

## Into the Looking Glass

The murder of Prime Minister Yitshak Rabin reminds us once again that it is possible to wear a *kippa* and observe sacred mitsvot like *tsitsit* and *tefillin*; *daven shaharit*, *minha* and *ma'ariv*; recite *berakhot* before and after every meal—and still act in ways that bear the unmistakable imprint of the profane.

For murder is not only a cardinal violation of the Torah; it is also the ultimate capitulation to the unholy. To express one's rage in fist, sword or bullet is to surrender the voice of Jacob into the hands of Esau.

The confessed assassin was surely concerned about the *kashrut* of his food, the reliability of his *eruv*, and the quality of his *lulav*. How can it be that the taking of a life or the desecration of the name of God apparently did not concern him?

Who can know the answer? Only God knows the intricate machinations of the human heart, says Jeremiah (17:9-10). But that human beings can rationalize any act is evident from the incident of the strange "*ish*" with whom Jacob wrestled through the night. Who was he? One Talmudic view (*Hullin* 91a) holds that he appeared to Jacob as a heathen (*ke-akum nidme lo*); the other, that he appeared to him as a Torah scholar (*ke-talmid hakham nidme lo*). On which the Avnei Nezer (R. Avraham Bornstein, known as the Sochatchover Rebbe, d. 1910) famously suggests that within each person there reside two types of temptation: one persuades the sinner to transgress even if it is wrong (*ke-akum*); the other persuades the sinner that the transgression is not wrong but is in fact a mitzva (*ke-talmid hakham*).

In our day we have moved beyond this: not only do transgressions become mitsvot, but the transgressors convince themselves that they are reincarnations of Pinhas, pure and untarnished *kana'im* acting on behalf of God. But those who realize that they are not pure or untarnished will take this opportunity to look unflinchingly in the mirror.

## II

We Orthodox of the contemporary west have been rather sanguine about our involvement in the secular society around us.

We were confident that we could resist the strains of spiritual diminution which inevitably emanate from the unholy elements within that society. Not only were we certain of our immunity: we would even help repair and sanctify this society through *tikkun ha-olam*, while all the time the purity of Torah would remain inviolate within us—nay, would even be enhanced.

But to our chagrin we in this generation must now ask if this confidence has been justified. How deeply have the profane elements of the surrounding culture penetrated even the camps of the Orthodox? Have we sanctified this culture in the process, or have we been desanctified? In sum, has our foray into the world stopped at the borders of Greece and Rome, or have we lost our way, crossed the border, and permitted the values of that world—including the use of violence as a substitute for discussion—to insinuate themselves into our beings?

Consider the creeping little profanations that have wormed their way under our *kippot* and black hats into our heads and hearts:

Popular Jewish music with primitive jungle beats masquerading as Biblical lyrics (can Jewish religious “gangsta rap” be far behind?); Orthodox weddings that are *glatt* kosher exercises in conspicuous waste (why do we not in this regard ape our non-Jewish neighbors and their dignified and restrained weddings?); night-clubs which feature kosher food (the *Yore De’a* is strictly observed, but the *Even haEzer* is hidden in a corner); the vulgar entertainments which we welcome into our Orthodox homes (we are, after all, open to the surrounding culture).

These are the lighter profanations, adumbrations of the darker ones yet to emerge: imitating the nations around us, thinking and reacting like them, marrying and assimilating with them, and soon enough becoming them.

It comes as a disorienting jolt that the ultimate profanation—murder—should now have become the expression of choice by a product of Orthodox schools and an Orthodox community. But upon reflection, was not this ultimate profanation drawn upon the silhouettes of the petty ones that foreshadowed it?

This is not to suggest that gluttony or vulgar entertainment or involvement in the affairs of society inevitably lead to the willingness to murder. Nor is it even to suggest that contact with

the cultures around us is to be shunned. But it is to suggest that we become newly aware of an old axiom: that unholiness has a way of insinuating itself into our existence in a variety of ways, and that murder, no less than kosher night-clubs, is a paradigm of the ways these values can effect even observant Jewish lives.

Although many Orthodox Jews remain committed to the concept that openness can be a helpful handmaiden to the affirmation of God in the universe, it should be conceded that those of us who wrestle with the Prince of Esau, even if we emerge victorious, do not always emerge entirely unscathed. Like Jacob, the encounter can culminate in a limp on our thigh.

### III

We who have learned to tolerate and even cherish the co-existence we have negotiated with various profanations must not turn aside from painful soul-searching in the wake of the assassination. Such soul-searching in no way condones the reaction of the Israeli media and of people in high places who instigated a witch-hunt against the observant community; who, in a textbook display of *dati*-phobia, encouraged the demonization of hundreds of thousands of *kippa*-wearing Israelis; who paraded respected rabbis into police stations for interrogation as if they were common criminals; who instead of healing wounds, inflamed anti-religious prejudices and succeeded in casting a pall of suspicion and mistrust over the land. (No one was really surprised that the instigators were advocates of "human rights" who cluck constantly about democracy and freedom of conscience.)

Despite such behavior and the concomitant temptation to lash back—and despite the temptation to claim that the assassin was only an individual and we should not overreact—it is appropriate for us to look inward and ask ourselves some troubling questions.

Have we successfully explored the culture of the Nations without being affected by the values of the Nations? Have Torah and its values been accorded the same gravity in our time as have the various handmaidens with which it has been allied? Or have the handmaidens been given the keys to the treasures of the house and become co-equal with the mistress? In sum, must we,

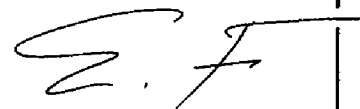
in these difficult days, "to the marriage of true minds admit impediments"?

The answers may not be easily formulated, but it would be unhealthful for the questions to be suppressed.

Nor should such probing be limited to those who are involved in the surrounding culture. A careful look in the mirror would be salutary for every single group and every single Jew, including those who reject such involvement. For example, can a lack of social consciousness also serve as a precursor of unholliness? Is the impulse for personal autonomy, as opposed to recognized authority, limited to those who wear colorful *kippot*? Does encapsulated self-absorption pose risks of spiritual diminution that parallel those of complete openness?

The fact is that desecration of the name of God is not the monopoly of any one group. It appears in many disguises and in many head-dresses. If we truly believe that all Israel are *arevin*/responsible for one another, no camp will self-righteously stand aside and say, "*Yadeinu lo shafkhu et ha-dam ha-ze* ('our hands have not shed this blood')" (Dt. 21:7). The Jewish land and the Jewish people are enveloped in several layers of crisis. The sound of the distant *shofar* should cause us to tremble.

May it come to pass speedily in our day that we who pray regularly, observe mitsvot, and are engaged in God's world will also come to engage ourselves in *tikkun atsmi*/repairing of the self—and by so doing will learn to distinguish the handmaiden from the mistress, and to recognize the borders that separate that which is profane from that which is sacred.



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