

MORAL GYMNASIUM

Someone has said that "Israel is the moral gymnasium in which other nations exercise their flabby moral muscles."

There was, for example, little flexing of world moral muscle at those Phalangists who actually committed the murders in Sabra and Shatila. Or the Lebanese state officials who allowed them to go in by refusing to do so themselves. Or the continuing murders of Palestinians by the Phalangists today in Lebanese-held Lebanon. Or indeed that slaughter in a contained tunnel in Afghanistan.

But Israel heavily contributes to its own image as a moral gymnasium. The Israeli Commission of Inquiry opened new frontiers of national self-scrutiny. According to the Commission, public officials are to be held accountable not just for the moral crimes they commit; and not just for exhibiting *indifference* or negligence in the face of crimes they witness; but also they are to be held accountable for any indifference to the *possibility* of damage which might be caused by others.

The Talmud lays out such accountability in personal behavior. Thus, if you saw a piece of jagged glass on the sidewalk, you would be culpably indifferent if you did not remove it, lest someone else be hurt. Or take the Talmudic case of the goat and the turnips. The first man's unsupervised goat breaks a second man's barrel by climbing the barrel to get at the turnips on top. Rab Yehuda found the first man accountable for the broken barrel because it could have been anticipated that an unsupervised goat would want to climb the barrel to get to the turnips.

It was this kind of Talmudic principle which was applied to Sharon by the Commission of Inquiry when it said that he had failed in his duty "to take into account all the reasonable considerations for and against having the Phalangists enter the camps and not to disregard entirely the serious consideration mitigating against such an action, namely that the Phalangists were liable to commit atrocities..."

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If that rigorous moral logic had been applied to the My Lai massacre in the Vietnam War, the U.S. Defense Secretary would have lost his job, not just some low grade officers in the field. *That might indeed have been a proper thing to happen.* But political states do not generally feel accountable for the effects of such indirect moral mistakes. Political actions and effects are considered more complicated than a piece of jagged glass on the sidewalk, or turnips on a barrel.

Israel's Commission has set a new and exciting moral standard for the world. Israel should use that standard when it makes mistakes, as it will. But it is to be hoped that the whole world will use that standard for self-scrutiny, and not just apply it to Israel, everybody's moral gymnasium. Perhaps, also, the world will note that Israel's survival is a moral issue in itself. Israel should continue to be a light unto the nations, but not by setting fire to herself.