

My Lai - The Terrible Truth About Us All
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Temple Israel
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Rabbi Sidney H. Brooks

I do not know the literal translation of the words, *My Lai*. I am not sure that I want to. For all I know it may mean something like "Peaceful Valley" or "Village of Joy" which would make the contemplation of what happened there all the more painful. Whatever the meaning, there is no turning from the fact that all of us must face the significance of what My Lai has come to mean.

It is impossible for us ever to be the same in our self-righteousness. Let it be crystal clear that even before My Lai, self-righteousness was without any basis in fact.

Our country has reacted with horror, as well it should, over the testimony of those who reported what they saw and did at My Lai. The reason for the horror was based upon a thoroughly irrational belief: That Americans could not possibly be involved in wanton slaughter of innocents, that Americans were incapable of wholesale killing, that Americans were somehow, even in war, humane and decent, absolutely incorruptible in their regard for human life and human dignity, that when Americans kill there is something less than death involved.

The horror was the result of having really believed that everything American is honorable, everything American decent, everything American allied to the highest of principles anywhere in the world.

Now it is clear this is not so. We were fools to believe it could be so.

Now the real horror is that My Lai joins a list of other place names: Lidice, Auschwitz, Dresden, Babi Yar, Bataan, Hiroshima, and others.

During World War II, one of my teachers, Abraham Cronbach, was an absolute pacifist even in those days which saw the slaughter of millions of our own co-religionists. Repeatedly he said to us that inevitably in war one becomes more and more like one's enemies as the war protracts in cruelty and desperate struggle. It took some time for his students to accept that fact, but accept it we all did eventually.

True enough, we do not know what happened at My Lai. We may never know. We should by no means condemn anyone to guilt until the real facts are established.

Whatever the depth of the investigation, whatever the results of that inquiry or even the results of the trial of those who took part--whether they are acquitted or not, we had better heed the moral lesson involved.

My Lai is not only a place in Vietnam. It is not an isolated instance of the cruelty of war. My Lai, I submit to you, is not the only example of American cruelty.

My Lai is war itself. My Lai is the moral bankruptcy of men who find in war the solution of human differences, the satisfaction of human greed, the means to satiate human demand for land, wealth, power, domination.

My Lai represents what happened not to America at large, not to any nation at large, but what happened to *some* men, trained to kill, trained to see in others not human beings,

but targets, understandably desperate to kill rather than to be killed.

Who are we to fault them for this? Were they really so much more brutal than any others? At this point I doubt very much that we have the right to court martial *some* soldiers who were at My Lai while thousands of others have killed in essentially the same way. The society that sent our men to My Lai (which means "to war") should be subject to our court martial of judgment.

The mother of the GI who made the initial confession about My Lai said over and over again, "The army made a murderer out of my son." The other day I heard and saw a man stand up and introduce his son by saying, "This is my son who is on his way to fight in Vietnam and I am proud of it!"

As a Jew I am reminded of this: Our tradition teaches that "he who saves one life has it accounted to him by God as if he saved the whole world; and he who destroys one life is held guilty as if he had destroyed the whole world."

That is not overstatement. When one loses one's child, one's husband or wife, one's family in needless slaughter, is it not as if the whole world were destroyed?

The GI at My Lai reported, "They were begging and saying 'No! No!' and the mothers were hugging their children--well, we kept right on firing. They were waving their arms and begging."

Were mothers elsewhere any different?

Most of us are sensitive to the daily raids that take the lives of men, women and children in the border settlements of Israel in the insane protraction of that conflict. I have myself seen the ravages of those raids and the desperate measure to protect the young and the infirm.

Then the other day The New York Times reported that Prime Minister Dayan disclosed that the Israeli authorities had demolished 516 dwellings in occupied Arab areas since the war of June 1967 as punishment for suspected terrorist activity. It is clear that dwellings *and not people* are the targets. How long can the Jewish reluctance to kill wantonly be held in check as deaths mount in Israel and hatred begins to run rampant.

How long will the attitude of Jewish soldiers be so untypical of most as it is now. There is a book in Hebrew called Siach Lochamim. The Conversation of Fighters. Said one:

"There was one of their soldiers, a Syrian. He lay wounded.
Badly. As for our soldiers, we had reason to have a burning
hatred for them. But I saw the Arab as a human being. It was
not important what he had done before this. At this point,
lying there, he was a human being."

Another, at Latrun, as the Arab refugees moved out of the town:

"I don't know if the other soldiers felt like this. Maybe they
did. I didn't say anything to anyone. But this was a sad

picture. All of a sudden, we are invaders. Where the Arabs are going, they don't know at that moment, I ask myself, after all are we like this? I had pity on an unfortunate man. To become a wanderer now. I was caught in a conflict of emotions."

My Lai is in Vietnam and in Israel and in Syria and Jordan and Biafra. My Lai is war itself!

Our country is torn by the revelation that our soldiers killed women and children.

If we are civilized at all, we cannot morally or religiously distinguish between the life of a 4 year old child or a 14 year old boy or a 24 year old young man. Destroy that life in any case at any age and it is a loss to man and God. Destroy that life and you have destroyed the world for those who loved him and for God.

It may be a court martial will take place! Whether it does or not, we--all of us who tolerate violence and war in any degree share the guilt of My Lai, the guilt of war, the guilt of teaching men to kill, giving them medals for it and pretending to goodness and kindness.

Another of my more revered teachers, the great Leo Baeck pointed out that in Judaism there is no such thing as corporate guilt. That is why having seen the slaughter of his people in Germany, after years in the concentration camp at Theresenstadt, after hearing from Eichman himself that he would be done to death, Baeck could hold no hatred for the

Germans as a people in his heart. A man is guilty but not mankind. An individual is guilty, *but not a nation.*

America is not guilty, but some Americans are. As citizens we share that guilt in proportion to our complicity in the business of war and killing and in proportion to our refusal to see in the machinery of war what it really is.

Thus my own pride in those who work and demonstrate for peace. Thus all honor to those who in their own individual system of choice or religious belief refuse to kill, not only women or children, but any human being and prefer instead imprisonment, expatriation alienation from all they hold dear. For when the day comes that so many individuals refuse to march into a My Lai and the jails are full, the war machine will grind to a halt and the slaughter of innocents will be done.

It is almost impossible to attach to the deaths at My Lai any purpose that would justify them (even partially) in political or economic terms.

The best we can hope is that what allegedly took place at My Lai and that which undoubtedly takes place every day in the conflict of war will now so sting our consciences, so horrify our souls that disengagement from the Vietnam war and repudiation of all wars will come the sooner to all men.

"For he who saves a single human life has it accounted to him
by God as if he saved the whole world."