

Littleton and Jerusalem

The Columbine High School tragedy in Littleton, Colorado will not soon be forgotten by Americans, and Israelis will not soon forget last June, when two Israeli teenagers were stabbed to death by other teenagers, and when a gang rumble between some 50 sixth and eighth-graders was narrowly averted.

This is only the tip of the iceberg. Out of 28 countries in a recent study on bullying in schools, Israel ranked worse than Belgium, Switzerland, Austria, France, the USA, Finland, Greece, England, and Slovakia. The head of the Juvenile Department of Israeli police report that violent crime among Israeli school children has more than doubled in the past five years, and that the level of violence has also intensified.

What are the causes of youth violence? Typical was the *Jerusalem Post* of June 18, which devotes a full section to the subject under the banner, "Whose fault is it? Maybe yours."

Among the experts interviewed was the chairman of the Behavioral Sciences Department at Israel's Jezreel Valley College, who stated, "Children arrive at pre-school without self-discipline or the ability to control themselves." The key, he claims, is to teach children that there are limits and boundaries. A child has to be made aware from the most tender age that certain things are permitted and others forbidden, to understand restraint and self control. The professor suggests that when the child wants to watch TV instead of doing homework, the parents have to stand their ground. Further, he advises that "parents have to make sure their kids go to bed on time," and not allow their children to flout the rules.

A second interviewee was a famous Israeli intellectual, a professor of philosophy at Hebrew University. For him, the reason for youth violence is the switch from a socialist society to a market economy, with its inevitable emphasis on competitiveness and aggressiveness. Because of this, he claimed, Israelis do not care about one another as they once did; there is meanness and nastiness everywhere.

Another expert on youth at the Hebrew University School of Education avers that TV might be the culprit, and he advises parents to monitor their children's viewing—although, he adds, it is difficult to ascertain exactly how TV affects behavior. It would not be good scientific method, for example, to compare violence among kids that have TV with those who do not have TV, "because the

abstainers would usually be haredi families and then the religious elements would be an intervening variable that would distort the results.” (In other words, it would distort the sampling if we compared the violence of religious children to the violence of non-religious children—a logic that is beyond belief and beyond science.)

Rules, authority, obligations, caring about one another, loving one’s neighbor: the terms have a familiar ring. Where have we heard them before? One waits for the obvious conclusion from these experts, but there is only silence.

Jewish professors in a Jewish land in a Jewish newspaper call for more discipline, limits and self-control, but have nothing to say about the way Jews have become the most disciplined people in the history of mankind. Are the professors so Jewishly unaware that they fail to know that the Torah offers a way to teach the importance of limits to both young and old? Why does this obvious solution not occur to them, or to the reporter who interviewed them?

The gun is literally pressed against their temples, they recognize that Israeli society lacks self-control and discipline, yet they can only repeat the tired old mantras about going to bed on time and doing homework. The Talmudic dictum (*Eruvin* 19a) about *pitcho shel Gehinnom* comes to mind: Those who are mired in their stubborn ways “do not return even when they stand at the brink of Gehinnom.”

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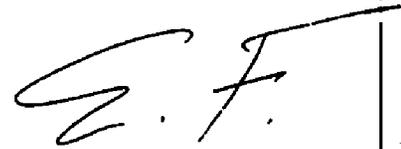
Littleton, Colorado and the Holy City both have traditions. Littleton takes very seriously the American right to bear arms, and still retains the American frontier tradition that a gun is a man’s test of selfhood. Jerusalem also has its traditions. It was meant to be a city of peace, a city of love and kindness and of reaching out to fellow man and to God.

Littleton and Jerusalem are ten thousand miles apart, but in their tragedies they have grown closer together. And yet, in one terrible respect, they are still worlds apart. In Littleton, a wave of religious introspection has enveloped the townspeople. Hillel Goldberg, editor of Denver’s *Intermountain Jewish News*, informs me that churches have been packed, people have begun to pray, inquiries about religion are being made of ministers and priests and religious leaders. Citizens are asking ultimate questions about their values and their behavior: Have we stressed the wrong things? Do we need to reassess, to reevaluate, to reconsider our lives?

One still waits for similar introspection within the secular Israeli community. Its intellectual leaders still utter the same tired banalities, the same generic boilerplate remedies, the same secular mantras. And all the time the remedy they seek stands silently by, waiting to be noticed. But it is not noticed, because religion is an “intervening variable” that “distorts results.”

Somewhere there must be a perceptive non-religious Jew who has the courage to say publicly that perhaps Israel’s secularists have not been walking on the right path, and that quite possibly that other path—the unmentionable “T” path—has something to offer. No one is suggesting that everyone become Orthodox, but surely someone must have the insight to notice the moral fog into which the ideology of *kekhol ha-goyim bet Yisrael* (“Let the Jews be a nation like all others”) has led us. (In this case, it would not hurt to emulate the *kol ha-goyim* of Colorado.)

We keep hearing about the need for Israel to have the courage to make peace with its neighbors. The real issue is whether Israeli secularists have the courage to make peace with their own Jewish heritage.



EMANUEL FELDMAN