

Danger of transforming faith into hysteria

A SERIES OF exceedingly important questions has been teasing and troubling me for a long time, but since the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin they have assumed more ominous proportions. Is the territorial integrity of "Greater Israel" one of those mitzvot which must be observed even under pain of death? The last I heard, there were only three such commandments, and the territorial integrity of Israel — or "Greater Israel" — was not one of them.

There has been much talk of the prohibition of turning over even a square inch of "Greater Israel" to the Palestinians. But this contradicts an explicit teaching of the Torah. In I Kings 9:11, we read of Solomon turning over 20 towns in Galilee to Hiram, King of Tyre, as a gift to the pagan king, and there is not a whisper in the Bible, the Talmud or the Midrash criticising him for it.

In II Chronicles 8:2, we read that Hiram gave Solomon 20 towns. Of the commentators, only Ralbag complains that it was improper for Solomon to give away territory of Eretz Israel, but he concedes that an exchange of territory was quite kosher. The other commentators, such as Malbim, say that Solomon sent in Jewish labour to make the land fertile and then gave the produce to Hiram; but there is no protest against giving away an inch of "Greater Israel."

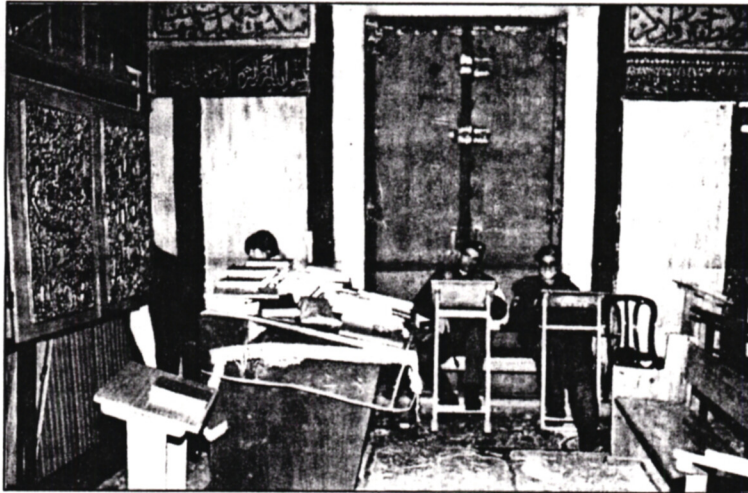
Who has the right to make halachic decisions for *klal yisrael*, for all the Jewish people? A Chief Rabbi? A community rabbi? A pulpit rabbi? A rosh yeshivah? A high-school rebbe? Which of them is so proficient in realpolitik, in international affairs and military strategy, that he can rule on such issues, without hesitation, from the comfort of his office or classroom? Clearly, someone who is unqualified, and yet passes judgment on such fateful issues, must stand accused of endangering all of Israel by a wrongful and arrogant assumption of infallibility. He will have to answer for the consequences before the Almighty Himself in the heavenly court, where every person is forced to confront his own conscience.

Indeed, do we have the material with which to issue halachic judgments affecting the whole of our people, considering the paucity of halachic literature on such subjects? There are thousands of halachic tomes on such subjects as the mixture of milk and meat, non-kosher foods, divorces, judicial and similar matters. But there is hardly anything on the conduct of war according to the halachah — or even the question of "territories" in contemporary times.

I am deeply convinced that the attempt to over-apply the halachah to situations where our ignorance exceeds our commitment can only damage the reputation of Torah and cause a desecration of Torah and the good name of Judaism. Moreover, do halachic precepts that obtain for normal, individual or communal life also apply to national life?

Let me give one example of misapplied halachah. The law of *ein dochin nefesh mipenei nefesh* — that one may not give preference to one life over another, but must follow the natural sequence — is an expression of the Torah's law and ethics regarding a birth which threatens the life of the mother (Mishnah Ohalot 7:6). If a woman is in difficult labour, such that a choice must be made between her life and that of the child, then the rule applies: one may not set aside one

The future of the peace process — and, with it, of the occupied territories — hinges on the result of the Israeli general election on May 29. Rabbi Dr Norman Lamm, president of Yeshiva University, New York, discusses the status of the territories in the context of the halachic issues surrounding them



Israeli soldiers on guard duty at the Avraham Avinu Synagogue in Hebron's Cave of Machpelah

life for another. Thus, if the baby is yet unborn, it may be killed, dismembered, and withdrawn. But if most of it has emerged from the womb, the same principle applies, and the result is the reverse: the child's life may not be sacrificed for that of the mother.

A distinguished rabbi has applied this principle to the political situation — namely, that we may not jeopardise anyone's life now in order to save many lives later. Hence, he asserts, we may not put the lives of citizens at risk of being murdered by Hamas, or endangering the lives of the settlers, now in order to avoid a nuclear confrontation with Iran or Iraq later on. Such a policy is "anti-Torah," and therefore such risk-taking is tantamount to complicity in murder.

Is this really so? Yes, it is correct, but only when deciding a medical question such as that before us. It does not apply to the laws of war and peace. Proof comes to us from the Talmud (Shavuot 35b), where Samuel said: "A government that kills only one out of six is not punished." The Hatam Sofer (responsa to Orach Chaim, I, 208) adds that this refers not only to *milchemet reshut*, a "permissible war" — for which approval was granted by the Sanhedrin — but even for a war which the king or the government considered important for reasons of prestige and standing. Without such permission, a general could be punished for sending out a reconnaissance group on a dangerous mission; and a democratic government certainly has the right to take risks now in order to save the entire people later. The law of *ein dochin nefesh mipenei nefesh* simply does not apply to a government.

Which of the halachot that we have clearly apply only in messianic times? Are we so sure

that all halachot that deal with borders and national and international affairs are meant for our contemporary, non-messianic reality?

This brings me to the next step: is religious Zionism inextricably tied to the messianic assumption, that of *atchalta di'geulah*, the "beginning of the redemption"? Or can it function, perhaps more successfully, without the benefits of messianic fervour, but also without its negative consequences?

Such a reassessment involves more than style or civility, or even proper halachic methodology. Our current ideology is based on the assumption that we are living in messianic or pre-messianic times and that, halachically and politically, this must be a major factor in our thinking and attitude. Hence we must seriously confront the axiom of the nationalist right of our national-religious camp, and ask deep, probing questions about the nature of religious Zionism.

My feeling is that classical religious Zionism was tragically sidetracked after the euphoria of 1967 and was linked to an extreme form of nationalism — territorialism — of which the late Chief Rabbi of Palestine, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, would not have approved. I was disturbed by Gush Emunim from the very beginning. I admired them — and still do — but their ideology and self-certainty scared me. I should have spoken up more. When I did speak and write about my "messianic agnosticism" — by which I mean that we cannot, as mere humans, identify our exact location in the grand divine plan of redemption, that it may or may not be *atchalta di'geulah* — many of my colleagues and friends were dismayed. But I should not have been dissuaded.

Look at what we have lost as a result of our

smug certainty that we are experiencing, as the phrase in our prayer for the State of Israel goes, *reshit tsemichat geulatenu* — "the beginning of the flowering of redemption." We have become wedded to the concept of "Greater Israel," and have consequently lost control of the ministries of education and religion, so that these two highly critical portfolios are now held by people who either know little about the subject or are inimical to Judaism. We have lost influence in government, in society, and in the world at large. And we are looked upon — unfairly, it is true — as wild-eyed fanatics who are anti-democratic and a danger to the future of the state. And the settlers — idealistic, self-sacrificing pioneers, the flower of our people — are now suffering a cognitive dissonance as their messianic ideals unravel before their eyes. I maintain that it was not, and is not, worth it.

It is because I so identify with religious Zionism, and am so proud of its brilliant record of achievement on behalf of the people, land and Torah of Israel, that I believe it is time to reassess the tendency to evaluate all current events through the messianic prism — without at all yielding a single iota of the belief in *biat hamashiach bechol yom sheyavo*, for the latter phrase means, quite literally, *whenever the Messiah comes*, and not necessarily that all that is happening this very day is related to his imminent arrival.

The best way to have the Messiah come is by not talking about him overmuch; by not forcing his hand, as it were; by not transforming faith into hysteria; by not assuming that our impatience will influence him to come before the time that the Creator has set for him — but by proceeding with normal life while entertaining the quiet, but powerful, hope that he will come soon.

Too many of us find it easy to scoff at the runaway messianism of Lubavitch, but turn a deaf ear and a blind eye to our own romantic notions of incipient messianism; and both types of over-eager anticipation of the "end of days" can lead us — has led us — into deep crisis. And we are sufficiently sophisticated to know the tragic historic events which confirm my fears for the future.

These are some of the serious questions that beg to be discussed — seriously, soberly, softly, and without sloganeering. And if the answers offered are concise, clear, crisp and uncomplicated, we may be quite sure that they are crude, misguided, and just plain wrong. Do not trust them.

Life is complex. It is filled with paradox, riddled with ambiguity, suffused with subtlety and nuance; simplistic answers are dangerously misleading. Never must we entrust our national lives or treasure in the hands of people with primitive perspectives. Until we are much, much surer of ourselves in correctly interpreting the halachah, I would prefer that the political debate proceed *without* involving the halachah.

It is in order to bring "proof" of one's point of view, if one wishes, from interpreting a biblical verse, or citing a midrash, which represents a free and non-coercive use of sacred sources and speaks of Jewish values in a general sense. But one must not invoke the decision-making authority of halachah. To use it to buttress a political "line" skirts the very dangerous area of *megaleh panim be-torah shelo kehalachah*, of improper manipulation of the halachah.

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