

**MURDERERS, NAZIS, TRAITORS, WISE MEN AND NOISE:
Reflections on the Rabin Assassination
Rabbi Shalom Carmy**

Not very long ago, in the days when Prime Minister Rabin z"l regularly demonized American Orthodox *olim*, he was taken to task by an American Orthodox Rabbi. The Rabbi confessed that his colleagues occasionally spoke of Rabin and his government in language intemperate, irresponsible and envenomed. But that was no justification for Rabin to reciprocate in kind. For they were merely rabbis, while he was a world class statesman, who ought to set himself a higher standard.

Good diplomacy can make for flawed *hashkafa*. Mr. Rabin, with all due respect, was a veteran politician. His discourse, and that of his associates, was not always above the campaigner's vernacular of half-truth, bombast and innuendo, the red meat of "us against them" that nourishes the cheers of the adoring crowd. Of *talmidei hakhamim*, however, we expect something different. The words of Torah must be spoken with honesty, dignity and humility. The pious Jew must conduct himself in a manner that engenders respect for Torah. If, God forbid, he does the opposite, he desecrates the Name of God.

A significant segment of the Orthodox community liked to express its opposition to the security policy of Mr. Rabin's government by routinely castigating its ministers as murderers, Nazis and traitors. (A trip to the incinerator uncovers the latest issue of a popular tabloid and the predictable headline: They Were Traitors from the Start.) If we are to believe the crescendo of accusations, Mr. Rabin's malice and/or obtuseness were of such magnitude that his schemes worked inexorably toward "national suicide." He was incessantly depicted as a *rodef* who menaced the lives of Jews, because, due to his abysmal ignorance and arrogance, he came to positions on Israeli security that challenged the certitudes of various journalists and functionaries associated with the Orthodox establishment, the basis for whose certitude was not always obvious to the naked eye. The experts whose authority they invoked did not seem to be more knowledgeable, more experienced, more canny, or more successful than Rabin and his crew, yet their pronouncements were found faultless, while the elected government could only pile error upon error.

What disease of the spirit could begin to explain Rabin's infinite perfidy? It couldn't be his estrangement from *Torah uMitzvot*, since the politically correct leaders of the Likud were, for the most part, equally removed from observance. There were, in fact, *talmidei hakhamim* who disagreed with this assessment of Rabin's policy. But they, too, were branded murderers, reviled, cursed and outshouted. The journalists and teachers and the average *baalei bayit* shouted to their hearts' content, and when, having bullied everyone else into silence, they communed with the echoes of their own invective, that was time to renew the effort and shout a little louder.

But screaming at the top of one's lungs will scarcely deter murderers, Nazis and traitors, nor will threat of the ballot box. Is not a more decisive punishment in order? For most big talkers words are primarily a noise that makes for self-importance. The majority of shouters do not become shooters. If anything, the stunned hush that follows the final act of the tragedy is most suitable for a measured amnesia into which the inveigher awakes with no recollection of his

actions: he has done nothing; he is responsible for nothing. Yet there is a literal-minded minority that does not care to distinguish the pageantry of hate from the trumpet call of truth. Such individuals draw the line of inference tight. They know one thing: for murderers, Nazis and traitors the only remedy is death...

And so the words became demands, and then became commands. Violent deeds proliferated, while too many of us pretended not to see. Amid the halakhic hemming and hawing (whether it is indeed permissible to murder someone who disagrees with your politics, or should the *mahmir* gallantly refrain) too few of us cried out "Gevalt, enough! *Devar HaShem* is not your political plaything!" Therefore we wander in the regret-filled land of the *egla arufa*, as each of us asks if we have the right to say that "our hands have not shed this blood, and our eyes did not see." The greater the influence, the louder the voice, the harder the answer.

II

Knowing the gravity of one's offense is, according to Rabbenu Yonah, an ingredient of repentance. Another component in the work of *teshuva*, according to *Halakha*, is the recognition that the sin wasn't worth it. Are we better off now that Rabin has been murdered? Can religious Zionism continue to make substantial moral and political claims on a government and on a society that has reason to doubt the firmness of our commitment to *lo tirtzah* as a principle of civilized discourse? The act of murder, and the perception that too many of the teachers who set the tone in our community condone, or do not strongly object to, the intimidation or liquidation of political opponents, suggests frightening questions about our educational institutions. Precisely what are we conveying, in addition to (or in place of?) the *Ketzot* and the *Shaagat Aryeh*?

This act of murder adds new zest to the indiscriminate cultivation of hatred (*sinat hinnam*), providing the religious Zionist with the opportunity to play both homicidal maniac and scapegoat. R. Kook diagnosed "that hatred of mankind... characteristic of the evil passion which does its work under the banner of nationalism" and knew that this hatred "eventually becomes an inner curse; the hatred of brothers increases and destroys all national weal." What he foresaw ninety years ago is coming true before our horrified eyes. How much farther must we travel along the trajectory of the one sin that, above all others, led to the destruction of the Second *Bet haMikdash*? Is that what we truly want?

III

Repentance weaves together the past and the future, disease tutoring cure, therapy redeeming diagnosis. Though we still tremble with the initial horror and shame of the tragedy, it is perhaps not too early to reflect on the noble and exciting dimension of *teshuva* devoted to the resolve for the future. Two thoughts, among the many that have crossed my mind this week.

Regarding our duties as representatives of Torah, whether in Israel or in America: We have squandered many opportunities to present Torah in a manner that commands respect and fosters commitment. We must now, and in the foreseeable future, labor under unpropitious conditions: the desecration of God's Name intrudes a thick layer of revulsion, skepticism and suspicion. If we are to penetrate this fresh resistance on the part of others, we must ruthlessly pare away

the causes of interference on our side: the disdain for what R. Kook called "natural morality" (*musar tiv'i*) that has made healthy moral intuitions an object of distrust and contempt within our camp; the communal self-centeredness that so easily hardens into a callous disregard of the humanity of people who differ or dare to disagree with us; the intellectual timidity and fear of self-examination that render us pitiful to ourselves and blind to others. All these deficiencies are indulgences we cannot afford. Nor can we any longer afford to submit uncritically to the mindless militant trash self-important persons shout. We must learn to say no to moral rubbish, no matter how assured the orator's voice or how impressive the beard.

"The words of the wise are heard in quiet (*be-nahat nishma'im*) more than the shouting of him who governs over the fools (*Kohelet 9:17*)."
 Much has been said, in the past few days, about the evil of vicious language, and my own remarks have not been kind to adherents of the loudmouth school of Jewish philosophy. Yet the *pasuk* is more than disapproval of the bellowing bully and his audience of dunces; it is also a praise of the wise. Note carefully: the words of the wise are not only spoken in quiet; they are heard in quiet. It is possible to speak quietly, to modulate one's voice, at least for a time, by a simple application of will. To hear in quiet requires a more radical reordering of one's attention; it is less the product of sheer will power than the fruit of a sustained process of education.

The shouter rules not only because he intimidates the competition, but also because his listeners have learned to take comfort in the meaningless noise and overheated rhetoric, in all that helps us to gaze at the mirror enchanted by the view, or look at our reflection and see nothing. The quiet listener has summoned up the courage to defy the shouter, but he has also discovered the power to overcome the attraction of the shouter's message.

Onkelos, in translating the phrase *nefesh hayya* as *ruah memallela*, points to the central place of language in determining man's purpose in the world. It is the power to think, to reflect, to criticize oneself and one's society, to understand oneself, to speak to others and to listen. The blustering bully, with his cult of amnesia and irresponsibility, contaminates the value of words. He erodes his own standing as a unique person, created in the image of his Maker, long before he succeeds in dehumanizing the target of his thoughtlessness. If philosophy has been described as an activity that condemns us to mean what we say, then many of our functionaries, teachers and other communal ornaments, have strenuously avoided it. It is our place, as *benei Torah* who are privileged to have at our disposal the most sophisticated tools of self-examination, to remind them, and ourselves, that words have meaning not only in the liberal arts, but in real life as well.

May God, who consoles the bereaved and forgives the penitent, grant us the power and the integrity to extract light from our present darkness. May all the house of Jacob dwell together in fraternity and true peace, to do the will of *Avinu she-ba-shamayim*, in whose light we walk.

[Appeared originally in the *Yeshiva College Commentator*, November 1995.]