

All Those Wars



The week through a Torah lens

*Welcome to Behind the Headlines, a new weekly column. Each week we'll take one story from the news and suggest a possible Torah way of seeing it, in the spirit of my book *The Hidden Hand*. Of course, we can't know Hashem's reasons. We can only try to notice His hand.*

This past Wednesday was three years since October 7. The Mayor of New York, Zohran Mamdani, marked the day with a statement. He opened by calling the attacks “horrific war crimes.” Then he spent most of the statement accusing Eretz Yisrael of “an ongoing genocide in Gaza.” When people objected, he refused to take it back.

Mamdani isn't the only American politician spreading these incendiary lies, and the chorus from much of the Muslim and Arab world is louder still. They all say they have nothing against Jews,

only Zionists. Much of the world believes them.

Chazal saw this coming long ago. The Gemara describes a nation that fought war after war for its own sake, then claimed it had done it all for a good and holy cause. It even records Hashem's response. But first, let's do some bookkeeping.

■ **Brother Against Brother**

Here's a partial list from roughly the last hundred years. It counts only Muslims killing Muslims and Arabs killing Arabs. Historians argue over the numbers, so these are estimates.

The Iran–Iraq War, 1980–1988: half a million to a million dead.

Bangladesh, 1971: Pakistan's army killed hundreds of thousands of Bengalis, most of them Muslims. Bangladesh puts the number at three million.

Syria, 2011 to today: half a million dead or more, most of them killed by their own government.

Yemen, 2014 to today: close to 400,000 dead by 2021, counting those who died of hunger and disease. In the 1960s Yemen had another civil war, and Egypt dropped poison gas on Yemeni villages.

Iraq under Saddam Hussein: about a quarter of a million of his own people. In 1988 he gassed the Kurdish town of Halabja and killed about 5,000 in one day.

Hama, Syria, 1982: the Syrian army killed 10,000 to 40,000 people in a few weeks.

Algeria, the 1990s: 100,000 to 200,000 dead in a civil war between the army and Islamist groups.

Darfur, Sudan, 2003 onward: Arab militias killed about 300,000 of their non-Arab Muslim neighbors.

Somalia and Afghanistan: hundreds of thousands each, over decades of civil war.

Jordan, 1970: the Jordanian army killed thousands of Palestinians, the same people the Arab world says it fights for.

Add up only the wars where both sides were Muslim, and the total runs well into the millions.

■ **And Everyone Else**

Now add the non-Muslims.

The Armenians, 1915 and after: up to a million and a half killed by the Ottoman Turks. Hundreds of thousands of Assyrian Christians and Greeks died with them.

Southern Sudan, 1955–2005: about two and a half million dead in two long wars, most of them from hunger.

The Partition of India, 1947: hundreds of thousands of Hindus and Sikhs killed. The killing went both ways.

The Yazidis, 2014: ISIS killed about 5,000 and carried off thousands of women and children as slaves.

Christians in Nigeria and across Africa: tens of thousands killed by Boko Haram and similar groups.

Terror around the world: about 3,000 killed in New York and Washington on September 11. Hundreds more died in Bali, Madrid, London, Mumbai, Paris, Sri Lanka, and Beslan, where more than half of the dead were children.

And Jews: Hebron in 1929, the Farhud in Baghdad in 1941, every war fought against Eretz Yisrael, and October 7.

■ “We Did It for Yisrael”

The Gemara at the beginning of Avodah Zarah (2b) describes a scene at the End of Days. Hashem takes a Sefer Torah in His arms and announces that whoever occupied himself with it should come and take his reward. The nations of the world come crowding in.

Rome goes first. “We built many marketplaces and bathhouses, and we gathered much silver and gold,” Rome says. “And we did it all for Yisrael, so they could learn Torah.” Hashem answers that the marketplaces were for their own sinful pleasures and the bathhouses were to pamper themselves. As for the silver and gold, Hashem quotes the pasuk, “*Li hakesef v’li hazahav* — The silver is Mine and the gold is Mine” (Chaggai 2:8). It was never Rome’s to give. Rome leaves with nothing. Then Persia steps up.

“We built many bridges, we conquered many cities, we fought many wars,” Persia says. “And we did it all for Yisrael, so they could learn Torah.”

Hashem answers that everything they did, they did for themselves. They built the bridges to collect tolls. They conquered the cities to draft forced labor. And the wars? Hashem says He fought those, and quotes the pasuk, “*Hashem ish milchamah* — Hashem is a Master of war” (Shemos 15:3).

■ The Wars Are His

Hashem's answer can be hard to hear. Does Hashem fight wars?

We can't know Hashem's reasons, but here are some possible ways to look at it.

One is that the Gemara is settling a question of credit. Persia says, "Those wars were our gift to Yisrael." Hashem says they were never Persia's to give. People decide to go to war. How a war ends, and what comes out of it, is *hashgachah*, Hashem guiding history.

That doesn't let the war makers off. Hashem's answer holds them to account: "Everything you did, you did for yourselves." Persia is standing in judgment when it hears that, and it's being judged on why it fought. It gets no credit for what Hashem made of its wars, and no excuse for why it fought them.

Did the wars help Yisrael? Certainly, even if we don't readily see it. And certainly in ways Persia never intended. In 1980 Iraq was building a nuclear reactor, and Iran bombed it first, the year before Israel destroyed it. For eight years, two of Eretz Yisrael's fiercest enemies poured their armies into fighting each other. Syria's civil war wore down the army that had attacked Eretz Yisrael in 1967 and 1973.

Even if those assumptions are correct, we're seeing a small piece, of course. *Hashgachah* works over centuries, and most of it stays hidden from us.

■ A Holy Cause

Who is Persia today? When the Gemara was written, Islam didn't exist yet. But the Maharal explains that Persia's role in history passed to Islam, whose followers claim Yishmael as their spiritual root. Today Persia even calls itself the Islamic Republic of Iran.

So when Persia stands before Hashem at the End of Days and says it fought all its wars for Yisrael, it will be speaking for Islam. Its heirs are already making a version of that claim. They call their wars a holy cause, jihad. But jihad is an ideology with no moral justification, and it never stops. It murders, and then it murders again. In the end, the people who promote it and defend it become its victims too.

The Torah said it before Yishmael was born: "*V'hu yihyeh pere adam, yado vakol v'yad kol bo* — He will be a wild man, his hand against everyone and everyone's hand against him" (Bereishis 16:12). His hand against everyone. That covers both lists above, his brothers and everyone else.

The charge of genocide is a thin attempt to turn attention away from all that. An alarming and growing number of American politicians promote the lie, and now the Mayor of New York, home

to the country's largest Jewish population, has added his voice to the chorus. They also have something to cover up: their own identification with the horrors of an ideology that has no moral justification, dressed up as a holy cause.

The record of those wars, mostly against their own brothers, is there for anyone who cares to look.

Do you see something else behind this week's headlines? Share your thoughts in the comments below.

Behind the Headlines is written in the spirit of Yaakov Astor's Hidden Hand books, which look for Hashem's guiding hand in history and in nature.

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