

The Ghetto Rabbis

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On 29th Teveth 5765 (10/01/2005), a dastardly and profoundly evil thing occurred.

The leaders of the ultra-Orthodox camp in Israel chose to ignore the plight of their brothers in Gaza and Northern Samaria. They chose to ignore the fact that by voting for the morally illegitimate 'national unity' government of Ariel Sharon—a government which defies the will of Israel's voters who resoundingly rejected a unilateral retreat from Gaza —they were lending their hand to the expulsion of ten thousand Jews from their homes and the snuffing out of their livelihoods, turning happy and proud Jews into refugees.

Clearly this obscene policy contravenes many of the Tora's cardinal precepts: the nullification of the commandment to settle the Land; the wanton destruction of lives and property; the obliteration of yeshivoth and the desecration of graves. Not to mention endangering the continued existence of the Jewish state, and at the very least creating a new bridgehead for military operations against Israel. And for what? Not one of the haredi rabbis has claimed that a unilateral retreat from Gaza under present circumstances is wise policy. It is public knowledge that most of their number opposes this decision as unsound and certain to lead to the deaths of many Jews. And make no mistake: the vast majority of the haredi public hold right-wing views. So what went wrong?

Let's call a spade a spade, or in this case, let's call a bribe a bribe—for this colossal betrayal came with a colossal price tag. Sharon, arguably the most corrupt Israeli PM ever, had to promise 690 million NIS for haredi educational institutions. It is certain that the so-called United Tora Judaism party would not have voted for Sharon's proposal without the promise of funding. So it was the money.

We might well ask ourselves: Do we have the right to be surprised? Have haredi leaders not made similarly calamitous decisions in the past, particularly when offered ample incentives? Was it not Shas who twelve years ago abstained on the crucial vote on the Oslo accords, thus ensuring its passage—and facilitating the carnage, misery and despair which have been the hallmarks of our existence ever since?

It would appear that Tommy Lapid (leader of the anti-religious Shinui party) was right: the haredim will indeed sell their mother, or at least their motherland. It would appear that money is the clincher for the rabbinical leaders who made this call. True, the funds are earmarked for Torah institutions—but can one accept a prostitute's wages in order to support the study of Torah?

At the time of the original Knesseth vote on Sharon's planned retreat under fire, UTJ's representatives explained that they voted against the plan because they dislike (sic!) the idea of expelling Jews from their homes. But they quickly added that their Halakhic authority, Rabbi Elyashiv, did not make a pronouncement on the matter "because Sharon had the votes anyway, so we voted with our hearts but not necessarily our minds". (This claim, incidentally, is untrue: 67 MK's eventually supported Sharon, including seven haredi votes). Thus UTJ was able to vote both for (in the end) and against (initially) PM Sharon's policies. How convenient.

Is it not legitimate to wonder about a sage who does not see that it is totally immoral to receive monies for yeshivas as a payoff for turning a blind eye to the destruction of entire towns in the

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Land of Israel and the deportation of their citizenry (as long as it's not one's own constituency)? Is it improper to question the decision of a rabbi who sees only today and tomorrow but misses the big picture: that we are in the midst of a battle for the soul of Israel, a struggle between those who believe in the concept of a Jewish state and those who wish for nothing more than a state of Jews, or even a morally neutral 'state of its citizens'? What are we to think of a spiritual leader who fails to comprehend that Sharon's policies are aimed at maintaining the present oligarchy of a small but well-entrenched establishment which has marked the settlers and their supporters – and if the truth be told, all Tora Jews – as the only real threat to their continued reign and who must therefore be broken at all costs?

The haredi rabbis see themselves as guests in the land of the secular Jew. "Let the 'goyim' decide. Give us our yeshivas and leave us alone. Whose idea was this state anyway?" – this is the mentality that animates them. Their policy on 'foreign' and defence issues is not to have a policy. After all, it would be unseemly for the guest to tell the master of the house what to do.

The bare truth is that the haredi rabbis prefer it this way; they would rather let such issues be decided by others. The haredi leaders consider the state of Israel to be a new form of exile. Their aim is to function and survive as Jews did in Europe for centuries "until the Messiah arrives" – and in the meantime lead the life of a ghetto Jew, a disenfranchised nobody wielding no real control over his own destiny. Tragically lacking in their makeup is a healthy dose of self-respect – the *sine qua non* of wholesome and honourable human enterprise.

Haredi rabbinical leaders have demonstrated time again that they will always prefer their narrow sectarian interests over those of the nation. This chronic lack of vision leads them repeatedly to make decisions that are immoral, evil and indefensible.

And this is why they cannot possibly provide the Tora leadership that the Jewish nation requires and deserves.