



For Heaven's Sake #35: An Israeli Pre-Emptive Strike on Iran?

Internalizing Two Aspects of War

Elana Stein Hain

As Iran approaches the nuclear threshold, Israeli leaders are explicitly warning of an imminent preemptive strike against Iranian nuclear facilities. The IDF has begun training for precisely that possibility. The consequences of an Iranian-Israeli war would be devastating. Is a preemptive strike worth the price? Or is stopping what many Israelis perceive as a potential existential threat worth any risk? How does Jewish tradition define a legitimate act of self-defense? And as we approach the point of no return, how should Israelis and Diaspora Jews speak about this increasingly realistic scenario?

This week, Donniel Hartman, Yossi Klein Halevi, and Elana Stein Hain begin the conversation many North American Jews have preferred to avoid.

*This source sheet is part of Episode #35, "An Israeli Pre-Emptive Strike on Iran?", of **For Heaven's Sake**, a bi-weekly podcast from the Shalom Hartman Institute's [Engage Project](#) that revives the lost art of Jewish debate for the sake of illuminating a topic, not sowing division. The podcast draws its name from the concept of *Machloket l'shem shemayim*, "disagreeing for the sake of heaven."*



The Shalom Hartman Institute is a leading center of Jewish thought and education, serving Israel and North America. Our mission is to strengthen Jewish peoplehood, identity, and pluralism; to enhance the Jewish and democratic character of Israel; and to ensure that Judaism is a compelling force for good in the 21st century.

475 Riverside Dr., Suite 1450
New York, NY 10115
212-268-0300
info@shalomhartman.org | shalomhartman.org

1. Midrash Zuta on Ecclesiastes (Kohelet), Chapter 7

אמר ריש לקיש כל מי שנעשה רחמן על אכזרים נעשה אכזר על רחמנים, מנלן משאול, הדא הוא דכתיב ואת נוב עיר הכהנים וגוי' (שם /שמואל א' / כ"ב י"ט), כתיב הכא ויחמול (העם ושאול) [שאול והעם] (שם /שמואל א' / ט"ו ט'), והתם לגבי נוב עיר הכהנים על רחמנים לא חמל. [ורבנן] אמרין כל מי שנעשה רחמן על אכזרים מדת הדין פוגעת בו, הדא הוא דכתיב (ואת שאול ואת נושא כליו) וימת שאול ושלושת בניו ונושא כליו וגו'

Reish Lakish said: all who become merciful upon those who are cruel eventually become cruel to those who are merciful. From where do we learn this? From King Saul. On the one hand, the Bible says: "And Saul and the people had pity upon King Agag – the king of the Amalekites," (I Samuel 15:9) but late, Saul "put Nov, city of priests, to the sword..." (I Samuel 22:19) and was not merciful to those who are merciful. And the rabbis said – all who are merciful upon those who are cruel – will be harmed by the attribute of justice, as it is written, "So died Saul, his three sons, and his arms-bearer..." (I Samuel 31:6).

2. Deuteronomy (Devarim) 23:10

כִּי־תֵצֵא מִחַנֵּה עַל־אֹיְבֶיךָ וְנִשְׁמַרְתָּ מִכָּל דְּבַר רָע:

When you go out as a troop against your enemies, be on your guard against anything evil.

3. Nachmanides, Commentary to Deuteronomy (Devarim) 23:10

הישר בבני אדם בטבעו יתלבש אכזריות וחמה כצאת מחנה על אויב ועל כן הזהיר בו הכתוב ונשמרת מכל דבר רע

The fairest of man by nature comes to be possessed of cruelty and fury when the army advances against the enemy. Therefore, Scripture warned, *be on your guard against anything evil.*