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In this issue

We mourn the tragic assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. May his memory be for a blessing, and his legacy a shining light leading the way to peace.

Of dreamers and pragmatists: the lessons and legacy of yitzhak rabin Irving Greenberg

The first tears go for Yitzhak Rabin. At an age when most people—their work done—retire and enjoy their waning years, he was totally engaged in doubling his life's contribution to the Jewish people. Having been credited with the greatest war victory in Jewish history (which included the liberation of Old Jerusalem), he sought peace and pursued it. Acting as a statesman, he was seizing an opportunity initiated by his bitterest political rival, no less. The collapse of Communism, the weakening of the PLO and the softening of the Arab position opened up a risky ambiguous, fraught—with-frustration chance to make *shalom*.

Determined to release Israel from the burden of keeping a million and a half Arabs under Israeli rule against their will, prepared to pay the price in turning over historically precious, sacrificially won land, Rabin concentrated on security arrangements to insure that the new situation would be defensible by Israel.

Pursuer Of Dreams Amid Reality

As a general, Rabin understood how war had taken or scarred the lives of too many—on both sides. He was committed to be as tough as necessary (more down and dirty than many doves could accept) to protect Israel from those who denied its right to exist. He was committed to take as tough political decisions as necessary (more down and dirty than many hawks

could accept) to break out of the vicious cycle of perpetual war.

Yitzhak Rabin deserved the opportunity to reach the goal—especially since almost no one else could get there. His rightful reward was long years to bask in the blessing (or confront the curse of betrayal) that would follow. He was robbed of those years by the cruel act of an ideologue, convinced by his single-minded indoctrination and personal circle that he was doing God's work.

Our Loss Of Innocence

The second tears are for the loss of innocence in Israel; a committed Jew murdered a Jewish Prime Minister. Many express shock and despair. How could political murder terminate the head of government in Israel? That is what happens in totalitarian states or in neighboring Arab countries where the sovereign rules by force and lacks legitimacy! After 47 years of national unity, building and defending the State against a sea of enemies, how could an eruption of hatred occur that would legitimate the assassination of a would-be peacemaker? A devout Jew killing a national hero, no less!

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The answer is: **It can happen here.** No democracy is exempt from the risks of destructive behavior, especially in time of high social conflict and tension. Every American President elected in the 20 year intervals from 1860 to 1980 was shot or died in office; six of the seven were shot. It is fallacious—indeed covertly racist or chauvinist—to believe that Jews are genetically incapable of such vile, violent behavior. The classic Jewish tradition portrays the Jews to be like other people—only more so.

Fifty years ago, the Jewish people decided that there is no moral alternative to assuming power. It takes power to establish a just society—as a step toward *tikkun olam* and the triumph of life. Powerlessness makes greater evils unavoidable. Therefore, our historic task is to create, *all together*, an ethic of Jewish power that works in the real world, the world of power which we now inhabit. If Jews rise to the occasion, we will create an ethic that is faithful to the best of our memories, one which is a worthy model for us and can serve as a “light to the nations.”

Rabin And The Ethic Of Jewish Power

This is what Yitzhak Rabin was doing all his life. When the record of the *halakhah* (code) of Jewish power is written, it will reveal that Israel’s generals—and Rabin in particular—were the greatest *poskim* (decisors) in its history. Using scraps of memory, they forged this distinctive ethic of Jewish power almost from scratch, in the crucible of the 20th century—the greatest age of Jewish power (and powerlessness).

The principles of the emerging Jewish ethic can be summarized briefly:

- 1) For the sake of life and *tikkun olam*, the assumption of power is mandatory. Powerlessness is a sin, an invitation to evil to triumph.
- 2) Power must be exercised in the real world—a flawed reality in which vested interests, entrenched evil and human error all play a role. Power links ultimate ends (the triumph of life and *tikkun olam*) with proximate means in a continual process. On balance, ethical use of power means maximizing possible good (and life) and minimizing possible evil (and death).
- 3) Jewish power is never self-validating or absolute. That would be idolatry. Therefore, power must be limited, guided and judged.
- 4) Given what cannot be changed, given the evil that cannot be avoided, there is still an ideal way of exercising power. Therefore, there can be no one decisive moral policy, only an endless series of judgments in specific

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situations, reconciling conflicting claims and shifting facts.

5) In an imperfect world, there will be inescapable evil or bad side effects in all use of power. Therefore, to take on power is to take on guilt. Those who care, take on guilt. Those who refuse to act are morally irresponsible; in their hands, the ideal becomes the enemy of the possible good. They are less moral—and self-righteous to boot.

6) To be Jewish is to be committed to strive for a higher standard of behavior. That goal is worth taking risks for—but excessive risks are reckless and immoral.

7) Perfection is impossible but a people achieving consistently a 5 to 10 percent higher standard is being faithful to its Jewishness. This constitutes being “a light unto the nations.”

To Rabin, the distinctive ethic of Jewish power meant taking a measured risk for peace. He drew the conclu-

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sions: narrowing the margins of military security but strengthening the shield of international acceptance. Sacrificing even sacred land to save lives and out of respect for the Arab presence. In Rabin's view, being Jewish meant a commitment to build a better life in this world. Therefore, of the competing models for Israel's future, he proposed to reject a stress on creating the kingdom of heaven to move to a focus on the business of life, for Jews and Arabs alike.

By contrast, the right has been arguing that it upholds the banner of Jewish exceptionalism. The religious right has charged that in trading land for peace, the left is giving away too quickly the fruit of settler *chalutzit* (pioneering) because the left wants to become 'normal,' 'like all the other nations.' Opponents fear that peace will be followed by the triumph of consumerism and a surge in assimilation. There is some truth in these concerns. But these truths have been drowned in the torrent of anger unleashed in their unrestrained opposition. This loss of control stems from the delegitimation of viewpoints opposing theirs—a direct result of the denial of pluralism on the extreme right.

What Went Wrong

Sooner or later, Israel was bound to have an issue on which fundamental national interests were in conflict. It was entirely appropriate that this conflict be over the peace process. The survival risks—if the Arabs prove untrustworthy—are real. The moral risks if Israel is corrupted—or split by exercising control over unwilling Palestinians—are equally real. The inevitable removal of settlers is a high and painful cost; it is understandably opposed strongly by those whose lives are uprooted. However, it was not appropriate that the conflict turn vituperative and alienated. Driven by increasingly self-referential political discourse which dismissed the claims of the other side, galvanized by vivid clashing memories, reinforced by religious norms and growing social segregation, the two sides increasingly shifted *from disagreement to delegitimation*. The political process began to founder when this key difference was overridden. The ethical principle is clear: **disagreement, yes; delegitimation, no.**

This principle must be underscored, analyzed, taught; it is the fundamental principle of pluralism. Failure to grasp its meaning is polarizing the Jewish people in Diaspora as well as Israel.

The right must take responsibility for starting down the path of increasingly inflammatory rhetoric which weakened the norms of civil behavior. This incitement provides the context in which loners act out the violent

impulses of society. Furthermore, certain rabbis taught Yigal Amir that the peace process is equivalent to declaring open season on Jewish blood. They taught Yigal Amir that giving up Israel's land to Gentiles is forbidden and that God's instructions overrule human norms. And the rabbis who ruled that government decisions to yield territories are not to be obeyed must hold themselves responsible for their share in creating an atmosphere for extra-legal behavior.

Yet, it will not do to put all the blame on the right; the left must repent for its sins. The settlers were demonized as if they were all Baruch Goldsteins waiting to strike. Assume that the settlements are a major security burden. Was there no one on the left to say that although settlements must go, the pioneering spirit that led many to the West Bank should be honored? After all, many settlers went there in response to the government's encouragement. By all means campaign, telling the public that the settlements are an obstacle to peace. But why was there silence, if not scorn, for the deep religious roots of Judea and Samaria? Why was there no affirmation of the sense of loss, no empathy for the pain in giving up Hebron? The left should look at itself in the mirror and ask: What did we contribute to the breakdown of political dialogue? Why did we contribute to the atmosphere of violent, delegitimizing language that bore such bitter fruit?

I do not equate the left and the right; the right must bear the heavier burden of guilt. The beginning of wisdom in a democracy is that no matter how frustrated you are or how opposed to national policy, you do not deny the legitimacy of the system. Any resort to violence (or murder) is totally beyond the pale. The extreme right violated this principle and the right/religious did not curb them enough.

What Is To Be Done

It would be dangerous to focus on unity as a way of papering over the conflict. Many are quoting the famous talmudic dictum that the Second Temple (and Second Commonwealth) was destroyed by *sinat hinam* (unjustified hatred). Some cite Rabbi Kook's magnificent corollary that the only cure for *sinat hinam* is *ahavat chinam* (unjustified love). But the greater danger is 'justified' hatred—the rejection that grows out of the conflict over evacuating territory or clashing religious values; eventually that urgency will again sweep aside well meant general pledges of love. In response to these contradictions, we need to articulate and rekindle 'justified' love—the regard that comes from active political exchange and shared ways of living.

A conscious effort must be made to live together. Graduates of Yeshivot Hesder should better serve in mixed battalions rather than in segregated units. To make that possible, a greater effort to make religious life livable yet not invasive of secularists' privacy must be made. The Shenhar Commission's recommendations for revitalization of religious studies in the secular educational system should be pursued. The key is to take a pluralistic approach not to offer a missionary or standard Orthodox view only. Orthodoxy will have to stretch and grow to be able to offer itself as an alternative in a free society as against a monopoly in a coercive establishment. The left will have to grow to be self-respecting religiously (not to see itself as non-Orthodox) while becoming open to the positive values in the tradition that it rejects.

There are real short-term conflicts: over Arab trustworthiness, over government priorities, over the weight of religion in making political decisions. These contradictions were allowed to shatter the long-term foundation of politics—the covenant of democracy which undergirds all political action. Powerful but dissonant self-interests, given free rein, spun out of control—driving some on the right to breach the bounds of legitimate discourse and others to stand by silently, lest they lose some constituency. But on the left also, the sense of common fate was devalued—as if the opposition was paranoid and there was no risk in the peace process; as if intransigent settlers were the only threat to peace itself.

Heshbon Hanefesh—Humble Self-Assessment

If we are to restore national unity in the face of the continuing deep conflicts over policy, then it is essential for each side to *criticize itself*. To change the political path of extremism and restore national trust, each side must repent for its sins—rather than just point out the others' wrongs. Each side must show its good will by using the other's self-criticism as a model to emulate in cleaning up its own act.

Restoring the sense of the covenant of fate is essential. Even if there is peace with the Arabs and even if the opponents of the peace process are more religiously oriented and historically minded, should the left allow itself to dismiss the common history, common suffering, common responsibility which it shares with the right? Even if it is convinced that the peace will work, is the left to really say "what have you shared with me lately" and declare that from now on it has more in common with Arab proponents than with Jewish opponents of peace? Peace should not induce amnesia. There is no

escape from the task of remembering what all Jews have in common to link up and to frame the arguments between us. □

Have no fear

Yehudah Mirsky

Word of Yitzhak Rabin's murder knocked the bottom out of my mind and pushed me into animal silence. All I could think of was the line in Lamentations (5:16): "Woe to us, for we have sinned." Then I went to the bookshelf and pulled down a volume of Rav Kook's writings.

I began to read his *Ikvei Ha-Tzon, The Traces of the Flock*, a collection of essays published in 1906. And there I found this:

"Unbridled fear is the source of all material, moral and spiritual weakness...the shadows always pursue the light, and the greater one's capacity for understanding and enlightenment, the greater one's imaginary fears... 'Fear of the anger of the oppressor who seeks to destroy' (Isaiah 51:13) has diminished the soul of this heroic people, such that it lives in fear and trepidation of most every thought...and thus its spiritual weakness is truly weak indeed. Our people's greatest salvation in this time is the banishing of imaginary fears from the heart, to show as clear as the sun, that there is nothing, but nothing to fear."

Yitzhak Rabin's murder marks the culmination of a process that has been underway for years—the reemergence within Jewish politics of the configurations of prewar Europe.

Through the early decades of this century, Labor Zionism was by no means a self-evident or universal proposition within the Jewish community. Revisionism, socialist universalism, Orthodoxy, all vied with it for Jewish allegiance and command. The Holocaust stilled much of that debate, even as it vindicated Zionism's direst predictions.

The 1967 war ended the Holocaust's apotheosis of Jewish vulnerability, and since then the tripartite division between nationalist, universalist and halakhic identities has steadily reasserted itself. Why? Because the centrifugal forces of politics, economics and culture that have

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