

The genesis of a tragedy

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When Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated on 4 November 1995 it was a terrible shock, but not entirely unexpected. In two years, from September 1993 to August 1995, Israel had experienced 11 suicide bombings by Hamas and Islamic Jihad, leaving 79 people dead and over 50 injured. Most of the bombs were in buses and bus stations—Israelis lived in a state of daily terror as they went to work, to school, to shop or to visit family. The atmosphere was riddled with deep mistrust and fear.

During this period was the signing of the first Oslo agreement by the Government of Israel and the PLO in Washington, DC in 1993, the Paris Protocol of April 1994 and the Interim Agreement in Taba, Egypt in 1995. The accords promised a road to peace with the Palestinians, but for many ordinary Israelis, ‘peace’ was a pipe dream regularly shattered by bombings that struck at the heart of civil society.

On that fateful evening at the Kings of Israel Square in Tel Aviv, Rabin, the Labour Prime Minister of Israel, was celebrating the signing of the peace agreements in a public rally, in which he echoed the famous Beatles’ refrain, “give peace a chance”. Most people assumed that his assailant was yet another Palestinian terrorist. What they did not appreciate was that some Israelis were ready to adopt the same tactics—and even the same target—as their enemies.

To strike at the leader of your own nation is a deeply cynical or desperate act, and one that has many infamous forerunners. Lincoln, Gandhi, Kennedy, Sadat, Indira Gandhi and Benazir Bhutto immediately come to mind, but there are literally hundreds of heads of state that have been assassinated throughout history and in every country. Four American presidents alone have been

assassinated. Perhaps it stands to reason that the most visible representative of a policy with grave consequences for some would be a likely target.

What made the assassination of Rabin especially tragic was that, with a distinguished military background, he took a bold position with the hope that, after having fought for his country, he could now make peace with his enemies. Indeed, his speech on the night of his assassination began with the words, "I wish to thank each and every one of you, who have come here today to take a stand against violence and for peace."

Not everyone present agreed. Yigal Amir was there for the opposite reason, to violently put an end to the man who uttered these words. A law student at Bar Ilan University, Amir was never going to accept a peace that was based on a denial of the Jews' right to settle in the land of their forefathers. For Amir, this made a peace treaty with Yasser Arafat, a man who denied the ancient Jewish heritage of the land and demanded the dismantling of the settlements, nothing but a sham.

Many Israelis would have agreed that peace with Arafat was never going to bring peace to the region, but that did not in any way justify Amir's assassination of Israel's esteemed leader, who hoped against hope that it would. Amir's unforgivable act, which would change Israel's sentencing laws to prevent the parole of a person who murdered a head of state, was completely contrary to the values central to Jewish life and to democracy. Simply put, the belief in the sacred value of life created by God is the driving force in the edifice of Jewish law. Democracy's recognition of an individual's inalienable rights, including and most especially their sacred right to life, is the political expression of this foundational belief.

In the surrounding countries of the Middle East, where political culture relies on militant suppression, theocratic absolutism, and

monarchical power and privilege, Israel's democracy is unique. In a region torn asunder by internecine warfare, tribal genocide and religious bigotry, Israel's democratic government and open society, with equal rights across the religious and gender divide, is nothing short of a miracle.

Like any democracy, Israel's is a hard won and arduous process that aspires to an ideal that is not always fully realised. Israeli society—comprising of a wide variety of Diaspora Jewish communities with diverse languages, skin colours, histories, cultural and political differences—requires an ear sensitive to the rumblings of the disgruntled and disinherited among them.

Amir was a member of one such group, the Yemeni Orthodox (Mizrachi), for whom cultural differences and economic hardship often made entry into the dominant European, Holocaust-survivor community difficult to achieve. Nonetheless, Amir was well on his way up the ladder. One of eight children, he was studying law at Bar Ilan University as part of the Kolel program, combining religious and secular studies, and joining campus protests against the Oslo accords.

In *Heart of Violence: Why people harm each other* (2020), Melbourne psychiatrist and traumatologist Paul Valent considers the biographies of a number of violent men. While he does not include Amir in his study, Valent examines spree killers, such as Martin Bryant, who perpetrated the Port Arthur massacre, and totalitarian leaders such as Hitler, Stalin and Mao. There are some remarkable similarities among them, such as delusions of grandeur grafted onto rather pitiable beginnings and a sense of profound alienation. Valent also identifies 'lovelessness' as a key factor in their lives. Grafted on to ideological visions of conquest and domination, it may be a catalyst in acts of violence that is more significant than political critics have dared to imagine.

It is well known that Amir was in a bad personal state when the Ashkenazi girl with whom he was in love and hoped to marry rejected him at her parents' behest because he was Mizrachi, and instead married his friend. It is also a fact that Amir's mother frequently inflated his ego, believing him to be destined for greatness. The contrast between his mother's unrealistic expectations and his personal experience of love betrayed might have been the emotional trigger inflaming his ideological aspirations and for Amir to make his mark on what he saw as the bigger betrayal of the Jewish people by the Oslo accords. And while no one commits an act of political violence simply because they are lovelorn, it is conceivable that an individual's sense of shame and belief in his unjustified suffering can catapult them into extreme acts for a cause they believe in.

And yet Amir, of all people, should have had a more Jewish response to his disappointment in the leadership of the day. Being a fervent student of Judaism throughout his young life, he would have been aware that the primeval sin of shedding blood—especially within the family—first represented in the Torah as Cain's murder of his brother Abel (Gen 4:8), is the gravest sin in Jewish law and the most reprehensible of all offenses according to Maimonides (Guide for the Perplexed 3:41). Indeed, as the Bible and rabbinic commentaries make clear, the shedding of blood is a disparagement of God's own image, since man is made in God's image (Gen 9:6; Tosefta, Yevamot 8:4, Gen Rabbah 34:4) More poignantly, the sin of the shedding of blood is even thought to be the cause of God turning away from the Land of Israel, and for the Temple to be destroyed (Tosefta Yoma 1:12 , Shabbata 33a; Sifra Numbers 161).

If Amir thought he was theologically justified in shedding blood to protect Israel (as Baruch Goldstein believed when he perpetrated the massacre at the Cave of the Patriarchs on 25 February 1994, killing 29 Palestinian Muslim worshippers, and wounding 125), he was surely confusing an extremist's understand-

ing of Torah against that of the mainstream Orthodox of Israel who condemned Goldstein and his ilk. The irony of extremists like Goldstein and Amir committing acts of murder to achieve their religious goals is precisely the undoing of a tradition and a society that puts the rule of law at the forefront, reasoned debate as its modus operandi and peaceful resolutions as its goal. Neither of these men could argue that either defenseless Muslim worshippers or a leader determined to negotiate a workable peace were a threat to Jewish lives.

The assassination of Rabin reverberated throughout the diplomatic world as a senseless loss of a great and distinguished leader, but it did not change the possibility of peace for Israel. That has always been in the hands of the Palestinian leadership, who have avoided constructive steps and positive attitudes to Israel that are the bare essentials for peace to become a reality.

The Palestinian Authority's current disapproval of Israel's normalisation of relations with Arab countries in the region is further proof that they do not want to give peace a chance.