

Eulogy for Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin

by Dr. Norman Lamm/Yeshiva University/November 6, 1995

The victim was a general, a celebrated hero of his people, deeply involved in the diplomatic and political issues of government. He came to this rendez-vous unsuspecting, in peace, wanting peace, expecting peace. Followed by the assassin, he knew nothing of what lay in store for him.

But then the stalking assassin struck and, within a moment, the leader lay dead—laid low not by an enemy of Israel, but by the hand of a fellow Jew.

Thus was Avner ben Ner killed by Yoav (II Samuel 3:26,27)

When King David heard the news he was horrified, and at the funeral he pronounced the following immortal words:

יָדְךָ לֹא אִסּוּרוֹת וּרְגְלֶיךָ לֹא לִנְחֻשְׁתִּים יָגֵשׁ

"Your hands were not bound, nor your feet put in chains."

One would have expected him to die a hero's death—gloriously, on the field of battle, slain by an enemy in the course of combat on behalf of his people. Instead, he was done in by one of his own who came silently, in stealth.

We assemble here today to mourn and honor a modern Avner ben Ner. And we are filled with grief and apprehension.

Let me begin my eulogy by referring to a סוגיא you are now in the midst of learning (שבועות דף כי עי"א) --

איזהו איסור האמור בתורה? -- האומר הרי עלי שלא אוכל בשר ושלא אשתה יין כיום שמת בו אביו, כיום שמת בו פלוני, כיום שנהרג בו גדליה בן אחיקם, כיום שראה ירושלים בחורבנה

There is a form of oath called an *issar*, whereby one swears he will not eat meat or drink wine -- and here the Talmud gives four examples: "as on the day my father died; as on the day so-and-so died; as on the day Gedaliah ben Ahikam was killed; as on the day I saw Jerusalem in its destruction."

Now, I can understand יום שמת בו אביו--the day one's father was deceased is very *personal*. יום שמת בו פלוני--the day a certain acquaintance died is certainly a *human* consideration. יום שראה ירושלים בחורבנה--the day one saw Jerusalem's tragedy is one of *national* significance. But why יום שנהרג בו גדליה בן אחיקם, the day that Gedaliah, governor of Judea, was murdered?

I suggest the following answer: The assassination of Gedalia included all three of the above—the personal and the human and the national elements and, in addition, had fateful consequences for the future of an entire people.

So it is with Yitzhak ben Nehemiah Rabin: We have lost a *human being*—not the caricature depicted by those who demonized and dehumanized him. Direct yet thoughtful, tough but introspective, unceremonious, even humble, always tense and nervous—which he had every reason to be...

Yeshiva, and I as an individual, had a *personal* relationship with him. Yeshiva gave him an honorary degree, and he spoke before Yeshiva University audiences at a number of occasions since. Personally, I met him a number of times, since his days as Ambassador to the U.S., and at all times I found him to react with ארך ארך. He was always respectful, personally deferential, courteous, and with the highest regard for this institution. Losing him is כיום שמת בו אביו, much like losing a highly regarded and respected authority figure in one's family.

Third, he was a *national*, even international figure—witness the remarkable and unprecedented array of the world's greatest leaders who attended his funeral just a few hours ago. He was the Liberator of Jerusalem, and his death is akin to "seeing Jerusalem in its destruction."

And, most important: just as the murder of Gedalia led to the dissolution of the Jewish state and the beginning of the hardest part of *galut*, so the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin may leave in its wake consequences as disastrous as they are unforeseen and unforeseeable.

Avelut, mourning, contains within it an element of *teshuvah*, repentance. It is therefore appropriate for us to undertake a חשבון הנפש, to examine ourselves and learn if we can in any way improve what we are doing and how acting, so as to avoid such catastrophes in the future.

Let me begin these few ruminations by saying that in addition to shock and grief, I for one experienced a vital element of *teshuvah*, and that is: *bushah*, shame. I am chagrined that it was a Jew who murdered the Prime Minister. I was always proud that Jews do not behave in this way...And I am deeply embarrassed that *it was one of us—a religious university student, who did it—even if he is a mad man...* Yigal Amir and Baruch Goldstein were, otherwise, fine representatives of what we stand for. So we have a lot of thinking and pondering to do.

Most everyone possesses within himself a seething cauldron of passions, noxious energies that, if released, can destroy recklessly and with abandon. But we have been civilized—by Torah, by social sanctions, by parental training, by moral conscience. That constraining inhibition is powerful in most people, often as powerful as steel. With others, the lid that holds down the boiling pot of

emotions is made of weaker stuff, the psychological equivalent of plastic and glue. But in a few unfortunate individuals, that cover is no more than paper. The inner curbs against blood-lust, violence, rape, and murder are no stronger than tissue paper, tied down with gossamer threads spun by a weary and ineffective spider. A person so poorly endowed can lead an otherwise normal life for a long time, but place him in an environment which is permissive of violence, which exposes him to harsh talk, to hype, to unrestrained overstatement, to irrational and undisciplined expression—and anti-social urges buried deep within his sick psyche will explode in an unspeakably ugly display of hostility that turns men into monsters, society into a jungle, and civilization into chaos.

Our responsibility is to avoid such an environment, never to be guilty of having, knowingly or unknowingly, directly or indirectly, encouraged such bestiality.

Our responsibility is to be responsible, to recognize that violent rhetoric invariably leads to violent deeds. In the absence of such awareness, we stand accused of having prepared the ground for the explosion of such malevolence by people of weak restraint, like a sewer blowing its cover and uncontrollably spewing forth its odious and miasmatic gases.

Let us say it: we should never have permitted ourselves the luxury of escalating political differences to such heights of hatred—and such depths of depravity.

Let us never again, in Jerusalem or in New York or elsewhere, call a respected leader of Israel a "traitor." Let no one tolerate irresponsible individuals who dare to refer to the Prime Minister of Israel, no matter of what party, as a Nazi. And let us silence those raucous voices of vicious discord who declare that it is a *mitzvah* to assassinate a Prime Minister of the State of Israel!

Remember what King Solomon taught: והחיים והמנות ביד הלשון—words can bring joy and enhance life; and words—oral or written—can also hurt and maim and destroy and kill.

I want to make it clear: *Nothing in what I say should be construed as approving or disapproving of the Rabin policies; condemning or condoning statements he may have made.* That is precisely the point that I wish to make: We may deplore what a man says—we may even find it deceitful and hateful—but never may we denigrate his צלם אלקים, the divine Image which confers upon him his basic human dignity. We may oppose, however strongly, the policy, but not savage the personality. That is not the way of any morally mature and responsible, sensitive human being, and certainly not בני תורה, people who study Torah.

The murder of Yitzhak Rabin should put all of us on notice:

Tone down irresponsible rhetoric, which creates the ambience for irresponsible deeds, even the foulest of them.

Beware of ever lightly cloaking political views, no matter how much you believe in them, in the mantle of Halakha, because that is מגלה פנים בתורה שלא כהלכה, of improper manipulation of the Law. These are issues of such historic import that only a Sanhedrin can decide them *on the basis of Halakha*, or whose decision has the status of Halakha. No one in this generation may arrogate that prerogative to himself.

And keep far away from excessive self-confidence that leads to arrogant self-righteousness that, in turn, persuades us that our ideals are greater and better than those of the other fellow; that we are sincere and he is not; that we are unquestionably right and he is indubitably wrong; that we are therefore entitled to force our views on him—by "eliminating" him if need be, in order to have our "truth" prevail.

Such arrogance and such invitation to violence and such rhetorical extremism must come to an end—whether in the Knesset or in party precincts, whether of the Left (the extremists of which demonized the late Menachem Begin) or the Right, the Religious or the Secular, whether in Merkaz Harav or in Yeshiva University. Yes, Yeshiva University...

We must develop a new sensitivity to extremism of all kinds. When I argue against uncivil speech, it is not a matter of taste or a preference for bourgeois manners. *Le style c'est l'homme*. Style often reveals character. We have allowed ourselves too often the luxury of intemperate, extremist expression, and we must all band together to learn how to avoid it—whether by young or old. We must no longer be as tolerant as we have been of strident invective and ugly epithets and hurtful hype.

Neither the Right nor the Left have been careful enough in gauging the temperature of debate. All of us must rethink not our positions as much as our methods. And we must develop a new respect for simple civility.

At the creation of man, the Torah tells that the Almighty exclaimed: והנה טוב מאוד, "Behold, it is very good." The Midrash offers a startling commentary on this verse: "והנה טוב מאוד--זה המות", -"very good" refers to...death!

The great Rabbi Yosef Engel of pre-War Galicia explains tersely: כל מאודיות זה מות -- all "very-ness," all extremism—even "very" good—is deadly!

I return to the object of our grief, to Yitzhak Rabin. He was not, it is true, an observant Jew, a שומר מצוות. Perhaps if we had his upbringing, we would be no different—and if he had ours, he might easily have outshined us... But he was a great man—whether or not you agreed with him—and his place in Jewish history is assured.

The famous Kabbalist R. Hayyim Vital teaches that there are within humans two different levels of soul—one is *nefesh* and the other is *ruach*—and that one may possess one or both or neither. If one is helpful to his fellow humans and devoted to people and his land, if he is motivated by genuine moral considerations, he possesses a higher degree of *nefesh* than one who spends his life in Torah and mitzvot but fails to serve his fellow Jews and his country; whereas the latter possess *ruach* which the former does not.

I am in no position to judge the quality of Yitzhak Rabin's *ruach*. But I can tell you this: he had an noble *nefesh*. His entire life was spent on behalf of his people and his country. His *nefesh* was one of indomitable courage, of bravery in war and in peace, of genuine heroism on the battle-front and in the chancelleries of the world. He laid down his life on the מזבח שלום, the altar of peace. And שלום is a Name of the Creator—not a political policy convenient for the agendas of the Left or one that the Right implies we must look upon with suspicion...

In Iran there was yesterday and is today celebration. In Lebanon there is dancing. In Gaza there is joyous shooting in the air. On the lips of some incredibly foolish Jews there forms a smirk of shameful satisfaction. But for us, for the majority of sane Jews all over the world, and in the hearts of good men and women of all peoples, there is profound sadness—an אָבֶל כָּבֵד מְאֹד, for we have lost the general who fought for Jerusalem in the War of Independence, who as Chief of Staff of the armed forces of Israel in 1967 liberated Jerusalem, who served his country gallantly as Ambassador, as Minister of Labor and of Defense and twice as Prime Minister and who, above all, was a man of great *nefesh*, of a courage that will inspire generations to come of our people.

תהא נפשו ורוחו ונשמתו צורות בצור החיים.