16.1 Introduction

The subject of security has undergone significant changes in recent years. For the better part of the past century, security studies had as its goal the examination of international affairs with the hope of finding ways to minimize armed conflict between nations. However, in the past decade or two, security specialists have recognized that security defined in this fashion is of little utility. Human beings may live in a world devoid of war but still be miserable if their lives are endangered by a host of factors in other realms, such as the economy, the environment, and politics. The focus of recent explorations of security has therefore shifted away from the security of states to the security of individuals, with an interest in examining the nexus of factors that affect the individual’s physical well-being.

To my knowledge, the present chapter is the first attempt to explore this new conception of security from a Jewish standpoint. My goal here will therefore be to establish whether Judaism even has such a conception. In the first portion of my analysis, I will examine this question from a broad theological perspective by evaluating the extent to which Judaism values the physical well-being of the individual. I will argue that Judaism not only has concern for this issue, but that it is basic to its world-view. I will then discuss how Jewish sources grapple with specific topics in human security. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to conduct a comprehensive discussion of all such topics because of the large volume of Jewish material on these issues. I will therefore concentrate my efforts on three major topics: war and peace, human rights, and poverty. My hope is that a discussion of these themes will give a sense of the richness of Jewish sources regarding human security. Finally, I will address the role the State of Israel has to play in Jewish conceptions of human security in the modern period.

My analysis will be based on a reading of Jewish religious sources that is admittedly selective. First, I will focus mainly on biblical and rabbinic texts since biblical and rabbinic Judaism are the twin pillars upon which all later Jewish thought and ethics are based. Secondly, even my citations of biblical and rabbinic texts will be selective because those texts present a wide range of views on any given topic. Therefore, one can speak only of a preponderance of opinion in biblical and rabbinic sources with respect to the issues discussed here. Nonetheless, the sources present enough of a consensus on those issues that conclusions can be drawn about what constitutes mainstream Judaism.

16.2 General Theological Considerations

One might expect that Judaism would offer a paucity of material on the subject of human security, given that this topic is so closely tied to the political realm. Throughout their history, Jews have had relatively little opportunity to deal with political matters. Jews have spent almost two-thirds of their three-thousand year history governed by others, and thus a large portion of their sacred texts were written when they did not have political sovereignty—most notably, the entire corpus of rabbinic Judaism which includes the Talmud.

However, Judaism has a great deal to say about human security and this is so for several reasons. First, Jews did have sovereignty for many centuries in ancient Israel and therefore the Hebrew Bible furnishes

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2 This is a problem that afflicts all religions with a long history, such as Judaism. In such religion, there is rarely unanimity on any given issue, but rather tendencies and emphases in one direction or another.
much material on political issues. Second, the later rabbis often reflect on political matters even though their discussions are mostly theoretical in nature, seeing as they could not implement them in practice. Third, when Jews lived under the sovereignty of others in the medieval period, they were often allowed to govern their own communities and they therefore evolved an extensive body of legal literature concerning politics as applicable to this local form of government, limited as it was. Fourth, in the past several decades Jews have once again gained sovereignty with the establishment of the State of Israel and this has thrust new attention on the question of the political in Judaism and has revived interest in developing this area. Fifth, Jewish sources often have an acute sensitivity to issues related to human security because Jews have had an extensive history of persecution and suffering. In fact, in the biblical text Jewish nationhood is forged in the bonds of the Egyptian slavery. This sensitivity has inspired Jews to place great value on human physical well-being.

Yet, perhaps the most important reason that Judaism has a lot to say about human security lies in the very nature of Judaism itself. One of the hallmarks of Jewish religion is its highly positive view of the mundane world. One is supposed to enjoy God’s earth in all its materiality and physicality – though within limits set by God’s commandments. Striving for physical well-being is therefore not only permitted but a divine imperative.

16.2.1 The Hebrew Bible

This insight is borne out by a selective perusal of Jewish sources. In the Hebrew Bible, Adam and Eve are initially placed in the Garden of Eden where all of their physical needs are taken care of. Idyllic human existence is therefore characterized by human security. When Adam and Eve sin and are expelled from Eden, their punishment is that their security is effectively taken away. They lose their economic security in that they must now produce bread by the sweat of their brow, and their security is further compromised when violence and murder are introduced into the world with Cain’s killing of Abel (Gen. 3:17–8, 4:1–16). That violence only grows over the next few generations so that finally God decides to destroy the world in the Flood Story (Gen. 6:5–12). The stories about the Patriarchs also reflect a concern for physical well-being. The relationships that the Patriarchs develop with God are inextricably tied in with such mundane issues as health, wealth, and family dynamics. In fact, one reason why the stories in Genesis have had timeless appeal is that their characters are so human in their involvement with mundane concerns.

The central theme of the Torah and a key theme in the Hebrew Bible as a whole is the covenantal relationship between God and the Israelites, and that relationship is very much centred on this-worldly concerns. According to the terms of the covenant, the Israelites will merit reward if they obey God’s will and will be punished if they do not. Obedience here is the strict adherence to God’s laws which specify not only the proper worship of God through ritual but also the construction of a just civil society that allows the Israelites to thrive both as a nation and as individuals. Therefore, human security is central to God’s plan for the Israelites.

Even more important, the concern for human security is evident in the nature of the rewards and punishments which according to the Bible come as a consequence of obedience or disobedience to the covenant. These are defined entirely in physical terms; there is no mention of spiritual rewards in an afterlife. Reward consists of residing in the land of Israel which is characterized by its economic wealth; it is a land flowing with milk and honey. Reward is also equated with ample rainfall, physical health, abundant crops and livestock, and peace with Israel’s neighbours. Punishment is the opposite of these: famine, disease, poverty, war, and exile (Lev. 26; Deut. 28).

Also relevant here are the eschatological passages in the books of the Prophets which imagine a period free from material want and violence from Israel’s enemies. The prophet Micah, for instance, predicts that in this period “nation shall not take up sword against nation; never again shall they know war. But every man shall sit under his grapevine or fig tree with no one to disturb him” (Mic. 4:4; Is. 2:1–4). Thus, when the prophet envisions the messianic era, he describes a society in which the nation and its individual members are physically secure. Eden is re-created.

One can, of course, question the relevance of this conception of human security for our own time, given that in the biblical text physical well-being is a consequence of obedience to God - not political, economic, or social policies. Still, it is noteworthy that the Hebrew Bible places such a high premium on physical well-being when one considers the fact that the sacred texts in many other religions denigrate life in this world and place greater value on a spiritual existence detached from physical needs both in this world and the next.