

# COMMENT & FEATURES

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## Wrong cause

Many injustices plague Palestinian society, few of which can be blamed on the Jewish state, even by the farthest stretches of the imaginations of Israel's enemies. These are self-inflicted injustices.

In the Gaza Strip, an Islamic quasi-state ruled by the totalitarian regime of Hamas has in the past few weeks arrested or summoned for interrogation at least 16 journalists as part of a campaign aimed at intimidating the local media, as reported by *The Jerusalem Post's* Khaled Abu Toameh.

These journalists' only crime is daring to criticize Hamas's leadership.

And the situation for journalists in the West Bank, which is ruled by the "moderate" Palestinian Authority, is not much better. Just last week, a PA court sentenced 26-year-old Anas Said Awwad to one year in prison for "insulting" President Mahmoud Abbas on Facebook. Awwad was found guilty of depicting Abbas as a member of the Real Madrid soccer team.

In both Gaza and the West Bank the Palestinian political leadership has suffered from a fundamental lack of legitimacy for the past four years. Besides municipal votes, the last democratic election in Gaza and the West Bank took place in 2006. Palestinians were supposed to hold elections again in 2009. But after Hamas's victory in the last election, Palestinian leadership was split.

With Western support, the Fatah-led PLO managed to maintain control over the West Bank. In Gaza, Hamas launched a violent and successful putsch in which Fatah members were shot down in the streets or thrown off buildings. Warnings by Israel that if Hamas were allowed to participate, Palestinians' first truly democratic election (Hamas boycotted the 1996 vote) would be their last were not heeded by then-US president George Bush.

Yet, neither the jailing and intimidation of journalists (and other human rights abuses), nor the lack of democratic representation in their political leadership, has mobilized Palestinians in a significant way. At best, rallies are occasionally organized under the vague banner of "Palestinian unity."

Instead, Palestinians – and Arab citizens of Israel – are rallying under a different banner: the rights of Palestinian terrorists in Israeli jails. Palestinians and Israel's Arabs, threatening a third intifada, have been demonstrating against the "injustice" of Israel's rearrest of terrorists who are among the 1,027 Palestinian prisoners released in October 2011 under the Egypt-brokered deal between Hamas and Israel for the return of IDF soldier Gilad Shalit.

Samer Tariq Ahmad Essawi, a member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, is one of the rearrested terrorists. Essawi was captured in April 2002 and later sentenced to 30 years for possessing weapons and for helping to form terrorist cells in the Jerusalem area. He was one of many terrorists arrested during Defensive Shield, the military operation carried out under then-prime minister Ariel Sharon that essentially ended the second intifada and restored security to Israelis who had been regular victims of suicide bombings and shootings.

Another rearrested prisoner is Ayman Sharawna, who was arrested for helping carry out a terrorist attack in Beersheba. On the morning of May 11, 2002, two Palestinian terrorists placed an improvised bomb near a group of civilians in the Old City of Beersheba and fled. A technical fault prevented the bomb from exploding fully. Eighteen civilians were wounded. Sharawna was sentenced to 38 years imprisonment.

Both men were released in the Shalit deal and both men subsequently violated the conditions of their release. Sharawna returned to terrorist activities with Hamas, according to the IDF, and was arrested in January 2012.

Essawi, who was freed on condition he remain inside Jerusalem, left the city to visit the nearby PA town of a-Ram and was arrested in July 2012. Both men must now finish out their original sentences.

Inexplicably, Palestinians – and Israel's Arab citizens – have chosen to champion the causes of these hunger-striking terrorists and others while ignoring the fates of journalists arrested, beaten, censored and arrested by their own political leadership, which for four years now has been ruling without democratic legitimacy. Under the circumstances, what prospects for peace can US President Barack Obama hope for when he visits the region next month?



PEOPLE CELEBRATE Purim in Jerusalem. (Marc Israel Sellem/The Jerusalem Post)

## Unmasking the Purim story

• By SHIMSHON HAKOHEN NADEL

Purim celebrates a miraculous salvation that took place over 2,000 years ago, in the Persian-Median Empire. But its message is as relevant today as ever.

Purim literally means a lottery, a reference to the lot that the wicked Haman drew. The name of the holiday implies fate and chance – the roll of the dice, the luck of the draw.

And at first glance, the story of Purim appears to be a series of mere coincidences. When reading the megillah, you get the feeling that the narrative is written like a great piece of classical literature: Heroes and villains, high drama and suspense, climax and denouement. The fabric of the story is tightly woven. The plot thickens with all of its twists and turns.

But behind this "storybook drama" lies something profound. According to Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, one of the lessons of the Purim story is that man is vulnerable. One minute everything is fine and then suddenly, without warning, the Jewish People across the entire Persian Empire are confronted with the threat of destruction.

Is this story merely a string of events strung together

with no meaning? Is life just a series of events? Are we merely subject to the whim of an evil tyrant? A pliable king?

*Esther* is one of the books of our holy Bible, but God is not mentioned, not even once. According to our tradition, He is hiding. The Talmud (Hullin 139b) asks, "Where is [there an allusion to] Esther in the Torah?" The Talmud then cites the verse from the Torah's admonition that speaks of hester panim – God seemingly hiding His face amidst Jewish suffering – "And I will surely hide (haster astir) My face from you."

And yet, there is a tradition that in the book of Esther, when we read the word ha-Melekh, "the King," it's not only a reference to King Achashverosh, but therein lies an allusion to God, the King of Kings.

ON PURIM, we are challenged to see God, the King, in the narrative; to search for him; to seek him out. He appears to be "hidden," in the fabric of this tightly woven tale, but indeed He is pulling the strings from behind the curtain.

The name of the book itself *Megillat Esther*, in fact, can be understood to mean "revealing the hidden." But it's not enough to see God in the Purim story; we are challenged to find him in the narrative of our lives:

in our trials and tribulations, in the vicissitudes of life; the ups and downs of our personal lives. And it's true for our national life as well – Purim challenges us to see God behind the curtain on the stage of modern history as it unfolds before our eyes.

Purim is a topsy-turvy day. Everything is upside down. We hide behind costumes to remind us that to truly see is to peel back the layers of perception. Some drink in excess to access a deeper reality, one beyond logic or reason. We recognize that redemption can come in places we least expect it, and that the plans and schemes of our enemies can be foiled just as quickly as they were hatched.

Being human, we are limited in our ability to understand. Tragic events seem senseless, without a rhyme or reason. World events can seem confusing, with the future uncertain. On Purim, we recognize that God's hand is guiding it all. The King is working behind the scenes.

We may not understand all of the twists and turns of the plot, but we know the Author.

*The writer lives and teaches in Jerusalem and is the author of Mishteh Shmshon on the Laws of Purim. His forthcoming book is Return Again: The Argument for Aliyah.*

## Elect Rabbi Stav to revamp the Rabbinate

• By DAVID M. WEINBERG

In June 98 rabbis, 35 mayors and 17 public figures will vote in secret ballot to elect Israel's next chief rabbi for a 10-year term. But in truth, the identity of the new chief rabbi will likely be determined between now and March 17 in the current negotiations for formation of a new coalition government.

This decision may be as important as any issue on the national security or domestic agenda, and I call upon Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu to get behind the right man for the Ashkenazi chief rabbi job – Rabbi David Stav, head of the Modern Orthodox, Religious Zionist "Tzohar" rabbinical alliance.

Unlike other countries where "chief rabbi" is mainly an honorary title and the "chief" primarily serves a ceremonial role, the Israeli Chief Rabbinate (and its satellite bureaus in municipalities, rabbinical courts and kashrut agencies) is a powerful governmental agency with thousands of employees that has a dramatic impact on the lives of every Jewish man and woman in Israel, from birth to death.

Issues such as Jewish status, conversion, marriage, divorce, burial and more are all legally regulated by the Rabbinate. Moreover, decisions of the Israeli Chief Rabbinate have enormous impact on the Jewish status, legitimacy, and affiliation with Israel of Jews around the world.

Unfortunately, over the past 20 years the increasingly haredi-dominated Rabbinate has misused its powers, applying extreme stringencies in matters of personal status and conversion, creating many bureaucratic obstacles to practicing Judaism in Israel, and fostering deep resentment within both religious and secular Jewish and among Jews around the world.

In fact, the chief rabbinate has evolved into a force that is deeply contrary to the inclusive Zionist spirit it once embodied. All Jews – Left and Right, religious and secular, settler and suburban – pay the price. The Rabbinate bureaucracy, or "Rabbinocracy," must be rehabilitated, its mandate redefined, and its radicalization curbed.

IT WASN'T always this way.

For Israel's first 40 years, rabbis of the Religious Zionist (or Modern Orthodox) community dominated the Rabbinate apparatus, and used it both to advance Shabbat and kashrut observation in Israel's public sphere, and to bridge the cultural gaps between religious and secular Israelis.

In general, this community's rabbis and religious court judges were moderate and welcoming in their approach and demeanor. They were part of, not aloof from, the Zionist ethos of the country, serving in the Israeli army and living side-by-side with their "congregants." They believed that they were the servants of all Israelis, and as such, they ran the Orthodox Rabbinic bureaucracy with love, relative efficiency, and openness – without compromising halachic principles.

But in the 1990s, the political Left handed the keys to Israel's Jewish character to the Ultra-Orthodox, in order to purchase haredi support for the Oslo process and the disengagement. Haredi rabbis began a slow but inexorable conquest of city rabbinates, religious courts, conversion courts, municipal religious councils, kashrut agencies and more, turning the Rabbinate into a hostile, contrary, backwards force that created more problems than it solved.

It is, sadly, no surprise that today one-fifth of Israeli couples marry abroad. That's 10,000 couples. If the chief rabbinate doesn't clean up its act, researchers estimate that within a decade the number of couples marrying outside the Rabbinate will jump 40 percent.

Which brings us to the current crossroads: The ideological approaches to the unity of the Jewish People of the new chief rabbis (Ashkenazi and Sephardic) will play a major role in determining the fortunes of Judaism as a creed, as a practice, and as a national identity for coming generations. Their success or failure in repairing and revitalizing the "Rabbinocracy" will save or doom that institution, as well.

Simply put, it is critical that broad-minded, moderate, vigorous and Zionist rabbinical figures be elected to the posts of chief rabbi. We need chief rabbis who

enjoy significant public credibility, have concrete executive experience, and most of all, come to the job with the right attitude. We need chief rabbis who will put a premium on synthesizing tradition with modernity, and on efficient, user-friendly service, while neither compromising halacha nor insolently stonewalling secular Israel.

Of course, we also need chief rabbis of respectable rabbinical standing, but they don't have to be the "Gedolei Hador" – the ultimate, high-end halachic arbiters of the generation. The job is managerial and ideological, not scholarly.

RABBI DAVID STAV is such a figure. The current chief rabbi of the City of Shoham, he is the co-founder and chairman of Tzohar, which over the past 20 years has proven its commitment to Jewish unity, and its creativity and efficiency in making religious ritual life accessible and relevant to the broad public.

He is a serious, exacting and halachically-faithful rabbi, endorsed by some today's leading yeshiva deans and Torah giants. Unlike many Ultra-Orthodox rabbis, Stav also served in combat as a soldier and reservist, and his eldest son is a paratroop commander.

Stav has developed a detailed and responsible plan for deep and long-lasting reforms of the Rabbinocracy. He would encourage couples to sign prenuptial agreements to ensure wives can request a divorce, a right not granted to them in the traditional Jewish marriage contract.

He would privatize the kosher certification industry and make the chief rabbinate its regulator, lowering the soaring prices of kosher supervision and rooting out corruption in the process.

He would make ritual baths more handicapped-accessible, require ritual circumcisers to refresh their skills in training classes every two years, and require strict attendance and performance standards in the rabbinical courts to clear away backlog and ensure friendly service.

He promises a massive genealogical research campaign to help Russian (and other) immigrants prove their Jewish lineage, and to encourage those who are

not of Jewish descent to convert. And he would encourage the academization of the rabbinate, and make Zionist commitment a relevant qualifying factor for appointment to senior rabbinical posts.

"My candidacy is 'for' the Rabbinate and not 'against' it," emphasized Stav. "We are for uniting the Jewish people with their Torah heritage, for bringing all Jews closer to God. We are for uniting the Israeli people as one. This is what we did for close to two decades at Tzohar and this is the spirit: Inclusivity, not exclusion or coercion." Netanyahu has yet to express an opinion on the qualities he looks for in a chief rabbi, mainly for fear of alienating his long-standing haredi coalition partners. It's high time he did so, and show that he truly wants to be the prime minister of all Israelis and elect a chief rabbi who will act for the benefit of all Israelis.

It is also incumbent on the 52 mayors and public figures that are on the voting committee to speak up and take a stand, if they want a chief rabbinate that truly takes a "Klal Yisrael" approach.

Naftali Bennett, too, hasn't yet committed himself to the campaign for Stav, and this is truly disappointing. Bennett and his Bayit Yehudi colleagues are under tremendous pressure from conservative (haredi-influenced or "hardal") circles within Religious Zionism to support candidates that are less liberal than Stav.

While the other two Religious Zionist candidates – rabbi Eliezer Igra and Yaacov Shapira – are worthy individuals, neither can match Stav's executive experience in driving change. Neither Igra nor Shapira have Stav's proven record in bridging the religious-secular divide, and neither has the support of any secular Israelis.

Stav does have the backing of a group of secular Jews who wish to see the chief rabbinate once again become a positive force for Jewish identity and affiliation. Bennett should re-assert the primacy of religious-secular unity and inclusiveness that was a hallmark of his political campaign – by endorsing Stav.

*The writer is the director of public affairs at Bar-Ilan University's Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies.*

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