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RELIGIOUS ZIONISM AND THE RABIN ASSASSINATION¹

Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin was assassinated by Yigal Amir, an Orthodox Jew, a student in the law school at Bar Ilan University, and a graduate of Yeshivat Kerem B'Yavneh, two of the most prominent educational institutions of Religious Zionism. Amir claimed religious justifications for his act, quoting halakhic arguments widely discussed in rabbinic circles of Religious Zionism at the time. He determined that Rabin's policies endangered Jewish lives, which placed Rabin in the category of *rodef* (pursuer), whom one is permitted to kill.

It has not been determined whether Amir had specific rabbinical approval for his act. He has denied it, saying that the permissibility of the assassination was sufficiently clear that he could act on his own. His brother Hagai, who was convicted as an accomplice to the assassination, has repeatedly asserted that there had been rabbinical approval, although he has not mentioned a name. In the broader community there remain strong suspicions that Yigal Amir's actions were approved by many Religious Zionists, including rabbis, even though only a small fringe has openly said so.

The assassination was traumatic for all Israelis. It shattered the assumption that a Jew was incapable of killing a Jewish political leader because he opposed his policies. The fact that the assassin came from the religious community had a dramatic impact on the pre-existing split between religious and secular Israelis and the political left and right. For the Religious Zionist community it was a source of acute embarrassment and it led to an initial period of self-reflection.

In order to understand the reactions then and later within the Religious Zionist world it is necessary to understand the different strands within the community. The Mizrachi (Religious Zionist) movement was founded by Rabbi Yitzchak Reines five years after the first World Zionist

¹ This paper was originally presented at a symposium marking the 20th anniversary of Rabin's assassination, sponsored by the Yeshiva University Center for Israel Studies.

Congress. R. Reines was a respected Eastern European communal rabbi whose willingness to be part of a movement headed by secular Jews was controversial. Most Orthodox rabbis, including some who had initially sympathized with Herzl's Zionism, became disillusioned when they realized that the Zionist movement would not follow the rulings of the rabbinate.

Mizrachi argued for religious participation in this broad movement to return Jewry to its ancestral home. The goal was primarily saving Jews from the rampant anti-Semitism in Europe; the future Israeli state would be a haven and protection for world Jewry. R. Reines did not focus in his writings on the Messianic potential emerging from the return. Some of the rabbis who earlier promoted a return to Zion did see this in Messianic terms. During the years of Zionist activities preceding the founding of the state in 1948, factions existed within Religious Zionism differing on religious, political, and economic issues. A major source of inspiration, although he never was affiliated with Mizrachi, was Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the first Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi, a rabbinic scholar, thinker, and mystic. R. Kook saw the unfolding process of the resettling of the land of Israel as the beginning of the final redemption and the Messianic era.

After the state was established, the various factions united in one political party, although the differences remained. Mafdal, as the party eventually was renamed, was part of every coalition government and seen as a junior partner of Mapai, the dominant party, until Likud won in the elections of 1977. Mafdal's political leadership was moderate, supporting a center-left government. The victory of Israel in the Six Day War transformed Religious Zionism. The Messianic elements became dominant within the party. Gush Emunim, loyal to R. Abraham Isaac Kook as interpreted by his son Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook, a movement committed to settling the territories of historical Israel captured during the war, emerged as the vanguard.

Among the followers of the younger R. Kook there were some for whom the state took on major halakhic significance, while for others the land was most important. This distinction only became significant when the Israeli government decided to return land to the Egyptians and Palestinian Arabs. Those for whom the state was paramount reluctantly accepted the government's decisions; those for whom the land was most important demonstrated against them. Those who remained committed to the earlier, more moderate policies were still part of the movement but had become a minority. The non-Messianic elements were more prone to accept territorial compromises.

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When analyzing the response of Religious Zionism to the Rabin assassination, recognizing these differing perspectives will be helpful. For those who saw the victory of Israel in the Six Day War as proving that we are in the beginning of the ultimate redemption and to some a part of the redemption, Rabin, the Chief of Staff during that miraculous victory, had become a traitor. To many, his behavior and the earlier peace treaty with Egypt signed by Menachem Begin indicated that secular Zionism had completed its role and that only a new, religious Zionism was needed to complete the Messianic process.

From this perspective one can understand the level of anger and frustration that followed the signing of the Oslo accords. A major bloc of Religious Zionists, including many rabbis, felt betrayed. Verbal attacks on Rabin employed incendiary language and halakhic categories were included. Extreme rhetoric from rabbis who function in a world of ideas and theory was probably not intended to justify violent acts, but the possibility of translating theory to behavior cannot be excluded.

One reaction, primarily in Religious Zionist circles, which has intensified over the years, is denial. In its extreme form it is expressed in conspiracy theories that claim that Yigal Amir did not kill Yitzchak Rabin. On the surface the combination of a confession and many witnesses, including a video of the shooting, would eliminate any doubts; but books have been written supporting the notion that Amir shot blanks and others, in one version Rabin himself, were actually responsible. A recent study claimed that over half of Religious Zionist youth believe there was a conspiracy.²

As criticism of Religious Zionism and its rabbinical leadership intensified in secular circles, the claim was made that the assassination was the act of an isolated individual with a handful of supporters and did not reflect the broader community. Aspects of Amir's upbringing that were not typical of Religious Zionist youth were stressed to reduce the connection. He came from a Yemenite family and attended an ultra-Orthodox elementary school and a yeshiva high school that was religiously to the right.

Except for a few who voiced approval of the act, the vast majority of Religious Zionists disassociated themselves from the assassination. The Kahanist element that had supported Baruch Goldstein when he shot up the mosque in Hebron, killing twenty-nine people, supported Amir's killing of Rabin as well, but they were a fringe element. I recall returning to

² In the epilogue of his book *Killing a King: The Assassination of Yitzchak Rabin and the Remaking of Israel* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2015) Dan Ephron disproves the major proofs of the conspiracy theory.

the dormitory at Yeshiva University that Saturday night to debate students who had returned from studying in Israel where they had attended demonstrations against the Oslo agreements; they supported the assassination. After a short time, as they began to realize the enormity of the act, they no longer spoke openly.

The rabbis in Israel and America who had been most vocal in criticizing Rabin and his policies reacted in different ways. In America Rabbi Ahron Soloveichik, who had led a delegation to meet with Rabin to express opposition, was terribly distressed that his words (and he never mentioned *rodef*) might have been misconstrued to justify the assassination. Others simply denied any correlation between their theoretical halakhic discussion and anyone's actions. In Israel a serious accusation was made by Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun against rabbis he claimed authorized Rabin's assassination, but he did not reveal names and no rabbi accepted responsibility.

A public meeting was held where leading rabbis reflected on what had gone wrong and reevaluated the education that prevailed in the Religious Zionist yeshivot and schools. A number of the speakers from moderate circles had never taken a strong stand against Rabin, but others came from the more militant camp. The period of self-reflection was relatively short as the community had to defend itself from fierce criticism from the secular left. In a split society the assassination led to blaming those who had argued against land for peace. Since Yigal Amir with his *kippa* came from the Religious Zionist world, the entire community felt that it was under attack.

This soon led to a defensive posture. The political opposition to Rabin came from religious values that had become an integral part of the Religious Zionist identity. The community was not prepared to change its values because of the act of one extremist. When under attack it is difficult to be self-critical. The growing acceptance of it being a conspiracy becomes understandable.

Two articles appeared, written years apart, analyzing the reaction of the religious Zionist community to the assassination. The first, written by Professor Aviezer Ravitzky, a noted scholar and a leader of Meimad, a moderate religious political party, focused on the serious self-reflection and moderation of the active Messianism after the assassination.³ He did

³ Aviezer Ravitzky, "'Let us Search our Path': Religious Zionism after the Assassination," in Yoram Peri (ed.), *The Assassination of Yitzhak Rabin*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 141-162.

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acknowledge that this became difficult to discuss publicly after the attacks from the secular left on religious Zionism as an ideology.

Yoav Sorek a few years later wrote an article that was essentially a defense of Religious Zionism.⁴ He examined published articles before the assassination and demonstrated that there were no public calls for an assassination. He also made reference to the initial mood of self-reflection but concluded that in the main the rabbinical and political leadership decided that it had acted correctly.

The split amongst the followers of R. Zvi Yehuda Kook about the relative significance of the state and the land led to opposite reactions to the assassination of the Prime Minister. For Rabbi Zvi Tau and his associates and students for whom the Jewish state is holy, assassinating the Prime Minister is by definition horrible. The Prime Minister's policies do not detract from his position as the head of a holy government. For those who saw the state essentially as a vehicle to conquer the land, a Prime Minister who was willing to give up land lost his legitimacy.

With the passage of years the impact of the assassination diminished, but the feeling that the secular left had utilized the assassination to attack Religious Zionism remained. The political component in the annual commemorations of Rabin's assassination strengthened the Religious Zionist community's sense of being unfairly criticized for the actions of an individual in what may actually have been a conspiracy.

One way of avoiding the issue of participation in the commemorations of the assassination was to find another death that had occurred on the same day according to the Hebrew calendar and focus on it instead. A tradition mentioned in the Midrash determined that Rachel, the matriarch, died on the fourteenth of Marheshvan, the Hebrew date of the assassination. Rachel's tomb is in Bethlehem, an Arab city which was captured by Israel in the Six Day War; this promoted visiting the tomb on that day. Symbolically this became an expression of Jewish historical rights to the biblical borders and by implication a rejection of Rabin's political legacy.

Each year there is an internal debate about Religious Zionist participation in events commemorating the assassination. When there is a speaker representing Religious Zionism at one of these events, invariably it will be from the moderate camp. The Religious Zionist schools in general avoid

⁴ Yoav Sorek, "*Rega shel Tsemarmoret: ha-Tsiyyonut ha-Datit le-Nokhav Retsah Rabin*," in *Ha-Tsiyyonut ha-Datit: Idan ha-Temurot* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 2004), 475-532.

discussing the assassination or claim that Rabin then and certainly today would oppose a Palestinian state.⁵

Politically, in the twenty years since the assassination, Religious Zionism, as expressed by Habayit HaYehudi, the successor party to Mafdal, has moved to the right of the political spectrum. In the present right-wing government it is considered to be the most right-wing party in the coalition. Its leadership, from within the government, opposes Prime Minister Netanyahu's policies, arguing that he is not strong enough in his crack-down on Palestinian terrorists. During the incursion into Gaza last year the party wanted Israel to recapture Gaza and wipe out Hamas.

When an attack on two homes in a Palestinian village resulted in three deaths, including an infant, and the police blamed a Jewish right-wing underground group, the general response in Religious Zionist circles was anger at any attempt to blame the community. The lesson that stuck from the Rabin assassination and its aftermath was that a secular leftist society is using isolated acts to tar an entire community. Even when accusations of the dangers a Jewish underground poses come from leaders of a right-wing government, the response has been to question that claim. Even if true they are dismissed as a small fringe and not reflective of the values taught by Religious Zionist institutions.

The Rabin assassination has not left a serious mark on Religious Zionism in Israel. Accusations of responsibility for creating a climate which may have led to the assassination are seen as an unfounded attack by political opponents. The initial period of self-reflection passed with essentially no permanent impact. There is one important exception. When Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, who even more than Rabin was seen as a betrayer of a movement that he had promoted, removed the Jewish settlements from Gush Katif, there was no halakhic discussion of *rodef*. Assassinating a Prime Minister on religious grounds was not an option to be considered.

⁵ I am aware of one such discussion in commemoration of the twentieth anniversary of the assassination, which included R. Bin-Nun, but it was held at Yeshivat Har Etzion, which is considered the center of the moderate wing of the movement.