



Test launch of “David’s Sling,” an Israeli defense system built to intercept warheads. Photo by the US Missile Defense Agency via Wikimedia Commons: <http://bit.ly/2iaBe3i>

Note on this Case Study:

No religion is inherently violent or peaceful. However, religions are powerful forces. They can inspire horrific violence. They can also inspire nearly unfathomable acts of love and peacebuilding. The Jews described here span a wide range of values regarding the intersection of their religion and violence. Some are the perpetrators of violence, some are working to end violence and promote peace, many more are bystanders, who may build up cultural violence, cultural peace, or even both.

As always, when thinking about religion and conflict, maintain a focus on how religion is internally diverse, always evolving and changing, and always embedded in specific cultures.

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Jews and Nuclear Weapons

Today, Jewish views on violence and peace are usually deeply influenced by the horrors of the Holocaust, when Nazi Germany systematically murdered six million Jews in an attempt to completely exterminate the Jewish people. Around one third of European Jews were killed in the concentration camps in the genocide.¹ During the Holocaust, many Jews fled to the US. Several of these refugees were the world’s top physicists, and the US government employed many to work on the Manhattan Project—the military research project to build the first atomic bomb. These refugees played key roles in the Project’s success, including Hans Bethe, Leo Szilard, and Joseph Rotblat.²

Rotblat was one of the first physicists to discover that splitting an atom could cause a huge explosion. He did not want his discovery to be made into a weapon, but he agreed to work for the Project, as he feared that the Nazis would invent an atomic bomb first, win the war, and expand the Holocaust. Rotblat’s fears were deeply personal; his wife did not escape occupied Poland and was killed in the Belzec concentration camp. But in 1944, when he discovered Germany had abandoned their atomic research, he left the Manhattan Project, making him the only conscientious objector among Project scientists. He devoted the rest of his life to fighting for complete nuclear disarmament. In 1995, Rotblat was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his anti-nuclear campaigns, which laid the groundwork for the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).³

The NPT is a global agreement signed by nearly every nation to stop the spread of nuclear weapons. Since its ratification in 1970 only four countries have never signed, and three have atomic weapons today: India, Pakistan, and the Jewish state of Israel. Israel, home to nearly half of the world’s Jews, was created in 1948 following the Holocaust. Since then, Israel’s neighbors have declared war on the state several times for complex reasons that include Israel’s occupation of Palestine and anti-Semitism. Thus, haunted by memories of the Holocaust and surrounded by hostile neighbors, Israel refused to sign the NPT and began their own project to build an atomic bomb. With help from France, they did so

¹ Joseph E. David, “Between the Bible and the Holocaust: Three Sources for Jewish Perspectives on Mass Destruction” in *Ethics and Weapons of Mass Destruction: Religious and Secular Perspectives*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 392.

² “Scientist Refugees and the Manhattan Project,” *Atomic Heritage Foundation*, June 20, 2017. <http://bit.ly/2AiykhL>

³ Andrew Brown, *Keeper of the Nuclear Conscience: The Life and Work of Joseph Rotblat*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 18, 65; Holcomb B. Noble, “Joseph Rotblat, 96 Dies; Resisted Nuclear Weapons,” *The New York Times*, Sept. 2, 2005. <http://nyti.ms/2BibuFp>

in the 1960s. Israel has always refused to confirm or deny the existence of their stockpile, but it is widely known that by 2014 they had at least 80 nuclear warheads.⁴

Today, while the vast majority of Jews agree that using nuclear weapons should be a last resort, many Jews, especially in Israel, have religiously justified possessing them. Surrounded by hostile neighbors, Israeli Jews often believe that the survival of the Jewish state is dependent upon having the bombs as deterrents. They cite Jewish law in the book of Exodus which prohibits Jews from allowing oneself to be killed, arguing that eliminating atomic bombs would be tantamount to committing suicide as their antagonistic neighbors would take advantage of their weakness. With strong social memories of the Holocaust, they believe that the fear of nuclear retaliation will ensure that a genocide of the Jews will never happen again.⁵ In fact, Israeli rabbi Pinchas Peli has argued that, “if anyone has the right to possess nuclear weapons... Israel is the country that should irrefutably have that right. It is, after all, the only state that is threatened openly and constantly with total destruction.”⁶ However, other Jews have argued that while Israel should keep their nuclear arsenal, it is still clearly immoral, so Jews must “choose the lesser evil,” between having the bombs and being destroyed.⁷ In short, many Israeli Jews believe that if they were pacifists, “they would have long since been dead.”⁸

In fact, Israel’s stockpile itself is often described in religious terms. For example, in the Six Days War in 1967, a secret plan was drawn up—though not executed—to detonate an atom bomb in Egypt if Israel seemed poised to lose the war. It was named “Operation Samson” after the character in the Biblical book of Judges who pushed over the support columns of a temple, killing himself and his enemies. Similarly, an Israeli system to intercept incoming warheads is called “David’s Sling” after the weapon King David used to kill Goliath in the book of Samuel.⁹

However, while some Jews believe having atomic bombs will deter the next Holocaust, many other Jews, particularly in the United States, worry that these weapons will cause the next Holocaust. Therefore, for these Jews, “never again” means advocating for complete nuclear disarmament. Many of them believe that the Jewish experience in the Holocaust give Jews a “special responsibility to prevent nuclear war” since they understand the devastation of annihilation.¹⁰ Some also cite the Jewish concept of *Bal Tash’hit*—a prohibition on “wanton destruction”—to claim that the complete ruin of humanity that would occur in nuclear war makes atomic weaponry impermissible for Jews to even possess.¹¹ In 1983, the Synagogue Council of America, which represents a diverse coalition of US Jews, declared its opposition to nuclear weapons, stating that it was their “religious duty” to try to stop nuclear war.¹² Many of these Jews adopted the rainbow as the symbol of this movement, recalling the flood story in the book of Genesis, in which God creates a rainbow as a sign to Noah and his descendants that the world will never be completely destroyed again.¹³

⁴ Julian Borger, “The Truth about Israel’s Secret Nuclear Arsenal,” *The Guardian*, Jan. 15, 2014. <http://bit.ly/2hC1VwA>

⁵ Pinchas H. Peli, “Torah and Weapons of Mass Destruction: A View from Israel,” in *Confronting Omnicide*, (New Jersey: Jason Aronson Inc. 1991), 75-77; Reuven Kimelman, “Judaism, War, and Weapons of Mass Destruction,” in *Ethics and Weapons of Mass Destruction*, 369, 377.

⁶ Peli, “Torah and Weapons of Mass Destruction,” 80.

⁷ Walter S. Wurzurger, “Nuclear Deterrence and Nuclear War,” in *Confronting Omnicide*, 230.

⁸ Irving Greenberg, “The Dialectics of Power: Reflections in the Light of the Holocaust,” in *Confronting Omnicide*, 26-27.

⁹ Avner Cohen, “Israel’s Secret Plan to Nuke the Egyptian Desert,” *Politico Magazine*, June 5, 2017. <http://politi.co/E1aXzr>; Judah Ari Gross, “Israel to Deploy David’s Sling, Final Piece of Missile Defense Shield,” *The Times of Israel*, Mar. 20, 2017 <http://bit.ly/2AiHHOc>

¹⁰ Louis René Beres, “From Genocide to Omnicide: The Jewish Imperative to Save the Earth,” in *Confronting Omnicide*, 241.

¹¹ David Novak, “Nuclear War and the Prohibition of Wanton Destruction,” in *Confronting Omnicide*, 101, 105.

¹² Charles Austin, “Synagogue Council Endorses Nuclear Freeze,” *The New York Times*, Feb. 25, 1983. <http://nyti.ms/2hWEP17>

¹³ David, “Between the Bible and the Holocaust,” 390.

Additional Resources

Primary Sources:

- Interview with Jewish nuclear scientist and 1995 Noble Peace Prize winner Joseph Rotblat: <http://bit.ly/2Bu27UU>
- Recording of Joseph Rotblat from the Smithsonian: <http://bit.ly/2jrJTer>
- Transcript of an interview with Joseph Rotblat from the National Security Archive of George Washington University: <http://bit.ly/2zKkho7>
- Home videos of the top-secret Los Alamos National Lab from 1943-1945—featuring several of the Project’s Jewish physicists—during the construction of the first atomic bomb: <http://bit.ly/20asMwR>

Secondary Sources:

- NYT report on the Synagogue Council of America’s call for nuclear disarmament in 1983: <http://nyti.ms/2hWEP17>
- Al Jazeera report on Israel’s nuclear arsenal (2009): <http://bit.ly/2AfPyMu>
- The Atlantic explains the secrecy surrounding Israel’s nuclear program (2014): <http://theatlantic.com/20DtKWU>

Discussion Questions

- Jewish views on violence and peace changed significantly after the Holocaust. Why do you think this happened? How did their cultural context impact these views?
- How do different Jewish views on the ethical implications of creating and possessing nuclear weapons show the internal diversity of Judaism?
- While Jews of differing opinions can be found in all parts of the world, Jews in Israel are more likely to support nuclear arsenals, and Jews in the US are more likely to support total disarmament. What about their cultural context might explain the difference between these two Jewish groups?
- How do different Jews use the Bible to express their beliefs regarding nuclear weapons? Why do they sometimes have such different interpretations?
- Watch the home videos from Los Alamos National Lab. What impressions do you get from these images? Is there anything you find surprising about the images? Why or why not?
- Listen to or read one of the interviews with Joseph Rotblat. Why did he change his mind about the morality of the Manhattan Project? Why do you think he devoted his life to total disarmament?



Jewish American physicist and Hungarian refugee Leo Szilard who conceived of the nuclear chain reaction and worked on the Manhattan Project. Photo by US Department of Energy in 1960. Via Wikimedia Commons: <http://bit.ly/1ZxU2nH>