

A Kosher-Stamp On Murder

by Uri Avnery



Two shocking manifestos were published this week. Both call for comment.

One of them declares that dismantling the settlements in the Gaza Strip is a "crime against humanity." It does not mention that they were set up on the land reserves of a million Palestinians crowded in the tiny strip, and rob them of their scarce water. Their removal, it says, is an "expression of tyranny, evil and arbitrariness." Officers and soldiers are called upon not to take part in this "ethnic cleansing."

This manifesto is signed by the father and brother of Binyamin Netanyahu, as well as Meir Har-Zion, the favorite pupil of Ariel Sharon, who became famous in the 1950s for slitting the throats of several innocent Bedouins with his own hands in revenge for the killing of his sister. Two former directors general of the prime minister's office also signed. Most of the signatories are not religious.

The second manifesto declares that the Halakha (Jewish religious law) commands the killing of innocent Palestinian civilians if this helps to save Jews. It is signed by the heads of the "Arrangement Yeshivot," the West Bank settlement rabbis and other religious leaders. They were later joined by one of the two chief rabbis (the Sephardic one).

I was not unduly upset by the first manifesto. People of this kind can be found all over the world. In other countries they are called fascists (but, because of the Holocaust, we do not like to use this term in our country). What unites them is a primitive, atavistic morality that says that "we" are a superior race, God's chosen people, a master race, etc., while "they" are inferior races, untermenschen. We may do to them whatever we please, with a clear conscience; they are not allowed to do to us anything at all. (In the manifesto, the settlers are requested not to bodily harm "their own people" – leaving them free to harm all others.)

In the course of the 20th century, such people have wrought destruction on many nations, including their own. But healthy nations overcame them in the end. I hope that we shall manage to do the same.

The second manifesto is far more dangerous. A religious doctrine that calls for the killing of civilians in the name of God is very serious. Such a decree signed by the rabbis of the "Arrangement Yeshivot" is tenfold worse.

In order to understand this, one has to know that these Yeshivot are in fact military units. They constitute a unique phenomenon in the Israeli army: whole units formed on an ideological-political basis, obeying their own leaders.

When David Ben-Gurion created the Israeli army (officially called the Israel Defense Forces, or IDF) in the middle of the 1948 war, he was determined to eliminate all its political groupings. So he disbanded the Palmakh, the legendary elite force that was based on the kibbutzim and tended to the left.

The present setup was created, officially, in order to enable students of Yeshivot (Jewish religious seminaries) to serve in the army without interrupting their studies. In practice, they constitute a militia of the extreme-right wing, especially the settlers. While serving in the army, the Yeshiva students are nominally under the army chain of command, but in practice they are also subject to their rabbis, whose position is reminiscent of the political commissars of the Red Army.

If the orders of the officers and the directives of the rabbis ever conflict, the great majority of the soldier-students will undoubtedly obey the rabbis. And in any case, a great number of the officers themselves now wear kippas, attesting to their belonging to the religious camp.

The chiefs of the religious-nationalistic wing, and especially the settlers, have for years now been engaged in a systematic effort to capture the army from the inside. In the first decades of the IDF, kibbutz members had a decisive influence on the army command, but nowadays the settlers and other

religious-nationalist people are taking over. They fill the lower and middle ranks of the officer corps. This development, together with the deepening occupation, has completely changed the face of the IDF. It's a different army now.

The manifesto of the Yeshivot chiefs, calling for the killing of Palestinian civilians, exposes this situation. Since not one single head of an Arrangement Yeshiva has spoken out against it, we have to assume that they are unanimous on this.

On the face of it, it is just an expert opinion. With the hypocrisy typical for the chiefs of this camp, they say that this is not, God forbid, an operational directive, but only an innocent effort of the rabbis to explain to the leaders of the nation what the Halakha says about this subject.

That is, of course, a tongue-in-cheek explanation. The Arrangement Yeshivot soldiers are daily engaged in situations where they have to decide whether to shoot civilians or not. It is quite clear that the "opinion" of their rabbis will determine their behavior. It is a sentence of death for many people.

Even today, Palestinian civilians are killed every day. Only a small fraction of the incidents are reported in the media. An old handicapped man was recently buried under the ruins of his home by an army bulldozer that demolished it so quickly that his family had no chance of getting him to safety. Only yesterday a 9-year-old boy was killed while sleeping at his home by shrapnel from a missile fired by a helicopter at an adjacent building. Almost every day, boys of all ages are killed while throwing stones at tanks and soldiers (whose bulletproof vests and helmets mean they are in no danger).

It is impossible to know how many, if any, of these civilians – men, women, old people and children – are killed by Arrangement Yeshivot soldiers, or soldiers commanded by kippa-wearing officers. Nobody can be accused without incriminating evidence. But it is clear that the interpretation of the Halakha by the rabbis has now put a kosher-stamp on such acts. It puts an end to any pretense of the "pure arms" myth. It negates not only the prohibition of murder, but also the shame for such acts.

The only religious voice raised against this appalling document was that of a small and courageous group called Rabbis for Human Rights, which opposes the dirty messianic current that has submerged almost the whole religious camp in Israel. Their statement discloses that the Yeshiva heads have intentionally falsified the Talmud passages "quoted" by them. The actual text forbids a Jew to kill innocents even to save his own life. After all, God created all human beings "in his own image" (Genesis 1:27).

Unfortunately, this statement will have no impact whatsoever on the IDF's religious militias, and even less on the settlers, who now set the tone in the army.

Many of the most heinous crimes in human history were committed in the name of religion. The Book of Joshua says that God commanded the Children of Israel to commit a general ethnic cleansing in the land of Canaan. The crusaders carried out horrible massacres in this country (and against the Jews on the way here) while shouting "Deus le volt!" (God wills it). Three years ago today, Osama bin Laden sent his people to kill thousands in the New York Twin Towers in the name of Allah.

May God protect us from those who would speak in His name.

Uri Avnery is a longtime Israeli peace activist. Since 1948 has advocated the setting up of a Palestinian state alongside Israel. In 1974, Uri Avnery was the first Israeli to establish contact with PLO leadership. In 1982 he was the first Israeli ever to meet Yassir Arafat, after crossing the lines in besieged Beirut. He served three terms in the Israeli Parliament (Knesset), and is the founder of [Gush Shalom](#) (Peace Bloc).

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