

REVENGE, 2002

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Revenge 1. To inflict punishment in return for (injury or insult). 2. To seek or take vengeance for (oneself or another person); avenge. (*American Heritage Dictionary*, fourth edition)

*In part, the piece that follows was written on Yom Kippur; it came gushing out after I listened to a Kol Nidre sermon. It says some of the things I felt at that time, as well as much of what I need and want to say about war, violence, and my own Jewish feminist position. I want to talk about revenge, the desire to inflict punishment in return for injuries that we have suffered, and the wish to make right a wrong. I find myself caught in the gap between these conflicting desires. I want the release of revenge. I want to take justice into my own hands and express my rage and indignation. At the same time, I cannot find justice in these enactments. The injury is never avenged. As a woman who has known bodily harm, as an American Jew who was born well after the Holocaust and has loved Israel, this is the only way I can begin to make sense of the ongoing violence in Israel and Palestine. These are not words that I share lightly. I do not feel comfortable saying them in public, yet they are the only things I feel compelled to say. I risk saying them here, in the context of this forum, in the hope that they may help initiate a more honest conversation about the painful and difficult issues they concern.**

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Yom Kippur 2002

I cannot hear another sermon about how the world is against the Jews and how much we, as Jews, need to set the world right about our needs. I cannot hear about the righteousness of our claims to the Holy Land; nor can I hear about how peace-loving and democratic we are, or how it is our duty to buy Israeli goods and read Israeli books, even those of dissenters, who, by their very dissent, are proof of the open, liberal, and democratic values of the State of Israel. I cannot hear these things all over again, especially on Yom Kippur. The rabbi said he felt that he was not preaching to the already converted. I found that very hard to believe. His claims could have been made by any of the rabbis of my childhood. He offered no new notions of Jewish history. The only difference in his retellings of familiar stories lay in his belief that these all-too-old lessons are no longer as familiar or accepted as they once were.

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To me, that was precisely the point. Instead of demanding that congregants step up to the difficult challenge of facing the complexity of the current situation, the painful truths about how the state was founded and about its ongoing acts of settlement of claiming and inhabiting so-called holy land, he asked us to reclaim the old myths, the old truths. Despite the holes in these visions, he demanded that we reclaim them wholeheartedly. This is exactly what some of us want to hear; even I found it oddly comforting to hear those old narratives spoken with such zeal, such conviction. It was as if I had re-entered a more naive past, when we were right because we were Jews and because we were aligned with the greatest nation on earth, the United States of America, the true keeper of liberty and justice for all, throughout the world. Even as I write this down, I stumble. The words feel false and frightening. They echo my childhood self, the American dreamer who believed the rhetoric of my liberal Jewish, liberal American parents and the communities in which they raised me.

I have not been able to believe these truths to be self-evident, except in their falseness, for quite some time. I read such words with a great deal of caution, wanting to know whose specific interests are being served by their deployment. Who stands to benefit; what battles are being justified, what policies sustained? When I ask these questions of the sermon I heard, I feel that it proffers a sense of relief. The rabbi says I can feel good again about being a Jew, about supporting Israel. The critics are wrong. The whole world continues to be against the Jews, while Israel is the only democracy in the entire Middle East region. She has no reasonable negotiation partners, no civilized and democratic Arabs, much less Palestinians with whom to deal. And remember how restrained Israel has been in its treatment of all those terrorists living in the West Bank and Gaza, or is it Judea and Samaria?

I don't think I heard the sermon wrong. The rabbi is a reasonable, thoughtful man, yet he cannot entertain even the possibility of engaging with those others whose voices rise up in pain, day in and day out, in territories occupied for over a generation. These desperate people, some of whom act out violently and brutally, are all out of bounds. Somehow it is impossible for him to see them as ordinary human beings who, like us, crave dignity and self-governance. They long not to live their everyday lives under siege.

Where is our sympathy, our empathy on this most holy of days? If we cannot see the pain of these others, these very specific Palestinians and their families, on this of all days, when will we ever? Humbled before our

God, shouldn't our hearts go out? Can't we do this even as we do not forget our own pain? As we remember our own ancestors, estranged wanderers in foreign lands who had to rely on others to grant them some semblance of safety and sustenance, can't we make the connection with the Palestinians, engaged in an uncanny wandering in all-too-familiar territory? Shouldn't we, of all people, know better? And does knowing better, hearing the cries of others, mean that we deny our own pain, pretend away our own lingering wounds? I think not.

Knowing that the world is a cruel and unforgiving place, where there is all too little justice or regard for the past and for the sins that have been perpetrated on whole peoples, including our own, is painful, devastating. It makes us hard and indifferent. This response makes sense to me, but I also know that it is deadly. When we use our own all-too-real pain to justify the suffering of others, suffering continues. No lessons are learned. The pain continues to expand, to reach out to whole new communities, and they, too, come to take a share in this ever-expanding pool of sorrow. Why are we unwilling to say it is enough? Why do we take morbid pleasure in the suffering of others? "Good, it serves them right. Let them see how it feels." I know this pain so intimately that I can hardly write these things without recourse to my own specific angers and disappointments, in my case with a legal and justice system that does not work to protect women who are violated.

I say these things, knowing how angry I have been at times, but also what it feels like to resist these feelings when someone else is hurting, is violently confronted with their own vulnerability. It is at these moments that I find myself telling others what I have learned the hard way. I understand revenge fantasies as necessary fictions to be played out in one's imagination, in order to let go of the anger and frustration, which are always greater than one can begin to imagine from the outside. However, I cannot act on these things. Even accounting for all kinds of righteous rage, I cannot fathom what it might really mean to enact such fantasies. I cannot sit back and allow another to suffer what I know to be devastating pain. I cannot tolerate that. If anything, this is what I have learned from my own experience of violation. I cannot stomach the idea of violence against others, much less its actual enactment.

Concretely, for me, this means that even now, over ten years after I was raped, notwithstanding my hatred of the American justice system, I would testify in court against the man who raped me. But I would not do this

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for revenge; I would do it only for the sake of other women who might be harmed by the man who attacked me. I wrote about my rape for them, if only to make living with rape a bit less lonely, less frightening, by letting other women know that someone else was there and had experienced, at least in part, their pain and anger. For me, it felt good to reach out like this. Although such moments of reaching out have become rare with the passage of years, they still happen.

Thus, perhaps the only recent connection I have made across the globe that feels like it has mattered happened toward the end of last summer. I received an e-mail message from Israel asking how a copy of my essay, "Speaking Out of the Silence around Rape" (*Fireweed*, 41 [Fall 1993], pp. 20–31), could be found. The woman who wrote to me was not someone I knew; she was familiar with my work and wanted to share it with a friend who had recently been raped. Because the piece was not on line, I asked for the friend's name and address so that I could send her a copy. It turned out that this second woman, whose name I did not recognize as Jewish or Israeli, was in Europe, so I sent the material to her there. In my imagination, this is who the women were: an Israeli woman reaching out to a Palestinian friend, thinking that my essay might be of some help. In this small instance we had connected to each other. I felt hopeful. I do not know the actual story of these two women, and I do not need to. What I do know is that my package arrived: I received an e-mail message from Europe. That was enough.

This fantasy takes me back to where I began. I do not understand how even a people as wounded as we Jews are can let our revenge fantasies overrule our empathy. I cannot understand a rabbi calling for the re-invocation of old, broken, and now untenable narratives as an answer to our current crisis. I, too, am horrified by the violence of suicide bombers on the streets of Israel, by the terrible and terrifying deaths of innocent women, children, and men, but I cannot allow my anger at these acts of brutality perpetrated against my people to shield me from the larger context of these enactments. For me, this means confronting the status quo of violent occupation, the destruction of over a generation of Palestinian life under Israeli rule. I cannot let myself become blind to the suffering of others, which has led to some of the most desperate, frustrated acts of revenge within Israel's official borders.

I do not want to justify these acts. Like my own frustrating fantasies of revenge, they can never be justified, but they do need to be understood as all too human and familiar. Fighting the desire to make others suffer because

we have suffered is extremely difficult, but not resisting such desires is, perhaps, even more devastating. It only reproduces a world in our worst image. I cannot allow myself to be a part of such madness. I wish my rabbi could have appreciated this problem. Instead of making us congregants feel good and secure in our old beliefs, I wish he could have tried to appeal to the hurt in all of us that knows better and wants more than just revenge. Letting go of our self-righteous rage, however justified, could have been a more meaningful entry into the real work of repentance.

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“AND WHAT ABOUT THE GIRLS?”

WHAT A CULTURE OF WAR GENDERS OUT OF VIEW*

Rela Mazali

The first lecture I ever gave on the subject of parenting in a state that practices conscription began with the sentence: “When my daughter was born, I could allow myself a sigh of relief that I couldn’t take when each of my sons was born.” This was in 1991. Reading this opening sentence today, I cringe.

A majority of Jewish parents in Israel fail to see girls’ future military service as a threat in any way comparable to the threat faced by boys. This is so, despite the very real, though insidious, threats facing women soldiers and young women in general. In my view, even the feminist movement in Israel, and within it the feminist peace and anti-militarist movement, under-emphasizes this fact. I see this as one of the deeply embedded conceptual binds that underlie militarization and war. Taking a look at how discourse in Israel, including feminist discourse, is gendered and circumscribed by the culture of war, I’ll ask “And what about the girls?”

Carol Cohn, a feminist scholar who studied the discourse of nuclear scientists, described a process through which independent thinking is blocked. In her article: “Wars, Wimps and Women: Talking Gender and Thinking War,” she followed the practices making it dangerous, emotionally loaded, and practically impossible to cross the conventional and prescribed boundaries of a field of discourse: