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# Israel and the CNN Effect

Images of bloodshed in Gaza should upset anyone with a healthy moral sense. But they don't help determine whether the actions that brought these scenes about were ethical.



Smoke rises from an explosion in Gaza on October 28, 2023 seen from Sderot, Israel. Dan Kitwood/Getty Images.

## OBSERVATION

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### About the author

Rabbi Shlomo Brody is the executive director of Ematai, an organization dedicated to helping Jews think about aging, end-of-life care, and organ donation. His newest book, *Ethics of Our Fighters*, was released at the end of 2023.

*This story on international law, Israel, and the conflict in Gaza is excerpted and adapted from Ethics of Our Fighters: A Jewish View on War and Morality (Koren Publishers, 2023). It will be followed shortly by another on the same subject.*

For the past three months, it's been nearly impossible to open a newspaper, turn on the news, or log onto social media without seeing photographs of the destruction the IDF has visited on Gaza. Images of adults carrying wounded children out of the rubble of flattened buildings seem to be the particular visual hallmark of this war. And there have been sights more terrible still. More than the dubious statistics churned out by Hamas, the often-tendentious reporting of professional journalists, or the libelous condemnations issued by politicians and celebrities, it is these images that have done the most to shape perceptions of the conflict. A picture, as the saying goes, is worth a thousand words. And many of these pictures should indeed upset anyone with a healthy moral sense.

But what these images don't do is help us determine whether the actions that brought these scenes about were ethical—or who bears moral responsibility. To answer such questions, we need to draw on the extensive tradition of thinking about just war, the more recently developed laws of armed conflict, and Judaism's own rich body of legal and moral reasoning about the difficult questions faced by any military trying to conduct a modern war.

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As I lay out in my book, *Ethics of Our Fighters*, all these ethical frameworks rightly permit the unintended but inevitable killing of noncombatants provided that reasonable precautions are taken to minimize civilian deaths. But the age of modern media adds an additional concern: that such photographs constitute a *hillul Hashem*, a desecration of God's name. That is, the perception of His people as bloodthirsty murderers, even when deeply mistaken, might bring dishonor to God, and Israel should therefore act in a way that minimizes this perception. This argument was invoked in the Arab-Israeli conflict as early as 1937, when Zionists first developed the "Purity of Arms" doctrine that still governs the IDF. A similar argument can be phrased in secular, pragmatic terms: bad publicity hurts a country's alliances and detracts from its soft power. Should Israel, to protect its reputation, sacrifice significant military gains in order to reduce noncombatant casualties—even if doing so would be justified on ethical and legal grounds?

Generally speaking, the answer is no. The concept of *hillul Hashem* has two different connotations, one political and the second moral.

1. First, God's reputation rests on the *political* state of the Jewish people. Israel's exile is seen, by the world, as divine failure. Its success, by contrast, is proof of God's greatness and His ability to bring justice to the world. Evildoers must fall and a righteous Israel must thrive for His name to be glorified.
2. Second, God's reputation is shaped by the *moral* behavior of the Jewish people. Jews represent the values of the Bible. When they act ethically, the Torah is glorified. When they behave badly, the Torah is denigrated. Thus Israel must, at the very least, maintain basic international standards of civilized military behavior while keeping to its ethical commitments under international agreements.

Both understandings are firmly rooted in tradition, and both must be taken into consideration. Yet it's important to determine which cases rightly condemn a country's reputation. After all, a country's political standing or ethical behavior should not be judged solely on the superficial perspectives of uninformed, and sometimes hostile, observers.

To illustrate the point, we'll take two incidents that occurred in the same Lebanese town, ten years apart.

**On April 18, 1996**, Naftali Bennett, the twenty-four-year-old commander of the Maglan special forces, radioed for emergency help from southern Lebanon. Bennett's unit had spent the previous eight days on a reconnaissance mission to locate Hizballah fighters, rocket launchers, and other targets. These efforts were a part of Operation Grapes of Wrath, launched by then-Prime Minister Shimon Peres to stop Hizballah attacks from southern Lebanon that were increasingly fatal for both IDF soldiers and Israeli civilians. Bennett's reconnaissance unit would identify the location of moving Hizballah targets; then the IDF would destroy them with air strikes or artillery.

This method served two goals: to decrease the danger to IDF soldiers, and to identify targets clearly so that Lebanese civilians would not be caught in the crossfire. As the head of the Israeli air force explained, "Extreme precision was required because the apartment buildings [housing Hizballah operation centers] also housed the families of Hizballah fighters. We did not want CNN to broadcast scenes of dead women and children."

After eight days, an IDF helicopter was mistakenly sent during daytime hours to provide Bennett's unit with food and supplies. One detachment became exposed. Hizballah fighters, wearing UN flak jackets, stood in a Lebanese cemetery and shot mortar fire that landed close to the IDF commandos and then took cover in a UN compound 560 feet away that was sheltering nearly 800 civilians. (Three days before, when a Fijian peacekeeper tried to stop the guerrillas from firing in the vicinity, he was shot in the chest.)

Needing to act quickly and with few options to protect the exposed soldiers, the IDF opened up with its artillery on Hizballah's rocket launchers. Due to a combination of unfavorable weather, imprecise maps, technological limitations, and human error, the artillery fire missed its mark and hit the UN compound. Over 100 people were killed and a similar number wounded. Images of decapitated children and disemboweled women were soon broadcast throughout the world. In the interim, the IDF commandos were extracted by helicopter to safety. Robert Fisk, a British journalist who built his reputation on antipathy for Israel, filed his report under the headline "Massacre in Sanctuary." The story began, "It was a massacre. Not since Sabra and Shatila had I seen the innocent slaughtered like this."

Fisk of course was referring to the 1982 assault on two Palestinian areas of Beirut by the Phalange, a Christian militia then allied with Israel. The images of the two incidents were similar, but the moral responsibility was very different. In 1982, the Phalangists targeted noncombatants when they were under no immediate threat. Their aim was revenge, not self-defense. This atrocity by an Israeli ally, when IDF soldiers were nearby, was a *hillul Hashem*. In 1996, the IDF was trying to destroy rockets that were threatening its soldiers. The noncombatant deaths were unintentional and were caused by Hizballah shooting next to the UN shelter. As Matan Vilnai, the IDF deputy chief of staff, argued, "Hizballah are doing their utmost to get civilians killed by sheltering among them and by firing Katyushas and mortars from positions very close to UN or civilian positions."

While Prime Minister Peres was initially sympathetic to the IDF's argument, he cut the operation short. The shocking images from Qana were damaging Israel's international support; he couldn't tolerate such a tarnished image, especially two months before Israeli elections. The IDF bitterly complained. Peres had not only stopped the operation prematurely before the army could complete its mission; he had also signed a lopsided cease-fire deal in which both sides promised not to "fire any kind of weapon at civilians or civilian targets." Such an agreement would not be observed by Hizballah and, moreover, would hinder the IDF's future responses since Hizballah embedded itself within Lebanese villages. It further gave the impression that should Israel attack Hizballah targets within civilian locations, Hizballah could legitimately retaliate against civilian targets within Israel. Hizballah had won a strategic victory from the so-called "Qana massacre."

Critical to this episode was the reaction of Rabbi Yehuda Amital, a leading religious Zionist thinker who had become a peace activist in the wake of what he saw as the moral errors of the first Lebanon War, including the incident in Sabra and Shatila. Amital had recently joined Peres's cabinet as a minister without portfolio after the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin. Rabin's death at the hands of a religious Jew was a terrible *hillul Hashem*; Amital's entrance into the cabinet was a welcome correction to the sullied image of religiosity.

Rabbi Amital was deeply shaken by the images from Qana. On a trip to England, he deemed the incident as "indescribable *hillul Hashem*

to the nations of the world.” Amital’s statement was covered on the front page of Britain’s main Jewish newspaper.

Such an acute moral sense is admirable, but his reaction was overly emotional and dangerously disproportionate. Yes, the scenes from Qana damaged Israel’s public image. But they are also very typical in warfare and should not stop a country from carrying out a just mission. No matter how “smart” bombs might become, and no matter how much intelligence may be gathered, civilians will be killed. Every attacking party makes mistakes, particularly when the defending party deliberately puts its own citizens in harm’s way. Yet these gruesome images tell us nothing about the morality of the particular strike, and certainly not of the larger mission.

The problem with using media spectacles as moral barometers isn’t just that the given journalists may be against the overall war or particularly biased against an attacking army (although this might be true, as is regularly the case with Israel). It’s that the medium itself leads people to replace hardheaded analysis with sheer emotion. As Robert Kaplan noted, “nothing matters to [journalists and others] except the horrendous spectacle before their eyes—*about which something must be done!*” Anyone looking at the photographs naturally thinks only about the victims. What could they have possibly done to deserve this? One stops taking into consideration the behavior of, and relationship among, the different parties to the conflict, and whether one side might be acting legitimately to protect its vital interests. Photojournalists cannot take pictures of the atrocities *prevented* by the pursuit of just war.

Rabbi Amital fell into this trap, forming a conclusion based on images on the television and Internet with little regard for context or moral complexity. Though Amital understood that Hizballah’s firing from civilian areas led to the incident, he deemed Qana a *hillul Hashem*, thereby playing into Hizballah’s misinformation campaign. The concept of *hillul Hashem* became a shield for Hizballah.

**Alas**, the same mistake was made by Israel ten years later during the 2006 Second Lebanon War. American negotiators were on the verge of securing a favorable cease-fire deal between Jerusalem and Beirut, which included meaningful provisions to keep Hizballah away from the Israeli border. Hizballah, pushed to the breaking point after two weeks of fighting, agreed to the conditions. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice arrived in the region to sign the deal.

As Israeli officials were having breakfast with Rice, their cellphones began to buzz. “Incident in Qana in Lebanon. Dozens dead.” The IDF had bombed the outskirts of Qana, whence Katyusha rockets had been launched. An apartment building collapsed from the impact. Televisions across the world displayed images of bleeding, soot-covered children and rows of bodies covered with white plastic sacks. Twenty-eight people were tragically killed, but initial media reports doubled that number. International condemnation was quick to follow. It didn’t matter that Hizballah had fired over 150 rockets from the area in the previous weeks. Instead of pressing Hizballah to stop its war crime of fighting from civilian territories, the UN Security Council held an emergency meeting to lambast Israel. Some members credulously accused the Jewish state of purposely targeting civilians. Israel also hurt its own case by taking too long to ascertain the facts and to release footage of Katyusha rockets originating in the village. Barred from entering Beirut by the enraged Lebanese government and annoyed by Israel’s sloppy handling, and shifting account, of the incident, a frustrated Rice realized the cease-fire deal was dead.

Despite the terrible press, the IDF brass wanted to intensify strikes and make clear that notwithstanding Qana, there was no way out for Hizballah without a political deal. The U.S. national security experts felt similarly: the war could not stop without a fundamental change in the Lebanese reality. Rice, however, demanded that Israel implement a 48-hour cease-fire for “humanitarian reasons.” She further convinced President Bush that Israel’s incursion was now causing more damage than benefit for the region. America successfully pressured Israel to end the war without achieving substantive political changes. For Hizballah, as two distinguished journalists would later write, “The killing in Qana was a godsend.” Instead of signing a humiliating cease-fire deal, it would continue to fight from civilian locations with impunity. The world’s emotional response to bloody images from Qana allowed it to once again to win the propaganda war. Today, both Israel and Lebanon are paying the price.

For the West to win its asymmetric wars, the Qana syndrome must stop. Collateral damage and tragic mistakes are inevitable in these wars. We might be saddened by these deaths, but our moral analysis must remain sober. Good reasoning must overcome our instinctive revulsion to bloodshed. We cannot fixate on body counts or CNN coverage. Instead, we must determine with whom culpability lies. Occasionally, Israel makes mistakes in the fog of war, and should take responsibility for those errors, even when they are unintentional. In Qana and countless other cases in Gaza responsibility falls on the extremists who ran for cover within their population centers. Israel and other countries should take reasonable steps to avoid collateral damage, but not by taking excessive risks with soldiers’ lives or endangering the success of the mission.

Ultimately, the greatest *kiddush Hashem* lies in following our moral principles constantly and consistently despite the protracted conflict against enemies who don’t care about any rules.

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