

Merkaz HaRav Kook

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The [terrible massacre in Merkaz HaRav Kook last week](#) plumbs new depths in depravity. Teenage kids sitting studying Torah, gunned down in the name of what? God? Allah? Palestine? Islam? Were they combatants? Were combatants making and firing rockets from within the yeshiva itself? Of course not. Then to see the celebrations in Gaza only confirms, even to my liberal mind, that peace is a pipedream. And no doubt Israel will be censored for creating the conditions that led to this apology for a human being doing what he did. There is too much hatred, too deep, too endemic for anything other than separation.

Yet separation has been the policy of recent years. Has it worked? In one way it has. There have been fewer homicide bombers. This is, after all, the first fatal incursion in Jerusalem for four years. It is ironic that it came from an Arab in East Jerusalem who was employed as a driver by the yeshiva. Was he forced into it? Was he blackmailed? Was it just a fatal lapse of security? A lesson that separation was not complete enough? This will only reinforce those who argue against employing any Arabs. But, like the rockets from Gaza, it reminds us that until there is peace we are in a low-grade ongoing war situation and in war everyone suffers to some degree or other.

I studied in [Merkaz HaRav Kook](#) in the early 1960's. It was the spiritual and ideological Mecca (if that is not inappropriate) of the religious Zionist movement. Mizrahi, as it was called in those days, saw itself as the heir to the ideology of the first Rav Kook (Abraham Isaac). It was in the coalition government, led by pragmatic, some would say biddable, politicians of moderate, accommodationist bent. [Rav Tzvi Yehuda Kook](#), the son of the first Chief Rabbi of Israel, was the titular head of the yeshiva then, though by no means its driving force. He saw himself as a dreamer, an ideologue; he surrounded himself with a small group of young rabbinic guards who were dedicated to furthering his messianic dreams and who today hold important positions throughout the country. But, because of the political power of Mizrahi, Rav Tzvi Yehuda and his acolytes were largely ignored.

After the Six-Day War, the messianic fervor that led to the settler movement and to what became known as the Charedi Leumi, the nationalist ultra-Orthodox movement, catapulted Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda into quasi-prophetic status. He and his cadre were the impetus behind the massive expansion in building on the West Bank and the national fervor that followed. They suddenly became the real Zionist pioneers. While the old secular, antireligious Zionists sat drinking coffee in Shenkin Street in Tel Aviv, these young people were following the footsteps of Abraham, settling the land promised by God. And while the black-hatted Charedi world sat refusing military service in the safety of Benei Brak, they were endangering their lives to follow the Biblical word of God to live, to fight, and to study in the actual Promised Land, itself, not a mandated substitute.

Now, once the genie of messianic nationalism is out of bottle, there is no way of getting it back in. From Kahana, to Baruch Goldstein, to [Rabin's assassin](#), the ideology of Rav Tzvi Yehuda was an inspiration for those who refused to compromise, accommodate, or make any concessions to Palestinian aspirations. Whether Rav Tzvi Yehuda was right or wrong is open to debate. That is not the issue I am interested in here. What I find sad is that those very forces unleashed by Merkaz, which suddenly expanded exponentially and moved from its old, cramped building in the centre of town to a new campus in Givat Shaul where it is today, became the hub of the Nationalist Movement. From being a marginal influence on Israeli life, suddenly it and its pupils became incredibly influential. The Mizrahi party completely lost its moderation and moved further and further to an extreme position. It is probably true to say that this sector of Israeli society now represents an ideological elite that has enormous influence in politics and in the army where they are regarded as the fighting elite, where once the kibbutz movement was.

So, it is significant that the perpetrator of the massacre chose Merkaz. Of course, it could be an accident that the terrorist movement found someone to exploit who had convenient access just to this yeshiva. But Merkaz is the icon of diehard nationalism. What could be a more symbolic target? Of course, what it will do is to strengthen the hands of the rejectionists, of those who want no peace, no compromise, and are ready to fight to the bitter end. Maybe that was the intention of Arab rejectionists of all colors.

The religious nationalists may in the end prove to be the victors. There may be no other way. But if they are, it will be a [Pyrrhic victory](#), for all that violence ever brings is more violence. However, if the only way to stay in one's own home is to fight, if Hamas and Hezbollah want total destruction (as they say they do, and why should one not believe them), then what else can one do?

They died studying Torah. It sounds nobler to me than going out to kill, dreaming of [seventy-two virgins](#).