



# Holy War in Judaism: The Fall and Rise of a Controversial Idea

By Reuven Firestone

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## **Holy War in Judaism: The Fall and Rise of a Controversial Idea** By Reuven Firestone

Holy war, sanctioned or even commanded by God, is a common and recurring theme in the Hebrew Bible. Rabbinic Judaism, however, largely avoided discussion of holy war in the Talmud and related literatures for the simple reason that it became dangerous and self-destructive. Reuven Firestone's *Holy War in Judaism* is the first book to consider how the concept of "holy war" disappeared from Jewish thought for almost 2000 years, only to reemerge with renewed vigor in modern times.

The revival of the holy war idea occurred with the rise of Zionism. As the necessity of organized Jewish engagement in military actions developed, Orthodox Jews faced a dilemma. There was great need for all to engage in combat for the survival of the infant state of Israel, but the Talmudic rabbis had virtually eliminated divine authorization for Jews to fight in Jewish armies. Once the notion of divinely sanctioned warring was revived, it became available to Jews who considered that the historical context justified more aggressive forms of warring.

Among some Jews, divinely authorized war became associated not only with defense but also with a renewed kibbush or conquest, a term that became central to the discourse regarding war and peace and the lands conquered by the state of Israel in 1967. By the early 1980's, the rhetoric of holy war had entered the general political discourse of modern Israel. In *Holy War in Judaism*, Firestone identifies, analyzes, and explains the historical, conceptual, and intellectual processes that revived holy war ideas in modern Judaism.

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## **Editorial Review**

### **Review**

"*Holy War in Judaism* has serious implications for the Arab-Israeli conflict whose peaceful solution, as Firestone stresses in the end, can only be reached when radicalism ceases on both, the Israeli and Arab sides." --*Middle East Media and Book Reviews*

"In Firestone's hands, holy war in Judaism moves quickly from a self-acknowledged questionable premise to a well-documented ancient historical reality, rabbinic theoretical possibility, and now once again an operative category and a modern-day paradigm for military action. His thoughtful assessments and painstaking research are matched by an easy-to-read style that makes the book suitable for nonexperts, and students of history, sociology, and religion can all benefit from its detailed discussions." --*Journal of Church and State*

"Admirers of Reuven Firestone will not be disappointed with this book, and its intriguing title and subtitle accurately outline its main thesis...This is in every way an excellent book, detailed and accurate and well-argued throughout...The book is certainly now the standard text on the topic and I am sure will remain so for a very long time. A sign of its excellence is that it raises many issues which it does not settle, and readers will find it a stimulating and inspiring read. --*Ilahiyat Studies*

"Reuven Firestone's comprehensive and deeply researched study of Jewish ideas of holy war could not be more timely. Modern Jewish sovereignty has caused some Jews to reject the rabbinic restrictions on 'commanded war' and to portray the struggles of the state of Israel in messianic terms. The tradition that Firestone has unearthed and reconstructed is now very much at stake in the most contemporary debates over Israel's future."--David Biale, Emanuel Ringelblum Distinguished Professor of Jewish History Chair in the Department of History, University of California at Davis

"Reuven Firestone has given us a first-rate history of the origins, transformations, and renewed relevance of the idea of divinely-justified war in Judaism. Firestone's narrative is crystal clear, and his selection, presentation, and interpretation of the primary sources reveal him to be a master of his topic. This is a worthy companion to the author's earlier volume on *jihad* in Islamic thought."--Martin S. Jaffee, Samuel and Althea Stroum Chair in Jewish Studies, University of Washington

"Simultaneously interesting and valuable as a study of both the historical conceptualization of normative rabbinic thought on war and its reconceptualization and application in contemporary Israel... Firestone takes readers inside the religious debate that is also going on, places it in the moral frame that nourishes it, and

helps readers to understand not only the nature of that frame but the internal tensions that define it."

--*Journal of the American Academy of Religion*

"Reuven Firestone's clear and comprehensive account of the career of the idea of holy war in Judaism is a most welcome contribution. This book will push readers to think about concepts-for example, 'holy' war as fighting considered legitimate in virtue of its authorization by God-as well as about the ways human communities develop ideas about war in response to concrete social and political conditions. Firestone's study deserves extensive discussion from a wide audience."--John Kelsay, Bristol Distinguished Professor of Religion and Ethics, Florida State University

"*Holy War in Judaism* is written in a very clear and explanatory style and is therefore also suitable for non-expert readers with an interest in Judaism, Israel, peace and violence, and holy war. Students and scholars of political and social sciences, history, and religious studies will benefit most from its detailed discussion of Jewish religious thinking on divinely sanctioned military action."--*LSE Review of Books*

## About the Author

**Reuven Firestone** is Professor of Medieval Judaism and Islam at the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion, Los Angeles.

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#### Donald Gullett:

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