

Time to Quash Those Who Preach a Torah of Terror

There are rabbinic voices who have sent the message that the messiah may choose to appear by stepping over the body of a murdered child.

Rabbi Eric H. Yoffie | Aug 03, 2015 7:07 PM



A relative mourns over the body of 18-month-old Ali Dawabsheh, killed when his house was set on fire by suspected Jewish terrorists.
Credit: Reuters

The reason for Jewish terror is Torah. It is not territories and occupation that are to blame, although they are part of the picture. It is not racism or hatred of Arabs that are at fault, although they play a role. The heart of the problem is Torah, the sacred teachings of Judaism.

We must not deceive ourselves. As the search for the killers of 18-month-old Ali Saad Dawabsheh continues, everyone – Arab and Jew, Israeli and Palestinian – assumes that the perpetrators, once apprehended, will be religious Jews. It is the world of Torah that has given rise to this insanity of baby killing and butchery. It is the institutions of Torah that have fostered and fed it, and then concealed it from the authorities under a veneer of false piety. And it is rabbis who have encouraged it, sometimes directly and sometimes with the wink of an eye. And these same rabbis now remain silent, as their disciples plan their next round of outrages.

To be sure, we are not talking about Torah properly understood, but a Torah that has been debased and defamed. In this pseudo-Torah, the plaything of terrorists, morality has been cast aside, replaced by the false gods of land, messianism, and military might. It is also true that we are not talking about most of Israel's rabbis, but a relative few.

Nonetheless, no rabbi anywhere can find consolation in the claim that "other rabbis do this and not us." At a time when the entire Jewish people is overcome with shame, rabbis and Torah teachers – all of them, no matter what their outlook or religious stream – feel the deepest shame and the most profound regret. After all, it is our world—the world of Torah—that has given rise to this abomination of Jewish terror and that has sustained it. When the world of Torah is defiled, all of us are responsible for cleansing and repairing it.

Still, the settler movement and religious Zionism bear special responsibility. The sad truth is that from its earliest days, the settler movement has been tainted with terrorism. In the early 1980s, the euphemistically named "Jewish underground" organization committed a series of outrageous terrorist acts. Its members killed three students at an Islamic college in Hebron, attempted to assassinate the mayors of three Palestinian cities, planted bombs that led to the blinding of an Israel Defense Forces demolitions expert, and were finally caught while attempting to blow up five buses in East Jerusalem. In 1984, 15 members of the group were sentenced to prison.

Three terrible things then happened, each worse than the next. First, despite the severity of the crimes, which included the premeditated, random murder of innocents, settler groups launched a public campaign to win the release of the prisoners. The campaign was led by Rabbi Yehuda Hazani, a disciple of Rabbi Tzvi Yehudah Kook. Second, the campaign was successful, gaining support of Jews in both Israel and America; in less than 7 years, every one of the convicted terrorists was free, including three who had been sentenced to life in prison. And third, many of these terrorists went on to assume positions of leadership in the settler movement.

It is this sequence of events and the patterns that it established that help to explain why Jewish terror remains a problem in Israel today. All the major authorities of religious Zionism have opposed Jewish terror in every form, but a small measure of ambivalence and uncertainty has infected the movement for many years, leaving room for other rabbinic voices. And it is those voices, to our everlasting horror and dismay, who have sent the message that the messiah may choose to appear by stepping over the body of a murdered child. Ali Saad Dawabsheh is dead on their account.

But now, perhaps, the time has come when long established patterns can be changed. The events at Duma, where Ali died, have crossed a line. Revulsion has gripped the Jewish world. All but the most recalcitrant rabbinic voices may now be prepared to point a finger at the guilty and stop the descent of Judaism into hell. The teaching of the rabbis has made the terror possible, and the rabbis can stop it.

And to deal with the remaining rabbinic resisters, immune to all reason and humanity, the State of Israel must join the battle in a way that it has not done for the last 35 years. No excuses and no deferring to rabbinic authority. If a single yeshiva student is implicated in terrorist activities, the yeshiva must be closed. If a rabbi condones or conceals terror, or engages in incitement to commit terrorist acts, he must be arrested and charged—or, if necessary, detained without charge. For yeshiva students and their rabbis, like every Palestinian in the territories, human rights will come second to human life.

Jewish life cannot be sustained without Torah at its core, but that Torah must be a Torah of truth. Those who choose a Torah of terror have no place in our midst and must receive no mercy.

Rabbi Eric H. Yoffie, the former President of the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ), is a lecturer and writer living in Westfield, NJ.