
**Reviewed by Donald J. Goldstein, Duke University OLLI Program, SC**

This slim volume is Part V of the Jewish Publications Society “Jewish Choices, Jewish Values” series. The book represents a remarkably thorough examination of a broad range of Jewish sources and problems addressed by modern and ancient scholars related to state authorized violence. Its’ audience appears to be members of the general public interested in such issues and it possibly could be used as an undergraduate textbook. Despite the august list of contributors, unfortunately, the book fails to break new ground on many of the troubling issues of today or, for that matter, ancient dilemmas such as the justification for the original conquest of Canaan and the alleged annihilation of indigenous idolatrous peoples. To its credit, the book does include a useful although rather loosely knit collection of Biblical, Talmudic, ancient and modern texts. Given the terseness of some of these quotations, it would have been helpful to provide some contextualization as to who was speaking, what was the purpose of the communication, and how important is the cited text believed to be in the various Jewish value systems. The collection, moreover, fails to convey adequately the intensity of debate among Jewish thinkers about the obligations imposed by divinely ascribed Writ. This is especially disappointing in the case of the most reflective writers, such as Professor Michael Walzer on the Jewish tradition of war, Rabbi Melissa Weintraub on Torah and Torture and Rabbi Sharon Borous on the grave responsibility war imposes. This might have been rectified if additional Orthodox and Reform, as well as Israeli writers had been included.

The individual essays, especially those noted above, are serious, thought-provoking, and significant contributions to the specific issues they raise. They are, however, frequently re-worked versions of more extensive works published previously. The linguist and social activist, Noam Chomsky is presented in the book as an alternative voice; but only through the vehicle of the transcript of an interview with one of the editors, Rabbi Dorff. Although the date of the
interview is provided, the reader is left clueless as to its context or completeness. More importantly, what is too often, though hardly completely, missing is a sense of the angst that issues involving war and matters of national security have caused Jewish intellectuals, Jewish members of the US Armed Forces, in Israel and other countries, and thoughtful Jewish citizens, wherever they may be and whenever they may have lived. [For purposes of full disclosure, Michael Walzer was my doctoral dissertation adviser at Harvard University and one of his keenest insights that has stayed with me was the necessity to ‘worry’ about one’s actions as a public official and citizen.]

Professor Walzer’s own contribution is painfully short, but it artfully demonstrates his incredible ability to frame difficult issues for the reader in a highly concise way. For example, he notes that the Divine injunction for Joshua to annihilate the inhabitants of Canaan should have been debated, if necessary with God directly. The Torah itself describes Abraham’s argument with God about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, lest ten righteous souls be killed as collateral damage. He also notes the Biblical story of the prophet Jonah, where the question of the possible destruction of 120,000 children too young to be responsible for the sins of their parents and royal leadership is called into question.

Rabbi Melissa Weintraub’s article, on the other hand, most regrettably errs in the other direction, at least in this truncated presentation of her work. Weintraub outlines an innovative, well researched, tightly argued, and quintessentially Jewish explanation of the necessity and duty to proscribe the use of torture in war except under the most stringently circumscribed circumstances. In fact she does too good a job. To be entirely fair, hers is an advocacy piece and again for reasons of full disclosure, the reviewer must reveal that he is a proud member of her advocacy group. In the face of the excesses of the George W. Bush Administration in the liberal, indiscriminate, excessive and reprehensible use of torture, it is hard to see how she could have done otherwise. Sometimes, scholarly moderation is an excuse for the shirking of moral and more importantly religious obligations to protest acts that promote anti-Torah values. To drive this point home even more keenly, not once in the entire Bible is torture by Jews committed, advocated, enjoined, or condoned. Torture was known in Biblical times. The Babylonians impaled the Jewish defenders of Lachish and left behind a stone carving to prove it, which
remains extent today. The closest an Israelite might have come is Samuel’s slaughter of Agag, in order to rectify Saul’s defiance of God’s commandment to kill all the Amalekites. This act was neither mandated by nor rewarded by God.

Weintraub does, nonetheless, surely underestimate the just intentions of the use of extreme measures of interrogation when the lives of unknown numbers of innocent Jewish and Gentiles are at stake. She could be accused of failing to recognize the some of the dangers posed by those who would kill and maim innocents in acts of religious, ideological, and political perversion. She is not oblivious to this, and goes to considerable length to point out the pragmatic and religious hurdles such acts must overcome. Weintraub’s argument would have been strengthened if she had focused a bit on how thoughtlessly the Bush Administration and the American people and their Allies resorted with alacrity to extreme and morally dubious measures. Fear alone does not justify the use of terror against presumed terrorists. As a Rabbi, Weintraub could have pointed out the lack of fear of Divine retribution for the wanton use of terror and the grave responsibility of Jewish citizen anxiety over what was being done in their name. This is what Hannah Arendt meant when she wrote about the banality of evil. Fyodor Dostoyevsky makes a similar case in The Brothers Karamazov. Even good people can become moral and religious cowards in dark times. It is costly and even dangerous to speak out, but as the Torah notes, Lo ta’ahmode rayecha dam, ani Adonai, “don’t stand [idly] by the blood of your neighbor, I am God.”

One essay worth mentioning is by an ‘ordinary’ American Jewish soldier named Joe Kashnow entitled “Ethics on the Battlefield.” He served as an infantryman in the current war in Iraq. Kashnow has no credentials as a scholar, but he brings what is more important than intellectual hypotheticals to the discussion. He brings common moral sense. His goal as a youth was to be a soldier and we he was severely wounded in Iraq losing his leg below the knee. While undergoing treatment at Walter Reed Army hospital he and his wife formed the Jewish Soldier’s foundation to assist serving Jews in the US military and to attempt to encourage more Jews to serve their country in the Armed Forces. His personal account of battle is so morally moving that we will not repeat it here. I wish I could say that Jewish values ruled his conduct, but rather it was a non-Jew’s ethics that are the most dramatic. Joe’s account is a powerful
reminder of the basic humanity of most members of the US military, especially those who do the actual fighting. Jews have no monopoly on morality and the men and women of all religious faiths in our Armed Services deserve a special commendation for preserving their humanity, the image of God, under the worst of conditions.

Despite whatever shortcomings this volume may contain, it deserves to be put on the bookshelf of every Jew and even every citizen of every country. It contains ample material for moral cogitation by members of all religions. It has a wealth of source material from ancient and modern texts, albeit in snippet form without context. The section on suggestions for further reading is excellent. It covers a variety of subjects of current interest from arms sales to both the conduct of war for citizens and soldiers and the ‘fear and trembling’ that should, and sadly all too often does not, accompany the pursuit of war. It is appropriate to conclude this review with an extract from the Talmud quoted by Rabbi Sharon Borous, one of the contributing authors:

Anyone who has the ability to protest against [the offenses of] the people of his house, but does not protest, that person is held responsible for the actions of the people of his house.

Anyone who has the ability to protest against the [offenses of] the people of the city, but does not protest, that person is held responsible for the actions of the people of the city.

Anyone who has the ability to protest against [the offenses of the entire world, but does not protest, that person is held responsible for the actions of the entire world.

Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat* 54b