

## ENEMIES AND FRIENDS: A LETTER FROM ISRAEL

Lest it be misunderstood, let the obvious be said at once: what happened at Hebron brought no honor to *am Yisrael*. Whatever pain and frustration Dr. Goldstein may have suffered over the murder of his friends and neighbors, individuals may not decide on their own to take human life. Killing them while they are at prayer only compounds the anguish.

Having said this, it must also be said that the the Israel government's reaction to the tragedy was as unsettling as the tragedy itself. The servile genuflection towards world sensibilities, the obsequious Mea Culpas, the closing of the *kotel hamaaravi* to Jewish worshippers, the daily concessions and gestures to coax Arafat back to the peace negotiations, the public self-flagellation, the increase in numbers of the new "Palestinian Police Force," the agreement to permit an international presence in Hebron—all because of a solitary act which had already met with national revulsion—were more than demeaning. They reflected instead a sense of unsureness about Israel's place in the world.

Of course, it is beside the point that one looks in vain for even a mild Arab expression of sorrow at the thousands of terrorist acts they have committed against the Jews. It is beside the point because we are an *am kadosh*, and we do not imitate our enemies lest we become like them. Therefore, heartfelt regret and remorse by the government were surely in order (as is soul-searching among the Orthodox as to how such an act can meet with the approval of even a tiny minority of observant Jews). But the abject groveling was unseemly, and hardly a sign of physical or moral strength. At the very least, some Begin-esqe tough-mindedness or Golda-esque sense of balance would have been useful.

Why this daily drenching in bathos? Was the government so eager to demonstrate the inherent morality of the Jewish people that in a sudden religious apotheosis, Rabin, Peres, and Ezer Weizman, whose roots into Jewish tradition normally reach no farther back than Herzl and Ben Gurion, unabashedly found themselves awash in religious, halakhic, and traditional Judaic categories? "Sensible Judaism spits you out," they shouted. "You are outside the wall of Jewish law . . . as a Jew I am ashamed . . . an embarrassment to Judaism. . . ."—rather hollow sentiments from people not previously renowned for their sensitivity to Judaism or to Jewish law.

It's not—just between us—that there aren't things to be embarrassed about in contemporary Israel, even as we are justifiably proud of her stupendous achievements. It would be salutary, for example, if the Prime Minister would confess that as a Jew he is embarrassed that fifty-thousand young Israelis who were raised in this holy land ecstatically worshipped Michael Jackson in his Tel Aviv performance in Ellul, and that another fifty-



thousand paid obeisance to Madonna in Tel Aviv on Hoshana Rabba. Or if Ms. Aloni were to admit that as a former Education Minister she is embarrassed that tens of thousands of Israeli youngsters graduate high school without ever having been exposed to concepts—even in the abstract—like halakha or mitzvah or Mishnah, and who consider Zionism a silly notion whose time has passed.

But this is what happens when people lose their authentic Jewish moorings. Perspective becomes distorted and the lines between shame and pride become blurred. Thus, Israeli secularists, having lost their inner vision, are able to see themselves only through the prism of the outside world. Their view of who they are, their sense of Jewish self, is rooted in what they think others think of them. As one watches them perform, a variant of a familiar verse keeps intruding on the mind: "for out of Zion shall come forth a Galut mentality."

## II

Worse than the face Israel showed to the outside world was the face it showed to a significant section of its own citizens. Just a few years ago the settlers of Judea and Samaria were heroes for risking their lives to go into hostile—but traditionally Jewish—areas to establish communities. The country hailed them as courageous and idealistic Zionists, ready to face danger and physical hardship to maintain a Jewish presence in the Land.

But even before Hebron it was apparent that in the eyes of the present Israeli leadership they had become an inconvenience, a thorn in the side which they would willingly abandon at the first opportunity. Now, in the aftermath of Hebron, the Jewish residents of Judea, Samaria and Gaza are vilified. There are calls to "disarm" them, to mete out prison sentences, to dismantle settlements, to evacuate residents forcibly from Hebron, Shiloh, Bet-El and other front-line places. They are viewed as if they were the terrorists, some Knesset members actually referring to them as " Hamas with kippot." And at the very moment that voices in the Knesset were demonizing these Jewish citizens—the overwhelming majority of whom are ordinary, loyal tax-paying citizens who love Eretz Yisroel—the government approved the release of convicted Arab terrorists from prison as a peace offering to a pouting Arafat.

The contrast is stark: the constant, well-planned terrorist bus bombings, stabbings, and brutalities are all greeted by the government with a certain equanimity, a let's-not-interrupt-the-peace-process rhetoric, and renewed begging for a condemnation or at least an apology from Arafat. But Dr. Goldstein's solitary act unleashed the entire fury of the government against him and "those like him."

"Those like him" means those who wear kippot. The anti-settler diatribes emerging from the Knesset revealed greater hostility towards religion

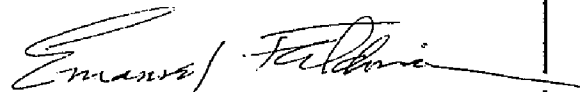


than towards the murderers of Maalot, Munich, and TWA. The paranoia reached a crescendo when a leftist Knesset member, unwittingly mouthing both the ancient blood libels and the anti-Semitic canard that the Torah teaches strict justice while the New Testament teaches love, averred that religious Jews learn vengeance and hatred from their Torah studies. As proof, he pontificated that it was Megillat Esther, with its "message of vengeance against the Goyim," which was directly responsible for the Purim tragedy.

This ludicrous insight was picked up with delight by secularist Israeli journalists and was quickly echoed by parroting pundits around the world—none of whom had troubled to read the Megillah and to learn that the Persian Jews were acting in self-defense against raging mobs who had been unleashed by governmental authority (Esther 9:16; 9:22); that the Jews did not pillage (9:10; 9:15); and that, far from teaching vengeance and killing, Purim was established as a time of "feasting and sending food portions to one another and gifts to the needy" (9:22). Nor did the chorusing columnists stop to wonder how it is that in nineteen-hundred years of Megillah reading, Jews, unlike their counterparts in churches and mosques, never were so inflamed by this or any other reading that they spilled out of their synagogues to kill non-Jews.

Thank heaven for religion's best friend in the Knesset, Minister Shulamit Aloni (best friend because her anti-religious fanaticism is so crude as to make religion's own zealots look civil by comparison) who introduced a touch of comedy with her grotesque statement that Hebron was never a sacred city for the Jews anyway. What transformed it into tragicomedy was the fact that she was serious.

But Madame Aloni plays only a bit part. The full drama unfolding before our eyes is much more riveting: yesterday's idealists are metamorphosed into today's villains, and yesterday's terrorists into today's policemen: enemies are treated like friends, and friends like enemies—and it is all done with a straight face. Were it not so fraught with danger, this is truly the stuff of tragicomedy. One can only pray that the God of Israel will send down from on high His own *deus ex machina* which will bring this dark entertainment to a merciful and peaceful end.



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