

## WHY ISRAEL'S SECURITY DEPENDS ON JEWISH DEMOCRACY<sup>1</sup>

On June 22, 1948, on a Tel Aviv beach not far from the place he was murdered 47 years later, Yitzchak Rabin ordered his troops to open fire on the Altalena, the ship that bore a large quantity of ammunition, hundreds of fighters, and Irgun leader Menachem Begin. Readers of Rabin's memoir *Pinkas Sherut* will find no mention of the incident in his narrative of Israel's War of Independence. Only in Volume 2, when Rabin describes handing over the Prime Ministry to Begin, on June 21, 1977, does he offer his version of the events. Briefly put, Rabin believed that the Irgun was plotting to take power by force. "The condition for Jewish national survival [is] one central authority," he argues. Twenty-nine years later he is no longer certain that Begin planned a putsch. In any event, he disclaims involvement or animus respecting the subsequent acrimony that poisoned Israeli political life for decades. Begin came to power legitimately: "The voter, according to the rules of democracy, is allowed to make a mistake."

Rabin's view rests on two philosophical premises: 1) Jewish survival requires central legitimate authority; 2) Electoral democracy is necessary for undisputable authority. Later in his memoir, Rabin subjects Prime Minister Begin's diplomatic tactics to caustic criticism. He does not question his legitimacy. What matters is that Begin, too, is faithful to these two premises. That is sufficient for a shared political culture.

The first premise—one central authority—is entailed by our mentor Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik's approach to Religious Zionism. As is

<sup>1</sup> My thanks to the Yeshiva University Israel Center for sponsoring, together with the Israeli Consulate, a day of study and reflection to commemorate Prime Minister Rabin's 20<sup>th</sup> *yahrzeit*. The published version of my remarks owes much to discussion with David Shatz, Ozer Glickman, Yosef Brander, and Judah Kerbel. Though responsibility for these comments is mine alone, I have made every effort to be faithful to the words and spirit of my great mentors R. Joseph Soloveitchik and R. Aharon Lichtenstein of blessed memory.

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well-known, the Rav contrasted the covenant of fate with the covenant of destiny. The former is common to all Jews. It aims at the material welfare of the Jewish people, of which survival is both an essential component and a necessary condition. The latter is defined by the divine imperative, whose fulfillment is distinctive to those who cleave unto God and His law.

The covenant of fate is a covenant of shared feeling. Remember the Rav's image of the conjoined twins: are they one person or two? To which he answers: pour boiling water on the head of one, then see what happens: if both howl in pain, they are one. The brotherhood of Israel cries out of shared feeling and shared concern. Therefore religious Jews and irreligious Jews can and should wholeheartedly unite in allegiance to the government devoted to Jewish physical survival and material welfare. On that basis the Rav regarded the negotiation of Israel's borders as a security question, governed by security considerations, analogous to a medical question of life and death, to be decided by experts in the field and in deference to the judgment of the sick person himself, rather than by rabbinic authorities.

Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein – mentor to many of us – R. Soloveitchik's son-in-law and primary disciple, applied these principles to Israeli reality as he saw them from his position as head of the Yeshivat Har Etzion. The religious value of Jewish sovereignty throughout Eretz Yisrael, however important, cannot outweigh concern for physical survival. The need for legitimate central authority mandates governmental authority over the policy views of individual soldiers and thus curtails the exercise of conscientious objection on duty. R. Lichtenstein himself opposed the bombing of Beirut during the 1982 Lebanon War, but wrote his open letter to Prime Minister Begin only after he was dismissed from his army reserve service (*milluim*). Twenty five years later, when many plausibly alleged that the Sharon government had blundered badly by undertaking the Gaza disengagement, he held that maintaining the legitimacy of the Israeli state precluded mutiny by members of the armed forces.

## II

All this is virtually axiomatic in my circles. But circumstances change and I must, therefore, point out a difficulty in applying these principles today. R. Soloveitchik spoke about the threat of immediate destruction. Despite constant conflict, despite recent events, no danger of immediate destruction exists today on the Palestinian front. Current choices will be confirmed or refuted only with the passage of time.

What determines responsible security policy today is no longer the short term verdict of battle; post-modern wars are not won on the battlefields but in the media. With outcomes distant and indirect, impossible to calculate, tacticians grope in long-range darkness. The tie-breakers that set policy do not express pure, unambiguous military calculations. Consequently, the hot water figuratively poured on the head of the Israeli Siamese twin in Hebron or in Tel Aviv is still uncomfortably hot but no longer agonizingly or life-threateningly scalding. In the Rav's scenario the covenant of fate takes precedence and hence dictates to the covenant of destiny. Today each group has its own vision of Israeli destiny and has the luxury of advocating the security policy likely to promote its realization. Neither militancy nor compromise put the survival of the state in clear-cut jeopardy. Why not decide based on the kind of the destiny that makes Israel worthwhile beyond mere survival?

R. Lichtenstein compared the evacuation of land for the sake of peace to the amputation of a limb to save a life. It is a terrible choice, but one that, if necessary, must be performed with sorrow and resolution. As we said: Nations cannot afford multiple centers of political authority. Statesmen, like physicians, are fallible, yet we have no choice but to defer to their collective judgment according to the rules of democracy. For a dilemma of survival his analogy is apt. Of course, one may insist that the decision to compromise is misguided and endangers Israel, that it is an act of national suicide, and that preventing it thus justifies delegitimizing the state and even killing its officials. But if this is true, it is by no means self-evident, insofar as there is no immediate, clear-cut threat to the state's existence. The decision to undermine the state represents a direct assault on its viability, while the consequences of allowing the state to pursue its erroneous course are not self-evident, except in the eyes of the individuals and groups exercising their private judgment. In any event, these considerations are mundane rather than religious in nature.

If we were faced by an immediate danger as once was the case, the approach just outlined would eliminate potential conflict between government authority and private conviction not only as a practical matter, but also, at the theoretical level, between halakhic ideals and possible security considerations. Conflict would arise only if retention of territory is held to be an inviolable religious principle. Once the Rav and R. Lichtenstein took that question off the table, those who follow their religious judgment would be in exactly the same position about security dilemmas as their secular brethren.

Yet as we have seen, security depends not only on force of arms but on public relations on the international stage and collective morale on the

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home front. Hence the security question cannot be separated from the sense of identity we experience and transmit to the world. Some Israelis think of themselves as Jews who must, under pressure, accommodate, to some extent, the fashions of the outside world. Others define themselves first and foremost as citizens of the liberal, secular West, with some place for Jewish identity. It seems to me that right wing Israelis, even—perhaps especially—those who are not thoroughly committed to Torah and mitsvot, experience the opposition between Jewishness and the rest of the world as a positive, invigorating aspect of Jewish identity, while those on the left are embarrassed, ashamed, outraged, and demoralized by the persistence of Jewish estrangement from the secular liberal community.

So our present situation cannot be compared to amputating a limb to save a life. It is more like a macabre dispute over which limb should be cut off, where one parent, who wants the child to be a concert pianist, would sacrifice a foot to preserve a finger, while the other wants the child to be a dancer, and would give an arm to save a toe. We can try to survive as hardy maximalists, at the cost of increased isolation, or to survive by bringing Israel closer to the family of cosmopolitan Esperanto culture. If those are the choices, I am afraid that R. Lichtenstein's analogy can no longer provide a clear-cut solution.

As long as the sharp divide about our attitude and relation to the Western world is prominent, Religious Zionists, whatever their nominal beliefs about security or other domestic issues, will find their “natural Jewish home” on the secular right because the right is at home with perpetuating Jewish separateness. In this area, the so-called left will always lack credibility; suspected of tailoring their policies to serve a cultural agenda in the guise of a futile and misguided attempt to obtain external acceptance.

For those educated as I am, who have internalized the kind of interaction between the study of Torah and critical appreciation of what Western culture offers at its best, and for most Israelis, whether fully committed to Torah u-Mitsvot or not, this tension need not present an either/or dilemma in the way most Israelis conduct their lives. Most want to be a people that dwells alone, yet one not isolated or excessively parochial. This middle road is viable to moderates on both sides of the Israeli political spectrum, the so-called *yamin shafuy* and *semol shafuy* (sane right and sane left). All the same, given that the gulf between religious and secular visions of Israel is, in a profound way, unbridgeable, and if, as I suggest, it impacts even on our shared search for physical security, the realization of such a practical middle ground requires personal investment on the part of those who have learned to live it.

Yitzhak Rabin had no particular contribution to make on the cultural and religious fronts. Nor was he especially gifted in appreciating the insights of those attentive to such matters whose outlook differed from his. Yet his wholehearted and painstaking concentration on security should have put him beyond the suspicion that he was motivated by an extraneous agenda. Branding him a traitor would have been ridiculous, had it not become obscene and murderous. But among contemporary Israeli leaders he was more the exception than the rule.

### III

When the bitter news came twenty years ago, and in the immediate aftermath, I was engulfed by a sense of horror and disgrace that we, as a people, had come to this.<sup>2</sup> To the extent that I imagined the future, I feared the end of Israeli democracy, because I anticipated an overwhelming wave of revulsion towards the sector that indulged the murderer; I expected a generation of unchallenged leftist hegemony. Since then, the right has solidified its Jewish majority. Under the shock of hard reality both right and left are disappointed, sobered, and perhaps hung over. Yet, not unencouraged by the indulgence of their fellow travelers, vocal and significant circles on the left still decline to accept the election verdict of 1977, and influential groups on the right continue to treat violence as an acceptable part of their political tool chest.

Since 1995 some well-meaning, desperate, or religiously uncomprehending leaders sought to promote a new Israeli identity transcending present ideological divisions and thus to ensure the superiority of the state. I doubt whether such uniformity is feasible or desirable even from a purely secular perspective. From a religious perspective, of course, to subsume our values and commitments under some supposedly higher, neutral secular ideal is out of the question. No human ideal, be it national or universalistic, be it socialist or liberal, can be elevated above the divine imperative. To do so is idolatry, and the destruction wreaked by such projects over the course of the twentieth century alone is a warning of what happens when secular ideals, even attractive ones, become absolutes.

I reject this way forward, not because I make light of the value of common “lower case” culture. Drawing on shared cultural values, history,

<sup>2</sup> For my reaction at that time, see “Murderers, Nazis, Traitors, Wise Men and Noise: Reflections on the Rabin Assassination,” *Yeshiva College Commentator* (November 1995). Available at [www.atid.org/resources/carmy/pdf/murderers.pdf](http://www.atid.org/resources/carmy/pdf/murderers.pdf).

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literature, music, humor, even food and popular songs, brings people together. It often provides the social glue that makes otherwise unbearable disagreement tolerable, and the social lubrication that makes compromise possible, when it is justified. Shared culture, however, in the absence of shared spiritual destiny, is a palliative, a bandage on an open sore, necessary in the short run but no substitute for the work of fundamental cure.

This is not the place to discuss the article of faith, among religious liberals, that religion is a prime cause of violence so that a reformulation of national identity that neutralizes or etiolates religious commitment is automatically regarded as a step towards peace and civility.<sup>3</sup> The excesses and perversions of secular ideologies alluded to above count for nothing in the face of this mantra.

Regarding Israeli history in particular, the celebration of violence was a notable feature of the extreme pre-State Zionist right wing, as the quest for Jewish power became identified with the glorification of force and embraced the romance of the conspiratorial gunman or bomber. Acolytes of this cult were antagonistic to traditional religion and to traditional Judaism in particular. The eloquent Abba Ahimeir, for instance, self-declared fascist, an influential if marginal Revisionist writer, and a leading proponent of militant Jewish self-display at the Kotel, taught that the true Bible was not a religious book and that God is no more central to understanding the Hebrew Bible than the Greek gods for appreciating the *Iliad*; that is, until the pious “editors” (for which read “the Rabbis”) disgracefully distorted it into a theological text.<sup>4</sup> Though the secular Israeli right was painstakingly demilitarized, domesticated, and Judaized during the forty year reign of Menachem Begin, its remnants did not vanish. In the new climate they found in modern religious circles a potentially hospitable host. The cure to this infiltration is not downplaying religious commitment and making religion more subservient to nationalistic feeling, but strengthening the authority and autonomy of traditional religion.

For many Haredi spokesmen, by contrast, the assassination of Rabin was the inevitable outcome of Zionist championing of military might. Immediately after Rabin’s murder R. Lichtenstein was asked by a Haredi

<sup>3</sup> See Shalom Carmy, “Is Religion a Primary Cause of War? An Essay in Understanding and Self-Examination,” *The Torah u-Madda Journal* 11 (2002-03), 35-49.

<sup>4</sup> Abba Ahimeir, “‘Hellenism’ in Judea and ‘Jewishness’ in Hellas,” *Ha-Tsionut ha-Mahapkhavit*, (Tel Aviv: Ha-Va’ad le-Hotsa’at Kitvei Ahimeir, 1965), originally published 1932. Note that the editors removed strong language found in first publication.

journalist whether the murder of Rabin was not the result of an educational system that teaches there are things of more value than human life. R. Lichtenstein answered:

We all believe that there are values greater than human life... In this sense, we need not be ashamed, nor need we erase one letter of our Torah. We will not surrender nor abandon a single one of our values. Our values are eternal; nothing can be given up or erased. But in terms of balance and application, of seeing the whole picture, the ability to think profoundly in order to know how to apply the Torah – here undoubtedly we must engage in a renewed and deeper examination. Priorities must be re-examined.

#### IV

So far I have spoken to, and for, the disciples of the Rav and R. Lichtenstein, who believe that “seeing the whole picture” allows for consideration of territorial compromise for the sake of peace, who respect Rabin’s thorough responsiveness to the covenant of fate and mourn his murder and the loss it represented and yet cannot be oblivious to the covenant of destiny that separates us from those who do not recognize its singular claims and commands. What of the many Religious Zionists who question or reject our premises, who believe that territorial compromise is halakhically out of the question and/or patently disastrous, a greater danger than the supposed risk of destroying legitimate political authority? What can we say to them that would lessen the likelihood of further violence and the radical divisiveness that is both its occasion and consequence?

Our voices are unlikely to affect the extremists who place themselves above the law, the Yigal Amirs and Baruch Goldsteins and their lesser emulators. Nor will orchestrated interdiction by the “great rabbis” compel their obedience: the violent fringe is, by and large, theologically liberal, in Newman’s sense of the term, convinced of their private judgment, unwilling to bend the knee to institutional authority, spiritual or political. Yet the insouciance of these extremists is nurtured by the tacit support of fellow travelers whose silence is interpreted as acquiescence and whose expressions of sympathy are taken as encouragement. It is the perceived support of these people that buffers the extremists against the condemnation of the public. The duty of each one of us, not only of prominent “super-rabbis,” is to shrink that buffer.

Surely the murder of Rabin shocked many rabbis and communities into assessing their responsibility. At least in the short run, many tasted

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the calamitous fruits of unrestrained invective and one-sided priorities. But such lessons are liable to be transient and perfunctory when they do not become permanent convictions. Abiding change requires that one keep in mind admonishing voices internal to and presumably normative to militant religious Zionist discourse. R. Abraham Kook, for example, warned over a century ago of the ill-will, “specific to the Evil Inclination that does its destructive work under the banner of nationalism. Even though this hatred is ostensibly directed only towards a foreign people and does not touch the heritage of the [Jewish] people, with the passage of time it becomes an inner curse, internecine hatred increases and destroys all national welfare.”<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, all of us must recognize self-delusion as a radical human temptation that makes no exceptions for ideologies. “Progressives” and “leftists” preach a Judaism controlled by their own affinities to secular ways of thinking; the same is no less true of nationalist ideology. As we have seen, the attraction of violent self-expression for the radical Zionist right draws heavily on non-Jewish and anti-Jewish incubators. Of course, when Jews study and are influenced by Gentile ideas, that is not always a bad thing, unless one is a chauvinist and regards any such exposure as contamination. Each idea or cluster of ideas must be assessed critically as it is compatible or not with what God demands of us. When the same standards of criticism from a religious perspective are applied to all secular ideals, nationalist or liberal, it is just a bit harder for professedly religious people to identify their favored ism with the service of God.

Lastly, beware the ideologist’s tendency to ascribe all flawed behavior to faulty ideas. Israeli Jews endure enormous provocations, both acutely—as in the preceding weeks (I am writing in November 2015)—and chronically. Their frustration at the limited power of their government to assure personal security is understandable. This frustration may find temporary release for some in naïve fantasies of peace at any price, for others in fantasies of glory and redemption through the anarchy of blood and fire. We should not treat reactions to terrorism and fear of betrayal as if they were merely the playing out of theological and philosophical dialectic.

## V

For some, the upshot of my discussion is that rabbis have no competence to rule on Israeli security and therefore should keep out of these

<sup>5</sup> *Derekh ha-Tehiyya* (in *Maamarei ha-Reiyah*, Jerusalem 1983), 5.

controversies. My conclusion is the exact opposite. Precisely because there are no simple answers to these problems, precisely because there is no party line that guarantees political correctness, our need for guidance is all the greater. What we require is not merely a policy to support, a dotted line to sign on, but an attitude, a way of thinking and living that enables us to keep our priorities straight, to communicate them and, in varying circumstances, to live by their light. For that we need living models of intelligent, passionate and responsible Torah thinking.

The themes of our discussion are remote from the military and diplomatic challenges to which Yitzchak Rabin dedicated his years on earth and ultimately gave his life. Yet it is a task in keeping with the message of that life.