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Haredi Violence in Contemporary Israeli Society

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I would like to begin by describing and analyzing an event that took place some decades ago and to use that as the framework for the ensuing discussion.

The spread of permissive American culture in Israel in the early 1970s brought with it the opening of so-called “sex shops” in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. This development met with displeasure in many circles, and especially within Israel’s haredi (ultra-Orthodox) society, which viewed it as a manifestation of the moral deterioration of secular Israeli society. One night in the summer of 1972, two yeshiva students set fire to the store in Tel Aviv, and the resulting conflagration endangered the lives of the building’s other residents. The perpetrators were arrested and charged with the crime; on the day of their arraignment, protest demonstrations were held in Jerusalem and in Bnei Brak. *Hamodia*, the newspaper of the Agudat Israel party, castigated the police for its “cruelty” toward the two young men. After they were convicted and sentenced to prison, a public and political campaign was launched to ease the conditions of their imprisonment and secure an early release. Although the torching of the “store of abominations,” as they called it, was clearly an act of violence that not only damaged the store but also threatened the lives and property of the building’s residential tenants, the haredi “street” was in clear sympathy with the two arsonists. This fact was a cause of great concern to Moshe Sheinfeld (1910–1975), one of the leading ideologues of the haredi “scholar-society” (*hevrat lomdim*).

Sheinfeld, who was not a rabbi, achieved an unusual status in haredi circles in Israel. He was a leader of the Agudat Israel youth movement, which was located on the extreme right of Agudat Israel. His articles, published mainly in the movement’s newspaper, *Diglenu*, had a considerable influence on the haredi scholar-society, centered in the yeshivas and in the *kolelim*, that by the 1970s had become a major influence in Agudat Israel. Sheinfeld, whose religio-political perspective was close to that of the more extreme Neturei Karta, was disturbed by the fact that haredi society viewed the two arsonists as heroes. His response was set out in an article titled “Violence—A Foreign Branch in our Education!” which appeared in *Niv hamoreh*, the journal of the semi-autonomous Agudat Israel educational system (*hinukh ’azmai*). Although *Niv hamoreh* was a relatively obscure publication, the

views expressed in it contribute greatly to our understanding of the phenomenon of religio-ideological violence in haredi society.

Sheinfeld opens characteristically by stating the heart of the problem from his standpoint:

As much as Torah [= haredi] Judaism has invested supreme efforts in erecting spiritual walls to separate us from the erring secular Jews [*hilonim*], the winds pass through them and affect our tender youth in particular. Heaven forbid that we should adopt an ostrich-like stance and ignore the spreading manifestations of violence that are increasingly leaving their mark on the haredi street. Whoever makes light of these phenomena and draws comfort from the saying, "Let the young men now arise and play before us" [II Sam. 2:14], has blinded himself to the gravity of the anticipated consequences and the foul wells from which they spring forth.¹

Sheinfeld sees the phenomenon of religio-ideological violence in haredi society not as intrinsically Jewish, but as imitative of past and current trends in modern secular society and as part of the permissive world of modernity:

The evil winds that poison the atmosphere in the secular street of late are gradually taking hold in our midst. It comes as no comfort that they wear the cloak of zealotry. If we view the matter clearly, we shall discover that this mantle is deceptive and tainted with hooliganism.²

Not only was Sheinfeld aware of the link joining the arsonists with traditional Jewish zealots; he was also aware that a majority of haredim viewed them in this light. This was most disturbing, as in his view, it endangered the future of haredi society as a whole. Such zealotry, he believed, gave expression to an irresponsibility among youth that bordered on outright rebellion against the rabbis and yeshiva heads.

Sheinfeld was far from naive. He was fully aware of manifestations of violent religious zealotry toward those who deviated from Jewish tradition. However, there was another aspect of the torching of the sex shop that frightened him in particular. Not only did such violence endanger those Jews ("infants, elderly, and probably sick people as well") living in the building, it further jeopardized the status and security of the haredi world within an already hostile Israeli society. In Sheinfeld's view, although haredi Jews lived in the state of Israel, nonetheless they still were in "golus," or exile.³ What is more, the rules for living in golus as a persecuted minority vis-à-vis the surrounding society had to be adhered to even more strictly in Israel, precisely because it was "golus among brethren":

During thousands of years of golus, we learned how to live as a minority among a hateful majority . . . how to cultivate the degree of separation that protects us from imitation, absorption, and intermingling with those who are different, and how to duck one's head under the evil waves, in the hope and faith that the waves will pass and we will remain whole. Golus among brethren is immeasurably more searing and painful [than that among the Gentiles], but the same rules of experience and life wisdom apply. The future of Torah Judaism depends upon developing reserves of young people and keeping them within its bounds, as at the foot of Mt. Sinai our forefathers declared, our children are the guarantors [of our future].⁴

It was precisely Sheinfeld's extreme anti-Zionism that made him so fearful that religio-ideological violence would expose haredi society to the vengeance of the secular Zionist majority. In support of his position, Sheinfeld drew upon the experience of the religious underground movements that were active in the early 1950s.⁵ "Since the founding of the state," he wrote,

a negative opinion has crystallized among the great rabbinical leaders of our generation against illegal demonstrations, and even more so against violent activity. When a religious underground was organized in Jerusalem and set fire to cars that had been driven on the holy Sabbath, the Hazon Ish, of revered memory, issued a public condemnation.⁶ And not only that, he also expressed the view that the arsonists were deemed pursuers [*rodfim*] of the Torah-abiding community—as had been determined halakhically in the case of Jewish counterfeiters in the countries of the non-Jews, who by their deeds had endangered the Jewish collective.⁷

As noted, Sheinfeld was not a political innocent, and the title of his article, "Violence—A Foreign Branch in Our Education!" did not give expression to some historical or social truth. By the mid 1950s, the phenomenon of violent underground organizations had virtually disappeared. Significantly, during this time, haredi society had been transformed into a scholar-society in which all males studied in yeshivas and continued learning in *kolelim* for many years after marrying. Located within what sociologists define as "total institutions," which maintain strict social supervision at all times, these students were wholly subject to the authority of the rabbis and the yeshiva heads.⁸ Since the latter were highly apprehensive of the dangers of religious violence, they acted to suppress all hints of such activity. The fact that yeshiva and *kolel* students did not serve in the Israeli army and were therefore not practiced in the use of weapons and explosives also militated against the further development and maintenance of an armed haredi underground.

Nonetheless, the potential for violence continued to exist. What Sheinfeld and others saw in religious undergrounds (he expressed this explicitly in his article) was the trend toward a lack of student discipline with regard to their rabbis, alongside the silent "surrender" of some of the rabbis to acts of religio-ideological violence. Moreover, the haredi scholar-society was by definition comprised of idealistic young people situated in a pre-adult moratorium⁹—a situation that could well provide fertile ground for an ideology of violence and zealotry. The only barrier to such a development was a tough and unequivocal stance on the part of the religious leadership. In the case of the torching of the sex shop, it was precisely in this regard that Sheinfeld discerned signs of weakness. And it is likely that his fears were shared by others in the haredi world.

Those who knew Sheinfeld were aware that he would never publish such an article without the explicit backing of at least one of the *gedolim*—the recognized great Torah scholars of the haredi community. Indeed, it is not beyond the realm of possibility that the initiative for it came from one or more of the *gedolim*. At the same time, the fact that the latter chose not to give public expression to their opinions suggests that there was greater solidarity and identification in the haredi community with the arsonists and the justice of their cause than with Sheinfeld and his fears. This perhaps explains why the article was published in a relatively obscure journal rather than in the more widely circulated daily or weekly haredi newspapers.

In haredi society, incidents involving the use of varying degrees of violence are a common occurrence. Nevertheless, manifestations of extreme violence and terror—acts of serious and permanent physical injury and killing—are utterly taboo. Although the burning down of the “store of abominations” belongs in this category, haredi society’s identification with the perpetrators is explicable in the particular context: the neighbors and their apartments did not in fact suffer any significant damage, whereas the arsonists were perceived as sacrificing themselves on the altar of the ideals of “societal purity.” But they never served as a model for emulation, and subsequent incidents of arson to maintain society “purity” were few and far between. From this perspective, haredi society is clearly unusual in that the potential for violence within it does not culminate in bloodshed but rather is defined, circumscribed, and controlled, both by means of education that penetrates deeply into haredi consciousness and by the effective social control that characterizes the haredi way of life.

As mentioned, religio-ideological violence is not a “foreign branch” but is directly connected with a central theme in the Jewish tradition, namely the myth of Pinhas the zealot, as recounted in Num. 25:1–13. Every traditional Jewish child knows the story of Pinhas, the grandson of Aharon the high priest, who, showing his zeal for God, speared to death an Israelite named Zimri (a chief of the tribe of Shimon) and the Midianite woman with him “in the sight of all Israel,” and thereby brought about the end of a plague and earned the divine blessing of a “covenant of peace.” Yet by the same token, every child in traditional Jewish society is aware of the talmudic interpretation of the phenomenon of violent religious zealotry, as expressed in Rashi’s commentary. Neither is there a *talmid hakham*—a Torah scholar—who is unaware of the talmudic discussion on religious zealotry that appears in Sanhedrin 81b-82a.

The talmudic discussion opens with the mishnah:

Whoever steals the *kasva* [believed to be a Temple decoration], utters magic curses, or has sexual relations with an Aramean woman—zealots shall put him to death.

In explicating this passage, the Talmud presents the opinion of R. Hisda:

If one seeks advice from the court [because he had witnessed such forbidden acts], they do not instruct him [to kill the transgressor].

To this, Raba bar-Hana and R. Yohanan add:

They should not instruct him to kill, and moreover, referring to the case of Zimri, if the latter had separated himself [from the Midianite woman] and Pinhas had nevertheless killed him, he [Pinhas] would have been put to death for it. [However], had Zimri turned about and killed Pinhas [in self-defense], he would not have been put to death for it, since Pinhas was a *rodef*.

In this talmudic discussion, the ambivalence of the attitude toward violent zealotry is palpable. On the one hand, Pinhas is doubtless an exemplary character, but on the other hand, there is a conscious tendency to prevent his becoming a model worthy of emulation. Here we find the equation “zealot = *rodef*” that Sheinfeld (following halakhic precedent) had used and expanded: where the Jewish people are a small, persecuted minority within a hostile society, any action (even one involving violent zealotry) that might provoke governmental action against the entire Jewish collective

falls within the category of *redifah*, or “pursuing,” and everything must be done to prevent it, even at the cost of endangering the zealot.

In Jewish society, and particularly within the state of Israel, this equation served to impose prior restraints and boundaries upon acts of violent zealotry. Moreover, would-be religious zealots were of necessity constrained by the sense of Jewish solidarity that is rooted deeply in haredi consciousness. The concept of a *hiloni* (secular) Jewish identity never received legitimation from any segment of Orthodoxy; despite some tendencies in that direction, secular Jews were never denied full membership in the holy nation of Israel. This fundamental sense of ethnic solidarity with all Jews was strengthened in recent generations by the experience of the Holocaust, which heightened the recognition among haredim of the shared fate and mutual dependence of all Jews in the modern world. These feelings, too, have helped to curb violent activities by haredi zealots. For example, in the 1950s, members of the Neturei Karta stamped prayer books in Meah Shearim synagogues with the words: “Would that the state of ‘Israel’ be destroyed, but without any Jew being injured, heaven forbid.”¹⁰ And when, during Israel’s lengthy war in Lebanon, *Der Yid*, the newspaper of the Satmar hasidim in the United States, declared, “We hope and yearn for the speedy passing [of the state of Israel],” it incurred the wrath of another Orthodox newspaper, *Algemeine tzeitung*, which pointed out that destruction of the state would endanger the lives of “hundreds of thousands of Jews.”¹¹ In response, *Der Yid* wrote:

Simple Jews know well that the omniscient and omnipotent Lord of the Universe knows how to conduct His world in lovingkindness and mercy and to remove the restraints and delays to the coming of the Messiah, without, heaven forbid, harming any Jew. . . . He who passed over the houses of Israel in Egypt and saved those awaiting redemption will also show us miracles in the future redemption, when the time comes.¹²

This perception, as noted, is rooted so deeply in haredi consciousness that it was almost beyond reason that groups or individuals would ever organize violent actions endangering the lives of any Jews, including *hilonim*.

Zealotry as represented by the Neturei Karta is deemed by haredi society to be “passive” insofar as its adherents are willing to endanger themselves by their activities and literally “offer their backs to their assailants.”¹³ From its inception, Neturei Karta viewed itself as antimilitaristic, as the group charged with preserving the *golus* tradition of passive resistance, as against the Zionist resort to force. Neturei Karta began in the 1930s as an internal opposition within Agudat Israel, in protest against the latter’s coming to terms with the Zionist movement and its enterprise in the Holy Land. It adopted the name Neturei Karta (“guardians of the city”) to highlight its opposition to the *kofer hayishuv*—a voluntary tax collected by the Yishuv’s Zionist leadership to finance the establishment of an armed force to guard Jewish settlements and residential neighborhoods from attacks and incursions during the Arab rebellion (1936–1939). Neturei Karta argued that only vigilant observance of the mitzvot, not military weapons, would protect the Jews under attack. In its view, a Jewish society that was not committed to upholding halakhah could not be sustained: “If the Lord does not watch over the city, in vain does the guard keep vigil; if the Lord does not build the house, in vain do the workers toil” (Ps. 127:1–2). Thus, it was not the police and sol-

diers who guarded the city, but rather those Torah students who faithfully observed its commandments.

In a eulogy of R. Amram Blau (d. 1974), the head of Neturei Karta, Sheinfeld emphasized the leader's passive zealotry:

Many battles were waged by R. Amram Blau in his life. . . . He failed in many struggles, but he never made victory the condition for engaging in battle. R. Amram fought because he could not do otherwise. . . . Approximately 30 years ago, I witnessed an unforgettable scene: about an hour before the end of the holy Sabbath, the Edison cinema in Jerusalem opened its ticket booth. R. Amram did not hesitate to stick his head into the narrow opening. He paid no attention to the vicious blows, hair-pulling, and pinching inflicted upon him by cinema employees inside the booth. He did not even let out a slight cry of pain. His joy at preventing the sale of tickets enabled him to drive out the pain and torture. Alone, he continued to carry on the work until the stars emerged. This sight of individual heroism, of one who does not retaliate and does not even attempt to defend himself, so impressed his tormentors that they let up and looked at him with evident admiration.¹⁴

This description is only partially faithful to historical truth. Neither Blau nor his associates and followers renounced completely all forms of violence, as will be seen. Significantly, Sheinfeld reflects the standard view in haredi society that the religious zealot in Israel today—the present-day Pinhas—does not kill deviants for their public Sabbath desecration or consumption of forbidden food but rather protests such behavior, even at the cost of subjecting himself to violent attack; as Sheinfeld put it, such a person “does not retaliate and does not even attempt to defend himself.” More important: if in the case of the biblical Pinhas, the zealot's violent act of killing the sinner constitutes the “termination” of their reciprocal relationship, in the case of Neturei Karta zealots such as Amram Blau, such acts are understood as an integral component of a complex and ongoing relationship with the zealot's secular “victim” that is based on both sides' recognition of their common identity and shared fate as Jews. From such a perspective, this reciprocal relationship lies in the “victim's” positive evaluation of the violent zealot, if only because the latter is perceived as sacrificing himself on the altar of his own belief. Indeed, one might go so far as to assert that the perception of Neturei Karta as zealots is contingent upon the “deviant” Israeli society's evaluation of them as idealists prepared to endure violence because of their faith. By the same token, their role as zealots requires the presence of a sinning and deviant Israeli society—even though they pray for its passing.

There are two underlying reasons why violence is not foreign to haredi society in Israel. To begin with, central to its self-definition is the belief that it is constantly at war to defend its way of life from the inroads of modernity and secularization, with the nonreligious segments of Israeli society reflecting the process of secularization in its most blatant and dangerous form. This war, it should be noted, has gone on for generations—indeed, ever since the development of Orthodoxy (especially its haredi variety), which arose in direct opposition to the movements for change that transformed traditional Jewish society in Europe during the 19th century. The rules and forms of the contemporary haredi war against modernity and secularization, including those relating to the use of violence, were determined in an earlier period and later

further sanctified by the continued endorsement of the *gedolim*, the supreme authorities in haredi society.

An analysis of the violent activities of haredi zealots, therefore, must take into account their relationship with the relevant great Torah scholars. Elsewhere, I have shown that the reciprocal relations between the two are not simple and harmonious but rather are complex, and include an inherent element of structural tension. Both sides need and are dependent upon each other. At the same time, zealotry is intrinsically violent, and must therefore be controlled by the *gedolim*. Their failure to do so will lead haredi society into dangerous territory from which it may be extracted only with great difficulty.¹⁵

Detailed descriptions of the complex relationships between great Torah authorities and the zealots under their wing may be found in haredi literature. Sheinfeld, for example, discusses events in the 1950s—the Neturei Karta's "war years"—when its adherents placed themselves at the forefront of the haredi struggle against Sabbath desecration in Jerusalem's haredi neighborhoods. At the time, one of the great Torah authorities, R. Yitzhak Zev (Velveleh) Soloveitchik, whose earlier endorsement and legitimation of the Neturei Karta were well known, requested them to moderate their activities on the grounds that their violent acts were proof that they were entrapped in the evil "shell" (*kelipah*) of Zionism.¹⁶

In sum, violence is the direct outcome of haredi society's definition of its situation as being under constant threat by outside forces. At the same time, however, violence in haredi society results from the fact that it is internally divided and lacks a powerful and accepted leadership with the authority to make binding decisions on the fateful questions confronting it. These conditions afford various zealots the latitude needed both to use violence and to obtain the required protection and support among the various autonomous and competing Torah authorities. In this respect, rather than being directed outwardly at the secular population and its "religious" supporters, haredi violence and zealotry are directed inward, against those political leaders—and even great Torah authorities—who commit the cardinal sin of seeking a *modus vivendi* with the surrounding Jewish secular society. It follows, therefore, that violence not only exists but is inherent in the economic, social, and political situation with which haredi society must contend.

With this understanding, it becomes possible to distinguish between two types of violent activity: outwardly directed and inwardly directed. The former—violence directed against non-haredim—today focuses mainly on three areas of public life: Sabbath desecration, violations of the standards of sexual modesty, and archeological excavations that involve the digging up of ancient Jewish graves. (Until the end of the 1970s, it focused as well on maintaining religious restrictions on the conduct of autopsies.¹⁷) Inwardly directed, or internecine, haredi violence occurs in a number of areas. As noted, it grows out of the struggle of extremist zealots against those within or close to haredi society who take an overly conciliatory approach to secular Israeli society. (A current example is the strident opposition to those haredi rabbis and politicians who support the *nahal haredi*, the special haredi army unit established at the end of the 1990s.) Primarily, however, inwardly directed haredi violence revolves around struggles for status, influence, and power within haredi society. A good example is the conflict in 1981–1982 between the Neturei Karta in Jerusalem (aided by

Satmar hasidim in the United States) and the Belz hasidim over kashruth certification in Israel. The latter established their own religious authority (*bet din*) in this sphere, thereby breaking the monopoly in these matters formerly held by the Badatz (an acronym for *beit din zedek*, or religious court) of the 'Edah Haharedit, with which the Neturei Karta was associated.¹⁸

Violence directed against those who breach the sexual modesty code has always been prominent among the various forms of haredi zealotry. Thus, in recent years, secular women who happened into such neighborhoods as Meah Shearim while dressed in a manner that blatantly breached haredi norms of sexual modesty commonly have encountered violent reactions—mainly verbal violence (shouts of “whore” and similar epithets) but also on occasion actual threats or physical assaults. Similarly, young secular women residing in or near these neighborhoods are deemed to be especially threatening to haredi society because of their dress and lifestyle. Not infrequently, young haredim have subjected them to harassment, physical injury, and property damage until they eventually moved out.

Sexual permissiveness has always been regarded as such a threatening attack upon the Jewish people's holy character that the haredi zealot is commanded to oppose it, even violently. Indeed, Pinhas—the quintessential Jewish zealot—killed Zimri and the Midianite woman because they blatantly undermined the norms of sexual modesty. To be sure, the case of Zimri is exceptional: it involves public sexual activity (“in the sight of the whole of Israel”) and its outcome—death—is unusually grave and violent. But in the Jewish tradition, one also finds other examples of zealous acts in response to lesser breaches of sexual morality, and over the centuries these, too, have provided would-be zealots with models for emulation.¹⁹

In this context, the contemporary Israeli media frequently report upon the activities of a group known as *mishmeret hazeni'ut*, or the sexual modesty guard, which uses violence to enforce norms of sexual modesty within haredi society. Few details are available about its early history, but from the little that we do know, this group seems to have arisen at the end of the Mandate period, following the increasing exposure of the residents of Meah Shearim and its environs to general processes of secularization and erosion. During the 1940s, these processes were accelerated perceptibly by the mobilization of haredi young men and women into the Zionist undergrounds and into the ranks of the British army. They were also manifest in distinct changes on the streets of Meah Shearim, such as the opening of a newspaper and magazine store on a street corner near the main entrance of the neighborhood. This store also contained a phonograph, and customers could pay to hear recordings not only of cantorial music, but also of popular Hebrew songs; its attractions were such that many of the neighborhood's youngsters were constantly milling around both inside and outside the store. The Neturei Karta regarded the store as evidence of a serious deterioration in standards of sexual morality, and twice set it on fire. They also took action against those young women from haredi homes who strayed from the straight and narrow and began to “go out” with young men and with British soldiers.

In the newspapers of the period, there is some mention of another organization named Bnei Pinhas (Sons of Pinhas), which also sought to stamp out deviations from the norms of sexual modesty. Over the years, however, following demographic changes that made the haredi neighborhoods more homogenous and conformist, the

activity levels of such groups declined markedly. Furthermore, their initial founders and members matured and aged. Today, as far as is known, the *mishmeret hazeni'ut* is not a structured hierarchical organization (as indeed, it may never have been). Rather, it is better defined as an ad hoc organization inspired by extreme haredi elements that acts in cases in which the perceived breach in standards of sexual morality threaten all the varied segments of the haredi public, and not just its extremist groups such as the Neturei Karta.

Thus, for example, the *mishmeret hazeni'ut* has taken action to prevent and break up unchaperoned meetings between young haredi males and females in public places and to drive out prostitutes from haredi neighborhoods. It has also been known to threaten—and at times to assault—men (whether haredi or not) involved in sexual relationships with married haredi women. Yet only rarely does the violence involve mortal danger.

Apart from some underground incidents during the 1950s, haredi religio-ideological violence did not involve the use of live weapons or explosives. Again, if we exclude one incident in 2000, which resulted in the burning to death of three prostitutes in a Tel Aviv brothel (and indeed, it is not clear whether the perpetrator was haredi in the accepted meaning of the term), one would be hard put to find evidence of haredi violence that resulted directly in loss of life. However, there have been many cases of physical injury, sometimes extremely serious, against persons perceived as criminals or as having impugned the honor of a great Torah authority or some other haredi leader. Instances of harsh verbal violence, contemptuous wall posters, and damage to property by means ranging from arson to vandalism have also been common. Sabbath demonstrations in Jerusalem (and elsewhere) commonly involve stone-throwing at cars. But in none of these instances has anyone been killed.

Thus, there can be no doubt that religio-ideological haredi violence is a complex activity that, while aiming to inflict harm, is at the same time limited and circumscribed. Its restrained character is an expression of the unique structure of haredi society, the major contributing elements of which may be listed as follows:

1. an awareness of the unique history of the Jewish people as a persecuted minority and a deep feeling of Jewish solidarity;
2. extensive social control within “total institutions” (yeshivas, *kolelim*);
3. a dependent relationship of yeshiva students on their rabbis and yeshiva heads, particularly in the realm of supervised matchmaking, where errant behavior can be punished by difficulties in finding a suitable marriage partner;
4. reliance of the yeshiva world on government budgets and exemptions from military service, which serves as a motivating force to restrain outwardly directed violent zealotry;
5. early marriages and economic dependence of young haredim on parents, communal, and governmental assistance, which similarly limits antisocial behavior.

All in all, these elements narrow the scope for maneuvering for contemporary haredi zealots. Thus, one of the most significant findings arising from a number of cases in which haredi youths were arrested for committing violent acts (such as the torching of bus stop advertisements featuring immodestly dressed women) is that the youths' families, and the religious authorities of the community to which they be-

longed, guaranteed their good behavior so as to secure their release. On occasion, such “wayward” youths were even sent overseas to keep them out of trouble.

In August 1987, a Jerusalem district court invalidated municipal ordinances forbidding the operation of movie theaters and other places of entertainment on Friday nights. The effect of this ruling was to legalize public Sabbath desecration in downtown Jerusalem. Haredim, as predicted, responded with angry demonstrations. Many of these harked back to the violent anti-Sabbath-desecration demonstrations of the early 1950s in an area that became known as Sabbath Square (located right in the middle of Meah Shearim). These demonstrations had greatly increased Neturei Karta’s status and influence in haredi society, and a recurrence of this phenomenon was widely expected. However, after a short period of haredi demonstrations in the city center that passed relatively quietly, downtown Jerusalem—only a few streets away from Meah Shearim and its haredi environs—became the site of public entertainment activity on Friday nights.

A detailed sociological explanation for this haredi “failure” is beyond the scope of this article. However, one major fact stood out during these demonstrations: the Badaz ensured that the protest did not degenerate into outright violence by placing young men in the crowd in order to separate more extremist zealot elements from the main group of demonstrators. Wall posters in the haredi community called upon the public to come out in force against the blatant desecration of the Sabbath in the center of the holy city but also warned against succumbing to the zealots’ incitement to violence. The citation by the rabbis of the well-known midrash that “the strength of the worm Ya’akov [the Jewish people] resides solely in its mouth [that is, through the power of prayer]”²⁰ gave clear expression to haredi society’s awareness of the dangers of violent religious zealotry and of the need to restrain it.

Some years earlier, the Badaz had played a similar role in restraining recurring mass demonstrations against Sabbath traffic on the Ramot road in Jerusalem. From that time, behind-the-scenes cooperation between the haredi leadership and the police increased, due to a mutual interest in compromise. The rabbinical court took it upon itself to ensure that violent elements among the haredi zealots would be isolated and controlled, while the police responded in low-key fashion to haredi demonstrators and tended to overlook their numerous infractions of the law, including stone-throwing, disruption of traffic, and damage to municipal property.

Given a number of dramatic changes in haredi society, such restraints and limits may well break down. Two important factors bear mentioning in this regard. First, because of the socioeconomic crisis in the haredi scholar-society, large segments of haredi youth are exposed to the Israeli “street.” More and more young haredi men (and even women) totally drop out of, or remain only formally enrolled in, their educational institutions, thus becoming more exposed to the secular influences of Israeli society. Second, the manifestations of religio-ideological violence among Islamic extremists and Christian fundamentalists also provide models for conscious and unconscious emulation, some signs of which are already evident in the relatively large number of haredi youth attracted to the various Kahanist²¹ movements.

The violence of extremist Jewish settlers on the West Bank provides another model for violent haredi zealotry. But perhaps even more significant is the greater suscepti-

bility to violence of newly religious haredim (*ba'alei teshuvah*) who have not yet internalized traditional haredi restraints upon zealotry and whose newfound religious enthusiasm often moves them to extremes. Furthermore, some newly religious haredim are former criminals. While the violence of some of these *ba'alei teshuvah* is a new and "foreign branch," it has nevertheless made serious inroads into haredi society. Indeed, the Tel Aviv brothel arsonist was himself a recent *ba'al teshuvah* (influenced by another recent *ba'al teshuvah*).

This violent crime must surely be a warning sign to the haredi leadership. The fact that they have not yet responded is worrisome—as is the fact that Moshe Sheinfeld has no apparent heir.

Notes

1. Moshe Sheinfeld, "Haalimut—Zemorat zar behinukhenu!" *Niv hamoreh* 41 (Sept.–Oct. 1972), 10–11.

2. *Ibid.*

3. "Golus" is the Ashkenazic pronunciation of the Hebrew *galut*.

4. *Ibid.*; in characterizing children as guarantors of the future, Sheinfeld was referring to *Yalkut Shimoni* on Jer. 267.

5. On haredi underground movements during the 1950s, see Menachem Friedman, *Hahevrah ha'haredit: mekorot, megamot vetahalikhim* (Jerusalem: 1991), 65–66.

6. The Hazon Ish (Avraham Yeshayahu Karelitz; 1878–1953) was considered the leading halakhic authority of his time (*gadol hador*); following his death, his influence in the haredi community became even more significant.

7. Sheinfeld, "Haalimut." On the *rodef*, or pursuer, see the discussion concerning Pinhas that appears later in this essay. According to the halakhah, one who endangers the Jewish collective is considered a "pursuer"; one may either kill him or turn him over to the (non-Jewish) authorities. See, for instance, Shulhan Arukh, *hoshen mishpat*, 425a. Following 1993, the term *rodef* was increasingly used by religious political opponents of the Oslo accords to deligitimate those in the government who supported and promoted the peace process—most notably Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, who was assassinated in November 1995. The operative political implication of the concept of *din rodef* (the law regarding the pursuer) was to provide a religious justification for Rabin's assassination.

8. On "total institutions," see Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Structure of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (New York: 1961).

9. See Menachem Friedman, "The 'Family Community' Model in Haredi Society," in *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*, vol. 14, *Coping with Life and Death: Jewish Families in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Peter Y. Medding (New York: 1998), 166–177, esp. 170. Yeshiva and *kolel* students, who by definition are meant to devote all of their time to their studies, are thereby exempted from supporting themselves or their families. In this sense, their lives are in limbo for the duration of their studies.

10. A copy of one such prayer book is in my possession.

11. *Der Yid*, 30 March 1984.

12. *Ibid.*, 11 May 1984.

13. Cf. Isaiah 50:6.

14. Moshe Sheinfeld, "Haemet tehe ne'ederet," *Niv hamoreh* 49 (Sept.–Oct. 1974), 8–10.

15. See Menachem Friedman, "Religious Zealotry in Israeli Society," in *On Ethnic and Religious Diversity in Israel*, ed. Solomon Poll and Ernest Krausz (Ramat Gan: 1975), 91–111; Menachem Friedman, "Jewish Zealots: Conservative versus Innovative," in *Religious Radicalism and Politics in the Middle East*, ed. Emmanuel Sivan and Menachem Friedman (New York: 1990), 127–142.

16. Sheinfeld, "Haalimut." In Jewish mystical literature, the *kelipah* refers to a class of demons.

17. More specifically, there have been protests against Sabbath traffic on major thoroughfares located in or near haredi neighborhoods (for example, the Ramot road and Bar Ilan St. in Jerusalem and Hashomer St. in Bnei Brak); movie theaters open on the Sabbath (for example, the Edison and Eden theaters in Jerusalem); swimming pools that were open on the Sabbath; and roads or buildings (for example, the French Hill intersection of highway no. 1 in Jerusalem and both the Holiday Inn and the Scottish Church in Tiberias), the plans for which had to be altered after graves were discovered.

18. The 'Edah Ha'haredit is the official name of the organized community of the extreme ultra-Orthodox in Jerusalem, which, on religious grounds, denies the legitimacy of the state of Israel and its religious institutions. The Badatz functions as its religious court.

19. See, for example, Berakhot 20:1.

20. See *Midrash tanhuma* on "beshalah," 9.

21. A reference to extremist political movements related to the Kach movement founded by the late Meir Kahane.