

## Judaism – Medieval Period

By Dr. Reuven Firestone

### TERMINOLOGY

The Hebrew Bible has no specific term for holy war. Most wars of ancient Israel were considered holy because they were authorized by God (see article, "holy war idea in the Hebrew Bible"). The Talmud, however, differentiated between "commanded war" (*milhemet mitzvah*) or "required war" (*milhemet hovah*), and "discretionary war" (*milhemet reshut*, see article, "holy war idea in the Talmud and Rabbinic literature"). The former category corresponds roughly with the Western idea of holy war. This terminology became the norm in all formal Jewish discussion of war in the medieval period.

With very few exceptions, Jewish life in the Middle Ages is defined as living under the political and religious hegemony of non-Jews. Jews did indeed evolve highly developed corporate organization under Christian and Muslim rule, but despite semi-independent courts of law and even occasional periods when Jewish communities could carry out capital punishment against their own members, Jews did not govern themselves in independent polities and had no standing armies. As a result of this unusual situation, ideologies of war had little relevance. Aside from only a few exceptions, therefore, medieval Jewish thinkers were not interested in war ideologies and did not extend the discussion much beyond that of the Talmud.

Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaqi (died 1105, N. France), for example, known universally as Rashi and the most widely read commentator on the Bible and Talmud, actually narrows the meaning and, therefore, theoretical application of holy war from that of the Talmud. In his commentary to the Talmud (Sanhedrin 2a s.v. *bemilhemet hareshut*), he limits holy war to the ancient wars of conquest of the Land of Israel

listed in the Book of Joshua ("all war is considered discretionary aside from the war of Joshua which was to conquer the Land of Israel" (cf. Rashi on Sotah 44 s.v. *aval milhemet mitzvah*)).

## MAIMONIDES

The only two medieval thinkers who reexamined the idea of holy war in a significant way were Maimonides (Rabbi Moses b. Maimon, died 1204, Egypt) and Nahmanides (Rabbi Moses b. Nahman, died 1270, Spain). Maimonides was the first Jewish thinker to develop a systematic ideology of war, and this interest in systemization was clearly influenced by his Islamic environment. He was extreme in his position against all forms of idolatry and considered it a universal obligation to destroy idolatry, even if that involves invoking violence. The Torah was given only to Israel and to those who wish to convert to Judaism. Those who choose not to convert are not forced to, but all humans are required to accept "the seven Noahide laws" that the rabbis of the Talmud considered the minimal moral duties enjoined upon all humanity. These include the prohibition of idolatry. "Those who will not accept [the Noahide laws] are to be killed" (*Mishneh Torah*, "The Laws of Kings and their Wars" [henceforth, *Kings*] 8:10).

Maimonides' systemization includes universalization, which for the first time allowed for expanding the application of holy war beyond the borders of the Land of Israel. An Israelite king may conquer any and all lands he wishes because "his acts are for the sake of heaven since his goal and design is to strengthen the true religion, fill the world with righteousness, destroy the seed of the wicked, and fight God's wars" (*Kings* 4:10). The *Mishneh Torah* contains aggressive rhetoric with regard to this issue, but this is toned down in Maimonides' great philosophic opus, *The Guide for the Perplexed* [henceforth, *Guide*], 1:36, 54; 3:29, 37,41, 52. Gerald Blidstein (1983,

221-222) has pointed out how Maimonides fluctuates between universal aggressiveness and restrained patience. While the king *may* conquer beyond the borders of the Land of Israel, he is never commanded (by God) to do so; but wherever the king conquers he is required to eradicate idolatry. The purpose of conquest and enforcing the Noahide laws is not to bring converts to Judaism, but rather to prevent the endangering of humankind through anarchy and violence. Maimonides does not articulate who would kill idolaters, and both that issue and the larger issue of war in general always remained theoretical and never actually carried out.

The only war that the king is commanded to carry out is war against the seven Canaanite nations, against Amalek, and a war to save Israel from an attacking enemy (Kings 5:1). Destruction of the seven Canaanite nations and Amalek symbolizes for Maimonides the destruction of idolatry and the immorality that is innately associated with it. This Maimonidean trope of Canaanism/idolatry forces him to adapt a universal view regarding repentant idolaters that also finds a parallel in Islam, namely, that the way must always be left open for them, including even Canaanites and Amalekites, to repent of their idolatry and, therefore, their immoral behaviors. In Islam such renunciation requires conversion to Islam; to Maimonides, it is sufficient that they become Noahides. Such a position would appear to fly in the face of the explicit biblical command to annihilate the Canaanites and Amalekites through the institution of the *herem* (see article, "holy war idea in the Hebrew Bible"), but Maimonides quite clearly states in Kings 6:1 that this rule applies for both discretionary and commanded wars.

Despite his position that a king may conquer beyond the borders of the Land of Israel, Maimonides nowhere suggests the option of going to war against any peoples who are already following the Noahide laws. He finds biblical proofs to

justify his universal position on idolatry, and in so doing, universalizes the extinct Canaanites and Amalekites by making them into eternal symbols of idolatry and its associated evils. By emphasizing the universal nature of the issue, he removes them and the entire discussion away from the particularity of the Land of Israel.

Maimonides thus portrays the biblical wars against the Canaanites and Amalekites more as part of the divine will to bring humanity to right religion or universal morality than as the divine will for Israel to take possession of the Land. His universalizing, with the resulting negation of the centrality of the Land of Israel in his war ideology, is repeated in his *Book of Commandments*, a detailed enumeration of the 613 commandments that the rabbis of the Talmud believed the Torah contains.

Positive commandment 187 requires us to kill the seven [Canaanite] nations and to exterminate them, for they were the original root and foundation of idolatry.... [God] has explained to us in many Scriptural texts that the reason [for their destruction] was to prevent our learning from their apostasy. Now there are many Scriptural passages that strongly urge killing them....This is a commanded war (*milhemet mitzvah*) through which we are required to root them out and pursue them throughout all the generations until they are destroyed without even a single survivor. And thus we did until they were brought to a complete end by [King] David, while the survivors were scattered and assimilated among the nations until no trace of them survived. It does not follow that, although they have been destroyed, the command to kill them is no longer in force throughout the generations, just as it cannot be said that war against Amalek is not in force forever even though they have been absolutely destroyed....(Positive Command #187).

Because the divine command to destroy the Canaanites and Amalekites persists even though they are no more, the command actually applies to the destruction of idolatry (*Guide* 1:54). A result of this universalizing is a reduction in the relative importance of the Land of Israel in his system.

#### NAHMANIDES

Nahmanides took issue with Maimonides over his enumeration of the 613 commandments and wrote a critique of Maimonides' *Book of Commandments*. This critique is his *hassagot* or "criticisms," that may be found among the major commentaries in traditional printed editions of Maimonides' *Book of Commandments*. Nahmanides criticizes Maimonides for the latter's universalizing tendency because it so clearly omitted what would appear to be undeniable divine commands to conquer and settle the Land of Israel. In a famous comment that is often cited by activists and thinkers among Orthodox ultranationalist Jews today, Nahmanides notes that the importance of conquering and settling the Land of Israel in every generation and by every individual Jew cannot be overstated.

The fourth commandment that we have been commanded is to inherit the land that God [may He be praised and exalted] gave to our ancestors, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and not to leave it in the hands of any other nation or to allow it to become desolate....The proof that it is a command is His words in reference to the scouts (Deut. 1:21), *Go up, take possession, as the Lord, the God of your fathers, promised you. Fear not and be not dismayed!...* When they did not obey by going up, it is written (ibid), *you flouted the command of the Lord your God; you did not put your trust in Him and did not obey Him*. This instruction is a command, not a statement of destiny or a promise. This is what the sages call a commanded war. This

is what they said in Sota (44b): “Rav Yehudah said: the wars of conquest of Joshua everyone agrees is required, while the wars of the House of David for [territorial] expansion everyone agrees is discretionary.”....Do not be confused and say that this commandment [only] obtains regarding war against the seven [Canaanite] nations whose destruction is commanded, as it is said (Deut. 20:17), *Utterly destroy them*. This is not the case, for we are commanded to kill these nations when they war against us; but if they desire to surrender we allow this and leave them [alive] according to the known conditions; but we do not leave the Land in their hands or in the hands of any other from among the nations in any generation....On the basis of the [rabbis’] statement that the war of Joshua to conquer [is commanded, you must] understand that the commandment is one of conquest. This is what they said in the *Sifrey* [*Devarim `eqev* 51:5 in relation to Joshua 1:3], *Every spot on which your foot treads I give to you, as I promised*: “[God] was saying to them: All the places you conquer other than these are yours, or it is your privilege to conquer outside the Land [only] after you have conquered the Land of Israel.”....We are commanded to engage in the conquest in every generation. Now I say that the sages could not overemphasize living in the Land of Israel, even to the point of saying that anyone who leaves and lives outside the Land is as if he has engaged in idolatry, as it is said (1 Sam. 26:19), *They have driven me out today from sharing in the Lord’s Possession* [as if] *I am told, ‘Go worship other gods.’* They made many other such emphatic statements regarding this positive commandment that we are commanded to possess the Land and settle it. It is therefore an eternal positive command, obligating every single individual even during the time

of Exile as is known from the Talmud in many places. In the language of the *Sifrey* [*Devarim re'eh* 12:29], “It once occurred that Rabbi Yehudah b. Batira, Rabbi Matya b. Charshuni, Chananya b. Achai, Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Natan had left the Land [of Israel]; [when] they came to Puteoli they remembered the Land of Israel, lowered their eyes, cried rivers of tears, tore their clothes [in mourning], and recited this verse (Deut. 11:31-32), *When you take possession of it and settle in it, take care to observe all the commandments...* They concluded: Settling in the Land of Israel is equal to all of the commandments in the Torah! (*Hassagot* positive #4)

The difference between Maimonides and Nahmanides on this issue would become a classic controversy (*machaloqet*) in the tradition and is cited, discussed and argued within traditional Jewry to this day. While both agree on the eternal validity of holy war (that is, "commanded war"), Maimonides minimizes its importance in relation to the Land of Israel by universalizing the concept and understanding it largely as a command to end idolatry and the immorality that was understood to be intimately associated with it. Nahmanides, on the other hand, understood the command to relate directly to the Land of Israel, obligating Jews of every generation to fulfill the command. Individual fulfillment of the divine command, to Nahmanides, included settling and living in the Land of Israel with the goal of bringing back Jewish hegemony. It did not necessarily require violence and war.

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Reuven Firestone

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