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# Holy War in Modern Judaism? “Mitzvah War” and the Problem of the “Three Vows”

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## Abstract

“Holy war,” sanctioned or even commanded by God, is a common and recurring theme in the Hebrew Bible. Rabbinic Judaism largely avoided

discussion of holy war for the simple reason that it became dangerous and self-destructive. The failed “holy wars” of the Great Revolt and the Bar Kokhba Rebellion eliminated enthusiasm for it among the survivors engaged in reconstructing Judaism from ancient biblical religion. The rabbis therefore built a fence around the notion through two basic strategies: to define and categorize biblical wars so that they became virtually unthinkable in their contemporary world and to construct a divine contract between God, the Jews, and the world of the Gentiles that would establish an equilibrium preserving the Jews from overwhelming Gentile wrath by preventing Jewish actions that could result in war. The notion of divinely commanded war, however, was never expunged from the repertoire of Jewish ideas. Remaining latent, it was able to be revived when the historical context seemed to require it. Such a revival occurred with the rise of Zionism and particularly after the 1967 and 1973 wars.

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