

Swords, Spears, ... and Other Weapons

Source Sheet by Rabbi Carl Perkins

Based on a sheet by Naomi Guembel

Shabbat 63a

MISHNAH: Just as a woman may not carry out certain items into the public domain, the Sages said that **a man may neither go out on Shabbat with a sword, nor with a bow, nor with a shield, nor with a lance, nor with a spear. ...**

שבת ס"ג א

מתני' לא יצא האיש לא בס"יף ולא בקשת ולא בתריס ולא באלה ולא ברומח.



Rabbi Eliezer says: These weapons are ornaments for him.

רבי אליעזר אומר: תכשיטין הן לו.

But the Rabbis say: They are reprehensible (and in the future will be eliminated), **as it is written:** *“And they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation will not raise sword against nation, neither will they learn war anymore”* (Isaiah 2:4). ...

וחכמים אומרים: אינן אלא לגנאי, שנאמר: “וכתתו חרבותם לאתים וחקיתותיהם למזמרות ולא ישא גוי אל גוי חרב ולא ילמדו עוד מלחמה” ...

GEMARA: We learned in the mishna that **Rabbi Eliezer says: These weapons are ornaments for him.**

גמ' ... רבי אליעזר אומר תכשיטין הן לו.

It was taught on this subject:

תנא:

The Rabbis **said to Rabbi Eliezer:** **Since**, in your opinion, **they are ornaments for him**, **why are they to be eliminated in the messianic era?**

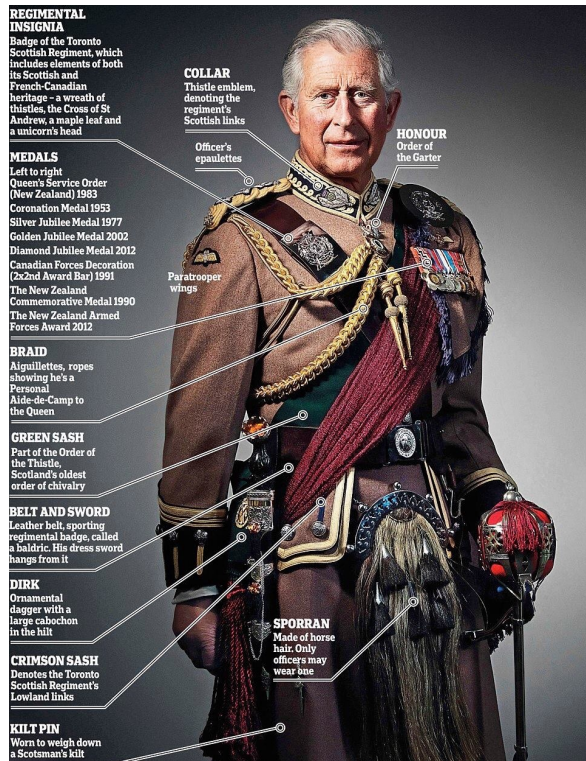
אמרו לו לרבי אליעזר: וכי מאחר דתכשיטין הן לו, מפני מה הן בטלין לימות המשיח?

He said to them: They will not be needed anymore, **as it is stated:** *“Nation will not raise sword against nation”* (Isaiah 2:4).

אמר להן: לפי שאינן צריכין, שנאמר: “לא ישא גוי אל גוי חרב”.

But even so, **they’ll remain ornamental.**

ותהוי לנוי בעלמא!



Abaye said: (No.) It will be just like a candle at noontime. (Since it won't be necessary, it won't be ornamental either.)

אָמַר אַבֵּי: מִיַּדִּי דִּהְיָה אֶשְׂרָגָא
בְּטִיבְרָא.

Avodah Zarah 15b-16a

it is taught: One may not sell weapons to gentiles or the auxiliary equipment of weapons, nor may one sharpen weapons for them.

And one may not sell them stocks used for fastening the feet of prisoners, **or iron neck chains, or foot chains, or iron chains.**

This prohibition applies equally to **both a gentile and a Samaritan.**

What is the reason for the prohibition against selling these items to Samaritans? **If we say that they are suspected of bloodshed**, that is difficult: **Are they indeed suspected** of this? ...

Rather, it is prohibited to sell these items to Samaritans **because they will come to sell them to a gentile.** ...

And if you would say that there is a difference between a Jew and a Samaritan, as **a Samaritan will likely not repent** and will sell to a gentile, whereas **a Jew will likely repent** and not sell these items, this reasoning is incorrect. **Doesn't Rav Nahman say** explicitly that **Rabba bar Avuh says: Just as the Sages said that it is prohibited to sell to a gentile, so too it is prohibited to sell to a Jew who is suspected of selling to a gentile?**

Rav Dimi bar Abba says: Just as it is prohibited to sell to a gentile, it is prohibited to sell to an armed bandit who is a Jew.

(Additional Material)

What are the circumstances? If the (Jewish) bandit is suspected of killing, isn't it obvious that it is prohibited? After all, he is the same as a gentile.

And if he is a bandit who does *not* kill, why not sell to him?

Actually, Rav Dimi bar Abba is referring to a bandit who does not kill, and here we are dealing with a bandit who steals -- as sometimes he makes use of his weapon to save himself when caught. Consequently, it is prohibited to sell him weapons in case he kills with them in self-defense.

§ The Sages taught: One may *not* sell shields [*terisin*] to gentiles, despite the fact that they are used for protection, not to attack others.

And some say: One *may* sell shields to them.

What is the reason behind the latter opinion? If we say it is because they protect them in wartime, if so, then even wheat and barley should not be sold to them.

Rav said[16a]: If it were possible to avoid selling produce to gentiles without incurring their animosity, indeed it would be prohibited to sell them. Since limiting sales to gentiles to such an extent would cause great harm, it is only prohibited to sell them shields.

There are those who say: With regard to **shields**, **this is the reason** that one is **not** allowed to sell them to gentiles: **As when their** use of their **weapon is finished** in battle, **they kill with these** shields. **And** accordingly, the reason that **some say** that **one may sell shields to them** is because they maintain that this is not a concern, **as when their weapon is finished they flee**, rather than use their shield as a weapon. **Rav Nahman says that Rabba bar Avuh says:** The *halakha* is in accordance with the opinion cited as: **“Some say.”**

Rav Adda bar Ahava says: One may not sell blocks [*ashashiot*] of iron to gentiles. **What is the reason?** It is **because they forge weapons from them**. The Gemara asks: **If so**, then **even hoes and axes** should not be sold to them, as they too can be used to forge weapons. **Rav Zevid said** in response: The ruling of Rav Adda bar Ahava was stated **with regard to Indian iron**, which is of a superior quality and used only for crafting weapons.

And as for the fact **that nowadays we do sell** all weapons, **Rav Ashi said:** We sell the weapons **to the Persians, who protect us**.

והאידנא דקא מזבנינן א'ר אשי לפרסאי דמגנו עילוין:

Should Jews Sell Guns?

Selling the tools of violence to people prone to violence violates the biblical prohibition of "setting a stumbling block before the blind."

(Published in MyJewishLearning.com, May 2022)

By Rabbi J. David Bleich

This is one view among several possible Jewish views of the ethics of selling firearms..Excerpted with permission from [Sh'ma: A Journal of Jewish Responsibility](#), 11/214, May 15, 1981.

Mr. Isaac Goldstein, Proprietor
Rocky's Pawn Shop
Elm Street
Dallas, Texas

Dear Mr. Goldstein:

Time Magazine reports that you are giving serious consideration to discontinuing the sale of handguns in your establishment. No doubt, the recent attempt upon the life of President Reagan is prompting such soul-searching not only on your part, as proprietor of the store which sold that particular gun, but on the part of countless other gun dealers as well. Permit me to draw your attention to one aspect of Jewish teaching which should figure prominently in such deliberations.

Maimonides (*Mishneh Torah*, Laws of a Murderer 12:12, paraphrasing *Babylonian Talmud* Avodah Zarah 15b) declares: "It is forbidden to sell heathens weapons of war. Nor is it permitted to sharpen their spears, or to sell them knives, manacles, iron chains, bears, lions, or any object which can endanger the public; but it is permitted to sell them shields which are only for defense."

Mr. Goldstein, a sticker on the door of your shop reads, "Guns Don't Cause Crime Any More Than Flies Cause Garbage." Maimonides disagrees emphatically. In explaining the premise upon which this provision of Jewish law is based, Maimonides tells us that in selling arms to a heathen "one strengthens the hands of an evil-doer and *causes him to transgress*" and "anyone who causes one who is blind with regard to a matter to stumble--or one who strengthens the hand of a person who is blind and does not see the path of truth because of the desire of his heart violates a negative precept as it is stated, 'you shall not put a stumbling block before the blind.'"

This precept was understood by the Sages as an admonition designed to protect not

only the physically blind, but the intellectually and morally blind as well. A Jew is forbidden to take advantage of another person's lack of awareness in a way which causes harm to that person or others. The Torah forbids us to mislead the blind and thereby cause them to stumble. We are forbidden to give the uninformed misinformation or poor advice; we are forbidden to prey upon, or pander to, the predilections of the morally blind.

These restrictions are part of Torah and accepted by Jews because such is the divine command, but they also happen to make good sense.

Jewish law recognizes that indiscriminate sale of weapons cannot fail to endanger the public. The daily newspaper confirms this deep-seated distrust far more often than is necessary. As the bearers of an ageless moral code, Jews ought to be in the vanguard of those seeking to impress upon our legislators that handguns are indeed "stumbling blocks" which must not fall into the hands of the "blind." Criminals do commit crimes, and it is precisely because "morally blind" criminals are disposed to crime that Judaism teaches that it is forbidden to provide them with the tools of their trade.

Yes, Mr. Goldstein, flies do not cause garbage, but garbage does attract flies. Guns may or may not cause crime, but crimes of violence cannot be committed without tools of violence. Self-restraint in the sale of weapons is a small enough price to pay for even marginal enhancement of public safety.

Sincerely yours,

J. David Bleich

*Source Sheet created on Sefaria by Rabbi Carl Perkins
Based on a sheet by Naomi Guembel*