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## **Self-Immolation; Insights from Hebrew Scriptures and Rabbinic Tradition**

(An Historical exploration of Martyrdom, Religiously Motivated Death and its Legitimacy)

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### **Abstract**

A powerful ritual and religious symbol, blood was valued by primitive people and modern people alike, as it could have harmful or healthy connotations, cleansing or destroying connotations. Blood symbolized the soul or life. Religion provides invaluable terms for referring to it. The article starts by exploring the historical existence of human sacrificial phenomena in world civilizations, followed by elaborating the nature of its existence in Judaism. It deals with such questions; Is there any Biblical narration Of human blood shed and its prohibition exists? When, according to the Jews, blood loses its veneration and One intends to shed human life? What the Hebrew terms *Kiddush Hashem* and *Yom kippur* are meant in relation to the religiously motivated death? Does the *Hebrew Bible* and *Judaic Tradition* record any instance of self-sacrifice/martyrdom; Individual and collective throughout Jewish history? Do the Jewish scriptures motivate its adherents to do so? What could be the objectives and reasons in fostering this extreme act of self-sacrifice? How the *Talmudic Teachings* and *Rabbinic Law* treat this phenomenon and elaborates its legitimacy or the other way round? The article is an attempt to present the Jewish approach on the subject matter by applying the historical and descriptive method.

### **Introduction**

## Self-Immolation; Insights from Hebrew Scriptures and Rabbinic Tradition

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Human sacrifice is often linked to the belief that human blood is a holy life force. Such an offering of a person to a deity can take many forms, including killing or substituting with an animal. *New Age Encyclopedia* explains that some cultures practiced this as a means of communing with their gods.”<sup>1</sup> *Encyclopedia Britannica* references numerous historical examples of ritualistic human sacrifice in various places as

“The offering of a human being to a god or slaughter of servants or slaves was more common in Africa, Egypt and the ancient Middle East where human sacrifice was connected with ancestor worship, some of the slaves of the deceased were buried alive with him, or they were killed and laid beneath him in his grave. For example, the Chinese practice of burying the emperor's retinue with him continued intermittently until the 17th century. The sacrificial offering of humans to a god has been well attested only in a few cultures. In what is now Mexico the belief that the sun needed human nourishment led to the sacrifice of thousands of victims annually in the *Aztec and Nahua* calendrical maize (corn) ritual. The burning of children seems to have occurred in Assyrian and Canaanite religions and at various times among the Israelites. Among the African Asante, the victims sacrificed as first-fruit offerings during the Festival of New Yams were usually criminals, though slaves also were killed. Some early *Christians* were falsely accused of cannibalism, consuming sacrificial victims at nocturnal feasts, a misunderstanding probably due to the secrecy surrounding the Eucharistic rite and the use of the words body and blood. From the Middle Ages until quite recently, *Jews* were often maliciously accused of having sacrificed Christian children at Passover, an accusation which has been termed the blood libel.”<sup>2</sup>

### **What is Self-immolation?**

A number of synonyms describe the intentional termination of one's life in English; martyrdom, suicide, self-destruction, free death, suicidal act, suicide bombing, sacrificial death and self-immolation.

“Self-Immolation” is simple to see but there is no debate on the fact that immolation as a term has not yet been discussed by the scholars of the

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<sup>1</sup> D.S.Girling, *New age encyclopedia* (Sydney: Bay books, 1983), vol: 25, p: 123.

<sup>2</sup> Robert P.Gwinn, “Human Sacrifice” in *The Encyclopedia Britannica*, vol: 5, p: 594.

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world. In the following lines after the discussion on its complexity some of the definitions have been recorded as back ground before entering the subject. Self-immolation is A deliberate and willing sacrifice of oneself by fire”<sup>3</sup>

Essentially, self-immolation means suicide by fire, but it also encompasses other forms of self-sacrifice, such as martyrdom, suicide, self-destruction, free death, suicidal act, suicide bombing, self-immolation, sacrificial death, etc. Religion, philosophy, and law have all contributed to these expressions.

Self-immolation in religion is interpreted through martyrdom and religiously motivated suicide, so we will begin with both the concepts and its historical background.

### **Jewish approach to Self-Immolation; Martyrdom and religiously motivated death**

In Rabbinic Tradition, a martyr is one who dies willingly for the faith, thus sanctifying the name of God.”<sup>4</sup> This standard derives from a reading of the phrase in Leviticus, “And you shall not profane my holy name.”<sup>5</sup> Jewish action that brings honour, respect, and glory to God is considered Kiddush Hashem, while behavior that disgraces, harms, or shames God is prohibited.

The definition makes sense very clear that a martyr is a person who dies for the sanctification of Yahweh's name. If we study Jewish literature, we find the term Kiddush Hashem to describe martyrdom activities.

### **The act of suicide (*Ibbud*)**

As part of this presentation, we will present the precise teachings of the *Hebrew Scriptures*, *Talmud* and *Rabbinic law* related to the concept.

Although Hebrew Scriptures don't explicitly forbid suicide, the Judaic tradition came to forbid it, partly on the basis of the belief that God alone gives life and takes it away, and partly on the basis of the sixth commandment, which forbids unjustified homicide. As a result, the Hebrew

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<sup>3</sup> *Dictionary and Thesaurus, Britannica Encyclopedia of World Religions*, Jacob E.Safra & Jorge Aguilar Gauz (ed.) (Singapore: 2006), self-immolation.

<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey Parrinder, *A concise Encyclopedia of Judaism*, p: 127.

<sup>5</sup> *Leviticus*, 22:32.

Scriptures provide a soft corner for suicide, since they state that suicide is a moral obligation.

### **Suicide as a moral Obligation**

For Jewish believers, suicide is a moral obligation as the only alternative to murder, incest, and idolatry. Also, Mircea Eliade considered suicides committed under pressure, such as to avoid murder, idolatry, or adultery, to be blameless.<sup>6</sup> In the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, the Jewish assembly of scholars determined that, for Jews, martyrdom as the offering of one's life is obligatory in the form of above mentioned three sins."<sup>7</sup> This is based upon the Biblical statement:

"You shall therefore keep my statutes, and my judgments: which if a man does, he shall live in them: I am the Lord."<sup>8</sup>

This verse teaches that one should die rather than violate religious requirements, hence one should not put his own life in danger through the practice of religious requirements.

**Idolatry;** The Ballad of Hannah and her seven sons highlights the strong commitment to prohibiting idolatry. It is based on the Biblical verse, "And thou shall love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might."<sup>9</sup> This means that one should only serve the Lord and not any other god. The seven sons of Hannah demonstrated how seriously this prohibition was taken during the time of Antiochus Epiphanes (d. 163 B.C.E.), as they refused to worship an idol, despite knowing that it may cost them their lives. .<sup>10</sup>

**Sexual immorality;** The second exception is extrapolated from referring to the case of a betrothed girl who was raped by a man, "But if a man meets a young woman who is betrothed in the open country and seizes her and lies with her, then only the man who lays with her shall die."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> "Suicide" in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol: 14, p: 126.

<sup>7</sup> Holger Preibler, "Martyr", *The Brill Dictionary of Religion*, vol: 3, p: 1823.

<sup>8</sup> *Leviticus*, 18: 5.

<sup>9</sup> *Deuteronomy*, 6:5.

<sup>10</sup> *II Maccabees*, 6:12-17.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 22:26.

According to this verse, one should sacrifice one's life rather than his sexuality.

**Murder;** The exception of murder is derived by logic, as the *Talmud* states, "It happened with Rava that the exception to murder was derived from logic, as the *Talmud* states, "A man came to Rava and said that the governor of the city ordered him to kill a certain man or suffer death, and Rava said, "Rather than slay another person, you must allow yourself to be killed." <sup>12</sup> A verse from Leviticus states, "Neither shall you stand against the blood of your neighbor: I am the Lord." <sup>13</sup>

### **Legitimacy of Martyrdom and religiously motivated death**

Judaism places high value on life, so the Book of Genesis presents a clear cut rule regarding human bodies. As in the Islamic system of Qisas, O.T. 's rule states blood for blood if someone intends to shed blood. It is not legitimate to shed blood, as it says:

"Whoever sheds the blood of man shall have his blood shed by man."<sup>14</sup>

### **Suicidal death in Talmud**

A strong condemnation of suicide is emphasized by the Teachings of *Talmud*. In the case of one's own intentional death, there were no mourning prescriptions until the 20th century. <sup>15</sup> According to Geoffrey Parrinder, suicide victims are denied normal burial and mourning. <sup>16</sup> According to *Rabbinic Law*, suicide is an act of unsound minds. Under such circumstances, they may still receive Jewish burial rituals. <sup>17</sup>

An extremely prominent Jew, Israel Shahak, has unmasked the Jewish face from religious, historical, and military perspectives. He presented evidence from Jewish history regarding killing non-Jews.

### **Martyrdom in Talmud**

The *Brill Dictionary* writes:

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<sup>12</sup> *Sanhedrin 74a, Babylonian Talmud, Michael L. Rodkinson (ed.) (Boston: the Talmud society, 1918), vol: 3, p: 135.*

<sup>13</sup> *Leviticus, 19:16.*

<sup>14</sup> *Genesis, 9:6.*

<sup>15</sup> *Chirly dos Santos, "Suicide" in The Brill Dictionary of Religion, vol: 3, p: 1823.*

<sup>16</sup> *A concise Encyclopedia of Judaism, p.184.*

<sup>17</sup> *Suicide in The Encyclopedia of Religion, vol: 14, p: 126.*

Martyrdom in Jewish history is conceptualized as *Kiddush Hashem*, Heb. Means 'sanctification of the (divine) Name'.<sup>18</sup>

In accordance with the Jewish calendar, Yom Kippur, the most sacred day of the year, commemorates the death of those who sanctified the name or reputation of God. Death for Kiddush Hashem, sanctifying of the name or the reputation of God is projected to impress the gentiles.

### **Martyrs' Day: Yom Kippur**

*Yom Kippur* (Day of Atonement) end of ten days of penitence that begin with Rosh Hashanah;<sup>19</sup> the most Holy of Jewish days.<sup>20</sup> The ten-day period of penitence that begins with *Rosh Hashanah* ends with Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement).

*Yom Kippur* is observed as a time of atonement and repentance. Jews spend 25 hours in fast and prayer, mostly spent at synagogue services. Uniquely, the *Yom Kippur* prayer service commemorates the ten great rabbis who were tortured and killed by the Romans during their occupation of Israel because they stayed true to *Torah*. These brave individuals stand as a model of Jewish martyrdom, with their deaths seen as an act of *Kiddush Hashem*, honoring God's Name.<sup>21</sup>

### **Historical exploration of Martyrdom and religiously motivated deaths**

Martyrdom in Judaism has an explicit idea. It begins with Abraham A.S, who was cast into a lime kiln and saved from the fire by divine grace. As a reward for this act of faith in one God, he was promised many offspring "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Holger Preibler, "Martyr", *The Brill Dictionary of Religion* (ed.), Kocku von Stuckrad (trns. German), Robert R. Barr (Leiden, Boston: BRILL, 2006), vol.3, p: 1611.

<sup>19</sup> This is the beginning of a New Jewish Year. In Arabic it is called *Ra'sus sanah*.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Riggs, *World mark Encyclopedia of religious practices* (USA: Thomas Gale, 2006), vol:1, p:430.

<sup>21</sup> *al-Masī rī*, Abdul Wabhāb, *Marwsū'at al-Yahūd wal-Yahūdiyyah wal-Sabyūniyyah*, vol:5, p:218.

<sup>22</sup> *Genesis*, 15:5.

The tradition was continued by Isaac in, who was headed to be sacrificed by his father.<sup>23</sup> This is the Jewish perspective while according to Muslims it was Ishmael (A.S).<sup>24</sup> Monotheistic teachings continued by Jacob, Moses and his brother Aaron (1313 BCE) facing the resistance by the rulers. As a result, Hazrat Abraham's methodology of preaching continued individually by the Israelite people. So we find a lot of individual martyrdom acts in Jewish history.

Presenting the historical view on the topic, we would like to quote from Naomi Janowitz's writings. The essay "Lusting for Death: Some Unconscious Meanings of Martyrdom Traditions" delves into the concept of martyrdom and suicidal attacks in Jewish history. It is believed this started more than 2,000 years ago when the Judaic world replaced animal sacrifice with human sacrifice, believing it would be a better way to atone for sins and become reconciled with God. The first chronicle of Jewish martyrdom can be found in the Book of Second Maccabees, which tells of a mother encouraging her seven sons to die rather than consume pork. This likely happened between 175 B.C. and 165 B.C., although the text was written later - 50 to 100 years later. What fueled these acts was a belief in an afterlife, where one could reunite not just with their mother, but also a divine father - with no mention of a biological father in the story itself. Thus, martyrdom offered hope not only for an afterlife but also being reunited with both parents - earthly and divine."<sup>25</sup>

Judaism draws a clear distinction between suicide, which it defines as self-murder and martyrdom, death on behalf of one's faith and religious convictions. Although the Hebrew Scriptures contain few references to die by one's own hand but do describe several instances of heroic suicide.<sup>26</sup> What are those instances of heroic suicide according to Mircea Eliade? Its details are as under. The first example is Abimelech.

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<sup>23</sup> Genesis, 22:2.

<sup>24</sup> al-Sāffāt, 102.

<sup>25</sup> Naomi Janowitz, "Lusting for death: Some unconscious meanings of martyrdom traditions" in *Psychiatric News*, March 18, 2005, p:9, retrieved on September 17, 2008 from <http://pn.psychiatryonline.org/cgi/search?sortspec=relevance&journalcode=psychnews&fulltext=lusting+for+death%3Aosome+unconciuous+meanings+of+martyrdom+tradition>

<sup>26</sup> Marilyn J. Harran, "Suicide", *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Mircea Eliade (ed.), vol: 14, p: 126.

## **Abimelech**

It is possible to view the king's command to his armour-bearer as a form of self-immolation even though he was not physically killed.

“And Abimelech came unto the tower, and fought against it, and went hard unto the door of the tower to burn it with fire. And a certain woman cast a piece of a millstone upon Abimelech's head, and all to break his skull. Then he called hastily unto the young man his armour-bearer, and said unto him, Draw thy sword, and slay me, that men say not of me, a woman slew him. And his young man thrust him through, and he died.”<sup>27</sup>

## **Samson**

As a result of his actions, Samson's death can surely be considered a heroic suicide, since he brought about the death of many Philistines.

“Now the house was full of men and women; and all the lords of the Philistines *were* there; and *there were* upon the roof about three thousand men and women that beheld while *Samson* made sport. And *Samson* called unto the LORD, and said, O Lord GOD, remember me, I pray thee, and strengthen me, I pray thee, only this once, O God, that I may be at once avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes. And *Samson* took hold of the two middle pillars upon which the house stood, and on which it was borne up, of the one with his right hand, and of the other with his left. And Samson said; Let me die with the Philistines. And he bowed himself with all his might; and the house fell upon the lords, and upon all the people that were therein. So the dead which he slew at his death were more than they which he slew in his life.”<sup>28</sup>

In the modern sight, heroic suicide can be defined as self-murder, self-sacrifice, death for one's faith, martyrdom for one's faith, or suicide. In spite of the similarities between the contemporary act of suicidal attack and the Jewish heroic suicide, do they both have the same style and purpose?

## **Saul**

When he was fighting a defensive war against his enemies, he was badly injured and fell on his own sword, avoiding a disgraceful death. Saul

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<sup>27</sup> *Judges, 9:52-54.*

<sup>28</sup> *Judges, 16:27- 31.*

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had ordered his armour-bearer to kill him before committing this holy act, but he had failed to fulfill his master's request, so Saul fell upon his own sword. What does the Bible say about this?

When Saul saw his armour-bearer, he said, “Draw thy sword, and thrust me through with it; lest these uncircumcised people come and thrust me through, and abuse me.” But his armour-bearer wouldn't; for he was so scared. Therefore Saul took a sword, and fell upon it. After seeing that Saul had died, his armour-bearer fell upon his sword and died with him.”<sup>29</sup>

During 2nd century BC, readiness for martyrdom grew to become a common Jewish ideal in response to the Antiochus persecution and Maccabean rebellion. Consequently, the Jewish scholarly convention of Lod decided that martyrdom is compulsory for Jews.<sup>30</sup> The gripping story of the mother and her seven sons is well-known in this regard. Moreover, Jewish people were more likely to choose martyrdom than desecrate the Sabbath during early Judaism period. Several devoted Jews even faced death when they circumcised their children during Hadrian's rule; notably, Ribbi Akiva embraced martyrdom to defend their right of publicly teaching Law.<sup>31</sup>

Since Hebrew times until the modern age, Judaism has had a long history of such suicidal acts. These are individual examples of self-immolation. Now move to the history of collective acts.

### **Maccabees 170 B.C**

The title Maccabees was given to a family of loyal Jews who revolted against Antioch Epiphanes, king of Syria, around 170 B.C. It is thought to originate from a Hebrew word meaning 'Hammer', which was fittingly attributed to Judas, one of the sons of Mattathias, a priest who first stood up in opposition. The royal commander demanded that Mattathias sacrifice on a pagan altar, which he flatly refused and killed both the official and an apostate Jew ready to comply with the command. This act of bravery attracted many devoted Jews and when Mattathias passed away around 166

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<sup>29</sup> 1, Samuel, 31:4.

<sup>30</sup> Robert P.Gwinn, “Martyrdom”, *Britannica Encyclopedia of World Religions* (Singapore: 2006), P: 695.

<sup>31</sup> Robert P. Gwinn, “Martyr”, *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, (Chicago, USA: 2004), vol: 7, p: 894.

B.C., led by his four sons especially Judas, they continued their guerrilla warfare in Palestine until 160 B.C., when Judas died in battle. The story is documented in 1 Maccabees, one of the books of Apocrypha penned down 100 B.C.<sup>32</sup>

### **Zealots or Sicarii**

The term, Zealots, is derived from the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word *Qanna*. The terms both in Hebrew and in Greek have a general and a specific usage. In its specific meaning the term is used as a designation of the fanatic Jewish nationalist.<sup>33</sup>

Sicarii literally means a person who is expert in killing people with dagger and zealot is an extremist in religious terms according to Bernard Lewis.<sup>34</sup>

David M. Rhoads says that zealots were Jewish revolutionaries in first century Judea whose zeal led them to fight to death against Romans.<sup>35</sup>

Dr. *Abd al-Wāhhāb* is of the view that there were two groups in Zealots; peaceful people and Extremist. The second one is called Sicarii.<sup>36</sup>

Historically this term is related to the people who struggled for the continuation of the State of Judea in Jerusalem. These people tried their best for the prolongation of the State till 70 A.D and battled against the victory of Romans in Judea. "In 6 CE, Judah (Yehudah) the Galilean showed for God's law and land when he led a revolt against the Roman census in Judea. He and his followers fought to cleanse the land by taking vengeance against Jews who cooperated with Romans. Judah considered such cooperation to be idolatrous recognition of a lord (Caesar) other than God. By such vengeance, he and his followers sought to appease God, who would thereby honour their cause against Romans, The revolt failed, but Judah had originated the so-called Fourth Philosophy "No Lord but God" based on the First Commandment. Judah's followers emerged again after all Judea

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<sup>32</sup> E. Royston Pike, *Encyclopedia of Religion and Religions* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1951), p: 238.

<sup>33</sup> Smith Morton, "Zealots and Sicarii; Their Origins and Relation" in *Harvard Theological Review*, January 1971.

<sup>34</sup> Lewis, Bernard, *The Assassins: A Radical Sect in Islam* (London: Phoenix, 1967), p: 126.

<sup>35</sup> David M. Rhoads, "Zealots", *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol: 15, p: 559.

<sup>36</sup> al-Masī rī , dr. *Abdul Wahhāb*, *Maosū'atul Yabūdi wal Yabūdiyyah was Sahyūniyyah*, vol:5, p:267.

became Roman province in 44 C.E. Their subsequent revolutionary actions against the corrupt and incompetent authorities contributed to the outbreak of war in 66 C.E. Josephus usually refers to Judah's group as Sicarii, after sikkah "dagger" used in assassinations."<sup>37</sup>

These people were in small number but they adopted violent and terrorist ways of insurgence. They used dagger to kill their opponents. They did not forgive their own religious fellows who accepted the hegemony of new Roman rulers and disagreed to their way of struggle.

## **Masada**

Stronghold on a rock near the Dead Sea. It served as a refuge of Herod the great in 40 BCE. In the Jewish war against Rome in 66-70CE and afterwards, it served as a Zealot fortress. In 73CE a garrison of nearly 1000 Jews committed suicide there rather than be captured by the Roman.<sup>38</sup>

## **Its Existence in Later Middle Ages**

In Later Middle Ages a lot of Jewish suicide attacks have been made against Palestinians. Priming synagogue attendance (but not prayer to God) increased the likelihood of Jewish Israeli settlers believing that a specific suicide attack carried out against Palestinians was "extremely heroic."<sup>39</sup>

Presenting the scholars view on the topic, we would like to quote a view point of an American psychologist Naomi Janowitz.

Her essay is titled "Lusting for Death: Some Unconscious Meanings of Martyrdom Traditions". Discussing martyrdom in Jewish history, she says at the end of her discussion that in contemporary Jewish tradition if we find female suicide attackers it will not be an unexpectedly phenomenon because it has a root in Jewish tradition. She concludes, "Finally, animal sacrifice had been an exclusively male preserve, a patriarchal system, where women were not allowed to participate. But when some Jews moved from animal sacrifice to human sacrifice, women got involved as well."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> *Zealots in The Encyclopedia of Religion, vol: 15, p: 559.*

<sup>38</sup> *Geoffrey Parrinder, A concise Encyclopedia of Judaism, p: 127.*

<sup>39</sup> *Jeremy Ginges, Ian Hansen, and Ara Norenzayan (eds.), Religion and support for suicide attacks, in Psychological Science, vol: 20, No:2 (07, 2008, p:45)*

<sup>40</sup> *Naomi Janowitz, "Lusting for death: Some unconscious meanings of martyrdom traditions" in Psychiatric News, March 18, 2005, p:9, retrieved on September 17, 2008 from*

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All in all, Janowitz concluded, martyrdom is crucial to the Jewish tradition which emerged more than 2,000 years ago.

*Ustādh Al-Masīrī says;*

The Zionist glorifies collective idea of the suicide. Most of national legends, identically the legend of Masada and Samson and Bar Kokhba too, are suicidal legends. So indeed one of the Israeli thinker Yhoshf t Harkbī said that the suicidal tendency in Israel is the reflection of the “Offers of Bar Kokhba”.<sup>41</sup>

### Conclusion

Judaism draws a clear distinction between suicide, which it defines as self-murder, and martyrdom, death on behalf of one’s faith and religious convictions. Although the Hebrew Scriptures contain few references to die by one’s own hand but do describe several instances of heroic suicide. Thus any action by a Jew that brings honour, respect, and glory to God is considered to be Holy, whereas any behaviour or action that disgraces or shames God is avoided. Although Hebrew Scriptures don’t explicitly forbid suicide, the Judaic tradition prohibits it. That’s why a soft corner for suicide is found in the Hebrew Scriptures, as it says that suicide is a moral obligation and suicides committed under pressure, as for example to avoid murder, idolatry, or adultery, were considered blameless.



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<http://pn.psychiatryonline.org/cgi/search?sortspec=relevance&journalcode=psychnews&fulltext=lusting+for+death%3Aosome+unconciuous+meanings+of+martyrdom+tradition>

<sup>41</sup> *al-Masī rī, Maosū'atul Yahūdi wal Yahūdiyyah was Sahyūniyyah, vol:5, 1999, p.263.*