

Munich

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

[Hillel saw a skull floating](#) down the river. He said, "Because you drowned others, they drowned you, and those who drowned you will in turn be drowned."

This thought kept coming back to me during the Spielberg film [Munich](#) that is creating such a stir because of the way it portrays Israelis avenging the cold-blooded [massacring of the Israeli Olympic athletes](#) in Munich in 1972 by the Palestinian Black September.

I am not going to address the issue of equivalence—whether the film is or is not implying that Palestinian violence and Israeli violence are equivalent—nor how the [lumpenproletariat](#) or knee-jerk anti-Zionists will respond. And neither will I deal with whether any of Spielberg's films are educational (Did [Schindler's List](#) reduce anti-Semitism? I doubt it!). This is just a therapeutic personal reaction, which is probably as much about me as about the film.

I'm sure there are Israeli and Jewish criminals, rapists, murderers and sadists. And without doubt anyone in the field of combat is likely to make tragic misjudgments and errors, sometimes with disastrous consequences. But I do strongly believe Israel as a state, with all its faults, and the Israeli army specifically, have always tried to be mindful of traditional Jewish values in theory, and have never, as a matter of policy, sanctioned the intentional killing of unarmed civilians.

Even if you were to argue that Palestinians who declare in public they want to see all Israelis swept into the sea are combatants, there has never been an Israeli policy to set out to kill regardless. Yes, there have been Jewish lunatics, fanatics and people so blinded by either hatred or primitivism that they have called for Palestinians to be driven out, and have committed atrocities—but never has this been justified either by Jewish Law or actual Israeli policy. An independent judiciary and Supreme Court and independent commissions have always held to this principle. Indeed, when [the Kahane party advocated racist policies](#) towards the Arabs it was expelled from the Knesset. This needs to be asserted again and again, and contrasted with those who think that children on a bus are a fair target.

Some would say that Israel has brutalized the Palestinians, turning them into crude killers. But it was other Arabs and the UN who have intentionally condemned the Palestinians to living in awful conditions without hope. Although outwardly supported, the Palestinians are deeply unpopular throughout the Arab world. This, of course, justifies nothing; but I would be more inclined to accept blame if the other side would accept that as much brutalization has come from their own as from Israel.

All of this is by way of introduction. Spielberg's film evokes a variety of responses, but I do not think anyone involved in the Middle East situation

could possibly see this film simply as entertainment. It is about what violence does to everyone involved. Impressively, the script quotes the famous Midrash in which the Angels want to sing songs of rejoicing as the Egyptians are drowning in the Red Sea, but God replies, ["My creatures are drowning. How can you rejoice?"](#) Even Pharaoh and his henchmen, who threw children into the Nile, killed and raped innocents, and actually did set out to destroy a people, even they were still creatures of God, just as much as Jews or anyone else.

Even when one's cause is just, the process of killing, even in self-defense, has a profound impact on anyone with a degree of humanity. This is why a kohen, a Jewish priest, who has killed, even justly, may not stand in front of the congregation to bless it. There is blood on his hands, even if justified. As another Talmudic phrase goes, ["How can you say one person's blood is any redder than another's?"](#)

Armchair pundits are good at passing easy judgments. And I agree not all human beings are sensitive. But to take a human life is an awesome, terrible thing to do under any circumstances. This film is about what killing does to people, those entrusted with the mission, regardless of whether it is just.

The hero of the film is haunted by the way bound and gagged Israeli athletes are mown down as he is by having to kill the Palestinians who planned it. Whichever side one is on, there is the very valid point that taking life has a profound impact on real people and that violence breeds violence and an inevitable cycle will lead nowhere and it must be stopped. This is the recurring theme. (On the most trivial of levels, as an ex-headmaster, I can assure you that group punishments, threats and retaliation were the most ineffective and counterproductive of tools).

But of course it takes two to tango. Until one sees any evidence of a willingness on both parts to stop the cycle, it will continue. Wonderful, sensitive humane young men and women will be faced with choices of life and death, and many will do their duty and suffer in silence. I am constantly reminded of Golda Meir's famous statement that ["I can forgive those who commit violence against us, but I cannot forgive those who force us to be violent in return."](#)

I don't know if Hillel actually knew whose skull it was. I'm sure he did not mean to say that we should not deal with murderers, but he would have agreed with the old saying that "Those who live by the sword die by the sword." Although tragedy can strike us all, we must give constant thanks if we are individually spared having to make such decisions and take human life. If God is unhappy about the death of a cruel man, then so must we be. Otherwise we are in danger of losing our humanity.

There are many things about the film I liked and disliked (why does he HAVE to keep on shoving gratuitous sex into our faces—does he have a checklist to pass?), but it makes us think about how precious human life is and how terrible it is to take it. And how awful it is to be forced to do so in defense of one's right to live and have a home of one's own. And before one castigates the hero for ultimately seeking to escape and not wanting to

return, let us not also forget that that simply puts him on the same level as over one million other Israelis who have left Israel after serving their country since the State was founded.

The real victor of the film is humanity.

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