

A FAQ: What do you think about suicide bombers?

By Moshé Machover

The common motivation behind this frequently asked question is by no means an innocent one. In fact, the question itself is quite strange: why ask about *suicide* bombers rather than about bombers *simpliciter*? Is the questioner interested in our view about suicide bombers as distinct from *non-suicide* ones? Surely, whether a perpetrator of a bombing commits suicide in the act is – morally speaking – not the principal issue: what matters most is the bombing. And why confine the question to *bombing*? Can our judgment about firing a machine-gun indiscriminately into a crowd differ from that about detonating a bomb in a crowded place?

I will therefore start by considering the principal issue raised by the question: that of indiscriminate killing. Yet, the secondary issue of suicide committed in such an act is nevertheless of some importance, and I do not wish to evade it. I will deal with it later on.

Indiscriminate killing

Indiscriminate killing of persons who are non-combatants and who may well be innocent is an abhorrent atrocity and must be condemned without reservation. Where the intention or the likely effect is the murder of *many* innocent non-combatants, the act is all the more heinous. This is so irrespective of the larger goal in the name of which the act is perpetrated. An atrocity can in no way be justified or excused even if committed in the course of a just war or a struggle for liberation from oppression.

Yet, the aims and circumstances do make a difference – not to the culpability of the act itself, but with respect to *additional* blame that may be associated with it. An atrocity committed in an unjust war or in the service of oppression is *doubly* damnable: for its aim as well as the means. On the other hand, where an evil is committed by those who resist oppression and in the course of struggle for liberation, the oppressor must be regarded as an accessory to the outrage. This is because the oppressor must know that those driven to despair and outrage by their miserable condition are likely to respond by deranged desperate outrageous acts; this in no way exculpates the latter, but it does make the former a causative contributor to evildoing. Oppression is the root cause.

Does a perpetrator's suicide make a difference?

Within an armed conflict, suicide killing – whether by bombing or by other means – is almost in all cases perpetrated by the weaker side, often by the downtrodden. So the hidden agenda behind the question posed at the outset, asking us to comment on suicide bombings, is to make us focus on the violence of the oppressed and turn our attention away from that of the oppressor. We must not fall into this trap. Yet the question deserves a straight answer.

In a case of indiscriminate killing of random victims, the suicide of the perpetrator does make some difference. However, the difference does not concern the degree of abhorrence or culpability of the act, but the character of the perpetrator. It is this: a soldier firing a missile from the safety of a helicopter or a tank into a densely populated area is not only a war criminal but also a coward. An officer or politician ordering such acts from the safety of an office is a war arch-criminal and an arch-coward. But suicide bombing – however abhorrent – is clearly not a cowardly act. In some limited sense – which in no way implies moral approval! – it may even be regarded as heroic. (One of the definitions of “heroic” in the

WordNet Dictionary of Princeton University is “showing extreme courage; especially of actions courageously undertaken in desperation as a last resort”. And in the Shorter Oxford Dictionary one of the definitions is “having recourse to bold, daring, or extreme measures”. Courage has no moral value whatsoever in itself; it is only laudable when in the service of good.)

Eyeless in Gaza

Contrary to the propaganda spread by some Western politicians and their media lackeys, suicide killing is by no means an invention of Islamic fanatics, nor is it unique to them. In fact, it is widespread in many cultures. In modern times it has been practiced, for example, by the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka. Kamikaze bombing by Japanese pilots in the Second World War is also similar in many respects.

But it is important to point out the positive attitude to an extreme act of this sort in the Judeo-Christian tradition. I am referring to the story about Samson in the biblical Book of Judges.

Samson, who terrorized the Philistines, was captured by them (using his lover Delilah as honey-trap, in a ruse reminiscent of the capture of the nuclear whistle-blower Mordechai Vanunu using an attractive Mossad agent). This is how the story ends (Judges XVI, 21–30):

But the Philistines took him, and put out his eyes, and brought him down to Gaza, and bound him with fetters of brass; and he did grind in the prison house. ... Then the lords of the Philistines gathered them together for to offer a great sacrifice unto Dagon their god, and to rejoice: for they said, Our god hath delivered Samson our enemy into our hand. And when the people saw him, they praised their god: for they said, Our god hath delivered into our hands our enemy, and the destroyer of our country, which slew many of us. And it came to pass, when their hearts were merry, that they said, Call for Samson, that he may make us sport. And they called for Samson out of the prison house; and he made them sport: and they set him between the pillars. And Samson said unto the lad that held him by the hand, Suffer me that I may feel the pillars whereupon the house standeth, that I may lean upon them. Now the house was full of men and women; and all the lords of the Philistines [were] there; and [there were] upon the roof about three thousand men and women, that beheld while Samson made sport. And Samson called unto the LORD, and said, O Lord GOD, remember me, I pray thee, and strengthen me, I pray thee, only this once, O God, that I may be at once avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes. And Samson took hold of the two middle pillars upon which the house stood, and on which it was borne up, of the one with his right hand, and of the other with his left. And Samson said, Let me die with the Philistines. And he bowed himself with [all his] might; and the house fell upon the lords, and upon all the people that [were] therein. So the dead which he slew at his death were more than [they] which he slew in his life.

This story of the suicidal killing of thousands of men and women, most of them no doubt innocent, by the blinded and humiliated Samson, is taught approvingly to present-day Israeli children. The protagonist is conventionally referred to as “Samson the Hero” (*Shimshon Haggibor*).

The 17th Century revolutionary English poet John Milton, a devout Christian, is even more panegyric in his glorification of this suicide killing. At the end his great poem *Samson Agonistes* (verses 1664–1672) he says:

O dearly-bought revenge, yet glorious!
Living or dying though hast fulfill'd
The work for which thou wast foretold
To Israel, and now ly'st victorious
Among thy slain, self-killed;
Not willingly, but tangled in the fold
Of dire necessity, whose law in death conjoin'd
Thee with thy slaughtered foes, in number more
Than all thy life hath slain before.

Of course, we need not accept the judgment of the Book of Judges (any more than the creationist story of Genesis). Nor should we blindly follow Milton in this matter. But let us beware of facile one-sided lack of compassion towards the miserable wretches driven by oppression and humiliation to horrendous deeds.