

## II. The Moral Outrage of Vietnam

by ABRAHAM J. HESCHEL

On January 31, 1967, clergymen and laymen concerned about Vietnam assembled in Washington, D.C. At the worship service, I offered the following meditation on the words of the prophet Ezekiel (34:25-31):

Ours is an assembly of shock, contrition, and dismay. Who would have believed that we life-loving Americans are capable of bringing death and destruction to so many innocent people? We are startled to discover how unmerciful, how beastly we ourselves can be.

So we implore Thee, our Father in heaven, help us to banish the beast from our hearts, the beast of cruelty, the beast of callousness.

Since the beginning of history evil has been going forth from nation to nation. The lords of the flocks issue proclamations, and the sheep of all nations indulge in devastations.

But who would have believed that our own nation at the height of its career as the leader of free nations, the hope for peace in the world, whose unprecedented greatness was achieved through "liberty and justice for all," should abdicate its wisdom, suppress its compassion and permit guns to become its symbols?

America's resources, moral and material, are immense. We have the means and know the ways of dispelling prejudice and lies, of overcoming poverty and disease. We have the capacity to lead the world in seeking to overcome international hostility.

Must napalm stand in the way of our power to aid and to inspire the world?

To be sure, just as we feel deeply the citizen's dilemma, we are equally sensitive to the dilemma confronting the leaders of our government. Our government seems to recognize the tragic error and futility of the escalation of our involvement but feels that we cannot extricate ourselves without public embarrassment of such dimension as to cause damage to America's prestige.

But the mire in which we flounder threatens us with an even greater danger. It is the dilemma of either losing face or losing our soul.

At this hour Vietnam is our most urgent, our most disturbing religious problem, a challenge to the whole nation as well as a challenge to every one of us an individual.

When a person is sick, in danger or in misery, all religious duties recede, all rituals are suspended, except one: to save life and relieve pain.

Vietnam is a personal problem. To speak about God and remain silent on Vietnam is blasphemous.

When you spread forth your hands  
I will hide my eyes from you;  
Yea when you make many prayers,  
I will not hear—  
Your hands are not clean.

In the sight of so many thousands of civilians and soldiers slain, injured, crippled, of bodies emaciated, of forests destroyed by fire, God confronts us with this question:

Where art thou?

Is there no compassion in the world? No sense of discernment to realize that this is a war that refutes any conceivable justification of war?

The sword is the pride of man; arsenals, military bases, nuclear weapons lend supremacy to nations. War is the climax of ingenuity, the object of supreme dedication.

Men slaughtering each other, cities battered into ruins: such insanity has plunged many nations into an abyss of disgrace. Will America, the promise of peace to the world, fail to uphold its magnificent destiny?

The most basic way in which all men may be divided is between those who believe that war is unnecessary and those who believe that war is inevitable; between those to whom the sword is the symbol of honor and those to whom seeking to convert swords into plowshares is the only way to keep our civilization from disaster.

Most of us prefer to disregard the dreadful deeds we do over there. The atrocities committed in our name are too horrible to be credible. It is beyond our power to react vividly to the ongoing nightmare, day after day, night after night. So we bear graciously other people's suffering.

O Lord, we confess our sins, we are ashamed of the inadequacy of our anguish, of how faint and slight is our mercy. We are a generation that has lost the capacity for outrage.

We must continue to remind ourselves that in a free society, all are involved in what some are doing. *Some are guilty, all are responsible.*

Prayer is our greatest privilege. To pray is to stake our very existence, our right to live, on the truth and on the supreme importance of that which we pray for. Prayer, then, is radical commitment, a dangerous involvement in the life of God.

In such awareness we pray . . .

We do not stand alone. Millions of Americans, millions of people all over the world are with us.

At this moment praying for peace in Vietnam we are spiritually Vietnamese. Their agony is our affliction, their hope is our commitment.

God is present wherever men are afflicted.

Where is God present now?

We do not know how to cry, we do not know how to pray!

Our conscience is so timid, our words so faint, our mercy so feeble.

O Father, have mercy upon us.

Our God, add our cries uttered here to the cries of the bereaved, crippled, and dying over there.

Have mercy upon all of us.

Help us to overcome the arrogance of power. Guide and inspire the President of the United States in finding a speedy, generous, and peaceful end to the war in Vietnam.

The intensity of the agony is high, the hour is late, the outrage may reach a stage where repentance will be too late, repair beyond any nation's power.

We call for a covenant of peace, for reconciliation of America and all of Vietnam. To paraphrase the words of the prophet Isaiah (62:1):

For Vietnam's sake I will not keep silent,  
For America's sake I will not rest,  
Until the vindication of humanity goes forth as brightness,

And peace for all men is a burning torch.

Here is the experience of a child of seven who was reading in school the chapter which tells of the sacrifice of Isaac:

Isaac was on the way to Mount Moriah with his father; then he lay on the altar, bound, waiting to be sacrificed. My heart began to beat even faster; it actually sobbed with pity for Isaac. Behold, Abraham now lifted the knife. And now my heart froze within me with fright. Suddenly, the voice of the angel was heard: "Abraham, lay not thine hand upon the lad, for now I know that thou fearest God." And here I broke out in tears and wept aloud. "Why are you crying?" asked the Rabbi. "You know that Isaac was not killed."

And I said to him, still weeping, "But, Rabbi, supposing the angel had come a second too late?"

The Rabbi comforted me and calmed me by telling me that an angel cannot come late.

An angel cannot be late, but man, made of flesh and blood, may be.



### *Military Victory—A Moral Defeat*

It is weird to wake up one morning and find that we have been placed in an insane asylum. It is even more weird to wake up and find that we have been involved in slaughter and destruction without knowing it.

What is being done by our government is done in our name. Our labor, our wealth, our civic power, our tacit consent are invested in the production and use of the napalm, the bombs, and the mines that explode and bring carnage and ruin to Vietnam.

The thought that I live a life of peace and nonviolence turns out to be an illusion. I have been decent in tiny matters on a tiny scale, but have become vicious on a large scale. In my own eyes my existence appears to be upright, but in the eyes of my victims my very being is a nightmare.

A sense of moral integrity, the equation of America with the pursuit of justice and peace, has long been part of our self-understanding. Indeed, for generations the image of America has been associated with the defense of human rights and the hope for world peace. And now history is sneering at us.

A ghastly darkness has set in over our souls. Will there be an end to dismay, an end to agony?

The encounter of man and God is an encounter within the world. We meet within a situation of shared suffering, of shared responsibility.

This is implied in believing in One God in whose eyes there is no dichotomy of here and there, of me and them. They and I are one; here is there, and there is here. What goes on over there happens even here. Oceans divide us, God's presence unites us, and God is present wherever man is

afflicted, and all of humanity is embroiled in every agony wherever it may be.

Though not a native of Vietnam, ignorant of its language and traditions, I am involved in the plight of the Vietnamese. To be human means not to be immune to other people's suffering. People in Vietnam, North and South, have suffered, and all of us are hurt.

Unprepared, perplexed, uninformed, ill-advised, our nation finds herself in a spiritual inferno. Where do we stand? Where do we go from here? For a long time we suppressed anxiety, evaded responsibility. Yet the rivers of tears and blood may turn into a flood of guilt, which no excuse will stem.

The blood we shed in Vietnam makes a mockery of all our proclamations, dedications, celebrations. We have been moving from obscurity to confusion, from ignorance to obfuscation. Many are unaware, some acquiesce, most of us detest this unfathomable war, but are unable to envisage a way of getting out of this maze. Millions of Americans who cannot close their minds to the suffering and sorrow are stricken with anguish, and form a large fellowship living in a state of consternation.

We are killing the Vietnamese because we are suspicious of the Chinese. The aim is to kill the elusive Vietcong, yet to come upon one soldier, it is necessary to put an end to a whole village, to the lives of civilians, men, women, and children.

Is it not true that Communists are fellow human beings first, antagonists second? Politically, the concept of the enemy is becoming obsolete; yesterday's enemy is today's ally. The state of cold war between the United States and Soviet Russia has given place to a quest of friendly understanding.

The absurdity of this war is tacitly admitted by almost everyone. Our presence in Vietnam has become a national nightmare, our actions are forced, we dislike what we do; we do what we hate to do. Is this a way to bring democracy to Vietnam: more explosives, more devastation, more human beings crippled, orphaned, killed? Is it not clear that military victory in Vietnam would be a tragic moral defeat? That military triumph would be a human disaster?

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of great force.*

The choice is clear. We decide either in favor of further escalation that may lead to a world war or in favor of gradual disengagement followed by negotiation. Refusal to embark upon a course of unlimited massacre will redound only to the honor of America. Did not the retreat of France from Algeria, where her involvement was incomparably more important, add to the glory of France? Did President Kennedy's self-restraint during the ill-planned expedition to the Bay of Pigs tarnish in any way the prestige of America?

Is it not the avowed policy of the United States to insist that there is an alternative to war?

We are fully aware of America's moral commitment to give aid to democratic governments all over the world when they are threatened or attacked by tyrants and dictators. However, we do not fight in Vietnam as allies of a freely elected democratic government but rather as fellow-travelers of anti-Communists, as allies of a despotic military oligarchy. Is it the destiny of our youth to serve as mercenaries in the service of military juntas all over the world?

Our major blunder is the fact that our aid and involvement is a government-to-government operation. Driven by our tendency to suspect social change, by our tendency to measure other peoples' values by our own standards, we have no communication with the people of Vietnam, nor have we sought to relate ourselves to their political understanding. We are in touch with military dictatorship, we ignore the people. We see the power structure, we disregard human beings.

We do not listen to their voice, we are ignorant of their way of thinking, traditions and scale of values. Our failure to convince the Vietnamese that our aim is to save their freedom, to insure their welfare, is not necessarily a sign of their being imbeciles.

Vietnam is a country which has for many decades been the victim of colonial demoralization. Injustice, poverty, exploitation prevail. Revolutionary change is a moral necessity.

Because the government of South Vietnam is corrupt, dis-trusted by and alienated from the majority of the people, our aid fails to reach the peasants. We are being misguided in maintaining that social revolution can be stopped by military operations. America's identification with Vietnamese

juntas not only thwarts any effort to bring aid to the destitute peasants but defames our image in their eyes.

Can an outside power succeed in bringing a recalcitrant heretic community such as the National Liberation Front back to the fold by fire and sword? A major stumbling block to these efforts is our opponents' distrust in our desire for peace. Yet the atmosphere on both sides is infected with suspicion. The Golden Rule seems to be "suspect thy neighbor as thyself."

Indeed, how can there be trust in our desire for peace, if the call for negotiation is consistently followed by further escalation? The groan deepens, the combat burns, the wailing cry does not abate. Every act of escalation has as its effect further aggravation.

For on horror's head horrors accumulate. We are in danger of being swept away—against our will, despite circum-spection—by a vehement current and compulsive course which never feels the retiring ebb but keeps on, due to a more violent pace, to an even wider torrent.

War tends to become its own end. Force unleashed moves on its own momentum, breaks all constraint, reaching intensities which man can no longer control. The nation's confidence both in the candor of the Administration and in the policy which it is pursuing in Vietnam is faltering, while the world's respect for American democracy has been profoundly shaken. America's image is tragically distorted.

For many years the world's eyes were directed to Wash-ington, trusting that the White House, the spirit of America, would secure peace. Should the world's eyes be directed to Moscow, hoping that the Kremlin may use its influence to bring about peace in Vietnam?

What is it that may save us, that may unite men all over the world? The abhorrence of atrocity, the refusal of the conscience to accommodate to the arrogance of military power. Indeed, it is the power of the human conscience which has in the last twenty years inhibited the use of ther-muclear weapons. Yet the power of the conscience is tenuous and exceedingly vulnerable. Its status is undergoing profound upheavals. We are challenged too frequently, too radically to be able to react adequately.

However, the surrender of conscience destroys first the equilibrium of human existence and then existence itself. In

the past, war was regarded as an instrument of politics. Today politics is in the process of becoming an instrument of military technology. How long can total war be avoided?

Militarism is whoredom, voluptuous and vicious, first disliked and then relished. To paraphrase the prophet's words "For the spirit of harlotry is within them, and they know not the Lord" (Hosea 5:4): "Samson with his strong body, had a weak head, or he would not have laid it in a harlot's lap."

### *Has Our Conscience Become a Fossil?*

Has our conscience become a fossil? Is all mercy gone? If mercy, the mother of humanity, is still alive as a demand, how can we say Yes to our bringing agony to the tormented nation of Vietnam?

It is a war we can never win. For, indeed, our superior weapons may well destroy the cities and the hamlets, the fighting forces and the villagers who support them. However, what will our army have left behind? Tombs, tears, havoc, acrimony, and vast incentives to hatred and rage.

The world is not the same since Auschwitz and Hiroshima. The decisions we make, the values we teach must be pondered not only in the halls of learning but also in the presence of inmates in extermination camps, and in the sight of the mushroom of a nuclear explosion.

Those who pray tremble when they realize how staggering are the debts of the religions of the West. We have mortgaged our souls and borrowed so much grace, patience, and forgiveness. We have promised charity, love, guidance, and a way of redemption, and now we are challenged to keep the promise, to honor the pledge. How shall we prevent bankruptcy in the presence of God and man?

We have embarked on this adventure guided by the assumption that those who disagree with us are a threat to us; the assumption that what is good for America is good for Vietnam; that it is better to be dead than red; that communism is the only danger, the only evil which all must fight.

Must we proudly cling to our first mistake? Must Americans and Vietnamese die in order to honor a false decision?

### *Is War an Answer to Human Agony?*

America has been enticed by her own might. There is nothing so vile as the arrogance of the military mind. Of all the plagues with which the world is cursed, of every ill, militarism is the worst: the assumption that war is an answer to human agony. There are many wild beasts in the human heart, but the beastliest of all is the brutality of arms.

No war remains within its limits; its road is not only downhill but steep. We have sown the wind, and we now reap the whirlwind.

The question addressed to every one of us personally and collectively is this: What shall I do to stop the killing and dying in Vietnam? It is this urgent question that we all have in common at this moment, challenging equally our integrity, our right to invoke the name of Him who is the Father of the Vietnamese as well as of the Americans. The war in Vietnam has plunged every one of us into unknown regions of responsibility. I am personally involved in the torment of the people injured in battle on the front and in the hamlets, in the shipping of explosives, in the triggering of guns. Though deaf to the distant cry of the orphaned and the maimed, I know that my own integrity is being slashed in that slaughter.

There is a deep and awesome power in blood that is spilled, in "the voice of the blood that cries from the earth." The voice of those who die in Vietnam abominates all of us.

The decision to use military force was a failure of statesmanship, a failure of nerve, a moral retreat. To deescalate now, people say, is difficult. What must not be forgotten is that to continue the war will make our situation even more difficult. Remember the price we pay when military pride is hurt. We have gone beyond the policy of brinkmanship. Are we prepared to descend into an abyss? War has ceased to be a human action, carried out with courage and volition. War today is an impersonal, mechanized process. It begins as darkness in the mind and creeps on as a spiritual pestilence, contaminating the power of decision.

There is abundance of weapons and scarcity of compassion. Arms are absolutes, reliable, infallible, while human

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understanding is relative, vacillating, open to question. So we put our trust in what the arms will do. It is not man any more who ascertains standards, directions. Vast military power tends to cultivate a sense of invincibility and to debilitate the delicate power of political and moral discernment. Decisions are made in terms of monstrosity. Statesmen surrender to the sovereignty of computers. The engine is driving the driver. Frankensteins are here.

Leading American authorities on international law maintain that the unilateral military intervention of the United States in Vietnam violates the charter of the United Nations; that the military presence of the United States in Vietnam violates the Geneva Accords of 1954; that the United States is not committed by the SEATO treaty or otherwise to intervene in Vietnam; that the intensity and destructiveness of United States warfare in Vietnam is contrary to international law; that the United States' actions in Vietnam violate treaties which are part of the supreme law of the land, and hence violate the United States Constitution.

Indeed, this is a war that cannot be waged within the terms of civilized rules of warfare. An advertisement in the *New York Times*, January 15, 1967, sponsored by a group of lawyers, said of the American campaign: "We, unintentionally, are killing and wounding three or four times more people than the Vietcong do. . . . We are not maniacs and monsters; but our planes range the sky all day and all night and our artillery is lavish, and we have much more deadly stuff to kill with. The people are there on the ground, sometimes destroyed by accident, sometimes destroyed because Vietcong are reported to be among them. This is indeed a new kind of war. . . ."

Where are the events leading to? Invasion of North Vietnam? Occupation of Laos and Cambodia? An encounter with the Chinese army?

The State Department and the Pentagon behave as if there were a division of qualities: infallibility of judgment in their possession; ignorance and sentimentality everywhere else.

Those of us who disagree with American policy on Vietnam are told by the State Department that since we do not possess all the facts, we are not competent to evaluate the

situation. Yet some of us wonder whether the State Department alone has a monopoly on wisdom and vision. Is it not possible that the minds of those involved in a certain policy become addicted to it, and are hardly capable of undertaking an agonizing reappraisal that may prove how wrong the premises are?

There is a large community of concern for Vietnam which is also a community of concern about the inadequacy of our concern. In Vietnam people die, while we deliver speeches. In Vietnam people bleed, while all we do is send telegrams to Washington. We have succeeded in getting pictures of the moon, but have no picture of the agony of the Vietnamese, no picture of the spiritual agony of millions of Americans who are aghast at what is being done in their names.

### *The Crisis of Responsibility*

Responsibility is the essence of being a person, the essence of being human, and many of us are agonized by a grave *crisis of responsibility*. Horrified by the atrocities of this war, we are also dismayed by the ineffectiveness of our protests, by the feebleness of our dissent. Have we done our utmost in expressing our anguish? Does our outcry match the outrage?

This is a unique hour in human history. It is within our might to decide whether this war is a prelude to doom, the beginning of the end, or whether to establish a precedent of solving a most complex crisis by abandoning slogans and clichés.

There is no alternative, we are told. Yet have we really exhausted all possibilities of negotiation? Is the state of humanity so overcome by insanity that all rationality is gone and war left as the only way? Is it really so simple? Are we Americans all innocent, righteous, full of saving grace, while our adversaries are all corrupt, wicked, insensitive to human rights?

Collision between states is not always due to a conflict of vital interests. It is often due to the tendency toward self-enhancement inherent in the monstrosity of power.

Worse than war is the belief in the inevitability of war. There is no such thing as inevitable war. And certainly

the war in Vietnam was not inevitable. It came about as a failure of vision, as a result of political clichés, of thinking by analogies, of false comparisons, of blindness to the uniqueness of an extraordinary constellation. This war will not end by dropping bigger and better bombs, by an increase in ferocity, and by the merciless use of force. Vietnam is primarily a human problem, a human emergency, human anguish. There are no military solutions to human problems; violence and bloodshed are no answer to human anguish.

We feel alarmed by a policy that continues to be dogmatic, devoid of elasticity. The root of the tragedy is in the combination of global power and parochial philosophy, of most efficient weapons and pedestrian ideas. New thinking is called for; new contacts must be made. Leaders not directly involved in present operations must be consulted.

Let the American presence in Vietnam be a presence of understanding and compassion. America's war potential is great, but America's peace potential is even greater. Let there be an effort for friendship for Vietnam. Modern war is a mechanical operation. But peace is a personal effort, requiring deep commitment, hard, honest vision, wisdom and patience, facing one another as human beings, elasticity rather than dogmatism.

Would not sending a Peace Corps prove more helpful than sending more armed divisions?

We have entered an age in which military victories are tragic defeats, in which even small wars are exercises in immense disaster.

The public enemy number one is the nuclear bomb, the population explosion, starvation, and disease. It is the fear of nuclear war that unites men all over the world, East and West, North and South. It is fear that unites us today. Let us hope that the conquest of fear and the elimination of misery will unite us tomorrow.

This war, I am afraid, will not leave the nation where it found it. Its conclusion may be the beginning of a grave alienation. The speed and the spirit in which this war will end will fashion our own lives in the years that lie ahead.

On January 22, 1917, President Woodrow Wilson in his address to the Senate uttered a point of view which we pray President Lyndon Johnson would adopt as his own: "It must

be a peace without victory." Let our goal be compromise, not victory.

In the name of our kinship of being human, the American people meet the Vietnamese face to face. Only few men are marble-hearted. And even marble can be pierced with patience and compassion. Let us create a climate of reconciliation. Reducing violence and tension, acts of goodwill are necessary prerequisites for negotiations. We must seek neither victory nor defeat. Our aim is to enable the South Vietnamese to find themselves as free and independent people.

The initiative for peace must come from the strong, out of a position of strength.

We will all have to strain our energies, crack our sinews, tax and exert our brains, cultivate understanding, open our hearts, and meet with all Vietnamese, North as well as South.

This is the demand of the hour: not to rest until—by excluding fallacies, stereotypes, prejudices, exaggerations which perpetual contention and the consequent hostilities breed—we succeed in reaching the people of Vietnam as brothers.

There is still time to unlearn old follies, there is still time to seek honest reconciliation. A few months from now it may be too late; a few months from now our folly may be beyond repair, sin beyond repentance.

It is not for man to decide who shall live and who shall die, who shall kill and who shall sigh. May no one win this war; may all sides win the right to live in peace.

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1 last two as well.*