

Rav Amital is Rosh Yeshivat Har Etzion in Alon Shevut, Israel.

A TORAH PERSPECTIVE ON THE STATUS OF SECULAR JEWS TODAY

לזכר תלמידי בישיבת הר עציון
שנפלו במלחמת שלום הגליל
דוד בן אביעזר כהן הי"ד
ודניאל בן משה מושיף הי"ד

Let us open with the famous question that has been occupying the State of Israel, and the Jewish world as a whole, for many years: Who is a Jew? The answer seems obvious, at least to Jews guided by Halakhah: A Jew is a person born to a Jewish mother. This answer is certainly correct halakhically speaking, but as a definition of a Jew's Jewishness it is surely inadequate. Any definition that does not embrace a person's affinity to Torah cannot be complete. The problem is to find a definition that on the one hand covers this affinity, and on the other hand does not exclude Jews who have forsaken Torah—including those who regard themselves as secularists and to whom Jewish tradition says nothing at all.

The full answer and the correct definition were given by Rav Saadiah Gaon and, later, Rambam. There is Rav Saadiah Gaon's famous definition: ". . . since our Israelite nation is a nation only by virtue of its Torah" (*Emunot ve-De'ot*, ed. Kappah, III:132).

Careful examination of this statement in its original context shows that it has quite a different meaning from the one usually assigned to it. Rav Saadiah is generally understood to be saying that the Jews are a people only if we strictly observe the Torah; failure to do so means the end of peoplehood, or failure of the individual Jew to do so means that he has cut himself off from the Jewish people. That is not what Rav Saadiah had in mind at all. Jews remain Jews and the Jewish people remains the Jewish people even when they fail to observe the Torah.

A Hebrew version of this paper was presented to an assembly of Yeshiva University in Jerusalem. The current translation was prepared by Moshe Kohn.

Let us examine Rav Saadia's statement in context. He speaks of the eternity of the Torah, and raises the question: Does the Torah given to us at Sinai obligate us for all time, or will there come a time, as the Christians contend, when this Torah will no longer be binding and will be replaced by another one? And he shows that the present Torah is eternal:

Since our Israelite nation is a nation only by virtue of its Torah. And since the Creator said that His nation would endure like heaven and earth, then most certainly its Torah will endure like heaven and earth. As we read (Jeremiah 31:35-36): "These are the words of God, Who appointed the sun to light by day, the moon and stars to light the night, Who stirred the sea so its waves roared, Lord of Hosts is his name: 'Only if these statutes vanish from My sight,' declares God, 'will the seed of Israel cease forever to be a nation before Me.'"

That is, what makes the Jews a special nation is their being commanded to observe the Torah. And the Jewish people will cease to be the Jewish people only when the Torah ceases to be valid, and is no longer binding on them.

The Rambam, too, writes about this issue in the *Guide for the Perplexed* (II:29), commenting on Isaiah 66:22, "'For as the new heaven and the new earth I am making will endure in My presence,' says God, 'so shall your seed and name endure.'" The Rambam remarks:

Sometimes the "seed" remains, and not the "name," as you find in the instance of many nations, about whom there is no doubt that they are of Persian or Greek stock, but are today no longer known by their original names; rather they bear the names of the other nations of which they are now a part. In my view, we have here a prophecy that our Torah by virtue of which we possess our special "name" will endure forever.

We see, then, that according to Rav Saadia Gaon's and Rambam's definitions a Jew is one who is commanded by Torah. The mere fact of his being commanded makes him a Jew, even if he does not observe. But his failure to observe makes him subject to judgment by temporal or Divine court. This is not the case with Gentiles: the most complete and scrupulous observance of Torah does not turn a Gentile into a Jew, since Gentiles are not under the command.

This raises the question: How can there be proselytes to Judaism? For if a Jew is only one who is commanded in the first instance, the Torah having been originally given to the Jewish people—"the Torah that Moses commanded *us*, as a legacy for the community of Jacob" (Deuteronomy 33:4)—how can an outsider's later voluntary submission to the command transform him into a

Jew? Indeed, this is a unique feature of Jewish peoplehood: by becoming a proselyte and joining the Jewish faith community, a Gentile also becomes a member of the Jewish people, the people that is obligated by the Torah. There is no other religion or nation with such an integral link between these two elements.

As Rambam writes in *Hilkhot Issurei Bi'ah* (14:1–2):

How are true proselytes admitted? When a heathen comes to be converted to Judaism, he is investigated. When no special reason is found to disqualify him, he is told: “Why have you come to convert? Don’t you know how much humiliation and suffering the Jewish people is undergoing?” If he says, “I know, and I am unworthy,” he is promptly accepted.

Rambam goes on to say: “And he is taught the tenets of the religion, which are the oneness of God and the prohibition of idolatry.”

In my opinion, this is the root meaning of Ruth’s declaration to Naomi, “Your people shall be my people and your God shall be my God” (Ruth 1:16). First comes the peoplehood affiliation, then the religious one, for “your God are my God” only when “your people are my people.”

Is it possible to resign from this obligation and all that it implies in the sphere of reward and punishment? Rambam says in his *Iggeret Teiman* (ed. Mossad Harav Kook, p. 136):

Not a single person of the seed of Jacob can ever escape from this Torah—neither he, nor his children, nor his children’s children, neither if he seeks to renounce it voluntarily nor if he does so under compulsion. He is punished for every single *mitsvah* that he violates. . . . And let him not imagine that having committed violations for which he is liable to severe punishment, he will escape punishment for minor infractions, and therefore may become careless about *mitsvot* carrying lighter penalties. For Yaravam the son of Nevat . . . was punished for committing idolatry and leading the rest of Israel into idolatry, and punished also for postponing the observance of Sukkot for no good reason. . . . This is a fundamental principle of the Torah and of our faith.

So a Jew can define himself as secularist, a Jew can define himself as non-religious, a Jew can even change his religion—for all that, he remains a Jew.

To repeat, a Jew is defined as a Jew by mere virtue of the fact that he is obligated by the Torah—even if he does not observe it. This definition has halakhic ramifications in the area of personal status, regarding such matters as marriage and divorce. This is the basis for the halakhic application to an apostate of the principle, “Even though he sinned, he is a Jew” (*Sanhedrin* 44a), although the direct reference of the statement is to Akhan ben Karmi (Joshua 7:11) and not to an utter apostate. (See also Maharsha’s *Hiddushei Aggadot* and Rashdam’s *Responsa, Even ha-Ezer* 10.)

In sum, I allow myself to assert: A complete Jew is one who is commanded and observes the commandments. A conscious Jew is one who, even though he does not observe the Torah, is conscious of its existence and feels the confrontation with it. And all those commanded by the Torah are Jews, even if they are not conscious of its existence.

Hence, no Jew can be stripped of his Jewishness, regardless of his deeds or opinions. But the Halakhah draws additional distinctions: righteous person and wicked person; sinner on a single matter and sinner regarding the entire Torah; brother in Torah and observance of commandments and brother, but not in Torah and observance. And the Halakhah relates to each of these categories differently. Now, what is the attitude of Halakhah to one who does not accept or believe in the Torah and considers himself a secularist?

We have to concede that in principle, Halakhah is harsh towards and intolerant of those who violate it. Here is what Rabbi Abraham Isaac ha-Kohen Kook had to say (*Ma'amarei ha-Re'iyah*, p. 91):

And the fiercest of the nations (the Jews: see *Beitsah* 25b; *Shemot Rabbah* 42:9) is a jealous and vengeful one. It wreaks hellish vengeance on those who muddy up its life. It does not tolerate those who do so, be they even brother or son. In its heart there continues to reverberate the proclamation of its first shepherd (Moses, during the episode of the Golden Calf; Exodus 32:27), "These are the words of the Lord, God of Israel: 'Let each of you take up his sword and go through the camp from gate to gate, and slay brother, neighbor and kin.'"

This attitude is primarily one of principle, and there is a vast difference between halakhic principle and practice in this respect. There are halakhic matters concerning which we are told *halakhah ve-ein morin ken*—"the action, if performed, is correct under the law, but it is not prescribed *a priori*." Between the proclamation in principle and the implementation there is a great distance. However, the assertion of the principle is important in itself and as an edifying factor. An example of this is a certain blatant difference between the Written and the Oral Torah. In the former we often find the expression *mot yumat*, the perpetrator of such-and-such an offense "shall surely be put to death." A literal reading of Scripture might make one think that one is reading the minutes of a "stoning Sanhedrin." On the other hand, there is the famous statement in Mishnah *Makkot* 1:10: "A Sanhedrin that carries out one death sentence in seven years is called murderous. Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah says, 'once in seventy years.' Rabbi Tarfon and Rabbi Akiva say, 'If we were on the Sanhedrin, no one would ever be executed.'" According to the Oral Torah, the possibility of sentencing an offender to death is extremely remote, virtually non-existent.

Halakhah (see Rambam, *Hilkhot Sanhedrin* 12:2) requires prior warning in the presence of two witnesses; the offender must also have been told precisely how he would be executed; and he must have declared, “I know, and I am committing the sin nevertheless.” If he only said “I know” without declaring that he intended to commit the offense, he is not considered to have been properly forewarned, as the warning must be issued when he is clearly showing his criminal intent. Altogether, a most far-fetched possibility. Nevertheless, the radical disapproval expressed by the Torah’s prescription of the death sentence has tremendous educational value. Rabbi Kook remarked that the Kabbalah designates the Written Torah as “Papa” and the Oral Torah as “Mama.” Father and mother both pursue the same aims in the education of their children; only the father does it in his manner, and the mother in hers. And both manners are needed if the child’s education is to be complete. Sometimes the child needs the father’s stern reprimand that does not consider extenuating circumstances, and at the same time needs motherly tenderness, mercy, and understanding.

The question is asked: If, as the Oral Torah says, “An eye for an eye” means “Money for an eye,” why does the Written Torah say, “An eye for an eye” rather than “Money for an eye”? The answer is: The Written Torah is the father sternly declaring, “An eye for an eye!” Then, along comes the Oral Torah as a clement mother, saying, “It isn’t that simple; it isn’t really an eye for an eye; actually it means money for an eye.” Revulsion at causing bodily harm is generated precisely by the Written Torah’s harsh prescription. There is educational value to the Torah’s emphatic repetition, “An eye for an eye! A tooth for a tooth! A foot for a foot!”

The same applies to the matter we are discussing—the stringent attitude to sinners, reflecting the attitude we are expected to take to the sin itself.

In dealing with the practical implications of the Torah’s attitude to sinners, we have to concentrate on our attitude to sinners in our time. Here the central question is: Are those stringent statements of the Sages regarding sinners and heretics applicable today? We have to treat this question from two standpoints:

1. The character and gravity of the sins: Do the various sins carry the same weight today as they did in the times of the Sages?

2. The quantity of sinners: When the Sages spoke of sinners as “fence-breaches,” Jewish society as a whole was observant and loyal to the tenets of Judaism. Does the halakhic attitude of the Sages apply in our time, when the totality of Jewish society cannot be defined as observant?

Before answering all these questions, let us briefly review the Sages' attitude to sinners. There are various degrees of sinners, and here I will refer only to the attitude toward the lowest and highest. The lowest degree concerns one who commits a solitary transgression in the presence of another Jew, is reproved by him and continues to transgress in spite of the reproach (see *Pesahim* 113b and Rambam, *Hilkhot De'ot* 6:8). The highest degree concerns apostates, heretics, those who reject the entire Torah, and those who transgress out of spite.

Regarding the lowest degree of sinner, the Gemara (*Pesahim* 113b) says:

Rabbi Shemuel bar Rav Yitshak said in Rav's name: "It is permitted to hate him, as said (Exodus 23:5), 'When you see your enemy's ass lying helpless under his load.' Who is this enemy? If you say that the reference is to a Gentile, we have already been taught (*Bava Metsia* 32b) that a Jew is meant, and not a Gentile, and the reference here is clearly to a Jewish enemy. In that case, is it permitted to hate him? Aren't we taught (Leviticus 19:16), 'You shall not hate your brother in your heart'? Rather, there are witnesses that he committed a transgression, so it is permitted to hate him. If so, why is he called the enemy of an individual? The whole world ought to hate him as well! It must be that the individual alone saw him sin."

In other words, to one who saw the sin, the sinner is considered an "enemy," and the witness is permitted to hate him. And,

Rabbi Nahman bar Yitshak said: "It is a *mitsvah* to hate him, as said (Proverbs 8:13), 'God-fearingness means hating evil.'"

As to the highest degree of sinner, Rambam says (*Hilkhot Rotse'ah* 4:10):

The heretics—that is, idolaters, or one who transgresses out of spite, even eating forbidden meat or wearing *sha'atnez* out of spite . . . or those who deny the Torah and prophecy—it is a *mitsvah* to kill them. If one has the possibility of killing them with a sword in public, one does so; if not, one uses various stratagems to bring about their death. How? If one sees such a person fall into a well and there is a ladder in the well, one takes the ladder and says, "As soon as I get my son down off the roof, I'll give it back to you." And so on.

This, then, is the Halakhah's theoretical position on the highest degree of sinner: *moridin ve-lo ma'alim*—"one helps to bring about their downfall; one does not help them up."

Now, what of the practice? Regarding the lowest degree of sinner, whom it is a *mitsvah* to hate, we should bear in mind the words of the Tosafot in *Pesahim* 113b. There is a *mitsvah* to help another person unload a burden from his fallen animal and to help him raise the animal and reload or readjust the burden (Exodus 23:5;

Deuteronomy 22:4; Rambam, *Sefer ha-Mitsvot*, Positive Commandments 80 and 540). One aspect of the unloading *mitsvah* is preventing cruelty to animals. This is not involved in the reloading *mitsvah*, which is solely a matter of helping the beast's owner. The Gemara (*Bava Metsia* 32b) tells us: If you simultaneously encounter a situation involving unloading and one involving loading, you deal with the former first, because that is also a matter of preventing cruelty to animals. But if the person requiring help in loading is an enemy, then you are to deal with him first, in order to force a change in your attitude. The Tosafot ask, "What is this business of forcing a change in attitude, considering that it is a *mitsvah* to hate the owner?" And they reply: Since the loader hates the owner, then surely the loader's fellows also hate him, as is written (Proverbs 27:19), "As a face opposite water reflects another face, so do people reflect each other's hearts." This would lead to total hatred. As the Torah vigorously combats total hatred, each person must coerce his attitude and overcome his hatred. If that is the case, how does one simultaneously overcome one's hatred and exercise what the Gemara says is one's right—even duty—to hate? On this the *Tanya* (32) says: Even those who ignore reproof and whom it is a *mitsvah* to hate—it is also a *mitsvah* to love them: hate the evil in them, and love the good in them.

Such, then, is the nature of that precept to hate.

It is worthwhile recalling what the *Tanya* says about those who have become so alienated from things Jewish that one is not even required to reprove them, since the commandment to do so applies only to "your fellow" in Torah and observance, and not merely to any neighbor or countryman. Hating people who are so alienated is forbidden. As the *Tanya* says:

Concerning one who is not your comrade, one with whom you are not close—it is concerning relations with such people that Hillel the Elder has said (*Avot* 1:12): "Be of the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving the *beriyot* (creatures) and bringing them close to the Torah." Hillel's use of the term "creatures" rather than "people" indicates that he is referring to those who are far removed from Torah; you must draw them closer with bonds of love—to the point where they are brought into the study of Torah and service of God, and at the same time you earn reward for having observed the precept of loving your fellow.

Let us return to the case of those who have ignored reproof and whom it is apparently a *mitsvah* to hate. To hate, of course, does not mean to hate totally; it should be hatred blended with love. And in the light of the *Tanya*'s statement, the question arises whether in our time—even in the time of Rabbi Tarfon and Rabbi Akiva—hatred of such people is commanded, or even sanctioned. This hatred is

permitted only after we have observed the *mitsvah* to reprove. And this precept is not all that simple, is not within the capacity of everyone and anyone to perform at will. The Gemara tells us (*Arakhin* 10b): “We are taught: Rabbi Tarfon said, ‘I doubt that there is anyone in this generation who accepts reproach. . . . Tell someone, “Remove the splinter from between your teeth,” and he will retort, “Remove the beam from between your eyes.”’” Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah said, ‘I doubt that there is anyone in this generation who knows how to give reproach.’” And since sanction of hatred presupposes observance of the *mitsvah* to reprove, which we are incompetent to fulfill, then the sanction to hate is null and void. So the *Hafets Hayyim* ruled, and in his wake, the *Hazon Ish*. Here is what the *Hazon Ish* writes (in his commentary on *Hilkhos De’ot*):

At the end of his book *Ahavat Hesed*, the *Hafetz Hayyim* wrote in the name of the Maharil that it is a *mitsva* to love the wicked . . . for we are bidden first to reprove, and since we do not know how to reprove, they are considered as sinners out of ignorance or under coercion.

Incidentally, regarding the law of *moridin ve-lo ma’alin* the *Hazon Ish* writes: “A sinner is not to be put down before efforts have been made to set him aright by speaking with him.”

So we see that there is a vast gap between the Halakhah’s trenchantly stated *mitsvah* to hate sinners and its implementation.

Now let us examine the views of the *posekim* regarding the practice towards sinners of the highest degree: those who deny Torah and Prophecy and transgress out of spite, concerning whom we are told that it is a *mitsvah* to kill them, and to expedite their downfall, and not to aid their comeback. First we have to ascertain the source of this law, according to which it is permitted to kill or cause the death of a heretical or spitefully sinning Jew. Does the commandment against murder not apply to such a Jew? The answer is that this law stems from the authority vested in the Sages to go beyond the law and sanction capital punishment in special instances involving maintenance of the social order (see *Sanhedrin* 46a and Rambam, *Hilkhos Sanhedrin* 24:4).

From this we must conclude that if the sole purpose is to prevent or mend a breach in the Jewish social order, then in our time, when killing will clearly not achieve this purpose, the prohibition on killing surely remains in force. Indeed, in the view of the *Hazon Ish*, the principle of *moridin ve-lo ma’alin* will be applicable only in the messianic era, as he limits its validity to a very special period in which such punishment will have deterrent and mending force. Here is what the *Hazon Ish* writes (*Yoreh De’ah* 13, 100:16):

Yehuda Amital

It seems to me that the principle of *moridin* applies only when the intervention of Divine Providence is manifest to all. For when the times were such, the extirpation of the wicked was clearly seen as the removal of an immediate threat to humanity, everyone knowing that it was the incitement and bad example of the wicked that caused pestilence, war and famine. But in a time of eclipse, when the people are cut off from faith, expediting the downfall of sinners does not serve to mend the breach, but only widens it. Therefore, the law does not apply, and we must do our utmost to bring them back with bonds of love.

The question remains whether there is a significant difference between those whom the talmudic Sages refer to as heretics—*koferim*—and those defined as such in our time, a difference dictating a different attitude. Here it is worthwhile to see what Rambam says in his commentary on the first mishna in *Hullin*:

Know that the tradition we have from our forebears that ours is an epoch of Exile when the capital code does not apply refers only to Jews who have committed capital offenses. As to the *minim*, Sadducees and Boethusians, however—those who initiate any of those deviant systems are to be executed, to prevent them from leading Jews astray and undermining the faith; this has already been done in many cases in the Maghreb (North Africa). But those born to those ideas and raised on them are to be regarded as innocents who do not know any better—unlike those who conceived those ideas, who are willful sinners.

Rambam expresses the same idea in *Hilkhot Mamrim* 3:3:

The foregoing applies to those who deny the Oral Torah and do as they please, like Zadok and Boethus and their followers. But the children and grandchildren of those deviants, who were born among the Karaites and raised according to that ideology—they are to be considered as unwitting offenders, who do not know what is a *mitsvah* and what a transgression. Even if such people afterwards learn that they are Jews and they see Jews and the practice of Judaism, they are still regarded as innocents, for they were raised on error. . . . Peaceable methods should be used to bring them back to the correct and solid way of the Torah.

Let us consider the status of heretics in our own time in the light of the Rambam's judgment. Many Torah greats of our era, including Rav Kook, dealt with this question. They declared that heretics today are to be regarded as innocents "coerced" by the prevailing cultural and general atmosphere. And not only their children are to be regarded as "infants who were kidnapped and raised by Gentiles," but also those who grew up in a religious milieu and forsook that way of life. Here is what Rav Kook wrote in one of his letters (*Iggerot Re'iyah*, I:171):

But if you think that it is fitting to ignore all those young people who have been swept from the path of Torah and faith by the raging torrent of our time,

then I declare unequivocally that that is not the way that God desires. Just as Tosafot in *Sanhedrin* 6b, s.v. *he-hashud*, say that one suspected of adultery should not be disqualified as a witness, because he should be regarded as having been coerced by his passions, and as Tosafot in *Gittin* 41b, s.v. *kofin*, say that they are regarded as “coerced” because the maidservant seduced them, so should the torrent of our time be regarded as a wicked maidservant whom Heaven has given a last spell of free rein before she vanishes, and who is using all her many allures to seduce our young people to whore after her. They are misguided innocents, and Heaven forbend that we should adjudge them willful sinners.

Let it be borne in mind that the above was said before the Holocaust. What shall we say after the Holocaust? Are we permitted to condemn people who find it difficult to have faith after all that the Holocaust did to Jewish souls? If Rav Kook and the *Hazon Ish* spoke of “coerced innocents” before the Holocaust, what shall we say today?

Furthermore, does the halakhic definition of heresy apply to what is today called heresy? According to present-day cognition theory and conventional thinking, one can at most be a skeptic; it is not possible to be a heretic, for that requires categorical assertions in the metaphysical sphere—a sphere to which human cognition has no access. An unequivocal heretic places himself in the “religious” category of faith along with the religious person. One can say that he does not believe in prophecy or a revealed Torah because it has not been proven to him. But only a person who thinks on a primitive level can categorically state that there is no prophecy or revealed Torah. Consequently, we have to define the present-day heretic as a skeptic.

Now the question arises: What is the status of the skeptic—that is, the person who has no faith but is not committed to heresy?

In tractate *Shabbat* 31a, we are told the story of the heathen who asked Hillel to convert him, saying that he believed in the Written Torah but not the Oral one, and that Hillel converted him. Rashi explains that Hillel assumed that he would eventually be able to persuade the heathen, for the man had not rejected the Oral Torah, but had only said that he did not believe it was of Divine origin. Rashi is suggesting that there is a difference between a non-believer and a heretic. According to Halakhah, then, a heretic is one who categorically rejects. As Rambam says (*Hilkhot Teshuvah* 3:7):

Five are called *minim*: one who says that there is no God and the world has no leader; one who says that the world has a leader but that there are two or more. . . .

Migdal Oz comments on this:

There are many who do not know enough to form a clear opinion and they express themselves confusedly. *Minim*, on the other hand, say exactly what they mean, in no uncertain terms.

Ramban, in his *Hasagot* (Dissents) on Rambam's *Sefer ha-Mitsvot*, indeed speaks of a prohibition on skepticism. Now, the skeptic may be violating a ban, or he may be psychologically ill, but it is questionable whether he can be described as a *min*. Rav Kook wrote in one of his letters that "we have not heard that the talmudic Sages treat as an *apikoros* anyone but those who deny outright."

I once heard Rabbi Elimelekh Bar-Shaul declare that a skeptic is not to be treated as a heretic. He based himself on Rambam, *Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim* 2:3:

If every person follows his whims, he is apt to destroy the world out of ignorance. How? Sometimes he will be drawn to idolatry, and sometimes he will wonder about the oneness of the Creator, whether it is true or not; will speculate on what is Above and what is Below, what Before and what After; will sometimes waver between belief and unbelief in the truth of prophecy, between belief and doubt as to whether the Torah is from Heaven; he simply does not know by which criteria to let himself be guided, and ends up tending towards *minut*.

Note that Rambam does not flatly state that he has become a *min*; he says that the man "tends towards *minut*," is in a state of doubt. It is most doubtful, then, whether the so-called "heretics" of our time are heretics according to Halakhah. In any event, it is hard to classify a person who thinks in modern categories as a "heretic."

Now to the question whether the attitude to transgressors ought to be different in a period when most Jews are defined as such. The Torah literature does not explicitly treat this question. I have a powerful feeling, however, that apart from the reasons I have stated above for not categorizing them as transgressors in the classical sense, the mere fact that so many Jews have forsaken God calls for a more lenient attitude to them and a special effort to find the good points in them and plead in their defense. This feeling is bolstered by quite a few dicta of the Sages emphasizing the good points of the Jewish people in times when idolatry was rampant among them. One of the most powerful such pleas appears in *Midrash Tanhuma, Hukkat* (ed. Buber, p. 71a; and with slight variations in *Vayikra Rabbah* 20:2, *Bamidbar Rabbah* 19:2 and *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana, Parashat Parah*):

Rabbi Joshua of Sikhnin said in Rabbi Levi's name: "In David's (i.e., Saul's) time, the children, who were not even old enough to sin, already knew enough Torah to adduce 49 reasons to declare something impure and 49 reasons to declare the same thing pure. And David would pray for them, as is written (Psalms 12:8), 'You, God, preserve' the Torah in their hearts, and guard them from a generation doomed to extinction."

After all that praise, the Midrash continues,

So many of them fell in war (i.e., the wars led by Saul)—on account of the talebearers and slanderers among them. This is what David had in mind when he said (Psalms 57:5), "I lie down among lions, among ravenous beasts, men whose teeth are spears and arrows and whose tongues are sharp swords." "I lie down among lions"—that refers to Abner and Amasa, who were lions in Torah; "ravenous beasts"—that refers to Doeg and Ahitophel, who were ravenous for slander; "men whose teeth are spears and arrows"—that refers to the people of Ke'ilah, as is written (Samuel 23:12–13), "David asked, 'Will the citizens of Ke'ilah surrender me and my men to Saul?' And God said, 'They will'"; "whose tongues are sharp swords"—that refers to the people of Ziph, as written (Psalms 54:2), "When the Ziphites came to Saul and told him, 'Why, David is hiding among us.'" At this point David said (Psalms 57:6), "Raise Yourself, God, above the heavens"—that is, remove Your Presence from them.

On the other hand, Ahab's generation was idolatrous through and through. Yet because there were no talebearers among them, they won their wars. We know this from Obadiah's statement to Elijah (I Kings 18:13), "Have you not been told, my lord, what I did when Jezebel was killing off God's Prophets—how I hid 100 of them, 50 to a cave, and provided them with food and water?" . . . And then Elijah proclaims at Mt. Carmel (I Kings 18:23), "I am the only prophet of God still left"! The entire nation knew [that, because of Obadiah's act, Elijah was not the only true Prophet left], but no one had told Ahab.

Thus the Midrashim.

Now, if the Sages make every effort to find worthy features in a generation that was "idolatrous through and through," how much more so does it behoove us to do likewise in our generation, about whom the least one can say is what the Sages said (*Kiddushin* 40a), "Rejection of idolatry is tantamount to acknowledgment of the entire Torah." It is incumbent upon us to find as many good points in this generation as possible. For we have a situation today that, to the best of my knowledge, did not exist in olden days. In talmudic times, people who desecrated the Sabbath were also suspect regarding theft and robbery. Today, high ethical and moral standards can be found among people who reject the authority of the Torah and have abandoned religious observance. In recent generations we have seen people devoid of religious faith giving their lives for ethical-moral ideals or for the Jewish people and Erets Yisrael. Therefore, it is only natural that we should adopt a different stance.

But I wish to raise two additional considerations. First, there was a time when the Jews were hated for being the bearers of the Torah. As soon as a Jew stopped living according to his religion and accepted the religion of his Gentile milieu, the hatred ceased. This is no longer true. Contemporary Jew-hatred is racial, directed against people in whose veins Jewish blood flows, irrespective of whether they live by the Torah or have had themselves baptized. When Jew-hatred is aimed at a person solely because he is a Jew, regardless of his opinions and actions, so should *ahavat Yisrael*—love of fellow Jews—also be directed at every Jew solely because he is a Jew, regardless of his opinions and actions. Let no one entertain the notion that someone treated as a Jew by the anti-Semites is going to be treated by us as an outsider. Even in the Halakhah we find that although we are not required to bewail the death of an apostate, we do mourn over him if he is killed by Gentiles because of his Jewish origins. In Auschwitz the Germans did not check Jews for their opinions or degrees of observance. Are we going to do so as a preliminary to observing the *mitsvot* of “You shall love your fellow as yourself” and “Your brother shall live with you”?

The second consideration concerns mainly the State of Israel, with ramifications pertaining to *pikkuah nefesh*—the saving of life. If we believe that the State of Israel is a haven for millions of Jews, and that the survival of those Jews hinges on peace for Israel and the Jewish state’s capacity to withstand its many enemies; and if we believe that the re-establishment of the Jewish state and its survival constitute *Kiddush ha-Shem*—sanctification and glorification of God’s name; if the State of Israel is precious to us; if we have not yet been infected by the “*Haredi* heresy,” which excludes God from the history of the re-establishment of Jewish statehood and regards it as a purely human act—then we had better realize that the State of Israel is not going to endure if cordial relations do not prevail between all sectors of the nation. Only if Jews relate to each other as brothers, irrespective of ideology, can we maintain this state. Otherwise we live under a threat of destruction.

I do not have to adduce any source texts to support these latter two considerations. Concerning such instances, the Sages have already said, “Why do I need a quotation from Scripture? It stands to reason.”