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### CHALLENGING BEGIN FROM WITHIN: THE RESPONSE OF THE RELIGIOUS PARTIES AND THE SEPHARDIM TO THE BEIRUT MASSACRE

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With the Begin government's decision to appoint a state commission with full powers to investigate Israel's role in the recent Phalangist massacre of Palestinians, it can fairly be said that Israeli democracy and the moral sense of the Jewish people were substantially vindicated. In ten days that shook the Jewish state, a prime minister who reacted, like so many mortals before him throughout the world, on the basis of what he thought would best protect his own hide, was forced by pressure from without and within his government to acquiesce to the fullest possible means of bringing out the truth about a horror which thoroughly shocked the people of Israel. Nothing less would have satisfied a public aroused as never before in the history of the modern Jewish state--beyond party or ideology--by a fundamental moral issue.

Among those most active in convincing Menachem Begin and Ariel Sharon that they had no choice but to acquiesce were the leaders of the National Religious Party (NRP). From the first moment that news of the September 20 cabinet meeting--the first to be held in the aftermath of the news of the Phalangist massacre of Palestinians in West Beirut--reached the Israeli public, it was apparent that the strongest voices demanding a full investigation of how the Beirut massacre could have happened while Israeli troops were in the area came from the ministers representing the National Religious Party, Yosef Burg and Zevulun Hammer, and from those of Sephardic background led by Tami's Aharon Uzan and Deputy Prime Minister David Levy. If their attack on the Begin-Sharon effort to stonewall such an investigation seems surprising to the average reader of the foreign press who have been fed a steady picture of the religious parties as "right wing" in character and the Sephardim as benighted supporters of a hard line against the Arabs, untempered by the humanistic values of the original Zionist pioneers, it is time to set matters aright.

In fact, both the religious parties and the Sephardim, including those in Begin's own party, have been moderating influences on Israel's governing triumvirate--Begin, Sharon and Foreign Minister Shamir--for the whole life of that government. All the signs suggest that it was Interior Minister Burg who kept Begin from ordering the invasion of Lebanon before June each time that Sharon

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had persuaded the Prime Minister to go in. It is an open secret in Israel that Burg and Education Minister Hammer were less than satisfied with the conduct of the Lebanon campaign, feeling that they were forced to accept one *fait accompli* after another. Thus, NRP demands for a thorough investigation of the Beirut tragedy represent the continuation of a long trend rather than a new departure.

Why is this so? Unlike the American situation, where there seem to be fairly close links between fundamentalist religion and political conservatism, in Judaism no such connection is necessary or particularly likely. What is considered religious fundamentalism among Jews is a strong commitment to the traditional observance of the full range of requirements of *halakhah*, or Jewish law, which, incidentally, requires a broad range of social assistance and income maintenance measures that would be considered very un-conservative in American terms. Thus, on domestic issues, such as health, education and welfare, the entire religious camp supports strong and active government intervention on behalf of the less fortunate to guarantee a basic minimum for all citizens of Israel.

On another plane, the NRP takes great pride in its kibbutz wing as one of its crown jewels. Burg himself, although not a kibbutz dweller, is identified as the leading spokesman for that wing in his party, and is best characterized as a social democrat for religious reasons. It is another open secret that he would be more comfortable aligned with Labor than with Likud in most matters, although, again, on health, education and welfare issues there is little difference between any of the major parties.

Zevulun Hammer points with pride to the fact that one of his first acts as Education Minister was to extend free high school education through twelfth grade for the entire population, something which the Labor government had failed to do in the nearly 30 years of its control of that ministry. On foreign policy matters, the NRP has consistently been moderate, opposing Begin's extremism of expression and action, seeking to foster good relations with the rest of the world, particularly the western world, even to the point of trying to build bridges to the Christian Democratic parties in Western Europe.

On only one major issue is the NRP committed to what is commonly interpreted as a "right wing" position--the future of Judea, Samaria and Gaza. A majority of the party is committed to retaining a strong Jewish connection with those territories for obvious religious reasons. No one can gainsay that Judea and Samaria represent the historic heartland of the Jewish people. However pragmatic one may be with regard to their future, that remains an uncontestable historic and religious reality which must be confronted.

The NRP position is for that and security reasons, Israel cannot abandon its presence in those territories. Even on this issue, a strong minority in the party (probably including Burg) is willing to accept a territorial compromise for the sake of peace. The party mainstream has indicated that it is prepared for shared rule with Jordan. Deputy Foreign Minister Yehuda Ben Meir, Hammer's close colleague in the party, said as much in print when the autonomy negotiations began in 1979. The NRP does include a hard line element demanding Israeli sovereignty with autonomy for the Arabs, a position similar to that of the Likud. But it represents a minority of the party.

What of the Sephardim? One of the myths developed by apologists for Labor Israel and propagated widely outside of Israel in the course of the last year is that the "new Israel" which consists principally of Sephardic Jews, mostly from Asian and African countries of origin, or their children, do not share the same values as the so-called "westerners" of the pioneering generation and their children, who came principally from Eastern Europe. More in sorrow than in anger, they reflect that it is these somehow deficient Sephardim who have given Begin the support necessary to carry out his belligerent policies.

There is no doubt that Begin's mandate rests heavily on Sephardic support. For many reasons, the vast majority of Sephardim find the Labor Party repellent. (I have discussed some of them in "The 1981 Elections: Some Observations," Jerusalem Letter #19, August 15, 1981.) But none of those reasons have to do with differences in values and standards in this sense.

In fact, it was the Sephardim in the cabinet who took the lead along with the NRP in demanding a full scale investigation of the massacre. Tami, the "Sephardic" party founded by Aharon Abuhatzzeira and usually viewed as the fullest expression of the worst in so-called "Sephardic values," which bridges the religious and Sephardic communities, was vocal from the first moment. Aharon Uzan, its representative in the Begin government, led the way. He was joined by Deputy Prime Minister David Levy, who, as leader of the Likud's political organization, is the most powerful Sephardi in the government. He represents those people in the Herut Party-- namely the Sephardim-- who did not come out of the I.Z.L. and L.H.Y. is the latter who form Begin's coterie and will stay with their leader no matter what. It is that coterie who are the true extremists in the Begin government, not the far more moderate Sephardim who are not encumbered with the ideas and conflicts of the 1940's. Mordecai Ben Porath, another Sephardi, who succeeded to the leadership of Dayan's party after the latter's death, and is a minister without portfolio, was the third of the Sephardim in the government to take a strong stand on behalf of a full inquiry. None of this surprised anyone who was not a captive of the self-serving myth of the Labor camp. Without denying them any deserved credit for their massive pressure on the government from the outside, it is high time for the erstwhile Socialists to learn that one need not share their ideological or geographic roots to be concerned with human values and that they are far from having any monopoly on human decency.

With the first news of the massacre, a strong feeling swept Israel, best articulated by President Yitzhak Navon, the country's first Sephardic president who, during his tenure, has become the premier exponent of Israel's humanist values, that a full investigation must be conducted so that the whole truth will out. Begin and Sharon were under severe pressure from within their government and without to take appropriate steps. While they were able to hold the coalition together in its Knesset test of September 23, it was only on the promise that within two weeks action would be taken, a promise extracted by the NRP, Tami and Ben Porath as the price of their continued support. A substantial share of the NRP leadership and rank and file has mobilized to indicate that they expect their leaders to make their demands stick and for their party to do what is right. Characteristic of that mobilization was the public statement of Rav Amital, one of the leading spiritual figures of the religious camp in the post-1967 years and head of a major yeshiva located in the administered territories, who demanded a full investigation as a matter of national conscience of the highest priority.

The day after the Knesset debate, Sharon caved in and endorsed the appointment of a formal investigating committee with full powers. Over the Yom Kippur weekend the matter was settled and on Tuesday, September 28, the government took the formal decision--the only decision the people would allow.

With the vote to establish the commission, the leadership of the NRP undoubtedly scored something of a personal triumph--staying in the coalition while playing a major role in bringing Begin to the right decision. Their triumph was enhanced by the fact that they also succeeded in convincing the Labor Alignment to withdraw its initiative to reconvene the Knesset for a second debate on the subject, which would have reopened the wounds.

As a result of all of this, the NRP for the first time since the 1981 elections may have found a way to resuscitate itself. Contrary to its image outside of Israel, the NRP is actually in serious crisis. Divisions in party ranks over its stance with regard to Judea, Samaria and Gaza and with regard to Aharon Abuhatzzeira, the former Minister of Religions who was charged with misappropriation of public funds, had brought it to a devastating loss of half of its electoral strength in 1981. Only the virtual tie between Likud and Labor saved its power position as a needed partner in any governing coalition. Since then, it has not been able to recoup. Its leaders have seemed closed to reform within the party and spineless before Begin within the government. A week ago, at the time of the Knesset vote, they seemed as spineless as ever, but nothing succeeds like success.

Will the NRP leadership emerge from this experience to rebuild their party? It is much too soon to make any predictions but for the first time in nearly two years, the opportunity to do so may be present. In a television interview on Wednesday night after the government decision, Hammer made a strong case for the responsibility of the NRP to set a moral standard for the whole people. He emphasized his earlier opposition to a military solution in Beirut and his personal willingness to make sacrifices for peace in the territories. This, in itself, marks a turning point in the party's recent history and has been received as such by friend and foe alike.

What would this mean for Israel? One of the significant aspects of the events of the ten days between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur (known in Judaism as the ten days of penitence--a term that was on so many Israeli lips this year) was the degree to which many self-proclaimed non-religious as well as religious Jews in Israel looked to the religious parties--and the religious community generally--for an appropriate moral stance. It seems that for the new generation of Israelis, the NRP's traditional role in defense of the interests of the religious community is not enough. As Hammer emphasized, it must also be a party willing to stand up for the moral norms of Judaism. His own remarks on television were well-received in that spirit among the general population, who began to look at him with new respect. That is a lesson which the party must yet demonstrate that it has learned if the NRP is to renew its contribution to Israel's body politic.

The Sephardim have emerged from the ten days with new opportunities as well. Tami, in particular, seems to be seeking ways to respond to them. Once again, the keen political instincts of its leadership are being made manifest. They seem to have sensed the moral outrage among the people and the latter's expectations that religiously-oriented parties should provide the leadership in the moral sphere. Here, too, it is too early to see any trends but not too early to see the possibilities for a morally stronger Israel to emerge from the tragedy of Beirut.

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