EXTREMIST RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM

This brings me to the other danger facing Judaism - religious nationalist extremism - which in the long run may prove to be the *greatest* danger facing the Jewish people.

The national religious movement was one of the most constructive facets of Israeli society. It harmonised torah and Zion, acted as a bridge between religious and non-religious and was noted for its tolerance and moderation in religious practice and political outlook.

The movement towards religious extremism - away from the traditional centrist groups - is a phenomenon which only accelerated after the religious euphoria which followed the Six Day War (1967).

It is paradoxical that the move towards national extremism was strongly influenced by Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook, son of the saintly former Chief Rabbi of Israel who was renowned for his mystically tinged love of Israel and the Jewish people. Rabbi Zvi Yehuda inherited his father's love of Israel but unwittingly transformed it into a form of extreme nationalism. As a consequence, some of his followers not only believe that we live in the messianic era; they have even been encouraged to believe that the Almighty has given them clear instructions about what He requires from us in the political domain. This, in turn, has led to a distortion of authentic Judaism into extremist Jewish religious nationalism.

Regarding themselves as the Almighty's soldiers on earth, some of these nationalists have concluded that major issues affecting life and death, national security, and even the very existence of Israel, are beyond rational or pragmatic discussion or consideration. They are convinced that their particular interpretation of both Halakhah and Jewish history is infallible, and that no other authentic interpretations are conceivable. They not only insist that one may not question their right to expound their theory in relation to the future of the disputed territories, they also claim the right to act on these theories on their own, even if this implicates all of Israel and world Jewry.

Most traditional Jews regard the idea of *Eretz Yisrael hashlemah* - the Land of Israel in its totality - as something close to their hearts. It attracts religious Jews in a way that some non-observant Jews would find difficult to comprehend.

Yet it is a terrible distortion of authentic Judaism to claim that the determination of this issue is beyond the scope of the democratically elected government and the people of Israel, on the basis that any concession in ceding land is contrary to Halakhah under **any** circumstances.

The result of such a viewpoint could lead to a dangerous situation - I say 'could' because I believe that, for the present, Israel **should** retain the territories unless the repercussions of the Gulf War or the implementation of America's "new Order" in the Middle East dramatically change the position. There is no basis for making any concessions as long as Israel does not have partners on the Arab side with whom to negotiate and when she remains the only country in the world still in a state of war with all but one of her neighbours.

Yet, ultimately the decision on whether or not to cede rocks and sand, or even areas inhabited overwhelmingly by Arabs, must not be subject to a veto by those who claim that this issue has been clearly determined by Halakhah. Such a situation could lead to a terrible cost in Jewish lives. It could even present a mortal danger to the very existence of Israel.

To insist that Halakhah has a clear position on such issues and must be upheld under all circumstances is extremist chauvinism and hence intolerable. Such a stance threatens democracy in Israel and jeopardises the very basis for co-existence between torah and State. Halakhah, while not open to an infinite number of interpretations, is not necessarily limited at all times to one single decision - as the voluminous codes and responsa literature of the Halakhah exemplifies. Moreover, the halakhot regarding Israel as an independent state are in their infancy when compared to the centuries over which laws regarding kosher food or usury or Sabbath regulations have evolved. At such a time it is thus morally and halakhically irresponsible for national zealots to act as if they and they alone have a monopoly on what is halakhically right and proper and to ignore the vast implications of their actions in relation to the potential life and death of millions of other Jews.

THE ABUSE OF HALAKHAH FOR POLITICAL ENDS

The *Gedolei Hador,* the rabbis regarded by *haredim* as their spiritual mentors, are also opposed to the religious nationalism of Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook. They were even more opposed to his revered father, Chief Rabbi Abraham Isaac Hacohen Kook. When some of them also decide to operate as political directors and strive to impose halakhic vetoes on political issues that may affect the future physical existence of Israel, then religious Jews must vigorously dissociate themselves from such attitudes.

It is perhaps pertinent to point out that as far as *haredim* are concerned the so-called halakhic demand not to cede an inch of territory is of relatively recent origin. Until recently the *haredi Agudah* party maintained a very dovish policy on territorial concessions which they then related to *pikuach nefesh* - the saving of human life. It was only when their relationship with *Likud* warmed that they also adopted halakhic vetoes against territorial concessions.

Rabbi Schach of the *Degel Hatorah* Party is willing to cede land to Arabs in exchange for peace and remains bitterly opposed to the Lubavitcher Rebbe and other religious nationalists who are unwilling to contemplate the return of territories under any circumstances. The Sephardi *haredi* Party *Shas* is divided over the issue, the leaders tending to be dovish but under pressure from a hawkish constituency.

When one is critical of religious nationalists one must make distinctions between the various groupings. When some supporters[27] of *Gush Emunim* living in Judea and Samaria demand that nothing be ceded and cite Halakhah to justify their case, we must at least respect them as people who are willing to lay down their lives, and those of their children, by their advocacy of what they sincerely believe to be divine will and Jewish

27. I say "some supporters" because I would certainly not classify as extremists the overwhelming majority of Gush *Emunim* supporters or settlers in the disputed territories. On the contrary, many of them today undoubtedly represent the best and most idealistic elements in Israel.

destiny. They are a group whose adherents, by personal example, have dedicated their lives to the Jewish State at a time when many others have become discouraged and disheartened by the tremendous burdens Israel imposes on its citizens.

But when rabbis in Jerusalem who do not permit their children or their yeshivah students to serve in the Israel Defence Force express views on security and military strategy, such attitudes are totally unacceptable.

Indeed, when rabbis living in America whose children have not even settled in Israel tell Israeli parents, whose children could be sacrificed in defence of the Jewish State, that Halakhah denies **them** the right if necessary to cede land in the process of achieving **a genuine** peace settlement, that represents a *chillul hashem,* a profanation of God's name.

As a layman, I may be accused of intruding on halakhic matters beyond my competence or meddling in matters which fall within the exclusive jurisdiction of the rabbinate. But we are involved here with the complexities of *pikuach nefesh,* the saving of life itself, not merely for one person, but as it affects the possible survival of the Jewish State.

I do not wish to be misunderstood. My argument is not with those in *Gush Emunim* and others who support the concept of *Eretz Yisrael hashlemah.* But I object to invoking an halakhic imperative for **any** political issue. Such behaviour threatens the essence of the Jewish people. It smacks *of* false messianism, which has had such tragic consequences for the Jewish people on previous occasions when we mistakenly believed in what we were told were iron clad guarantees from the Almighty.

To illustrate the point: was Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai breaching Halakhah when he tried to accommodate the might of the Roman Empire in order to save the Jewish people? Or alternatively, was Rabbi Akiva acting against Halakhah when he supported the Bar Kokhba revolt which failed and which brought about the defeat of the Jewish people in their land?

Of course not. Both Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai and Rabbi Akiva acted in accordance with their judgement of situations that confronted them. The point is that Jewish religious views and sacred texts can be employed to sanction many attitudes, but not to transform those attitudes into rigid Halakhah.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik clearly stated in relation to *pikuach nefesh* that when a person is sick he or she must seek a doctor, not a rabbi. In an era of ballistic missiles, poison gas and the threat of a nuclear holocaust, Israelis weighing up the life and death issues facing them as a nation must take guidance not from rabbis but from political and military experts. Ultimately they must make their own decisions **after reviewing the facts presented to them** and **not** on the basis of halakhic decrees from *Gedolei Hador* or other rabbis.

It is surely ludicrous to suggest that rabbis should use Halakhah, open to a variety of interpretations, to exercise a veto over military and political experts who are themselves obliged to consider *pikuach nefesh* for the nation. This form of religious fanaticism is doubly dangerous. It knows no limits and has serious repercussions in other areas of Jewish life. Let us not mince words. Once a person claims that he **knows** that God has personally instructed him to follow a particular path, those who oppose him can only be dubbed *son'ei Yisrael* - literally, enemies of the People of Israel. The next logical step is that the latters' existence becomes an affront to the Almighty, leading to the conclusion that they are not really *bnei adam,* human beings, and therefore do not have to be treated as such.

That is the basis upon which the *machteret* of the 1980s, the so-called Jewish 'underground' in Israel, justified the dreadful acts it perpetrated in Cod's name. It led to idealistic young men and women from the best and finest homes in Israel, some of them from Bnei Akiva backgrounds, participating in the premeditated murder of innocent human beings.

That, too, is why Rabbi Moshe Levinger displayed no remorse after having recently killed an Arab. That is why some of his followers treated him like a hero before and after he served a prison sentence for manslaughter. And that is why some extremists even make analogies between Arabs and the biblical tribe of Amalek and from this reach frightening conclusions that are utterly inconsistent with the whole tenor of traditional Jewish ethics.

The worst of such behaviour occurs when people are genuinely convinced that such violence against innocents is being undertaken *leshem shamayim,* 'for the sake of Heaven'. When well-meaning people believe that they can eschew normal civilised conduct and ignore the rule of law for what they arrogantly believe is a 'higher law', revealed only to them, we are on the brink of evil and chaos.

This descent into extremism has also contributed to a virtual collapse of the bridges built up over the years with so much loving care by idealistic religious moderates. Religious Zionists had succeeded in creating conditions in which religious and non-religious Jews in Israel did work harmoniously side by side. Their attitude was one of *keruv rechokim* - bringing Jews closer to torah by example, not by pressure, and not by confrontations.

Just two decades ago, in 1967, the religious Zionist elements were widely regarded by non-religious Jews as symbolising the elite idealists of the Jewish people. So it is sad that today, as never before during the past half-century, we face a situation in which religious Jews and their rabbis are, by and large, isolated from the mainstream majority.

THE NEED FOR MODERATION

All these religious and religious nationalist excesses are a result of a breakdown in responsible moderate religious leadership.

It has even had a snowballing effect. Today the inevitable by-product of an insidious process of pressure from extremists has been an inclination by most Orthodox rabbis to avoid assuming moderate positions. There is a corresponding tendency to adopt a simplistic perception of a Jewish world in which everything is black and white, good and bad. Moderation in a sense becomes a dirty word.

Rabbi Norman Lamm pleads against this trend:

> Moderation should by no means be considered a 'change' or 'innovation'; moderation is, if anything, more mainstream than extremism. But in today's environment, true moderation appears as an aberration or. worse, a manifestation of spinelessness, a lack of commitment. And that is precisely what moderation is not. It is the result neither of guile nor of indifference nor of prudence; it is a matter of sacred principle. Moderation must not be understood as the mindless application of an arithmetic average or mean to any and all problems. It is the expression of an earnest, sober and intelligent assessment of each situation, bearing in mind two things: the need to consider the realities of any particular situation as well as general abstract theories or principles; and the awareness of the complexities of life, the 'stubborn and irreducible' facts of existence, as William James called them, which refuse to yield to simplistic or single-minded solutions. Moderation issues from a broad *Weltanschauung* or world view rather than from tunnel vision. [28]

28. Norman Lamm, 'Some Comments on Centrist Orthodoxy,' *Tradition,* Fall, 1986, p. 6.

Maimonides also maintained that the path of moderation, not compromise, was *haderekh hayesharah,* the correct path. Today, all too frequently, moderation or 'the middle way' is described in some yeshivot as the way of a *chamor,* a donkey.

In the debased world-view of the extremist, life can be very simplistic. Jews who eat only *glatt* kosher must be 'good Jews'. Those who do not observe ritual *mitzvot are* dismissed as 'bad Jews.'

These distinctions can only be made by those who take it upon themselves to presume to **know** how the Almighty, in His infinite wisdom, categorises good Jews and bad Jews.

But is life really so simple? For example, would those Jews who identify with religious Zionism really feel comfortable at being associated with a Satmar Hasid who claims to be a *shomer mitzvot* but who insists that Israel is a Nazi state? Or would they feel happier associating with a secular Jew who is an *ohev Yisrael,* who loves all Jews and is prepared to fight to defend them?

The high point of intolerance is when our people are branded good or bad Jews. And it has reached quite frightening proportions. Many rabbis are terrified *of* being smeared and so, sadly, they remain silent even when they know wrongs are committed. It is a sad truism that too many moderate Orthodox rabbis have lost confidence in themselves and have surrendered leadership to the more dogmatic and determined right wing.

Just imagine Abraham today making his plea to the Almighty on behalf of Sodom and Gemorrah. There is every probability that the *Gedolei Hador,* the great rabbinical leaders, would excommunicate him and many religious leaders throughout the world would denounce his voice as that of Satan.

It is sometimes said that the only lesson we learn from history is that we do **not** learn from history. If Orthodox rabbis who are opposed to extremism fail to assert the importance of moderation; if they fail to emphasise the imperative of unity over division; and if, by default, they allow the *kana'im,*

the zealots, to split the Jewish people, then the disunity and enmity which led to the loss of Jewish independence in the time of the Second Temple could threaten us again.

It is somewhat unfashionable in the increasingly upbeat mood of modern Jewish life for those within Orthodoxy to sound such an apocalyptic warning. Sadly, it has become quite fashionable outside Orthodoxy to fear it may come true.

President Chaim Herzog was correct when he recently warned that **internal** religious divisions present a greater danger to Israel and the Jewish people than any threat from **outside.**

Anti-Semitism has always threatened the wellbeing and the physical existence of the diaspora. Throughout the ages countless Jews have also been lost to the Jewish people as a consequence of the ravages of assimilation and intermarriage, even though the threat has never been as great as it is today with the horrifying internal haemorrhage the diaspora is undergoing.

In this context the Orthodox revival is a profoundly important element in the struggle to stem the tide of acculturation. It has all the potential to bring about a renaissance in Jewish life.

But if the trend towards extremism amongst Orthodox leaders - in particular rabbis - is not going to be stemmed we should tremble for the future of the Jewish people.

For the reality remains that Orthodox Judaism cannot survive as a mere enclave without a bridge or level of communication to the Jewish masses.

And the Jewish people could suffer a catastrophic and possibly mortal blow if the current trends towards polarisation in Israel becomes institutionalised and two separate Jewish identities evolve.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

The solution to these burning problems depends primarily on the quality of our spiritual leaders.

- We desperately need a breed of enlightened Orthodox rabbis who are *yir'ei shamayim* - God fearing Jews - **and** who are willing to stand up and be counted, and if necessary condemn the growing extremism and bigotry which has permeated sections of the yeshivah world and alienated many Jews from Judaism. In other words, we need rabbis with courage to resist the 'halakhic blackmail' so frequently employed by their extremist colleagues.

- We need rabbis who are willing to denounce behaviour which is incompatible with Jewish ethics and morality. We need rabbis who will revive the ethical teaching of Rabbi Israel Salanter or the Chafetz Chayyim and who will not rely exclusively on ritual observance as the criterion for being a 'good Jew'.

- We need *gedolei torah* and, generally, rabbis who recognise the importance of moderation without compromising the observance of *mitzvot* or commitment to a life of faith; rabbis who will have the courage to proclaim publicly that within the framework of Halakhah there is scope for different interpretations; rabbis who will stand up and repudiate the zealots - those who wish to return to the ghettos and also those who believe that in respect to the future of Judea and Samaria, the Almighty has authorised them to act on His behalf even if this means acting in a manner that the majority of Israelis believe would endanger the State.

- We need rabbis who have the courage to stand up and fight against those who, under the banner of Halakhah, fight against the tradition of Torah and Reason. To quote Rabbi Norman Lamm once again:

  > *Klal Yisrael* desperately yearns for leadership from enlightened committed rabbis who have the courage to be *yir'ei shamayim begaluy-* observant Jews involved in the world at large - as well as *beseter-* inside the religious framework.

- We need rabbis who combine intellectual openness with a commitment to *torah min hashamayim* - the divine authority of the torah. We need rabbis with the sensitivity and humanity to strive to harmonize the problem of the modern Jew and the State of Israel in conformity with Halakhah.

- We need rabbis who realise that the entire people of Israel is not comprised of observant Jews alone, but that the non-observant Jewish masses are also part of the people whom God has chosen.[29] Our rabbis must regard themselves as spiritual leaders for all Jews, and not merely for those who observe the ritual *mitzvot.* They must understand that Judaism includes the Covenant of Abraham as well as the Covenant of Sinai, both of which relate to the common fate and destiny of the entire Jewish people.

- We need rabbis who acknowledge that *ahavat torah* and *ahavat Yisrael* are inseparable and who recognise their obligation to act as a bridge between the committed minority and the uncommitted majority who are in danger of losing their identity as Jews. They must convey the need for *keruv rechokim,* bringing all Jews closer to the torah. To do this our rabbis must be sensitive to human suffering and should be righteous without exuding an aura of religious superiority or self-righteousness.

Admittedly, a call for enlightened rabbis to emerge and forestall the dangerous trends I have been discussing may sound like a somewhat Utopian fantasy.

But all is not exclusively dependent on the rabbis. After all, as well as being leaders, rabbis were often also influenced by trends amongst observant Jewish laymen. And as history can testify, rabbis who emerged as great leaders did so because they found a willing resonance within the Jewish lay community which was seeking their guidance and direction.[30]

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29. A well known Talmudic dictum states: *"Af-al-pi shechata, Yisrael hu.* [Even if a Jew transgresses he remains a Jew.] *Sanhedrin* 44(a).

30. *Vide* Samuel Heilman, *op cit.,* Vol. 2, p. 26.

It is therefore a challenge to all enlightened and moderate Orthodox laymen to ensure that they obtain the rabbis they deserve. Modern Orthodox Jews must ensure that young men with the necessary levels of Jewish and secular education are encouraged to enter the Rabbinate. Rabbis should know that they will receive remuneration commensurate with their abilities and that they will not be obliged to compete with yeshivah graduates possessing no secular education who are frequently willing to accept positions at grossly underpaid salaries.

Most yeshivot, *kollelim,* and other traditional religious institutions are, and will continue in the future to be generously supported by Modern Orthodox laymen. There is, moreover, absolutely no suggestion that *haredi* institutions *per se* should be boycotted. Yet one of the most crucial prerequisites for the survival of Modern Orthodoxy is the need for its laymen to establish their priorities and direct their financial resources towards the maintenance and growth of educational institutions which will produce rabbinical graduates capable of promoting a Modern Orthodox stream of Judaism. In other words, special support - both financial and moral - will have to be channelled as a matter of priority towards schools, yeshivot and universities which are committed to *torah umadda,* recognise the central role which the State of Israel occupies in Jewish life, and promote a vision of love which embraces the Jewish people in its entirety and which fosters maximum communication and support amongst *Klal Yisrael.*

But it is in Israel itself that Modern Orthodoxy faces its greatest and most immediate challenge because the vast number of moderate religious Israelis seemingly have no effective representation. Unless they make their presence felt and find appropriate vehicles to express their views instead of merely privately bemoaning the deplorable state of affairs, all the ingredients exist for a major disaster.

The danger is that the rabbinical and religious spokesmen in Israel will become extensions of the most extreme and frequently primitive *haredim* or nationalist zealots, neither of whom can provide bridges to link up with the majority of Israelis or Jews in the diaspora.

In turn, our children and grandchildren will be in danger of dividing themselves into two separate communities, either rejecting traditional Judaism altogether or adopting a form of religious zealotry which denies

the relevance of the world in which they live and encourages them to isolate themselves in self-created ghettos.

In summary, moderate Orthodox Jewish laymen in Israel and in the diaspora must ensure that their views are heard and that the religious representatives they appoint reflect their approach. Lay leaders must also be willing to provide public support for moderate rabbinical leaders of broad vision so that they are encouraged to stand up and be counted in the face of extremist pressures.

This is especially crucial for Israel during these dramatic times when former Soviet Jews will, in all probability, soon become the country's largest group. The overwhelming majority will be illiterate in Jewish terms - with no Jewish tradition upon which to rely. They need spiritual guidance from enlightened rabbis or they could become Hebrew-speaking Israelis, devoid of any link with traditional Judaism. This would be a tragedy for Israel and *Klal Yisrael.*

These, and the other burning problems addressed in this monograph, highlight the fact that the religious issue today undoubtedly represents the most crucial challenge confronting the Jewish people.

Additional copies of this publication may be obtained from any office of the World Jewish Congress or directly from:

World Jewish Congress

501 Madison Avenue - 17th Floor

New York N.Y. 10022

Phone: 212 755 5770 Fax: 212 755 5883

or

Australian Institute of Jewish Affairs

G.P.O. Box 5402CC

Melbourne Victoria 3001 AUSTRALIA

Phone: 61 3 828 8570 Fax: 61 3 828 8584

Isi Leibler, A.O., C.B.E. is Co-Chairman of the World Jewish Congress Governing Board and Chairman of the Australian Institute of Jewish Affairs.

Mr. Leibler is acknowledged as one of the founders of the international protest movement on behalf of Soviet Jews and, has served three terms as President of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry.

He is a prolific writer on matters of Jewish concern. His work has been published in journals and in the international media, and he has published books on Soviet Jewry and Israel.