Who Killed Yitzchak Rabin?[1]

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The title is blunt and provocative but this is the question directed to me at a conference of the Association of Israel Studies held in Atlanta in June 1997. It was asked rhetorically. I had finished delivering a paper on the kulturekampf in Israel. A member of the audience sought to embarrass me with the question, perhaps because I was introduced as a member of the Bar-Ilan faculty or perhaps because he assumed I was Orthodox. The answer that my interlocutor took for granted was that the "the religious" or perhaps "religious-Zionists" had killed Rabin. Indeed, as far as he was concerned, the answer was so obvious that it was sufficient, he believed, to pose the question in order to undermine a point he mistakenly thought I was making. I responded by saying: "I assume you don't expect me to answer Yigal Amir. I don't know what answer you expect. It wasn't me". In a later session, an Israeli scholar who analyzes, in addition to her other work, Israeli public opinion surveys on issues of peace and war, opened her presentation by noting that whereas I claimed I couldn't answer the question "who killed Yitzchak Rabin?", she was able to do so. She pointed

to the fact that prior to the Rabin assassination, a disproportionate number of Israeli Jews who described themselves as "religious" condoned demonstrations that were not only illegal but also violent. While she never explicitly stated that it was the religious who killed Rabin, the implications were clear. She posed the question "who killed Rabin?" a number of times during her presentation and each time announced that the answer was provided by the survey results she had cited. As I recall, the proportion of religious Jews who countenanced illegal and violent demonstrations hovered around the fifty percent mark and nothing in the questionnaire had asked respondents if they condoned inflicting physical injury much less murdering someone. Nonetheless, the speaker insisted that based upon her analyses, we now all knew who killed Rabin.

There was nothing new in these insinuations. In the weeks immediately following the Rabin assassination, many politicians, journalists and academics blamed religious Jews in general, religious-Zionists and Bar-Ilan University in particular for the assassination. In many cases those who made the charges added some kind of caveat. Not all the religious were guilty, they readily admitted. Some prominent religious Jews known for their left wing proclivities were even mentioned by name and explicitly excluded. But this is really irrelevant because such

individuals were indeed a tiny minority of the religious population. Their presence, even at the peace demonstration on the night Rabin was murdered, does not by itself clear the camp of religious-Zionists of the charge of guilt any more than the fact that some Germans did help Jews during the Holocaust clear the German people of their guilt. If it is fair to hold the religious or the national religious guilty of the Rabin assassination, then in one way or another, as I shall show, all of them are probably guilty. To return to my main point, among an important segment of the Israeli intellectual and cultural elite, the inclination was and still is to blame Rabin's murder, directly or indirectly on the religious sector of the population. For example, Naomi Riftin, chairperson of Mapam's Central Committee, in an article headlined "My Hands Did Not Shed This Blood,"[2] contrasted her camp which educates its youth toward pluralism, democracy, open-mindedness, and intellectual curiosity, to the other camp which educates "its young people in an alien spirit, on fanatical racist fundamentalist slogans removed from the democratic process".[3] Referring to the assassin Yigal Amir, the author noted that "he is not a black sheep" but the product of this other culture, "nurtured by the halacha, and by rabbis and teachers in the community, at the yeshiva and at Bar Ilan University."[4]

Some of those who made accusations concerning the identity of the guilty parties or the guilty sector didn't specify "religious" or "religious-Zionists." In some respects this makes these charges even more invidious because they can not be answered. Take for example the bumper sticker which reads, "we will not forget and we will not forgive". The bumper sticker doesn't mention whom the bearer will not forgive but the implication, I believe, is clear. It refers to the religious in general and religious-Zionists in particular. And if not all religious-Zionists, then at least to all the West Bank settlers. Otherwise, the bumper sticker is pointless. Of course, one cannot know with certainty whom the car owners who display these stickers have in mind. I interpret it to mean anyone wearing a knitted kipah including myself. But how can I protest since the specific charge is never made. Indeed, the very act of protest points the finger at me. "The hat burns on the head of the thief" is a popular Hebrew expression. By implication, one might say, "if you Liebman think that it is you who is charged with murdering Rabin, ask yourself what you have done to invite such charges".

In general, I believe, it is important to distinguish the charge that religious circles shared complicity if in the murder of Yitzchak Rabin (whether the guilty parties are or are not

named explicitly), from the charge that whereas all Israeli Jews were in some way responsible, the religious sector, or the national-religious sector or the right wing shared a greater measure responsibility. I'm not even certain I would agree with that argument but it would, in my opinion, bear a greater measure of credibility. Were I presenting such an argument I would suggest the following.

First, the right wing in general and the national-religious right in particular bears special culpability stemming from the peculiarity of its ideology. Assuming the assassin or those who plot an assassination are rational, then murdering a democratically elected leader would seem to be a futile method of changing policy. The new replacement will presumably carry out the same policies as his predecessor. In this regard, however, we must distinguish between perceptions of the left and the right, especially between the secular left and the nationalist religious right. Nationalists in general and nationalist religious in particular believe that what they articulate is what the population at large knows to be true or what the masses feel in their heart to be true. The agreements which the Rabin government adopted, agreements which surrendered

part of the Holy Land to foreigners, was, in the eyes of the religious right, an agreement which "the Jewish people" rejected. The election of 1992, the Oslo agreements and the peace process posed an ideological problem for the nationalist right and a theological problem for the religious-nationalists. The surrender of holy territory, if endorsed by a majority of Jews, would suggest that the Jewish people had betrayed the Land of Israel. Nothing in the ideology-theology of religious-Zionism allowed for such a betrayal. On the contrary, it was the opposite of everything it understood as having taken place since the War of 1967 and especially since the electoral victory of the right in 1977 and everything its leaders predicted would happen. Hence, in the eyes of the religious-nationalists, those Jewish leaders who were prepared to surrender territory could not possibly be representative of the masses. And there was a basis for this belief. A majority of votes in the 1992 election, and certainly a majority of Jewish votes went to the parties of the right. The parties of the left were able to form a narrow coalition government because right wing votes had been "wasted" on parties that never received the minimum number of votes. It is questionable if a majority of Israeli Jews continued to approve the Oslo agreements once the terrorist acts took place, although they may have done so at the time they were signed. On

one occassion the Rabin government secured a Knesset majority for its peace program by outright bribery. Oslo II was approved by a 61 to 59 vote; those who were bribed to support the Government in the earlier vote continued their support for Oslo II. One shudders to think of the media reaction had a right wing government won an important legislative victory in this manner. But as far as the right wing in general and the religious right in particular were concerned, even if a legitimate majority of the Knesset had approved all the peace agreements, it was not by virtue of a majority of Jewish representatives. If Israel is a Jewish state then, in the eyes of the national-religious, all that counts is how the Jewish people or Jewish members of the Knesset vote. Hence, one might argue that assassination makes sense to the nationalists, religious-nationalists in particular, because of their conviction that the nation is with them but it has simply been misled (betrayed?) by the policies of its leaders. Assassinating the leader, therefore, might achieve one's goals. By contrast, the left wing in general and the Israeli left in particular has, for good reason, a less sanguine view of its support within the general population. It would be pointless for them to assassinate a political leader who would only be replaced by someone carrying out the same policies. It follows that since followers of the right are more prone to

carry out assassinations, at least in democratic societies, responsible leaders within the right ought to be cognizant of the danger.

The point I have made is arguable. When I offered it publicly, immediately following the assassination, it was challenged by scholars such as Ehud Sprinzak who are no less knowledgeable than I in the intricacies of right wing thought. Furthermore, even if I am correct, it is still a far cry from charging the right wing or the religious right with responsibility much less guilt for murder.

The second argument which might be offered and which I find quite credible is that religious education, by its very nature, carries consequences inimicable to a democratic culture. It doesn't necessarily promote a fanatical spirit, as Naomi Riftin charges, but it does promote an aura of certitude and discourages doubt. Religious education encourages the moralizing of political issues and the consequent dichotomization of political positions into evil versus righteous. This outlook can lead to political extremism and incline one to favor authoritarian leadership. Certitude, at least with regard to basic religious truths, and the tendency to moralize issues of ultimate concern is inherent in a religious outlook. Unless religious-Zionists find a way to temper the outcome of their

education they will produce citizens with attitudes that undermine democratic society.

Secular education has its own set of dilemmas. Secularism, other things being equal, encourages skepticism and irreverence toward all authority, the relativity of values and goals which center on self-fulfillment. This produces attitudes of nihilism and leads to forms of political disorder. Secularists also must be attentive to the negative consequences inherent in secular education for it too undermines society and the will to sacrifice our own needs for a greater purpose. For a society whose security is threatened from the outside, secular education can be disastrous.

But religion and secularism are not mirror images of one another. In practice many Israeli secularists, especially in academia, are quasi-religious in their secularism, but this is their failing, not a failing inherent in a secularist ideology. In its ideal-typical form, secularism nurtures an outlook of skepticism and the absence of certitude and is, therefore, open to recognition of its own limitations and the deleterious potential inherent in its ideology. Religion, in its ideal-typical form is not. Whereas both systems must deal with their problems for the sake of strengthening democratic culture, the onus falls most heavily on religious education. In this respect,

religious education bears at least partial responsibility for much though hardly all that is wrong in Israeli culture. But that is not the same as charging the religious with complicity in the Rabin assassination.

There is a third argument that one might make regarding the responsibility of the religious or the national-religious sector for the assassination. I think this argument too bears a strong measure of credibility though I will nevertheless argue that it is mistaken. The argument has a "soft" version and I "hard" version. I begin with the soft version.

If we assume that a climate of extremist rhetoric invites acts of assassination then virtually every Jew in Israel bears some responsibility, in one way or another, for the Rabin assassination. Almost all of us have all tolerated a climate of extremist rhetoric in the media, in the Knesset, in our own circles. The media is especially guilty because it publicizes those individuals who are most ready to employ extremist rhetoric. By indirection, therefore, it encourages such rhetoric. But even those who don't engage in such excess also share some of the guilt. We have turned our backs and closed our ears rather than made efforts to confront the extremists. I can testify to this in my own personal life. The rabbi of my synagogue, more so prior to the Rabin assassination somewhat

less so since then, exploits the synagogue pulpit to preach his extremist views. His speeches remind me of Muslim preachers in a Mosque inciting their listeners to take action against the Jews. I assume my rabbi is perhaps a touch more subtle than they, though I recall his charge that Arabs equal Amalek, an equation that invited the murder of Arabs, only one week before Baruch Goldstein massacred Moslem worshippers. I am reasonably certain, however, that he disapproved of what Goldstein had done. I doubt if he always understands the implications of what his own lips utter. I, in turn, tolerate his verbal excess in silence although following the Rabin assassination I informed one of the synagogue officers that I would publicly protest if the rabbi continued exploiting his pulpit as he had done in the past. As I noted, a slight improvement occurred following the assassination but had it not taken place, I doubt if I would have carried out my threat. I'm just not that type. It would have mortified my wife. Does this make me culpable? Do I share a responsibility in the Rabin assassination? My sin of omission certainly makes me guilty of tolerating a climate of extremist rhetoric. My responsibility is less, however, than that of Dan Margalit, the moderator of the program Popolitika which encourages Israeli extremists of all varieties to not only voice their opinions on national television but to do so in an aggressive and militant

manner, a style that by itself conveys a message of extremism and even violence. Margalit, of course, bears less responsibility than the rabbi of my synagogue, he in turn less responsibility than others, etc. etc. There are circles within circles of responsibility but I admit that religious Jews in general and the national-religious in particular are probably guiltier than many other circles of encouraging a climate of extremism. This inner circle of guilty not only includes the national religious; it includes some members of the Israeli left, members of the academy and popular journalists. It certainly isn't what Naomi Riftin means by her title "My Hands Have Not Shed this Blood".

As I indicated, despite the strong credibility of this argument, I think that it too is wrong. Before I explain, however, I want to present the "hard" version of this argument. It is found in Avishai Margalit's paper "How Shall We Remember the Rabin Assassination?" delivered to the 1996 Conference of the Rabin Center. According to Margalit:

> The Rabin assassination was not an assassination [whose understanding] can be reduced to the immediate assassin or assassins. The Rabin assassination, like the assassination of Walter Rathenau or Jean Jaures, was a statistical assassination. A system of

> condemnation and incitement and charges of treachery made by an entire camp marks the victim, and the attempt to kill him becomes a statistical question; who will be the one to do it. It isn't that every one that condemned or incited sought Rabin's murder. It is more than likely that the great majority of those who incited against Rabin really and truly did not want the assassination and didn't want the murderer. But the camp of the inciters created an infrastructure of soft drugs that paved the way for the core of hard drug users of the assassination.

Since Margalit, like others who offer this argument are political liberals they are trapped in the free speech dilemma. Their argument, after all, suggests that any rhetoric, really anything less than an academic argument, which accuses a political leader of critical errors which endanger the countries security, especially when accompanied by bad intentions, renders the accusers culpable, should someone sympathetic to their viewpoint murder the political leader. Such an argument, if widely accepted, would undermine freedom of speech. Margalit responds to this unstated argument in the following manner:

> Not all extreme rhetoric is an invitation to murder. A hundred years of Zionist politics, during which a

> steep escalation of rhetoric took place, were accompanied by very few political assassinations. And in comparison to almost all national movement, their number was negligible. But the activity of the Jewish underground and the murder by Goldstein were clear signals that something basic had changed. That a readiness for political assassination was now present.

Therefore:

> The identity of the murderer and the conspirators is not in dispute. The dispute is over the culpability of the camp out of which the conspirators emerged, and the narrowest reference group is the camp which calls itself the national religious camp.

I don't accept this argument. Furthermore, I believe it is counter-productive. Charges like the one of "statistical murder" serve the purposes of religious leaders. Since these leaders and their followers "know" that what Amir did was done independently of their reckless statements, charging them with complicity in the murder cleanses them from any sense of guilt concerning their statements.

My argument is that the activity of the Jewish underground, the murders committed by Baruch Goldstein and the extremist rhetoric which the leaders of the religious right condoned, is

only remotely connected to the assassination of Rabin. I begin with the last point.

Many leaders, rabbis and politicians of the national-religious camp did accuse Rabin of being a "traitor". A few used the term rodef. That fact that only a few used the term rodef doesn't excuse the remaining rabbis and religious politicians who refused to condemn those who used these terms. But I am less confident that these accusation, as horrendous as they are, is what led to the assassination.

Yigal Amir was driven by the same demons that drove others to formulate their opposition to Rabin's policies in extremist rhetoric. But it would appear from the testimony of Yigal Amir and his closest friends that his decision to assassinate Rabin including his first attempt to do so, preceded much of the "incitement" that took place during the mass demonstrations of the political right. Everything we have learned about Amir suggests that he was an extreme individualist acting without regard to what others said and deeply suspicious of rabbis in particular. "You cannot trust them" is how he referred to rabbis during the course of his interrogation.

Amir's suspicions of the rabbis is well founded. And this is critical to my argument that connecting Goldstein's murders or the activity of the Jewish underground with Amir's

assassination of Rabin is an oversimplification. There are tens if not hundreds of West Bank settlers, they tend to concentrate in certain settlements, who, under the proper circumstances, would indiscriminately murder Arabs. Thousands more would find excuses if not justification for such acts. But "Jew murdering Jew", in their world view, is a totally different matter. To overlook the distinction which many Jews, religious in particular, make between Jewish and Gentile blood, as horrendous as we may find the distinction, is to miss a major aspect of Rabin's assassination from the point of view of the religious sector in Israeli society.

The difference is illustrated by the response of a colleague of mine, at Bar-Ilan, a former activist in Tehiya who believes that the Oslo agreements are catastrophic for the future of Israel. He was among those who joined the procession to Rabin's grave on Har Herzl during the mourning period. I asked him why he went and he answered, "to demonstrate solidarity -- we are one people". "You mean", said I, "that mourning Rabin's death was a political act on your part, not an emotional act?". He looked at me strangely and responded, "A Jew killing a Jew?". Reflecting upon his response reminded me of a conversation with an extremist active in circles which resisted the withdrawal from Yamit. His solution, at the time, was to

urge his comrades to stage a situation which would lead to a settler being killed by an Israeli soldier. Such an incident, "a Jew killing a Jew", would be enough, he believed, to convince Begin to stop the withdrawal. The greatest tragedy the Yamit extremists could envisage was Jews killing other Jews. Begin, they believed, was like them. They may have been right. It is suggested in Begin's response to the massacre of Moslem refugees by the Falangist Christians in Sabra and Shatilla. He wondered why Jews were getting so excited by "goyim killing goyim", a point of view shared by a disproportionate number of religious Jews. The point is that "goyim killing goyim" is not an event to excite us, by implication "Jews killing Jews" is what should concern us the most.

Religious-Zionist leaders didn't search their souls following Rabin's assassination because they didn't believe they had done anything wrong nor do they think so today. One reason is that among all but a few, Rabin wasn't hated nor did religious-Zionists wish him dead. On the contrary, Rabin was admired. This is quite remarkable since, unlike Arik Sharon who is also admired, Rabin did so little to deliberately nurse that admiration. Nevertheless, he was not only admired but trusted in matters having to do with the security of Jews in general and the settlers in particular. The Oslo agreements aroused bitter

resentment. But the term "traitor", unlike the term rodef whose use was confined to the extremists, has a double meaning.

I don't believe that Peres was branded a traitor in religious-Zionist circles or would have been had he beenprime Minister. He was never branded a rodef yet significantly, Amir reported that he intended to murder Peres after he finished with Rabin. Rabin's betrayal in the eyes of the bulk of those who used this term, though not in Amir's mind, was not only a "betrayal of Eretz Yisrael" (a curious phrase which suggests how the land became reified in the eyes of the religious-Zionists), or a betrayal of the Jewish people, but a betrayal of his own values. Religious-Zionists are the mirror image of the crowd who gathered in the great Tel-Aviv square to demonstrate for peace on the night Rabin was assassinated. Avishai Margalit notes that this crowd was only able to embrace Rabin as one of their own on the very night he was murdered. The other side of the coin is that many religious-Zionists continued, almost to the end, to believe that in his heart Rabin shared their basic values. They would have been happy had he permitted them to embrace him.

The Rabin assassination could, in my opinion, serve as a unifying event in Israeli political culture if we all admit that, at least to some extent, we do share some basic values. I have no brief for those who distinguish Jewish from Arab blood

but the starting point is the sanctity of Jewish life and the goal to sanctify all life. Violence against person, verbal as well as physical, has yet to be excised from the political culture. The Rabin assassination, by challenging heretofore unexplicated boundaries, could have served to identify and strengthen these boundaries. Granted this is a minimal boundary but it is a necessary condition for further progress in transforming our political culture.

The Rabin Center has its work cut out for it in this regard. The Center will, in its various functions, present the story of Rabin. I hope that this will be, among other things, the story of the political maturation of a generation. It is more complex than the story of "from war to peace"; indeed as these words are written we seem far from achieving peace. Nevertheless, the story of Rabin should be told as the story of a generation which was filled with courage and determination but lacked political wisdom. It is the story of a generation which learned the limitations of violence although it may have yet to learn the promise of human understanding. The demonstrations against Rabin, the charges of rodef and traitor are part of that story. Indeed, they can serve a critical role in framing the nature of the struggle for wisdom and in confirming the lesson that progress enacts its own cost. But the story loses its point

if it is used as a wedge to divide us rather than a moral to enlighten us.

ENDNOTES

1. This is a revised version of a paper presented as a response to Avishai Margalit's paper at the March conference sponsored by the Rabin Center.

2. The article by Naomi Riftin appeared in Hebrew in HaDaf HaYarok (November 22, 1995) and was translated and reprinted in English in Kibbutz Trends, 21 (Spring, 1966), pp. 21-22.

3. Ibid., p. 21.

4. Ibid.