

SHEKALIM 5768

This week we are left to question how our sacred halls of learning have been turned into slaughter houses. Last April we were all in shock as we experienced the death of 32 at Virginia Tech—one of whom was a Jewish/Israeli professor who sacrificed himself to save his students. In February it was Northern Illinois University as 5 were killed. Now, barely 100 miles apart there were 2 Georgia Students: Lauren Burk of Auburn whose family is close to some of our members and Student President Eve Carson of the University of Northern Carolina. All of these were such senseless killings—acts of insanity.

But there was no insanity Thursday night when a Hamas gunman entered the Mercaz Harav Yeshiva in Jerusalem killing 8 students and seriously injuring 10 as they were studying Torah. This was not insanity or random killings. This was pure evil! These students of Torah were target only because they were Jews.

There was a minor miracle in all this. The gunman was killed by 2 older students who carried guns for just this sort of emergency. The students reported that the gunman was also wearing an explosive belt but was killed before he could set it off.

The timing was no coincidence. Thursday night is *mishmar* night in the Yeshiva world—a time when many students study late into the night beginning the process of ushering in the holiness of Shabbos the next day. And this Thursday night was extra special for it was Rosh Chodesh Adar II, a time of celebration for the beginning of the month of Purim. As the Talmud teaches: *Mi shenichnas Adar marbim b'simcha*, “When the month of Adar begins, increase your joy.” And many extra students were there for the celebrations.

The attack on Yeshiva Mercaz Harav was not just another terrorist attack as Calev Ben-David of the *Jerusalem Post* writes: *Rarely have terrorists chosen their target with so much malicious care as in Thursday night's attack... In striking the flagship institution of the religious Zionist movement, a Jerusalem landmark whose history is linked with the founding and fulfillment of the Jewish national home in the Land of Israel, the gunman aimed his weapon at the heart of the Zionist enterprise.*

Mercaz Harav is one of the most highly respected Yeshivot in Jerusalem. Founded in 1924 by Chief Rabbi Avraham Isaac Kook, it is one of the preeminent Zionist Orthodox Schools in Israel today. Some of the most highly respected rabbis in the world today are graduates of Mercaz Harav. This school is also at the very entrance to Jerusalem; it's one of the 1st landmarks one passes upon entering the city.

Who would have thought that terrorists would brazenly enter a place of Jewish learning and prayer? As far as I know it never happened before. My son Josh had been there on many such occasions. He studied in a yeshiva—Shaarei Mevasseret—a few miles away just outside of Jerusalem. My daughter Lea studied for 2 years in Jerusalem, and my son Jonathan will be there—i”yh, Gd willing—in the fall. Believe me, the terror of it all strikes very close to home.

What can we say? How can we respond to such a heinous and cowardly act? This attack is an attack on all of us—an attack on the very idea of a Jewish state.

Journalists have claimed that this was an act of retaliation for the assassination of terror chief, Imad Mughniyeh—as if to say the terror attack was Israel’s fault. But it is not clear who was responsible for his assassination or if Israel was even involved. And if Israel was involved, what does a hand-full of yeshiva students have to do with it? Besides, the rockets that rain down every day from Gaza into Sedeirot and now Ashkelon belie the claim that if Israel will only measure its response to Arab violence it will reduce its severity. No matter how Israel responds to terror, the terrorists have shown they will do what they can whenever they can to kill Jews.

The terrorist’s message Thursday night is clear—no Jew is safe. We felt sorrow this year for people of Sedeirot who live with the daily rockets shot at them from Gaza. Most of us felt, however, that Sedeirot is an “outpost city” and as such is vulnerable to such attacks. But this attack at the entrance to Jerusalem is a clear message—no Jew is safe—not anywhere in Jerusalem or in Israel, and perhaps not even American Jews in their synagogues.

There is, of course, nothing new about bloodshed in Israel—that is the sad truth with which Israelis live. Life there is cheap and expendable. The terrorists with their culture of death hate us more than they love their own children. It reminds me of a statement I copied off the internet some time ago: “If all the Arabs were to lay down their guns there would immediately be peace in the Middle East; if all the Israelis were to lay down their guns, Israel would immediately cease to exist.”

And how do we respond? Our attitude toward bloodshed is seen in the special Torah reading this Shabbos. Shabbat Shekalim celebrates the giving of an annual poll tax, which took place in the month of Adar. The Torah tells us that every Jew over the age of 20 was to donate a ½ shekel for the up-keep of the Temple service. The Torah says: “The rich shall not give more and the poor shall not give less.” The purpose was 2 fold: 1. it was a means of counting the men of drafting age, and 2. it was a *kofer nafsho*, literally, “an atonement for the soul” of each person.

But atonement for what? We find here a concept that is found no where else in the Torah—the idea that one can make atonement for an act or a transgression before the act is even committed. Imagine coming to shule and reciting the Shema 2 times and beat your breast while reciting the *Vidui* confessional before going across the street to Dusty’s and pigging out on a plate of ribs. Perhaps some of you might actually like that. Come to think of it, I might love it!

But reciting the *Vidui* and confessing before one sins makes no sense. The Mishnah says that, “One who says, ‘I will sin and I will repent,’ his repentance will not be effective.” For *Vidui* and repentance to be affect it has to be sincere. So how can one offer an “anticipatory atonement” of a ½ Shekel before shedding the blood of others?

Also, the Torah is clear that bloodshed as an act of self-defense is not a sin. The 10 Commandments does not say, “Thou shalt not kill.” It says, *Lo tirtzach*, meaning, “Thou shalt not murder!” And self-defense is not murder. So why was it necessary to offer an offering of “atonement” at all?

Answer: So we would not create—even permitted—bloodshed easily; so we would not take this license of killing in self-defense for granted. We don't celebrate the death of our enemies—unlike Hamas who were shooting guns in the air and giving out candy to children Thursday night celebrating after the attack.

The giving of the ½ Shekel at the beginning of the month is the counter balance to Purim—the only time on which we outwardly celebrate the death of evil in the guise of Haman and his followers. We are a religion of life, not death. And if we must kill, let us understand that every act of violence diminishes our soul, even when it is committed in self-defense.

We mourn for the 8 students who died Thursday night. We mourn for those who died in Sederot and Ashkelon. We mourn with the people of Israel, who must live in a constant state of vigilance and preparedness for war—who must shed blood in order to preserve blood.

And what can we do, we who live in the Diaspora? We can celebrate the Jewish life that those students can no longer live! We can study the Torah they can no longer study for their lives were cut short. We can rebuild our Yeshivot and shules. We can reach out in caring to our people in Israel, and help heal the wounds that have been left by yet another trauma. We can contribute our ½ Shekel to the welfare of the land of Israel because the upkeep of Israel is as much our responsibility as it is theirs! We can visit Israel and send our children there so that the haters of Israel will know that they cannot stop us!

And we can celebrate this month of Adar, despite the sorrow, and despite the despair. We can say to the world: “We will not let violence destroy our faith in the land of Israel, our pride in the people of Israel and our hope in the Gd of Israel. For we are 1st and foremost a people of life and hope.”

Let us rise for a memorial prayer for the 8 who died:

Yochai Lipschitz, 18, of Jerusalem;

Yonatan Yitzchak Eldar, 16, of Shiloh;

Yonadav Chaim Hirschfeld, 19, of Kochav Hashahar;

Neriah Cohen, 15, of Jerusalem;

Roey Roth, 18, of Elkana;

Segev Pniel Avihayil, 15, of Neveh Daniel;

Avraham David Moses, 16, of Efrat; and

Maharata Trunoch, 26, of Ashdod.

May Hashem guard their souls and comfort us and their families. Amen!

Rabbi Mark Hillel Kunis

3/8/08