

AHARON LICHTENSTEIN
AVRAHAM KURZWEIL
SHMUEL HABER
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A RABBINIC EXCHANGE ON BARUCH GOLDSTEIN'S FUNERAL

(*Ed. Note:* Israel's Hesder Yeshivot, where idealistic students volunteer for a five-year program combining army service in the Israeli Defence Forces with intensive Torah study, constitute one of the most significant institutions of Religious Zionism. Recently, the journal *Meimad* (no. 1) published the text of an exchange between the heads of three of these yeshivot relating to Baruch Goldstein's funeral. The following translation of these letters was prepared by Benjamin Samuels, a Wexner Graduate Fellow at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary and Assistant Rabbi at The Jewish Center in Manhattan.)

To my dear colleague,
Greetings, *ha-shalom ve-ha-berakha*.

We all recognize the great sensitivity that exists within the network of *Yeshivot Hesder* and our mutual cooperation in it toward safeguarding the absolute independence of each yeshiva in regard to its educational policy; and we are all quite committed to the appropriate and established tradition of mutual non-interference in this area.

Nonetheless, during these troubled times, I feel compelled to temporarily abandon this tradition—not out of a desire to express my opinion, but simply, because it is impossible, from a personal and moral stance, to remain silent.

Therefore, I must vigorously protest against what transpired last night before all of Israel and the entire world. A person, whatever his previous merits may have been, departed this world while engaged in an act of awful and terrible slaughter, *tevah ayom ve-nora*, and thereby, beyond the crime itself, desecrated the name of Heaven, trampled upon the honor of the Torah and *mitzvot*, soiled and sullied the image of *Kenesset Yisrael*, and endangered the future of [Jewish] settlement in Yehudah, Shomron, and Gaza. This man

won praise and honor in the yeshiva of his hometown, in Kiryat Arba, and was eulogized "*ke-halakha*," with full ceremonial honor, by her *Rosh Yeshiva*.

Woe to the ears that hear this! But, if it has been decreed that we must hear it, at least there should be a clear protest which expresses not just disassociation, but also disgust and shock. We must do so, not to protect our public image, but to preserve our self-image.

May He Who, "being merciful, forgives iniquity" [Psalms 78:38], "remove the shame of His people over all the earth" [Isaiah 25:8].

In fear and trembling,
For the sake of the honor of
the Torah and its students,
AHARON LICHTENSTEIN
Rosh Yeshiva, Har Etzion

Dear Rabbi Lichtenstein,
Greetings, *shalom rav*.

Let me note that we are against terrorism of any kind, Arab terrorism against Jews and also Jewish terrorism against Arabs. But the protests made by the rabbi [in his letter] do not sit well with us, in the spirit of "Take the beam from between your eyes" [T.B. *Baba Batra* 15b].

As is well known, your honor supports the political process and all that accompanies it, which includes, if even only *de facto*, the legitimization in the eyes of the entire world of the arch-terrorist (may his name be blotted out), who has spilled the blood of Jews and others like water, and the terrorist ideology he represents, thereby causing a terrible and awful desecration of God's name, a *hillul Hashem nora ve-ayom*, and indescribable damage to the Jewish people everywhere.

Therefore, although it is clear to us that your honor's intentions are for the sake of Heaven, his words in this matter are not to be heard. For where there is desecration of God's name, one does not grant due respect to sages.

With blessings,
AVRAHAM KURWEIL
SHMUEL HABER
Roshei Yeshiva, Karnei Shomron

Dear Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein,
Rosh Yeshiva of the *Yeshivat Hesder* in Alon Shevut,

With greetings, *ha-shalom ve-ha-berakha ve-kol tov sela*, and appropriate solicitude, *ahar derishat shelomo ka-ya'ut*.

We received a fax in our yeshiva office, and though it wasn't explicitly addressed to me, as my name did not appear, it was nonetheless clear to whom it was directed, and because of *kavod ha-Torah*, I find it proper to relate to it and respond out of respect.

Indeed, I eulogized the late Baruch Goldstein (may *Hashem* avenge his blood), who was lynched by the non-Jews in the Cave [of Makhpela]. A Jew who is killed because he is a Jew must certainly be called *kadosh*, a holy martyr, just as we refer to the *kedoshei ha-Shoa*, the holy martyrs of the Holocaust, without investigating their previous conduct. How much more so in this case, for we knew him intimately as God-fearing and compassionate, as one who loved humanity and saved lives.

Even if someone holds the opinion that his final act was improper, *lo haya ke-shura*, why should he not be entitled to a eulogy *ke-halakha*? In my eulogy, I intentionally did not address the deed itself, but rather his personality and his achievements, and I did not take a public position on the deed itself.

The eulogy took place in the assembly hall of the yeshiva, not to show our identification with the deed, but rather for other reasons, among them, the wintry and rainy weather conditions that did not allow for the event to be held outside in the public square.

I marvel that great Torah sages, lovers of Israel, are quick to judge an individual without knowing the background and circumstances in which he acted and which compelled him to act. Perhaps this was a situation of "his heart coerced him" [T.B. *Shevuot* 26a], for he was the first to see the spilling of blood in the area; people died before his eyes, and [he] also [heard] the cry "Slaughter the Jews! *Atbah al-Yahud!*" on Purim night and [saw] the disgrace of the Jewish people. All these together, I assume, caused him to do this extreme deed.

I repeat that my purpose in these remarks is not to formulate a conclusive judgment, but rather to judge favorably, *le-lammed zekhut*, as we are commanded to judge our fellow Jews favorably [*Avot* 1:6].

I hope the honorable rabbi will understand the spirit of my words, which are said in pain and distress, and may *Hashem* bind up

His people's wounds [Isaiah 30:26].

With blessings,

DOV LEOR

Rosh Yeshiva,

Yeshivat Nir, Kiryat Arba

Dear *Roshei Yeshiva* of Yeshivat Karnei Shomron,
Rabbis Avraham Kurzweil and Shemuel Haber, *Sblita*.

Greetings, *ha-shalom ve-ha-berakha*.

Upon returning from a brief trip outside of Israel, I found your response to my letter, which astonished me.

1. Reading between the lines it is evident that you agree that my reaction, in and of itself, was correct—that, at the very least, there was a “sliver” [T.B. *Baba Batra* 15b] which required attention—but felt that I am not the appropriate person to speak to the issue as I am “publicly known” as a supporter of the process which bestows legitimacy upon terrorist ideology.

Thus, the question begs to be asked: Why were you silent then? Why was no protest heard from those in our community, *mi-pi anshei shelomeinu*, who champion your political views, against the tribute given in a *yeshivat hesder* to (as Rabbi Leor wrote in his response to me) “the late Baruch Goldstein (may *Hashem* avenge his blood), who was lynched by the non-Jews in the Cave [of Makhpela]. A Jew who is killed because he is a Jew must certainly be called *kadosh*, a holy martyr, just as we refer to the *kedoshei ha-Shoa*, the holy martyrs of the Holocaust, without investigating their previous conduct”?

Was this the time for the enlightened scholars, with impeccable foreheads, without slivers and without beams, perhaps even foreheads adorned with *tefillin*, to be silent and still?

I admit without embarrassment that, from both a practical and communal perspective, it would have been better if my reaction would have been heard from *roshei yeshiva* who have no trace of the taint which, in your opinion, clings to me. But, to my distress, this did not happen. In any event, I doubt if this would have exempted me from the obligation and the desire to take a stand on this subject.

2. Even as we are astonished by the silence relating to the tribute expressed in tears and eulogy, we must likewise question the inaction within our own yeshivot in regard to the killing itself. I

do not suspect my colleagues, God forbid, of giving a seal of approval to the occurrence, even after the fact. But the reluctance to take a public position, in and of itself, calls for inquiry; it has caused moral and public damage to both our immediate and our broader community.

The Chief Rabbis, *shlita*, have said their piece; Rabbi Menachem Eliezer Shach and Rabbi Ovadia Yosef have issued, however belatedly, vigorous statements. In the religious-national camp, however, several of the elder statesmen who are accustomed to take positions and issue protests on the occasion of much less significant events were struck mute.

This fact has given rise to a variety of questions, and many have reached the sad conclusion that “since they are silent, presumably, the rabbis are content” [T.B. *Gittin* 56a]. I hope that this conclusion is mistaken, but as to the depth and intensity of the discontent, there is room for soul searching.

3. As to the supposed “beam” that disqualifies my protest, I am simply amazed.

This is not the place to discuss the peace process itself, concerning which I too, to some extent, am hesitant and perturbed, because of security considerations. But clearly, any *ben Torah* who supports it—and is prepared, in this regard, to forcibly swallow his objections to rewarding one who has spilled Jewish blood—is not acting out of esteem, even most grudgingly, for terrorism, but rather to prevent further bloodshed.

To be sure, in your opinion this assessment of the situation is mistaken, and the entire process leads to “indescribable damage to the Jewish people” instead of leading to progress.

But how can we equate a view sincerely based on the aspiration to save tens of thousands of lives with the bestowing of honor, even as a kind of last obsequy, a *hesed shel emmet*, to a mass murderer?

Were you convinced that the peace process is indeed necessary from the standpoint of saving the lives of the many, *pikuah nefesh derabbim*, and that it would indeed yield genuine peace to the House of Israel, would you abstain from embracing it only because of fastidiousness (*nekiyut ha-da'at*)?

With blessings of the Torah and *mitzvot*,
AHARON LICHTENSTEIN