

The Jewish Ayatollahs

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THE ARCHBISHOP of New York announces that any Catholic who rents out an apartment to a Jew commits a mortal sin and runs the risk of excommunication.

A protestant priest in Berlin decrees that a Christian who employs a Jew will be banished from his parish.

Impossible? Indeed. Except in Israel – in reverse, of course.

The rabbi of Safed, a government employee, has decreed that it is strictly forbidden to let apartments to Arabs – including the Arab students at the local medical school. Twenty other town rabbis – whose salaries are paid by the taxpayers, mostly secular, including Arab citizens - have publicly supported this edict.

A group of Israeli intellectuals lodged a complaint with the Attorney General, arguing that this is a case of criminal incitement. The Attorney General promised to investigate the matter with all due haste. That was half a year ago. “Due haste” has not yet produced a decision.

The same goes for another group of rabbis, who prohibited employing Goyim.

(In ancient Hebrew, “Goy” just meant a people, any people. In the Bible, the Israelites were called a “holy Goy”. But in the last centuries, the term has come to mean non-Jews, with a decidedly derogatory undertone.)

THIS WEEK, Israel was in uproar. The turmoil was caused by the arrest of Rabbi Dov Lior.

The affair goes back to a book released more than a year ago by Rabbi Yitzhak Shapira. Shapira is, perhaps, the most extreme inhabitant of Yitzhar, which is perhaps the most extreme settlement in the West Bank. Its members are frequently accused of carrying out pogroms in the nearby Palestinian villages, generally in “retaliation” for army actions against structures that have been built without official consent.

The book, called *Torat ha-Melekh* (“the Teaching of the King”) deals with the killing of Goyim. It says that in peacetime, Goyim should generally not be killed – not because of the commandment “Thou shalt not kill” which, according to the book, applies to Jews only, but because of God’s command after the Deluge (Genesis 9:6): “Whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed, for in the image of God made he man.” This applies to all Goyim who fulfill some basic commandments.

However, the situation is totally different in wartime. And according to the rabbis, Israel has been at war since its foundation, and probably will be for ever more.

In war, in every place where the presence of a Goy endangers a Jew, it is permitted to kill him, even though he be a righteous goy who bears no responsibility for the situation. It is permitted – indeed, recommended – to kill not only enemy fighters, but also those who “support” or “encourage” them. It is permitted to kill enemy civilians if this is helpful for the conduct of the

war.

(Intentionally or not, this is reflected in the tactics employed by our army in the “Cast Lead” operation: to protect the life of a single Israeli soldier, it is permissible to kill as many Palestinians as necessary. The result: some 1300 dead Palestinians, half of them non-combatants, as against five soldiers killed by hostile action. Six more were killed by “friendly fire”.)

What really set off a storm was a passage in the book that says that it is permitted to kill children, when it is clear that once they grow up, they can be “harmful”.

It is customary for a book by a rabbi interpreting Jewish law to bear the endorsement – called *haskama* (“agreement”) – of other prominent rabbis. This particular masterpiece bore the “*haskama*” of four prominent rabbis. One of them is Dov Lior.

RABBI LIOR (the name can be translated as “I have the light” or “the light has been given to me”) stands out as one of the most extreme rabbis in the West Bank settlements – no mean achievement in a territory that is abundantly stocked with extreme rabbis, most of whom would be called fascist in any other country. He is the rabbi of Kiryat Arba, the settlement on the fringes of Hebron that cultivates the teachings of Meir Kahane and that produced the mass-murderer Baruch Goldstein.

Lior is also the chief of a Hesder yeshiva, a religious school affiliated with the army, whose pupils combine their studies (purely religious) with privileged army service.

When the book – now in its third printing – first appeared, there was an uproar. No rabbi protested, though quite a number discounted its religious argumentation. The Orthodox distanced themselves, if only on the ground that it violated the religious rule that forbids “provoking the Goyim”.

Following public demand, the Attorney General started a criminal investigation against the author and the four signatories of the “*haskama*”. They were called in for questioning, and most did appear and protested that they had had no time to read the book.

Lior, the text of whose “*haskama*” testified to the fact that he had read the book thoroughly, did not heed repeated summons to appear at the police station. He ignored them openly and contemptuously. This week the police reacted to the insult: they ambushed the rabbi on the “tunnel road” – a road with several tunnels between Jerusalem and Hebron, reserved for Jews – and arrested him. They did not handcuff him and put him in a police car, as they normally would, but replaced his driver with a police officer, who drove him straight to a police station. There he was politely questioned for an hour and set free.

The news of the arrest spread like wildfire throughout the settlements. Hundreds of the “Youth of the Hills” – groups of young settlers who carry out pogroms and spit on the law – gathered at the entrance to Jerusalem, battled with the police and cut the main road to the capital.

(I can't really complain about that, because I was the first to do so. In 1965, I was elected to the Knesset and Teddy Kollek was elected mayor of Jerusalem. One of the first things he did was to pander to the Orthodox and close whole neighborhoods on the Shabbat. One of the first things I did was to call on my supporters to protest. We closed the entrance to Jerusalem for some hours until we were forcibly removed.)

But closing roads and parading the released Lior triumphantly on their shoulders was not the only thing the young fanatics did. They also tried to storm the Supreme Court building. Why this building in particular? That requires some explanation.

THE ISRAELI right-wing, and especially the settlers and their rabbis, have long lists of hate objects. Some of these have been published. I have the honor of appearing on most. But the Supreme Court occupies a place high up, if not at the very top.

Why? The court has not covered itself with glory when dealing with the occupied territories. It has allowed the destruction of many Palestinian homes as retaliation for "terrorist" acts, approved "moderate" torture, assented to the "separation fence" (which was condemned by the international court), and generally positioned itself as an arm of the occupation.

But in some cases, the law has not enabled the court to wriggle out of its responsibilities. It has called for the demolition of "outposts" set up on private Palestinian property. It has forbidden "targeted killing" if the person could be arrested without risk, it has decreed that it is unlawful to prevent an Arab citizen from living in a village on state-owned land, and so on.

Each such decision drew a howl of rage from the rightists. But there is a deeper reason for the extreme antagonism.

UNLIKE MODERN Christianity, but very much like Islam, the Jewish religion is not just a matter between Man and God, but also a matter between Man and Man. It does not live in a quiet corner of public life. Religious law encompasses all aspects of public and private life. Therefore, for a pious Jew - or Muslim - the European idea of separation between state and religion is anathema.

The Jewish Halakha, like the Islamic Shari'a, regulates every single aspect of life. Whenever Jewish law clashes with

Israeli law, which one should prevail? The one enacted by the democratically elected Knesset, which can be changed at any moment if the people want it, or the one handed down by God on Mount Sinai for all time, that cannot ever be changed (at most can be interpreted differently)?

Religious fanatics in Israel insist that religious law stands above the secular law (as in several Arab countries), and that the state courts have no jurisdiction over the clerics in matters that concern religion (as in Iran). When the Supreme Court ruled otherwise, the most respected Orthodox rabbi easily mobilized 100 thousand protesters in Jerusalem. For years now, religious cabinet ministers, law professors and politicians, as well as their political supporters, have been busy chipping away at the integrity, independence and jurisdiction of the Supreme Court.

This is the crux of the matter. The Attorney General considers a book calling for the killing of innocent children an act of criminal incitement. The rabbis and their supporters consider this an impertinent interference in a learned religious debate. There can be no real compromise between these two views.

For Israelis, this is not just an academic question. The entire religious community, with all its diverse factions, now belongs to the rightist, ultra-nationalist camp (except for pitiful little outposts like Reform and Conservative Jewry, who are the majority among American Jews). Transforming Israel into a Halakha state means castrating the democratic system and turning Israel into a second Iran governed by Jewish ayatollahs.

It will also make peace impossible for all time, since according to the rabbis all of the Holy Land between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River belongs solely to the Jews, and giving the Goyim even an inch of it is a mortal sin, punishable by death. For this sin, Yitzhak Rabin was executed by the student of a religious university, a former settler.

Not the whole religious camp subscribes to the unrelenting extremism of Rabbi Lior and his ilk. There are many other trends. But all of these keep quiet. It is Lior, the rabbi who Possesses the Light, and his like-minded colleagues, who chart the course.