

Detering Suicide Killers

Nathan Lewin

The terrorists have a new indispensable weapon — created by Yasser Arafat and refined by Osama bin Laden — in their war against Israel and the United States. It is the walking bomb — the suicide killer. Weighty ethical issues affect how a civilized society can deter the murderer who is ready to sacrifice his or her own life.

Organized societies deter criminals by imposing punishments that demonstrate to potential offenders that crime does not pay. In theory, capital punishment should prevent all crime by those who calculate the consequences if they are caught. The death penalty is so drastic that its mere availability should deter a potential offender, even if it is rarely implemented. The Torah prescribes capital punishment for a wide range of offenses, but a Sanhedrin that executed once in seven years (or in seventy) was called “destructive.” *Mishna Makkot 1:10*

In the United States, we go through extreme contortions before we carry out an execution. For several years, the Supreme Court blocked all capital punishment, and even now it gives extra-careful treatment to cases that involve the death penalty. It is better, we are told, to avoid executing one innocent person than to kill one hundred cold-blooded murderers.

That calculus works so long as death is a true deterrent. Terrorism, as practiced by Arafat’s thugs and by bin Laden’s acolytes, has thrown that assumption to the wind. Drastic rethinking of the theory of deterrence is needed when terrorists successfully recruit young men and women to commit suicide while killing dozens or thousands of innocent civilians.

Terrorism will not be shut down until the *individual* terrorist is effectively deterred. Israel’s campaign of “targeted assassinations” has tried to prevent suicide bombings by swift nonjudicial execution of known organizers of such deadly attacks. Experience has shown, however, that others take the place of those executed, and the supply of those willing to give up their lives has not dwindled. And Israel’s policy of retaliating against political targets — i.e., Arafat’s headquarters or Palestinian arms caches — has been a total failure.

What threat will effectively deter the individual

Continued on page 12

A Stronger Moral Force

Arthur Green

Although I am not as pious as Nathan Lewin, I still have some pretty old-fashioned Jewish instincts. My first desire on reading Lewin’s essay was to *rayz kri’ah*, tear my garments, as a sign of mourning on hearing the desecration of God’s name. Can we really have come to this? A well-respected spokesman for law, ethics, and Jewish tradition proposes that we (the government of Israel, that is, the one he would like to see operating on Torah-based principles) execute the families of suicide bombers. Devoting all of six words to the struggle of conscience (“This is no easy ethical question...”), he goes on to justify his proposal by reference to the Torah’s command to eradicate Amalek and the Canaanite peoples. I only wonder how long it will take him, by the force of this proof-text, to go all the way and suggest that the Palestinian nation as a whole has earned the fate of Amalek. After all, “when there is no other deterrent...”

One of the several tragic by-products of the Israeli/Palestinian struggle of recent years has been the conversion of ultra-Orthodoxy to support the most rightwing and aggressive stream within Israeli politics. Long lukewarm in their acceptance of Zionism and totally opposed to the messianic language of the National Religious Party’s settler element, these Jews have now joined their Sephardic counterparts in imposing the old Diaspora vision onto Middle East politics. The Arabs are simply the *goyim*. They will hate us forever, for this is the essential nature of Ishmael, Esau, and their descendants. Somehow these come to be identified with Amalek as well. There is no view more dangerous than this to the possibility of peace, except perhaps the one recently published in a Saudi newspaper, claiming that the Jews require Muslim blood to bake their *hamantaschen*.

Israel is by far the stronger party in the present conflict. It must be the stronger moral force as well. Indeed it must stop the suicide bombings, and I can muster little moral outrage at targeted assassinations of those planning and directing such operations. Since a few terrible incidents early in the Intifada, Israel has been remarkably good at not targeting civilians, although there have been more “collateral damage” killings than can be justified. We all once

Continued on page 16

Arthur Green continued

took pride in Israel's tradition of "purity of arms," the careful and responsible use of firepower. Today, with the fear generated by violent Palestinian resistance, there are too many nervous and vengeful fingers on the trigger, at all levels. Israel is the creation of the entire Jewish people, and has to stand for something, not just survive by becoming a barbaric Middle Eastern superstate. The Jewish tradition's most essential moral teaching, that every human being is the image of God, must not fall victim to the bleak times through which we are living.

Suicide bombings must be stopped. This will not happen through obscene suggestions that we stoop to their level, executing the parents and siblings of perpetrators. Such a horrid policy would only call

forth new troops of suicide bombers, recruited throughout the Muslim world. Suicide bombings will be stopped when we address the root cause of such desperate actions: the degradation and humiliation of the Palestinian people. Israeli society has failed terribly at respecting the Arabs who are destined to forever be its neighbors. This is true both within the country and in the occupied territories. Military policy, especially in its local application, is often needlessly violent and degrading. Endless checkpoint delays, bulldozing of homes, uprooting of trees, disrespecting of elders, and lots more have been the daily lot of Palestinians for thirty-five years. These constant humiliations are the immediate source of the rage that motivates suicide bombers, most of whom

come from the very respect-based culture of traditional Arab villages.

On the larger scale, we need to restore hope. No wonder Palestinians have no faith in the peace process. We continue to build settlements, expropriate land, and deny them the right to build homes on their own land while we build whole towns for newcomers. How can we expect them not to be frustrated and angry? If we want to end suicide bombings, we need to demonstrate clearly (by our actions, not just by words, as we keep saying to Arafat) that we are willing to end the occupation. Yes, a two-state solution is a gamble. But it's the only one we've got.

Arthur Green is the Phillip Lown Professor of Jewish Thought at Brandeis University.

Irreconcilable Differences? The Waning of the American Jewish Love Affair with Israel

(Steven T. Rosenthal; University Press of New England, 2001, 231pp.)

American Jews and Israelis are supposed to be close. All the "We Are One" talk suggests that we are friends, cousins, siblings. Unfortunately, all too often, the relationship between American Jews and Israelis is most reminiscent of a bad date, one that keeps on happening again and again, as in the movie "Ground Hog Day." Each side approaches every encounter with unrealis-

tic expectations, an exaggerated sense of its own importance, and a distorted sense of the other side's desperation. Disappointment and anger inevitably follow.

Steven T. Rosenthal's *Irreconcilable Differences? The Waning of the American Jewish Love Affair with Israel* offers a depressing overview of this dysfunctional relationship...

**Gil Troy reviews
this book on
www.shma.com**

(continues on www.shma.com)

Non-Profit
US Postage
PAID
Permit No. 401
Frederick, MD

Change Service Requested
Post Office Box 1019
Manchester, NH 03105-1019
