39b)?’

The moral force of this searing reprimand asserts that God cares deeply for all the children of Adam and Eve. They are uniformly endowed with God's imprint, even if they deviate from the paths of justice and righteousness.” x

The second version of the story tells not of angels celebrating but of the Hebrew people mourning the death of Pharaoh’s soldiers, rather than celebrating their newly found freedom. After 430 years as slaves, a people who had suddenly become free should be expected to be ecstatic. But according to the story, before the Hebrews celebrated they sat by the banks of the Sea of Reeds and they said a prayer which mourned that other’s lives had to be taken in order to preserve theirs. This “morality is meant to curb our innate disposition for revenge, no matter how warranted or licit. The hope of the future must not be held hostage by the horrors of the past.” xi

This Jewish morality is not meant to make one question the validity or justness of the action of taking another’s life in order to defend one’s own. This justness of deed was already established by the previous ruling from Deuteronomy about killing another in self-defense or in defense of another. It is meant merely to “temper” this justness in order to remind the Jews not to take life unnecessarily, to work to all ends to ensure that each life taken is necessary to prevent the murder and to ensure that no innocents are harmed unnecessarily. Given that this story does not appear in Islam as it does in Jewish

tradition, the morality that is passed on in this story may be lacking when those of the faith of Islam retell the story. It is not to say that Islamic religious tradition is lacking any such story or teaching and thus it is not to suggest that Islam as a whole condones unnecessary violence; the vast majority of Muslims do not kill or believe that killing is justified. This likely can in part be explained by their religious and cultural experiences and beliefs. But, the lack of this story of mourning, in partnership with the story of the parting of the Sea of Reeds, can be used by some within Islam to suggest interpretations of that particular story that indicate an acceptability of violence, and thus even of terror.

Another difference comes simply from the way the holy scriptures of the faiths were written. Judaism suggests that war is truly only to be used only as a method of last resort, and only when it has been forced upon the people in order to prevent annihilation, slavery, or oppression. Nevertheless, it is always spoken of as a necessary evil, and there are a great number of rules specifying when and how war is to be fought. The most notable of these rules is that “When thou drawest nigh unto a city to fight against it, then proclaim peace unto it. (Deuteronomy 20:10). This shows that the Jew must always pursue peace, even before entering each battle.^{xii} Further, even just the language used can be used by some to manipulate the meanings of Islam to support war. The term Jihad, usually translated as ‘holy war,’ has no corresponding term in Judaism. Many in Islam reject this translation of holy war for the term Jihad, defining it instead as

“the striving of spiritual good. This Jihad particularly involves change in one's self and mentality. It may concern the sacrifice of material property, social class and even emotional comfort solely for the salvation and worship of God ALONE. As a result, one who practices (sic) Jihad will gain tremendously in the Hereafter*.”^{xiii}

This quotation from the Quran does not mention war even once. Thus, while this does not prove that Islam supports war or even looks at war as just or necessary, the fact that some do interpret Jihad as a call to war can promote additional understanding why some Muslims may support terrorism and war that their Jewish counterparts shun or openly condemn.

While there are religious differences between the two, there are also cultural and experiential differences that might explain why these two groups of people may take differing views on terrorism. While both religions began as religions of the Semites speaking Aramaic^{xiv}, the root language of both modern Hebrew and Arabic, the similarities of experience between these two groups end there.

For example, right from the beginning these two groups point to very different experiences as their beginning points. Judaism's first national experience is as Hebrew slaves in Egypt, while Islam began as the religion of nomadic Arabs who were free to roam the open desert as they pleased. While Jews did have to conquer their land from the Canaanites, they were very quickly put back on the defensive by the powerful Philistines^{xv} and so never built a vast empire. Their largest holding of land was the Kingdom of David, which barely stretched beyond the borders to present day Israel, with the exception of some holdings on the East Bank of the Jordan River.^{xvi} Islam, on the other hand, experienced a “glorious conquest” that spread their religion from Spain and Morocco in the west, to the gates of Vienna in the north, to Indonesia in the east, and the

Comoros Islands in the South. The humble beginnings of Judaism versus the grandness of freedom of Islam could expand a difference in worldview between the two groups.

The Jewish people generally avoid glorification of battle, a good example of which is how they celebrate the festival of Chanukah. While the festival commemorates the liberating of ancient Israel by a small band of Jews called the Maccabees from the more numerous Assyrian Greeks through military exploits, the symbol of Chanukah is not a sword or spear but the Menorah.^{xvii} Jews could not stomach a holiday that celebrated militarism; it did not fit their worldview. So they celebrate a miracle instead, the lasting of enough oil for one day throughout a seven day period. War in Judaism today is looked at as a historical necessity that is greatly evil, while Islam continues to look at their conquest and the spreading of their religion by the sword as a noble and great event.^{xviii} Such differences can readily further the explanation of the acceptance of terrorism and violence on the part of some Muslims.

During Islam's golden age, when its empire was at its vastest and its learning far surpassing that of Europe, which was deep in the throws of the dark ages, the Jewish Ghettos were forming and the first major pogroms (government organized civilian violence against Jews) were taking place across the European continent. Many Muslim nations did not treat their Jewish populations much better, with discrimination in Ethiopia^{xix} as a particularly vivid example. This situation could only take place when Jews were minorities in other people's lands, for they had no land of their own. Muslims were not often (though examples such as the Spanish Inquisition certainly attest to their happening) persecuted and certainly not to the extent that Jewish minorities were, for that very reason. Muslims were majorities in most of the lands they occupied, and only during times of conquest were they generally harmed. However, Jews were minorities in all lands and were often readily available when someone needed a scapegoat. Even as Europe progressed into the enlightenment, things did not always improve for the Jewish minorities. The greatest example of this, and the one that most permanently resides in the psyche of the Jewish people, was of course the Holocaust. Such differing experiences can also be used to partially explain differences in outlook. Jews history has left the Jews with one lesson that can be understood in two ways: Never again. This statement demands both an active defense of fellow Jews around the world but also an active defense of all people because never again speaks not only of Jews but that no people should ever face genocide. Islam never experienced such a long and cataclysmic history, and this most certainly plays into the worldviews of members of both faiths.

In the wake of the genocide of the Holocaust, the Jewish State of Israel was recreated after one hundred years of Jewish immigration to the Ottoman province and later British protectorate of Palestine.^{xx} Despite the fact that the Jews finally had a home of their own again, the smallness of the Jewish people was never so acutely felt as in 1948, when the millions of Arab and Muslim's wanted to push the tiny (both geographically and in terms of numbers) nation-State into the Sea. Today, Islam is the world's second largest religion by number of followers. Due to the incredibly high birth rates in most Muslim countries, it is also the world's fastest growing religion and is widely expected to overtake Christianity as the world's largest religion. Inversely, Judaism is one of the world's smallest world religions, and is watching its numbers decline as intermarriage and lethargic birth rates keep this comparatively small religion

from growing. This idea of smallness most certainly plays into a people's willingness to use violence as a tactic. Because there are so few Jewish people in the world, there is an unspoken understanding that even a single life is significant and that even the loss of one is huge. Thus, when a terrorist bombing destroyed a bus in Israel and killed about a dozen people, it was often said that every single Jewish citizen in Israel either directly knew or knew someone who directly knew one of the victims. Yet when violence in Kashmir kills a dozen Muslims, most of the world's 1.3 billion Muslims^{xxi} are either unaware of the situation or would not be able to locate Kashmir on a world map. A real world example of this difference can be seen by the differing Jewish and Muslim response to the collapse of the former Yugoslavia. When violence broke out in the region, the Jewish population of the country was evacuated to safety and supplied with food and clothing. While the Jewish State of Israel also sent Hadassah medical experts to additionally help the other victims of the war, the Muslims were provided primarily with weapons from many Islamic nations, most notably Iran. The superiority in numbers discussed here does not conclusively prove that Muslims support terrorism or that Jewish smallness in numbers precludes it. But it does further an understanding that loss of life is not felt in the same way in the wider Islamic world as it might be in the Jewish, as proven in these real-world examples.

In addition to quantity of people, there is also the issue of quality in terms of the education the people receive. The majority of Muslims live in the third world where they often receive fewer years of education as those in the first world do. These third world inhabitants are less likely than, to be receive the liberal education that can often foster a better understanding of how one's actions can affect others, etc. The Jewish population of the world is generally centered in two places: Israel and New York City. Both are considered first world places with liberal traditions and good educational standards. Jewish people also tend to continue on to higher educational opportunities at very high rates, which have been positively correlated with liberal worldviews, whereas many third world Muslims may not have such opportunities available to them.

Based upon both the conclusions of the differences in religious expressions and cultural experiences between these two groups, the solution to Islamic terrorism seems quite clear. It will be necessarily three pronged in order to achieve success.

First, terrorism by definition seeks to cause political, religious, or social change. Thus, all those wishing to prevent terrorism must work to never allow anyone to think that violence will successfully bring about change. If people do not believe that a methodology will work they will be more likely to try other more peaceful and effective methods. This assumes that more constructive methods of expression do in fact exist. Such outlets must be encouraged and nurtured where already in existence, and must be supplied where they do not.

Second, as Professor Barry Smith suggests, a new form of colonialism may be in order. He seems to define colonialism at least in part as the exportation of liberal teachers from the colonizer to the colony. If Muslims received the liberal education that was available to so many westerners, the liberal views of relative pacifisms, moderation, and tolerance would likely be furthered in what are presently violence, extremist and intolerant nations. But alone, this would not be enough, because western liberalism is foreign to the east and might not take hold.

The third and most important change that needs to be made must come from within Islam itself. In Christianity, Luther's reformation and other events forced Christianity to modernize itself. They incorporated more enlightened ideas, and evolved into a more tolerant and compassionate religion. Judaism's reformed, conservative, and later Reconstructionist movements had similar effects, bringing in the ideas of universalism, egalitarianism and equality. No such movement has yet taken hold of any large numbers of Muslims, but such a step will be necessary if one of the world's youngest major religions is to remain modern enough to be relevant in today's world. An example of the necessity of such reasoning is the Midrash stories of the Jews mentioned above and how similar stories are not stressed in Islam. If Islam would chose to stress the story of the sanctity of life along with the necessity of self-defense, statements made by people such Yassir Arafat's, who

“frequently compares the accords with Israel to the Khudaibiya agreement made by the prophet Muhammad with the Arabian tribe of Koreish. The pact, slated to last for ten years, was broken within two years, when the Islamic forces - having used the peace pact to become stronger - defeated the Koreish tribe.”^{xxii}

If Muslim's viewed Islam in a different, more liberal way, perhaps they would see terrorism in a very different way.

There are some fundamental differences between Islam and its “brother religions,” but none are so great that Islam should no longer be considered one of the religions of peace.^{xxiii} The key is to understand Islam and the Muslim experience and to relate those experiences in order to create a more universally accepted understanding of Islam. It must fit with today's modern demands of abstention from violence, abhorrence of terrorism, and a greater linking of Islam to the western liberal experience. Only than can all Muslims understand fully that Islam is a religion of peace and that those who say otherwise are extremists who should be shunned.

ⁱ <http://www.crystalinks.com/tenccommandments.html> *The Ten Commandments of Moses*. April 24, 2002.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.submission.org/quran/ten.html> Welcome to Submission. *The Ten Commandments in the Quran*. April 24, 2002.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/is.html> *Israel*. CIA Factbook. April 27, 2002.

^{iv} <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/ir.html> *Iran*. CIA Factbook. April 27, 2002.

^v <http://www.crystalinks.com/tenccommandments.html> *The Ten Commandments of Moses*. April 24, 2002.

^{vi} <http://www.submission.org/quran/ten.html> *The Ten Commandments in the Quran*. Welcome to Submission. April 24, 2002.

^{vii} <http://www.jewishla.org/html/pesach5762.htm> *Hol Hamoed* The Jewish Federation of Los Angeles. April 25, 2002.

^{viii} http://www.theholidayspot.com/passover/history_of_passover.htm *Navigate Thru Passover History of Passover*. April 24, 2002.

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- ^{ix} http://islamicity.com/mosque/arabicscript/Ayat/10/10_90.htm *Sura 10 – Ayat 90 Yunus (Jonah)* IslamiCity.com. April 28, 2002.
- ^x <http://tiwestport.org/torah/5759/sh'mot.html> *Torah Portion: Sh'mot: Exodus 1:1-6:1* This Week's Torah Portion. April 24, 2002.
- ^{xi} <http://tiwestport.org/torah/5759/sh'mot.html> *Torah Portion: Sh'mot: Exodus 1:1-6:1* This Week's Torah Portion. April 24, 2002
- ^{xii} Dresner, Rabbi Samuel H. Sherwin, Rabbi Byron L. *Judaism: The Way of Sanctification*. Pg. 317. United Synagogue of America. New York, NY. 1978.
- ^{xiii} <http://www.submission.org/muhammed/jihad.html> *Jihad in Islam*. Submission. April 28, 2002.
- ^{xiv} <http://members.aol.com/assyrianme/aramaic/history.html> The History of the Aramaic Language. April 29, 2002.
- ^{xv} <http://www.bbie.org/english/Study03ThePromisesofGod/0305PromiseToDavid.html> *3.5 The Promise to David*. Bible Basics. April 27, 2002.
- ^{xvi} <http://www.ou.org/about/ou.htm> The Old Testament. April 28, 2002.
- ^{xvii} <http://www.torah.org/learning/yomtov/chanukah/> *Chanukah* Torah.org. April 27, 2002.
- ^{xviii} <http://www.al-islam.org/message/59.htm> THE EVENTS OF THE TENTH YEAR OF MIGRATION. April 27, 2002.
- ^{xix} <http://www.haruth.com/JewsEthiopia.html> Jews of Ethiopia. April 29, 2002.
- ^{xx} <http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/history/israel.html> Facts about Israel. April 28, 2002.
- ^{xxi} http://www.adherents.com/Religions_By_Adherents.html Major Religions of the World Ranked by Number of Adherents. April 30, 2002.
- ^{xxii} <http://www.gamla.org.il/english/article/1998/dec/ler2.htm> Sayings of Chairman Arafat. April 30, 2002.
- ^{xxiii} http://www.german-embassy.org.uk/world_religions_-_universal_pe.html World Religions-Universal Peace. April 30, 2002.