

“An Eye for an Eye Will Make the Whole World Blind”: Gandhi, the Jewish People, and Supersessionism

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The phrase “An eye for an eye will make the whole world blind” has come to epitomize the thought of Mahatma Gandhi. That phrase is in fact the invention of Gandhi’s biographer Louis Fischer. It is justifiably associated with Gandhi, however, because it articulates Gandhi’s persistently supersessionist understanding of Jews and of Judaism. The biblical phrase “an eye for an eye” is not, according to rabbinic tradition, an injunction that one inflict physical injury on another in the spirit of revenge or retribution.

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Gandhi famously told his biographer Louis Fischer that he was “a Muslim, a Hindu, a Buddhist, a Christian, a Jew, a Parci.”¹ Gandhi’s religious ecumenism was remarkable, especially for its time, but the truth is that he knew relatively little about Judaism, which he viewed largely through the lens of a stereotypical and dismissive supersessionism—that is, through the belief that Judaism finds its fulfillment, and its true meaning, in Christianity; that the new covenant through Jesus Christ has improved, superseded, and indeed replaced—and rendered obsolete—the Mosaic covenant.² According to Louis Fischer, Gandhi’s Jewish-American biographer, Gandhi considered Jesus to be “the finest flower of Judaism.”³ Fischer reports that Gandhi had a difficult time making his way through the first five books of the Bible (that is, the Torah proper, referred to in the Jewish tradition as the *Chumash* and in the broader Western tradition as the Pentateuch). According to Fischer, “Gandhi never got beyond Leviticus and Numbers; the first books of the Old Testament bored him. Later in life he enjoyed the Prophets, Psalms and Ecclesiastes. The New Testament was more interesting, and the Sermon on the Mount, he remarked, ‘went straight to [his] heart.’”⁴

Gandhi was not without empathy for the catastrophic plight of the Jewish people at the hands of the Nazis in the middle of the twentieth century. On November 11, 1938, Gandhi writes, “My sympathies are all with the Jews. They have been the untouchables of Christianity . . . [T]he German persecution of the Jews seems to have no parallel in history. . . . If there ever could be a justifiable war in the name of and for humanity, war against Germany to prevent the wanton persecution of a whole race would be completely justified.” Note how, even as Gandhi expresses his sympathy for the Jewish victims of Hitler’s hate, he refers to Jews as “the untouchables of Christianity.” But Jews are not Christians! Or perhaps Gandhi is saying that, for Christians, the Jews have the same lowly status as do the untouchables, when viewed from the perspective of Hindus from higher castes. The supersessionist understanding of Judaism, reflected in Gandhi’s conviction that Jesus is “the finest” – and indeed the culminating - “flower of Judaism” is what, in part, led to the very catastrophe that Gandhi is here lamenting. The

¹ Louis Fischer, *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi* (London: Harper Collins, 1997), 544.

² On Gandhi’s supersessionism, see Ephraim Meir, “Gandhi’s View on Judaism and Zionism in Light of an Interreligious Theology,” *Religions* 12 (2021), 489:12, 1 (<https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12070489>).

³ Louis Fischer, *Mahatma Gandhi: His Life and Times* (https://www.mkgandhi.org/ebks/mg_hislifeandtimes.pdf), 479.

⁴ Fischer, *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*, 53.

Germans' murderous persecution of the Jews, Gandhi goes on to say, might even render a war against the Nazis "justifiable." But," Gandhi writes, in sympathy with the views of his mentor, the great Russian novelist and moral and religious philosopher Leo Tolstoy, "I do not believe in any war."⁵ Armed resistance against Hitler was, for Gandhi, out of the question.

Gandhi understood the astounding human toll of the catastrophe of World War II, which would result in the deaths of 30 million people. His moral idealism is inspiring. In the case of the Jews, however, his approach appears naïve. "Can the Jews," Gandhi asks in 1938, "resist this organized and shameless persecution?" He goes on to write, in a remarkable passage that needs to be quoted at length:

If I were a Jew and were born in Germany and earned my livelihood there, I would claim Germany as my home even as the tallest gentile German might, and challenge him to shoot me or cast me in the dungeon . . . And for doing this I should not wait for the fellow Jews to join me in civil resistance, but would have confidence that in the end the rest were bound to follow my example. If one Jew or all the Jews were to accept the prescription here offered, he or they cannot be worse off than now. . . . The calculated violence of Hitler may even result in a general massacre of the Jews by way of his first answer to the declaration of such hostilities. But if the Jewish mind could be prepared for voluntary sacrifice, even the massacre I have imagined could be turned into a day of thanksgiving that Jehovah had wrought deliverance of the race even at the hands of a tyrant. For to the God-fearing, death has no terror.

The Jews of Germany can offer Satyagraha [non-violent resistance] under infinitely better auspices than the Indians of South Africa. The Jews are a compact, homogenous community in Germany. They are far more gifted than the Indians of South Africa. They have organized world opinion behind them. I am convinced that if someone with courage and vision can arise among them to lead them in non-violent action, the winter of their despair can in the twinkling of an eye be turned into the summer of hope. And what has today become a degrading man hunt can be turned into a calm and determined stand offered by unarmed men and women possessing the strength of suffering given to them by Jehovah . . . The German Jews will score a lasting victory over the German gentiles in the sense that they will have converted the latter to an appreciation of human dignity.⁶

The naïveté of this passage speaks for itself. Non-violent resistance by the native population proved itself to be an innovative and effective approach in the case of challenging British colonial rule in India, but it would surely have failed against the brutally inhumane Nazis. Appealing to the alleged humanity of Hitler was doomed to failure.⁷ Judaism is a religion that seeks peace, but

⁵ Fischer, *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*, 433. Fischer is quoting from Gandhi's book *Non-Violence in Peace and War* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1942). See particularly Chapter 64, "The Jews," 219–24.

⁶ Fischer, *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*, 433–34.

⁷ Even Hermann Kallenbach, the devoted disciple of both Tolstoy and Gandhi who believed deeply in non-violence, considered Hitler beyond redemption. A Jew, Kallenbach told Gandhi that he "cannot pray for Hitler." "I do not quarrel with him over his anger," Gandhi remarks. "He wants to be non-violent, but the sufferings of his fellow Jews

that also holds that there are times when armed resistance to evil is necessary in order to preserve life.⁸ Judaism's age-old aversion to war becomes clear when, after reading Homer's *Iliad*, one turns to the roughly contemporary Genesis, the first book of the Bible. While Homer is fully aware of the horrors of war, the *Iliad* represents battle after bloody battle, in gory detail. The first great hero of Genesis is Abraham, the first of the Jewish patriarchs. Abraham is known, above all, for his quality of *chesed*, of loving-kindness. When his nephew Lot is taken captive by the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham organizes a military expedition to rescue him. Abraham is clearly a military hero, but the text devotes only two brief verses (Genesis 14:14–15) to the military exploit itself, and describes it in matter-of-fact, understated, unheroic terms.

Another aspect of this Gandhian passage worth noting for its lack of understanding of Judaism is Gandhi's reference to the God worshipped by the Jews as "Jehovah." This name sounds particularly grating to Jewish ears, as it pronounces what is, for Jews, unpronounceable, namely the so-called Tetragrammaton, the four Hebrew letters Yod He Vav He יהוה, which are never pronounced in Hebrew. When Jews read these letters aloud, they traditionally say "Adonai" (literally meaning "my Lords," this being the so-called "plural of majesty" rather than referring to more than one God!). Or, when encountering the Tetragrammaton, Jews may refer to God as "*HaShem*," meaning "The Name." To pronounce the Tetragrammaton, from a Jewish perspective, is idolatrous, is to limit the infinity of God, who cannot be represented, who is beyond representation. God, from a Jewish perspective, is not an object or a thing but is rather to be understood or responded to—or at least this is my preference—as a moral exigency, as a command to love my neighbor as if that very loving of the neighbor is what it means to be myself.⁹

are too much for him to bear. What is true of him is true of thousands of Jews who have no thought even of 'loving the enemy.' With them, as with millions, 'revenge is sweet, to forgive divine'" (Fischer, *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*, 434). In order truly to be worthy of forgiveness, in Judaism, the sinner must be willing to recognize his sin and to begin the inner spiritual work necessary to correct it; to submit himself, that is, to the process of *teshuvah* (repentance). That is why it is so difficult for a Jew to forgive Hitler. For a balanced assessment of Gandhi's controversial response to Hitler and Nazism, see Douglas Allen, *Mahatma Gandhi* (Reaktion Books: London, 2011), who sympathizes with the view that Gandhi's "advice [to the Jews suffering from Nazi persecution] is insensitive, ill informed, naïve, out of touch, immoral and suicidal" (94). Despite Allen's reservations about "the short-term" (123) effects of Gandhi's response to Hitler, he suggests that "Gandhi's long-term preventative approach [to confronting violence] could have been very effective in preventing Hitler and the Nazis from coming to power and confronting the world with the difficult challenges of extreme short-term violence and war-making at home and abroad" (124).

⁸ As Ephraim Meir observes ("A Virtual Dialogue Between Levinas and Gandhi," *Religions* 12 (2021), 489:12, 1 [https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12060422], Veena R. Howard, in her essay "Nonviolence in the Dharma Traditions: Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism," raises the question of whether or not "the *dharma* of non-violence and the *dharma* of self-protection are reconcilable." In his notion of the third party (*le tiers*), Emmanuel Levinas attempts successfully to reconcile the two. For Levinas, in the face-to-face encounter, when there are just two of us, I owe the other everything. I am infinitely responsible for the other in front of me. But then the third party—the other other—comes along, for whom I am also responsible. And I am responsible, as well, for all the other others who come along. Justice therefore demands that my infinite responsibility for the other in front of me (ethics) be delimited by my obligation to the other others (politics). But then justice also can protect me, as one of the other others, from violence. When I am the third party (*le tiers*), the *dharma* of non-violence (effected through me, as an I—a subject—who is infinitely responsible for the Other in front of me) and the *dharma* of self-protection are reconciled. See Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 1998), xli-xlii, 157, and 191.

⁹ See Emmanuel Levinas, "God and Philosophy," *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 1998), 55–78 and Georges Hansel, "Abraham et le Monothéisme," *De la Bible au Talmud*

The great modern Jewish philosopher Martin Buber fled Nazi Germany in 1938 and relocated in Jerusalem. Buber greatly admired Gandhi, but he was troubled by Gandhi's lack of sympathy for Jewish claims on the Holy Land. In 1939, Buber addressed his concerns in a letter to Gandhi.¹⁰ Buber notes that, while the Indians could call a whole subcontinent their homeland, Gandhi believed a homeland that existed only in the hearts of Jews was sufficient for Jewish purposes. In regard to the Arab-Israeli conflict, Gandhi distinctly sided with the Arabs who, he believed, should not be forced to leave the land in which they had been living for centuries. His siding with the Arab population in the Arab-Israeli conflict can perhaps also be explained as a consequence of his own experience as an East Indian who was more far more familiar with Islam than with Judaism, as well, perhaps, as of Gandhi's political interest in allying India with the Muslim League.¹¹

After war had begun, and even after the horrors of the Nazis were more fully revealed, Gandhi continued to believe that the appropriate response of Jews should have been non-violent resistance. After Hitler's death in 1946, Louis Fischer reports that Gandhi said to him: "Hitler killed five million Jews [by the end of the war this figure was, of course, tragically, revised to six million]. It is the greatest crime of our time. But the Jews should have offered themselves to the butcher's knife. They should have thrown themselves into the sea from the cliffs . . . It would have aroused the world and the people of Germany . . . As it is they succumbed anyway in their millions."¹²

Let us look a little more closely at Gandhi's embracing of supersessionism, at his preference for Christianity over Judaism. This finds its most famous expression in a quotation associated with Gandhi, but that is, ironically, the invention of Gandhi's Jewish friend and biographer Louis Fischer. That famous quotation reads: "An eye for an eye will make the whole world blind." In his book *Gandhi and Stalin* (1947), Fischer embraces the Gandhian notion that true political change for the better, true democracy, can only come about if it begins with the transformation of the soul of the individual person. Democracy cannot be achieved through violent means. Fischer writes: "The shreds of individuality cannot be sewed together with a bayonet; nor can democracy be restored according to the Biblical injunction of an 'eye for an eye' which, in the end, would make everybody blind."¹³ In 1951, Fischer published *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*. Here Fischer discusses Gandhi's notion of *Satyagraha*, meaning "truth force or love-force," and which sees truth and love as "attributes of the soul." *Satyagraha*, Fischer insists, "is the exact opposite of the policy of an-eye-for-an-eye-for-an-eye which ends in making everybody blind."¹⁴

It is ironic that "an-eye-for-an-eye will make the whole world blind," a sentiment expressing the age-old association of Judaism with an attitude of bloody revenge, was in fact the

(Odile Jacob: Paris, 2008), 185–91. On Levinas and Gandhi, see Ephraim Meir, "A Virtual Dialogue Between Levinas and Gandhi," *Religions* 12 (2021), 489:12 (<https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12060422>).

¹⁰ The letter in which Buber expresses his disagreements with Gandhi can be found in the Jewish Virtual Library (<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/letter-from-martin-buber-to-gandhi>).

¹¹ I am grateful to the anonymous first reviewer of this essay for this excellent suggestion.

¹² Fischer, *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*, 435.

¹³ https://archive.org/stream/in.ernet.dli.2015.523247/2015.523247.Gandhi-And_djvu.txt

¹⁴ *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*, 102.

invention of Gandhi's Jewish disciple Louis Fischer who, despite his Judaism, appears to have been unaware of the traditional rabbinic understanding of the meaning of "an eye for an eye." The phrase "an eye for an eye" (Exodus 21:24) most definitely is not, according to the rabbinic tradition of biblical commentary and of the Talmud, an injunction that one inflict physical injury on another in the spirit of revenge or retribution. The rabbis have understood this phrase to refer to *monetary compensation*. If, as a result of my actions, I cause another to lose their eye, then I must reimburse them for this injury. If, because of my actions, I cause you to lose your eyesight, and you suffer financially as a result of not being able to see, then I must compensate you for your financial loss. That, according to the rabbis, is what "an eye for an eye" means, not "if you poke out my eye, I have the right to poke out yours." "An eye for an eye" most definitely is not, according to the rabbis, motivated by the spirit of revenge, which Gandhi went so far as to attribute, in 1938, to the Jewish motivation for advocating a declaration of war against Hitler.¹⁵

In his understanding of the infamous "eye for an eye" passage, Louis Fischer was guided by the following famous verses in Matthew, where Jesus says:

You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also. (Matthew 5:38–39, NRSV)

Here now is the context of the passage in which the phrase "an eye for an eye" first appears in the Hebrew Bible:

If men shall fight and they collide with a pregnant woman and she miscarries, but there will be no fatality, he shall surely be punished as the husband of the woman shall cause to be assessed against him, and he shall pay it by order of judges. But if there shall be a fatality, then you shall award a life for a life; an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a hand for a hand, a foot for a foot; a burn for a burn, a wound for a wound, a bruise for a bruise. (Exodus 22–25)¹⁶

If the pregnant woman dies as a result of being caught in the middle of a fight between two men, and the court finds that her death was intentional, "a life for a life" here means just that. The men receive the death penalty. But if intent cannot be proved sufficiently, then "a life for a life," according to the great and influential medieval biblical explicator Rashi (1040–1105), refers to *damages*, that is, *to what the offender must pay the victim's family in compensation for her death*. And the same goes for the injuries incurred, whether in the course of a fight or in some other manner. If someone caused permanent bodily damage to another, he must pay "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a hand for a hand, a foot for a foot; a foot for a foot; a burn for a burn, a wound for a wound, a bruise for a bruise."

So much for the written Torah and the ancient commentary—that is, the Midrash—on the written Torah. But Judaism is, traditionally, more than the written Torah. Jewish tradition

¹⁵ *Harijan*, December 17, 1938, as cited by Ephraim Meir, "Gandhi's View on Judaism," 14.

¹⁶ Nosson Scherman, ed., *The Chumash: The ArtScroll Series/Stone Edition* (Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 1993; rpt. 2004), 423. For a discussion of the so-called *lex talionis* (the law of retributive justice, or measure-for-measure justice) in the Jewish tradition, see Hansel, *De la Bible au Talmud*, 17–43 ("Significations de la loi du talion").

holds that both the written and the oral Torah were revealed to the Jewish people at Sinai. The oral Torah, according to tradition, had been transmitted orally until it was written down following the destruction of the Second Temple in the year 70 of the Common Era. The crown jewel of the oral Torah is the Babylonian Talmud, which consists of the Mishnah, compiled by Rabbi Judah Ha-Nasi around 220 CE; and the Gemara, dated roughly three hundred years later than the Mishnah, and which comments on the Mishnah. Here is how the Mishnah, in the tractate *Bava Kamma* (83a), understands the meaning of the phrase “an eye for an eye”: the Rabbis state that the offender must pay compensation “for damage, for pain, for medical costs, for loss of livelihood, and for humiliation. How is payment for damage assessed? If one blinded another’s eye, . . . the court appraises how much he was worth before the injury and how much he is worth after the injury.”¹⁷ The offender then pays the difference between these two sums to the victim.

“It is clear from the Talmud (*Bava Kamma* 83b-84a),” asserts Rabbi Nosson Scherman, the editor of a standard contemporary biblical commentary, that the phrase “an eye for eye”

. . . was always known to mean, as the Oral Law explains it, that the responsible party must pay the *monetary* value for an eye, in restitution for the eye that he had blinded. Never was there a Jewish court that ever blinded or otherwise inflicted a physical injury in revenge or retribution; the only corporal punishments ever imposed are the death penalty and lashes, where provided by the Torah. The question that remains, however, is expressed in terms that could be taken literally to mean that Jewish courts routinely mutilate people. *Rambam* [the great medieval philosopher Maimonides (1138–1204)] explains that in the Heavenly scales, the perpetrator *deserves* to lose his own eye—and for this reason cannot find atonement for his sin merely by making the required monetary payments; he must also beg his victim’s forgiveness—but the human courts have no authority to do more than require the responsible party to make monetary restitution.¹⁸

Citing Maimonides and other rabbinic sages, Rabbi Scherman comments that the wording of the biblical text implies that someone who blinds another *deserves* to lose his own eye. And the same might be said of the phrase “a life for a life.” As Rabbi Maurice Harris argues in his essay “Judaism and the Death Penalty,”¹⁹ the rabbis of the Talmud accept the death penalty in principle—if I take someone’s life, I *deserve* a death sentence in return—but they also make it virtually impossible for anyone to be sentenced to death for having committed murder. So rare was it for a rabbinic court to actually sentence a defendant to death, that a court that sentenced a plaintiff to death just once in seventy years was considered a hanging court.

Supersessionism sees the so-called Old Testament, with its allegedly vengeful doctrine of an “eye for an eye,” as depicting its God as angry and vengeful, while the New Testament emphasizes love over vengeance. We must insist here that the Pentateuch—that is, the Torah proper, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible—is, contra Gandhi, resolutely opposed to the

¹⁷ Koren Steinsaltz, ed., *Talmud Bavli, Bava Kamma* 83a, 2016.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Steven Shankman and Taylor Smith, eds. *Interreligious Perspectives on the Death Penalty* (Eugene, OR: University of Oregon Books, 2014), 22–33.

spirit of revenge. The Torah is deeply aware that revenge initiates a deadly cycle that becomes increasingly difficult, even impossible, to exit. Let us now discuss two passages that state this explicitly.

The first passage is Genesis 18:15. Cain, jealous over God's preference for the sacrifices offered to God by Abel over those offered by Cain, kills his brother Abel. This is the very first murder in the Bible. Immediately after Cain kills Abel, God places a mark on Cain's forehead, the infamous "mark of Cain." As Robert Alter explains in the commentary to his translation, this mark is "not a stigma as the English idiom, 'mark of Cain,' suggests." It is rather "a mark of protection."²⁰ This is clearly the meaning of the closing words of Genesis 4:15: "And the Lord set a mark upon Cain so that whoever found him would not slay him." The mark of Cain announces, by divine fiat, that no one should take it upon himself to slay Cain in revenge for his murder of Abel. The Torah, like Homer's *Iliad*, knows precisely where the motive of revenge will lead humankind: to an endless cycle of murders, each fueled by an insatiable desire for revenge.

The second passage that aims at stopping the cycle of revenge can be found in the Book of Numbers, and is repeated in Deuteronomy. The first five books of the Torah end with the Israelites on the verge of entering the Promised Land. One of the innovations promised in the Promised Land, which will make it truly a Land of Promise, is the establishment of the so-called Cities of Refuge. These are first described in Numbers 35:9–34. There are to be six of these cities: three on the east side of the River Jordan—that is, just east of the Promised Land—and three within Israel proper, on the west side of the Jordan. It is here that a person who has committed murder unintentionally—although in some cases with a negligence that still renders him guilty to some extent—may flee so that he can be protected from the so-called avengers of the blood of those killed while the judicial process runs its course. The setting aside of the three cities on the west side of the Jordan is alluded to again in Deuteronomy 4:41–43.

The phrase "an eye for an eye only ends up making the whole world blind" is often ascribed to Gandhi. As we have remarked, Gandhi never actually uttered these precise words, but they have come to epitomize his thought, for better and, from my perspective, sometimes for worse. For better, because the phrase rightly condemns all those seek revenge rather than justice. For worse, because the phrase is drawn from the Hebrew Bible without reference to the traditional commentary that would dispel the idea that the text is here valorizing vengeance. The phrase can thereby be understood as perpetuating dangerous stereotypes that have, for millennia, been used to justify violence against Jews. And that violence has been extreme, as Gandhi remarked in his comment that Hitler's persecution of the Jews was "the greatest crime of our time." Antisemitism, now ominously on the rise world-wide once again, has marked Western civilization since at least the early Middle Ages, culminating in the Shoah, meaning literally "the catastrophe," or what the Western world outside of Israel calls the Holocaust. Gandhi, like his mentor Leo Tolstoy, is a genuinely original and stimulating interreligious thinker, wonderfully open to a great variety of religious and spiritual traditions from around the globe. In regard to Judaism and to the survival of the Jewish people, however, the issue of Gandhi's legacy remains fraught.²¹

²⁰ Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 18.

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