

COLUMBIA JEWISH NEWS

November 2000

"A Legacy From the Rabin Assassination?"

By Kenneth W. Stein

This month is the fifth anniversary of Yitzhak Rabin's assassination. What impact did his murder have upon Israeli society and political culture? Was the assassination a watershed in Israeli history? The recent Palestinian-Israeli violence destroyed the "Oslo Process", that part of the Rabin legacy which has argued that land west of the Jordan River should be ultimately shared, divided, or separated between Israeli and Palestinian nationalisms?

Since Rabin's assassination on November 5, 1995, the "Oslo Process" survived periodic bouts of violence and was supported, though less vigorously, by a Likud government. Prior to Rabin's assassination, an incendiary mix was cooking: anti-Rabin statements made by Likud political leaders, religious authority legitimization to oppose Rabin's political path, and a political discourse characterized by limitless use of inciteful language and symbols, including the characterization of Rabin as a Nazi.

Rabin's acknowledged assassin, Yigal Amir, zealously opposed Rabin's policy of handing over a portion of the land of Israel to the Palestinians. Amir and a significant minority of the Israeli public believed that no temporal leader, like Rabin, had a legitimate right to revise or reverse G-d's territorial promise to the Jewish people. "Greater Israel" was the ultimate value, and territorial compromise was treachery. Logically, therefore, Rabin was a threat to the Jewish people.

The political atmosphere surrounding Rabin's murder, as in earlier assassinations before the founding of Israel where Jews killed Jews (Lehi, Etzel, and Haganah carried out the majority of 73 political murders in the 1940s), was characterized by hostile cleavages in Jewish/Zionist society. Motivational causes for these and the Rabin murders were strikingly similar: the victim was considered a traitor, informer, or collaborator. With one exception in the earlier period, halacha was not used to justify political murder. Ultra-Orthodox religious figures, lay leaders, and academics in Israel and the United States, branded Rabin as a traitor; many respected authorities on halacha repeated from early 1995 that anyone perceived as a *rodef* should be killed. (A *rodef* is a person about to commit or facilitate the murder of a Jew, or put the life of

a Jew in jeopardy.)

Recent scholarship (Yoram Peri, The Assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, Stanford, 2000) unmistakably makes a solid case that Amir's religious and psychological background was shaped by the belief that Rabin and his government were traitors to the Jewish people. Before Rabin's assassination, the ultra-Orthodox journal HaShavua wrote that "vicious maniacs who run this government takes Jews as sheep to slaughter...Rabin is a traitor... the government is endangering the state."

Five years later, the legacy from Rabin's assassination remains unfinished. A handful of Jewish religious zealots still passionately disapprove of dividing the land of Israel, but as the recent violence suggests, physical separation of the two nationalisms is the only workable alternative. In response to Barak's far-reaching concessions to the Palestinians in July 2000 and after the recent violence, the religious and secular political right have shown a new-found orderliness, staying within the limits of the law, and acknowledging that separating the populations is the only pragmatic solution.

Embroidered kippas were the visual sign of one's orthodoxy before the assassination. They remain so afterwards. Those who wear knitted kippas in Israel today are viewed with disdain by the secular majority who hold "them" collectively responsible for Rabin's assassination. Use of harsh language in daily political discourse is part of Zionist/Israeli history. However, Rabin's Oslo policy choice blended disparaging political remarks with religious zeal, thereby creating an atmosphere of incitement. Since the assassination it appears that verbal abuse justified by religious motivation has subsided, but character assassination and disparaging ethnic remarks have exploded.

For example, no etiquette awards would be given for the level of discourse during Israel's May 1999 election campaign. It was gutter-like.

A Sephardi leader classified Russian-Jewish immigrants as "eaters of pork, suppliers of call-girls, [and are] praying in churches." A secular political leader described Netanyahu as "filthy scum." The chairman of the Council of Jewish Communities in Judea, Samaria, and Gaza said Barak's One Israel political platform called for "ethnic cleansing" of Jews from the territories.

The United Judaism (Haredi) Party leader accused the super secular Shinui Party of being "anti-Semitic." In touring a Tel Aviv market, Netanyahu was overheard to have said to local merchants that "the elites [Barak supporters] hate Sephardim, Russians... and Ethiopians."

Since the Rabin assassination, neither political personalities nor the written media have policed themselves in limiting the use of abusive language. This continues despite the fact that, by law in Israel, the anniversary of Rabin's assassination is an official day of commemoration, like the memorial day for fallen soldiers and Holocaust memorial day. All students are required to participate in "activities that discuss Rabin's character and stress the importance of democracy and the danger of violence to the society and state." Perhaps, the law's flaw is that it does not include adults.

After the assassination, the Oslo process was, to one degree or another, endorsed by both the secular right and left in Israel; its durability is still being tested. So far, verbal invective has not subsided; eliminating it from Israel's verbal culture would seem impossible. Just as a physical separation of Palestinians and Israelis is in the works, Israel has yet to separate the use of religion as a platform for legitimate political action. History tells us that Jews have never done well in societies where religious zeal controlled the rule of law. There is no verdict yet on the legacy of Rabin's assassination; the jury is still out and is expected to be so for some time.

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