

Jewish Contemporary Ethics Part 32: Ethical Issues in Tanach 10: The Seven Cana'nite Nations

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Despite the inevitable devastation, it is sometimes possible to posit halachic and moral justification for going to war to defend one's country, people and interests. Both the right to go to war (*jus ad bellum*)

and the correct conduct in war (*jus in bello*) can protect governments and armies from accusations of immoral military action. Nor is the resolution to wage war confined to one's own self-defence. Stating that their reasons and methods are ethically justifiable, Western governments have often considered it a moral duty to intervene with military action to save the oppressed from the oppressor and rescue innocents from tyrannical regimes.

Yet intervention is sometimes akin to the darker side of imperialism and colonialism. The governmental policy of extending a country's power, influence and wealth through the appropriation, colonisation and cultural subjugation of another land and its aboriginal people by use of military force, is rightly identified in contemporary times as a strategy of moral turpitude.

Some might therefore find it surprising to note that God commanded the Israelites to wage war with the seven Canaanite nations in order to eradicate them and appropriate their land (Devarim 7:1). The majority of the Book of Yehoshua (Joshua) details the various campaigns against these nations, including the famous story of the siege and ultimate destruction of Jericho (see chapter 6).

However, it is crucial to draw a distinction between this command and contemporary western imperialism, through understanding God's motive for destroying these nations. The objective was not the physical annihilation of these peoples, but rather the destruction of their idolatrous practices. God swore to Avraham that the Land of Israel would belong to his

descendants (Bereishit 15:18), in order to eliminate idolatrous practice from the world (Shemot 34:10-17).

This was morally significant, for idolatry is mankind's attributing of Divine authority and influence to something other than God. Apart from being wrong, it distracts humanity from recognising God's moral perfection and His universal system of ethical laws for both Jews and non-Jews alike. This wreaks enormous damage, for it obfuscates God's plan to engage and enfranchise all of mankind to become partners with Him in the mission to perfect the world through His ethical system. We also recall that the kind of idolatry that existed in Biblical times was not merely theologically different to monotheism, but contained the most barbaric and savage practices, such as child sacrifice to the Canaanite god Molech, mentioned no less than five times in the Torah (Vayikra 18:21 and 20:2-5).

This is why the Rambam (Maimonides 1138-1204) highlights that it was incumbent upon Yehoshua's armies to first offer the Canaanites peace by adopting the seven Noachide laws (see Yehoshua 11:19-20). These laws form the basis of natural ethics for all mankind (see part 10 of this series). If the Canaanite nations would have accepted, they would have joined the Israelites as partners in God's plan.

We still need to examine the commandment to eradicate the nation of Amalek, including men, women, children and livestock (see Shmuel I 15:14). The next two articles will discuss the roots of this mitzvah and the ethical issues at hand.

