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Power and Morality

Irving Greenberg, one of the significant Jewish thinkers of our time, has written: "Exercise of power must be accompanied by strong models and constant evocation of the memory of historic Jewish suffering and powerlessness. It is so easy to forget slavery's lessons once one is given power, but such forgetfulness leads to the unfeeling infliction of pain on others." He concludes: "Memory is the key to morality."

I often quote these words in response to events in Israel. They're topical once again as the media carry news about alleged abuses by Israeli soldiers of Palestinian civilians during the Gaza operation. At this stage it's impossible to determine whether the allegation is about one particular instance or a reflection of a general trend.

In view of what we know about war, nothing is impossible. Abuses have occurred in every war, not least in our time, and even in so-called peace missions, as in the case of Canadian soldiers in Somalia. The fact that conscription in Israel brings boys, at times not older than 18, to the battlefield increases the risk of immature action that may turn out to be immoral, perhaps even criminal. In this case, however, nothing has been proven yet.

We'd like to think that Jewish soldiers know enough Jewish history, some of it very recent, to "remember" what it means to be humiliated and annihilated. It's a history that has shaped Jewish values to abhor the abuse of power under whatever circumstances. That such abuse may be commonplace elsewhere is no consolation for us.

I believe that a lot of the responsibility rests with the military rabbinate. Instead of instilling Jewish values it selects such texts for the soldiers that could encourage irresponsible acts in the name of God and in the guise of national pride. To invoke the Holocaust to justify cruelty perverts its lesson. Instead of training commanding officers to take responsibility for the actions of their soldiers by prohibiting abuse on both military and moral grounds, the rabbinate is too often too preoccupied with ritual trifles.

Instead of, for example, improving the quality of the military chaplaincy by taking it away from religious fanatics, those in authority are prone to shoot the messenger instead of examining the message. Thus it has already been said defensively that the man who leaked the allegations to the press is a known "lefty" and that none of the soldiers who alleged abuse spoke about themselves; they all reported hearsay about others.

Whatever the circumstances and the background, at this stage we're not entitled to draw definite conclusions. Women and men, Jews and non-Jews who, ahead of the evidence and on the basis of newspaper articles, organize protest marches and write indignant letters in all directions are making a case for those who say that negative reporting about Israel is a tool in the service of Israel bashing, an abuse that can be no less lethal than infringements by soldiers in uniform.

The leading Israeli newspaper Ha'aretz that broke the news and is pursuing the matter shows that Israel is an open, democratic society that's prepared to look at itself, warts and all. Even those who think that the paper went overboard this time don't want to collude with abusers but will argue for

the publication of truths, however painful.

Those committed to Israel, not least Jews in the diaspora, must discipline themselves not to be unduly defensive by accusing everybody who demands a full inquiry of morbid Jewish self-hatred or blatant anti-Semitism.

Editorial remarks

Rabbi Dow Marmur, Toronto, Canada, spends half the year in Jerusalem and the other half in Toronto. He sends his observations and comments out to his list.