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April 19, 2010: How Religions are Hijacked

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Title: How Religions are Hijacked

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4/19/2010—The question is asked all the time, “why don’t Muslims denounce jihadist violence?” Where are the voices of reason within that religious tradition? Well, if we look at an analogous situation, we can perhaps begin to empathize with the moderate majority of Muslims.

In the recent issue of the New York Review of Books, Eyal Press writes of the growing movement in the Israeli army to refuse any order to forcibly evacuate west bank settlements as part of an agreement with the Palestinians. ([Israel's Holy Warriors](#)) Not only does this movement threaten the democratic character of Israel, but even more significantly, Press shows that the movement is overwhelmingly religious in character: “when the Israeli government introduced a plan to dismantle twenty-six illegal settlement outposts in the West Bank last May, a coalition of rabbis based in the settlements advocated refusal. ‘The holy Torah prohibits taking part in any act of uprooting Jews from any part of our sacred land,’ they wrote.” At the Har Bracha Hesder Yeshiva, which the Ministry of Defense had previously funded as part of a shared military/religious training program, Rabbi Eliezer Melamed, published a book distributed to its graduates that unabashedly promoted refusal: “A simple halakha [law] is that it is forbidden for any person, whether a soldier or an officer...to participate in the strictly forbidden act of expelling Jews from their homes and handing over any portion of the Land of Israel to enemies.”

The problem here is not just the obvious one: how can there be peace if right wing religious types control the army? Rather, the problem is a religious one. Is it in fact forbidden by Jewish law to make a peace deal with the Palestinians that includes relinquishment of West Bank territory?

Now, I admit that I don’t know much about the intricacies of Jewish law. I have never read the works of the late Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda Kook, considered the spiritual father of the settlement movement. But it is hard for me to understand the legal position being proposed. In a sense, the entire Talmudic project represented an acknowledgement that giving up the holy land without further violence against Rome was the proper Jewish action after the Bar Kochba rebellion in 132. In addition, a peace deal with the Palestinians would not exclude Jews necessarily from land promised by God in the Torah. After a peace deal, one would simply live there under Palestinian authority and law. That was always the case with Jews living in Israel prior to 1948. Surely there was no religious obligation to seize the land throughout all that time.

As I say, I cannot make these arguments since I don’t know and don’t care about Jewish law. But that is true of secular Muslims as well in terms of violence. It is time to ask, where are the Jewish rabbis who should be contesting the settler interpretation of Jewish law? And I don’t mean just in Israel. Where are the rabbis here in America? And I am not talking about liberal rabbis making essentially political arguments for peace. Where are the serious Jewish scholars to contest with the rabbinic right wing from within the tradition? They have thus far been silent. Just like many Muslim leaders.