

The silent majority must not be silent

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The assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, now a quarter of a century ago, had a profound impact on Jews and non-Jews all over the world. The shock and horror of the news, when it broke, made it one of those moments forever etched in our individual and collective psyches, permanently engraved on our historical memories.

I remember the day vividly. In the early hours of a Sunday morning, the phone rang, waking up the house. It was an Australian journalist seeking a comment from my father about the assassination of the Israeli prime minister by a Jewish Israeli.

I was an idealistic 15-year-old religious Zionist, a passionate member of Bnei Akiva, a religious Zionist youth movement and a student at Leibler Yavneh College, a religious Zionist school. To be told that the sitting Israeli prime minister had been assassinated—not by terrorists, but by a fellow religious Zionist Jew—brought my world crashing down.

I couldn't absorb how this man, this murderer, had contrived—and fully embraced—a religious justification for such extreme and fanatically evil action. Yigal Amir was one of us and had been brought up in a tradition that was not dissimilar to mine.

The perspective I held at the time regarding the Oslo accords was irrelevant. I had watched Rabin shake hands with Yasser Arafat, an arch terrorist, with some trepidation. But I shared Israel's excitement about the prospect of a new peace for the region and I admired Rabin's courage and commitment to deliver a better future for both Israelis and Palestinians.

For myself, like many people in Israel and Australia, I took a certain level of political stability for granted. Sure, we fought, we disagreed, we argued. We were Jewish, after all. But there was a limit. 'Yesh gvul', as they say in Israel. Political assassinations and murder, that was over the limit and beyond the pale. That kind of thing happened in other communities, to other peoples and other nations. After 2000 years of unrelenting persecution, the Jewish people had learnt that, no matter what, human life was sacred. Inviolable. Yet here we were. Like any tinpot regime where political differences are settled not with argument and debate, but with violence.

In simple terms, religious Zionism can be defined as a form of Zionism that believes that Jewish autonomy in the land of Israel has religious, not just political significance. Religious Zionists believe in the Torah, in the eternal and sacred values of the Jewish people but also in the values of the modern world. Science and literature, technology and culture. My family's religious Zionism involved a passionate commitment to our religious values, our Zionist values and our participation in the broader culture simultaneously. None of it was contradictory. It all meshed together.

The ideology and the movement that I had thought I was a part of was one built on integration. Not weak and effete compromises, but on a sturdy and confident form of integration of complementary values. An approach that saw commitment to the Torah and commitment to Zionism as complementary and not contradictory. An approach that saw adherence to ancient values and the embrace of modern institutions not as discord but as harmony. Our heroes were Rav Kook and Rav Soloveitchik, titans of Torah who simultaneously embraced the secular Zionist movement and the teachings of modernity.

Yet, over in Israel, a very different religious Zionism had been fomenting within the broader religious Zionist camp. One that was not built on compromise and harmony but, rather, on something far more radical and extreme. We know that while Yigal Amir pulled

the trigger that ultimately killed the prime minister, this heinous act was not committed in a vacuum. Some rabbis could not resist the temptation of mixing religion and politics and, in doing so, created an atmosphere of hatred and incitement. Few of these leaders called directly for an assassination, but there were many whose rhetoric could be said to have created an atmosphere that allowed—or even prompted—Amir to pull the trigger. Signs dotted the country denouncing Rabin as a traitor. Others depicted him dressed in an SS uniform. Biblical laws and Talmudic interpretations were invoked that made the case not only for the removal of the prime minister, but for his murder.

While the religious Zionist rabbis and the leaders who incited the violence were certainly in the minority within the religious Zionist camp, there were others, both religious and lay leaders, who were vehemently against incitement and murder. Yet their views, by and large, remained unknown to the wider public. Because, at that time, they committed a cardinal sin. They remained silent.

We often talk of a silent majority. There is an urban myth in political circles that while the extremes of both the right and the left are the most vocal, there is a moderate centre that dwarfs both of these extremes.

With the idealism of my 15-year-old self and the resolve of my 40-year-old self, my message is that it is incumbent on all of us—the ‘silent majority’—to abandon our silence; to actively, determinedly call out extremism in any form from any source.

Whether from the left or the right, whether it’s antisemitism, racism, Islamophobia or homophobia.

Whether we’re sitting around the Shabbat table, the university quadrangle or the yeshiva study hall. We must challenge extremism that describes a political leader with a differing view as a ‘traitor’ or separates the world into those ‘for us’ and those ‘against us’.

As Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks says, “when you mix religion and politics, you get terrible politics and even worse religion”. This disease is not unique to the right or the left. Sadly, today it permeates both world views.

Engagement outside of our comfort zones, and respectful, nuanced debate is the only path to a better place for our troubled world.

Recently, new Knesset member Tehila Friedman of the Blue-White party and proud religious Zionist, made a stunning first speech to the Knesset that went viral in both Israel and the Diaspora. Directly attacking this winner-takes-all culture, she departed from the convention of using her first address as an acceptance speech, instead laying out a strong and compelling case for a new and assertive centrism. “My centre is a pre-existing centre, a fervent centre, that is unwilling to compromise on its centrism, on its responsibility for all the residents of the country.”

It is this kind of assertive centrism that must become the most vocal voice in our communities, and hence in our politics. A belief that is proud of compromise and finding a middle path. It is this kind of assertive centrism that led the Zionist Federation of Australia to condemn the merger of the Jewish Home party with the Kahanist Otzma party prior to the last Israeli election. It is this same assertive centrism that guides leaders like Rabbi David Stav to use compassion and sensitivity as a guide in deciding issues of Jewish law.

Extremism is seductive. Yet it only ever leads to destruction and chaos. Twenty-five years after the tragedy of Yitzhak Rabin’s assassination, we, the silent majority, must be silent no longer.