

## Vigilante Injustice

### *Shabbat Matot-Mas'ei 5785*

July 25, 2025

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In December, a man named Luigi Mangione shot and killed Brian Thompson, the CEO of United Healthcare, on the streets of New York. The execution-style murder was apparently motivated by anger toward a health insurance industry that rakes in billions but frequently denies coverage for sorely needed treatment and medication, endangering the health of millions of Americans.

Attorney General Pam Bondi charged Mangione with murder as an act of terrorism, punishable by death. Although I oppose the death penalty in virtually every case, I have little doubt that Bondi is correct to argue that the murder instills **terror** in health insurance executives.

However, not everyone agrees that what Mangione did was wrong. Amherst College Professor Austin Sarat explains: “Fans on social media, including Gen Z supporters, have embraced him as a crusader against the evils of corporate capitalism and insurers that deny and delay benefits to keep profits high. [Emerson College polled](#) voters aged 18-29, and a stunning 41% said the killing was acceptable.”<sup>i</sup>

There’s a term for Mangione: a vigilante. The murderer took the law into his own hands, serving as judge, jury, and executioner, finding Brian Thompson guilty of capital murder, sentencing him to death, and carrying out the punishment.

This week’s Torah portion seems to be of two minds about vigilantes. On the one hand, in a case of premeditated murder with malice aforethought, Torah instructs: “It is the blood-avenger who shall put the murderer to death.”<sup>ii</sup> “Blood avenger” refers to the closest surviving relative of the murder victim, empowered as judge, jury, and executioner, common practice in the ancient world.

Reading the portion’s full text, though, we learn that Torah is not so keen on fully empowering the grieving relative to settle the score. God commands Moses to establish six cities to which a manslayer may flee, clarifying: “The cities shall serve you as a refuge from the avenger, so that the killer may not die unless he has stood trial before the assembly.”<sup>iii</sup> Failure to do so is an affront to God, Who proclaims: “You shall not defile the land in which you live, in which I Myself abide, for I, יהוה, abide among the Israelite people.”<sup>iv</sup>

In short, even if Jewish principles abhor health insurance industry practice, a subject for another day, Jewish values do not permit killing those responsible for it without due process of law.

It must be said, though, that the land that God warns will be defiled by vigilante justice is not New York. It is the Promised Land. It is Israel.

Earlier this month, NBC reported, “A 20-year-old American from Florida[, Sayfolla Mussalet,] was beaten to death [by Israeli settlers](#) on Friday while visiting relatives in the occupied West Bank.”<sup>v</sup> This brutal murder, which included a second victim, was hardly an isolated event. This week, *Haaretz* reported that data collected by Israeli security forces found four hundred four violent hate crimes and assaults against Palestinian settlers perpetrated by Jewish West Bank settlers from January through June of this year, reflecting what *Haaretz* characterizes as a “steep but consistent increase” in West Bank settler violence throughout the Israel-Gaza war.<sup>vi</sup>

Even Israel’s sharpest critics have paid scant attention to this scourge of West Bank settler violence over the course of the last two years, with all eyes on Gaza. While there are pockets of Palestinian terrorists in the West Bank, they are consistently addressed by the Israel Defense Force. There is no such allegation in cases of violence carried out by settler vigilantes.

This week, the Reform Movement issued a stinging rebuke of these settler terrorists, explaining: “[T]hese settlers kill and injure Palestinians, steal their livestock, burn their olive trees, and destroy their property, terrorizing the Palestinian population in an attempt to clear Judea and Samaria for unfettered Jewish settlement.”<sup>vii</sup>

The statement clarifies that the problem is exacerbated by insufficient Israeli response: “Too often, when Palestinians call the police and the army during an attack by settlers, both arrive too late to help the victims, if they arrive at all. Similarly, too often, police or [Israel Defense Force] IDF soldiers are seen in videos or news reports standing by without acting to stop the violence. By contrast, when settlers call for help [to combat Palestinians] who are simply protecting their own people and property, the army and police come quickly....Frequently, after a Palestinian civilian is attacked or murdered, several Palestinians are arrested, for example for throwing stones in a futile attempt to chase violent Jewish settlers from the Palestinian community, but no arrest is made in the murder itself.”<sup>viii</sup>

Palestinians murdered in these incidents are not usually alleged to have committed **any** crime, let alone a heinous one. Therefore, Jewish terrorists are not

even carrying out vigilante justice, which is prohibited by the Torah. Instead, their actions are best termed “vigilante **in**justice.” Claiming to act on God’s behalf to clear the Promised Land for the Jewish people, their murders constitute a grave חילול השם, a desecration of God’s Name.

The U.S. Ambassador to Israel, Arkansas’s own Mike Huckabee, has demanded a full investigation into Mussalet’s murder. The Reform Movement applauds him for that, and Union for Reform Judaism President Rabbi Rick Jacobs met with him to discuss the matter this week. This one case may be the extent of Ambassador Huckabee’s authority, but these terrorists must be stopped entirely, not only when the victim is American.

Tomorrow morning, when I read the last words of the Book of Numbers for this year, we will say חזק חזק ונתחזק, “Let us be strong, strong, and strengthen ourselves.” In פרקי אבות, Sayings of the Sages, Ben Zoma asks, “Who is strong?” He answers, “One who conquers their inclinations.”<sup>ix</sup> The strength we seek when we say חזק חזק ונתחזק is not established by murder, theft, and vandalism. Instead, the strength that God demands calls on us to stand up to terror, no matter who perpetrates it. We exhibit strength when we seek justice with due process and law, not by killing those who stand in our way. Our strength is revealed when we sanctify God’s name with love for **all** God’s children.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Austin Sarat, “The Glorification of Luigi Mangione Is Disturbing—But Not Surprising,” *U.S. News and World Report*, December 18, 2024, <https://www.usnews.com/opinion/articles/2024-12-18/why-luigi-mangione-accused-killer-of-unitedhealthcare-ceo-has-become-a-folk-hero>.

<sup>ii</sup> Numbers 35:18.

<sup>iii</sup> Numbers 35:12.

<sup>iv</sup> Numbers 35:30-34.

<sup>v</sup> Freddie Clayton, “American beaten to death by settlers in the West Bank,” *NBC*, July 12, 2025, <https://www.nbcnews.com/world/middle-east/american-killed-west-bank-israel-settlers-violence-rcna218408>.

<sup>vi</sup> Yaniv Kubovich, Defense officials detect rise in Settler Violence, Including Against Security Forces, *Haaretz*, July 21, 2025, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2025-07-21/ty-article/.premium/defense-officials-detect-rise-in-settler-violence-including-against-security-forces/00000198-2951-dc47-a3fd-fd7501000000?lts=1753127109559>.

<sup>vii</sup> <https://www.ccarnet.org/joint-reform-movement-statement-on-west-bank-settler-violence/>. Note: I prepared the first draft of this statement.

<sup>viii</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>ix</sup> Mishna Pirkei Avot 4.1.