When Jew Murders Jew

Excerpts from a lecture given by Rabbi Mendel Weinbach, shlita, at Ohr Somayach Institutions, Jerusalem (6-Nov-95) before the funeral of Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin

In another couple of hours the eyes and ears of the entire world will be turned towards the funeral of the late Prime Minister of Israel. Together with all rational Jews in Israel and throughout the world, we express profound shock and unequivocally condemn this assassination which is a tragedy for the entire nation.

But it is a twofold tragedy. A Jew was murdered and he was murdered by another Jew. When our Sages discuss the historic background of the Fast of Gedalya, they ask, “Who murdered Gedalya?” The question is a strange one for the murderer of this saintly leader of the Jewish people following the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash is clearly identified in Tanach. And yet, our Sages ask in rhetorical fashion, “Who murdered Gedalya?” so that they can supply the obvious answer: “Yishmoel ben Netanya murdered him!” Our Sages wished to thus communicate the twofold dimension of that tragedy. A Jew was murdered — and — he was murdered by another Jew.

Let it be clearly understood by all that we do not suggest by any stretch of the imagination a comparison between the assassinated prime minister and Gedalya ben Achikom, that great tzaddik whose death is compared by our Sages to the tragedy of the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash itself. Nor do we feel that this is the time or place to offer any evaluation of what the late prime minister accomplished in his lifetime as a military and political leader. We leave those evaluations and eulogies to those who knew him better and who worked together with him. In another few hours, the world will hear their statements.

Our responsibility at this moment is to focus on the second half of this tragedy — the fact that a Jew was capable of shedding the blood of another Jew. How did we reach this point?

As Torah Jews we are aware that everything of this nature which happens is intended as a lesson from Heaven for us to learn so that we can improve ourselves in our relations with Hashem and with our fellow man. But let us not be guilty of the short-sighted small-minded and politically motivated reactions which fill the media today — with the Left blaming the Right and the Right blaming the Left for splitting the nation into two hostile camps. With the same passion for logic and truth which we bring to the study of gemora and its commentaries, let us try to analyze where all of us have made the mistakes, large and small, which produce an atmosphere in which Jew is capable of murdering Jew.

Let us here and now offer acheshon hanefesh, a searching of the soul for our entire nation.

First and foremost, let us ask ourselves if we are not guilty of a desire to be like all other nations — to imitate their music, their dress, their society and their political values. Have our government leaders not inscribed on their banners the slogan: Kechol Hagoyim Beis Yisroel — that Israel must be a nation like all other nations? Did not one of the early prime ministers say that Israel will not have achieved complete statehood until — like all other nations — it has a Jewish thief sitting in a Jewish prison? And when complaints were made to another prime minister that Jewish police brutally beat up a Jew, did he not answer that in a modern state we must become accustomed to the idea that a Jew can hit another Jew? So in order to be like all the other nations, we have paid the price of having prisons filled with Jewish criminals, of seeing Jews regularly beating one another with words and with clubs. And now, must we also become accustomed to political assassination as the crowning glory of our national assimilation?

But, perhaps, the most important lesson for us as bnei Torah is the danger which lies in a Jew deciding on his own what he may or may not do on behalf of the cause he believes in. The Torah Jew knows that there is a Shulchan Aruch, a code of Jewish Law which guides every aspect of his life and that there are Torah leaders who apply that Shulchan Aruch to every situation which faces our people.

When Jews are guided neither by the Shulchan Aruch nor their Torah leaders, but by their own idea of what is best for the Jews, then they degenerate into all sorts of violence, whether it was the extreme leftists in their time calling Begin and Sharon “murderers” because of the Lebanon war or the extreme rightists using the same term in regard to Rabin because of the peace process. And such violence of words inevitably leads to what
happened in the Malchei Yisrael Square in Tel Aviv two
days ago.

How many of us remember when the Rosh Hayeshiva of
Ponevizh, Rabbi Eliezer Shach, shliita, issued a letter a
few months ago urging yeshiva students to avoid
participation in any anti-government demonstrations?
At the time, we understood that Rabbi Shach, with all of
his reservations about an anti-religious leftist
government, was urging us to remain in the beis midrash
because the merit of Torah study was a much more
effective way of achieving security for our people than
futile demonstrations. But the words of a gadol hador, a
leader of our generation, must be understood on a
number of levels.

Perhaps Rabbi Shach was also warning us that political
demonstrations were dangerous because they gave
legitimization to verbal violence which, in turn, might
become physical violence and even lead to political
assassination.

And here we must do some soul searching in our own
community. Where in Shulchan Aruch is it written that it
is permissible to throw stones at passing cars and at
police on Shabbos? Which Torah leader gave
permission to call a Jewish policeman a Nazi and to burn
garbage containers as a form of protest? Have we ever
stopped to think that if Torah observant Jews indulge in
such minor forms of violence, they send a dangerous
signal to others that violence is the proper way to get
things done?

But let us return to the soul searching we offer on behalf
of the entire nation. Only a few months ago the prime
minister’s deputy defense minister put a bullet into his
head because he could no longer bear the illness he
suffered. Government leaders and the media hailed him
as a hero for having had the courage to commit suicide
in order to avoid becoming dependent on others.
This attitude was totally contrary to Jewish Law and to
the traditional Jewish opposition to suicide and mercy
killing. We believe that a man is not the master of his
own life, that the life given by the Creator can only be
taken by Him or through His directive. What was the
message communicated by all the fanfare surrounding
that suicide? That a man can decide when it is worth
living. How much of a leap does it take for someone to
take on the Russians and Americans, if necessary.

This was a modern version of the old danger which the
Torah warned us that a Jew may be misled by a G-d
given victory into believingkochi ve’otzem yodi. Such
confidence in his own power removes a Jew from his
dependence on Heaven and his faith in Hashem. It is
also this false faith in the power of arms which leads to
political violence and even assassination.

The traditional Jew always realized that he could rely
only on Hashem and he always bowed his head in
submission to the government of his country, praying to
Hashem to inspire a nation’s leader to act
favorably towards us. The sword and gun were
always the weapons of Esav and Yishmael. But
when the children of Yaakov begin to pride
themselves more on military prowess than on
obedience to Hashem, then, even a Jew is
capable of shedding the blood of another Jew.

This myth of “It can’t happen here” is just one of the
myths that have been exploded with the assassination of
the prime minister. Gone, too, is the myth of Israel’s
genius in guarding its leaders. Investigations are still in
process but it is obvious that somebody erred — and in
a very serious way. Perhaps this shattering of myths will
cure us of one of the most dangerous illusions which has
plagued Israeli society from the beginning of statehood.

Our successful wars against the Arabs led to the
emergence of the idea of “Super-Jew”. Little David
suddenly became mighty Goliath. I still remember the
national mood following the Six Day War when we
achieved a miraculous victory. The feeling in the
country was that the IDF was invincible and we could
even take on the Russians and Americans, if necessary.

Local intelligence and other factors are less than
credible in the idea of a whole country being unable
to withstand the Russian or American forces. This is
what the American Secretary of Defense Secretary
McNamara told his son in a conversation a number of
years ago. Israel’s 1973 Yom Kippur War proved his
point.

But let us return to our soul searching. Perhaps we
should ask ourselves how we can avoid becoming
dependent on the nations around us, and maybe, even
statehood. No one believed that once Jews had
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democratic state of their own that the political
assassination so familiar to less civilized countries would
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Political assassination, it should be noted for the record,
is nothing new in the history of Zionism. A Jew, Dr.
Yakov DeHaan, was assassinated by agents of the pre
state establishment for the “great crime” of negotiating
with Arabs for the sake of national security. Accusations
of murder were hurled by Left against Right and Right
against Left in such incidents as the murder of Arlozoroff
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