

Spiritual Insight For The Week

with Rabbi Bentzion Kravitz

Why I Refused to Turn the Other Cheek



When I receive anti-Semitic emails, I immediately delete them. However, while staffing a Jewish information table on a college campus, I was the victim of a verbal anti-Semitic outburst that turned violent. This individual, who disliked Jews, attempted to punch me.

Fortunately, years of martial arts training enabled me to defend myself. I blocked the punch and held the assailant down until the police arrived.

One student who witnessed the event was visibly upset by the attack but insisted that I had overreacted. I explained that although certain religions teach pacifism, Judaism permits self-defense. We are not required to “turn the other cheek.”¹

Some scholars are of the opinion that Jesus said to “*Turn the other cheek*” (Matthew 5:38-39), in response to his literal and mistaken understanding of the biblical directive, “*An eye for an eye*” (Exodus 21:24).

The statement “*an eye for an eye*” is in this week’s Torah portion, *Mishpatim* (Exodus 21:1–24:18). At first glance, this familiar saying appears to promote revenge. However, by carefully studying related biblical passages, we can understand why Judaism never understood this passage literally. Furthermore, to do so would contradict the Torah directive, “*Do not seek revenge among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself*” (Leviticus 19:18).

Monetary compensation was only a part of making amends.

Judaism has always understood “*an eye for an eye*” as teaching the principle of monetary compensation for injuries.² The context of this passage validates this interpretation. Just a few verses earlier, the Torah states that if someone injures another person, “*The guilty party must pay the injured person for any loss of time and provide for him to be healed*” (Exodus 21:19).

Nevertheless, monetary compensation was only a part of making amends. Our sages explain that the Torah uses the more graphic [an eye for an eye] imagery so that the offender would contemplate the profound damage he caused the victim, and by doing so, he would repent and ask for forgiveness. It was not sufficient to “simply write a check.”

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Although Judaism does not condone revenge, self-defense is permitted. In this week's Torah portion, we are instructed, *"If a thief was discovered breaking in and was struck down and died, his death is not considered murder"* (Exodus 22:1). Our sages taught, *"If someone comes to kill you, rise against him and kill him first"* (Talmud Sanhedrin 72a). This rule applies if you fear for your life and have no other way to prevent the thief from killing you.

Killing in self-defense is not the same as murder. This is why the correct translation of the words [לא תרצח]—*lo tirzach*] in the Ten Commandments is *"You shall not murder"* (Exodus 20:13), rather than *"You shall not kill."*

While killing is an absolute last resort, we are commanded to defend ourselves and also to come to the aid of others, as it says, *"Do not stand idly by while your neighbor's blood is shed"* (Leviticus 19:16). For example, when Jews returned to Jerusalem from exile and began constructing the Second Temple, they took self-defense precautions with *"spears, shields, bows, and armor"* (Nehemiah 4:16) against enemies who threatened to attack them.

Unlike people who read the Bible out of context and come to incorrect conclusions, Judaism requires that we examine the context and original language to ascertain the correct meaning of the Torah.

The Torah instructs us to protect ourselves and others from physical harm.

Ultimately, Judaism envisions a time when self-defense will be unnecessary, as it says, *"They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore"* (Isaiah 2:4). However, until the messianic age arrives, the Torah instructs us to protect ourselves and others from physical harm.

Additionally, we must safeguard ourselves against "enemies" who threaten our heritage and beliefs. The best tools for "spiritual self-defense" are Torah knowledge, Jewish spirituality, pride in our heritage, and, of course, critical thinking.

Shabbat Shalom,

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¹ Nor does a similar statement, *"Let him offer his cheek to one who strikes him; let him be filled with reproach"* (Lamentations 3:30), teach pacifism. Rather, in context, it teaches one to receive afflictions with the belief that whatever God does is ultimately for the good, even if the purpose is not apparent.

² Amazingly, one Jewish sage points out that *"an eye for an eye"* in Hebrew [עין תחת עין—*ayin tachat ayin*] alludes to monetary compensation. The word [תחת—*tachat*] means "under," and if you look at a Hebrew alphabet chart, you will see that the letters immediately under the three letters of [עין—*eye*] are the three letters that spell [כסף—*money*].