

# THE ACTS OF PERFIDIOUS TRAITORS THROUGHOUT JEWISH HISTORY

By Uri Avnery Haaretz 10 10 2011

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*Today they call them leftists, but throughout history, it is those who have strived for peace and compromise, and who may have been seen at the time as traitors, who are remembered for their moderation.*

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"There are situations in which a real patriot has no alternative but to be a traitor," wrote a senior German journalist, the late Rudolf Augstein, in a review of one of my books in the late 1980s. The book, "My Friend, the Enemy," described, among other things, my meeting with Yasser Arafat. It was the first encounter between an Israeli and the leader of the Palestine Liberation Organization. It was held during the heat of the battle for Beirut in 1982, and in order to have it I had to cross enemy lines.

When I was still on my way home, on the road from Beirut to Rosh Hanikra, I heard on the radio that four government ministers had demanded I be charged with treason. And indeed, Menachem Begin's government, with Ariel Sharon as minister of defense, formally ordered the attorney general to launch a criminal investigation. After the investigation, the attorney general, Yitzhak Zamir, concluded that I did not break any law, partly because I was in Beirut as a guest of the Israel Defense Forces and partly because there was no legal distinction between the eastern part of the city (which the IDF controlled ) and the western part (which was in the PLO's hands. )

In the 14 years that preceded that initial meeting, I maintained regular contacts with the PLO's leadership, though it was officially defined, at that time, as a terrorist organization, and identified with the arch-terrorist Arafat. I reported those contacts to Yitzhak Rabin, while he was prime minister (1974-77 ). Needless to say, it was only 11 years later that Israel concluded a treaty with the PLO, our prime minister hugged Arafat and those ministers who wanted to put me on trial as a traitor themselves were making pilgrimages to him.

A routine curse

When Augstein wrote his comment about treason he was thinking, especially, of Nazi Germany's most famous case of treason: the 1944 plot led by Col. Claus von Stauffenberg, in an attempt to assassinate Adolf Hitler. Von Stauffenberg, a war hero who lost an eye and several fingers in WWII, had many doubts before deciding to strike. As a real patriot he came to the conclusion that only the killing of Hitler could save Germany from the approaching disaster of defeat, and the unnecessary death of hundreds of thousands of people in a lost war. But he had sworn allegiance to the Fuehrer, and as a devout Catholic he considered the breaking of an oath to be a very grave measure. A rebellion in the middle of a war was, of course, treason.

Almost all Germans would agree today that such an act of treason was moral and just. Hence, the street where the German general staff headquarters was then situated, and in whose yard von Stauffenberg was executed, is named for him. Here, then, treason and patriotism dwell together.

Claus von Stauffenberg was not a leftist. On the contrary. He was a man of the right, very conservative, a scion of many generations of a noble family. More often, it is left-wingers who face accusations of treason. That charge may be the most common curse that rightists - worldwide, but particularly in Israel - level at the leftists: that they betray their people and their homeland.

According to the right-wing view, the left undermines national resilience and helps an enemy that is scheming to destroy us. Leftists almost always oppose increasing the defense budget, arguing that the money is needed for social services such as education, health and welfare. It raises the individual to a higher level of importance than the nation and the state. It seeks peace and to this end, is ready to make concessions to the enemy. In the Israeli-Palestinian arena, it is ready to cede parts of the land that the Almighty himself promised to the Jewish people. In short, despicable traitors.

The leftists in Israel and around the world counter that they are the real patriots, for it is they who seek a healthy society, which is the real foundation for national security. After all, only citizens who feel part of the homeland and the state are willing to fight for it wholeheartedly.

Moreover, no state can wage endless wars. The state and the individual need peace, and only in peace can a state develop all its spiritual and material resources. According to the left, those on the right cultivate feelings of hatred, fear and prejudices against aliens, both those in other lands and among the minorities who are within the country. In order to win the support of the masses, the right seeks constant security tension and war adventures, phenomena that can justify their own distorted worldview. That is why the right wing is a threat to the state and its citizens, and will ultimately bring about national disaster, which in our case would be the destruction of the "Third Temple" that is the renewed Jewish commonwealth. In short, despicable racists.

#### A murderous civil war

Our own history includes instances of betrayal that long preceded that of the German von Stauffenberg. Many years ago I had lunch with someone who was then a key figure in the Israeli economy. During the conversation I suggested that Shimon Bar Kochba, who led the failed Jewish uprising against Rome, in 132-135 C.E., was a crazy adventurer, that the Zealots of the Great Revolt who had preceded him were criminals and that the Maccabees too, before them, fought a murderous civil war.

The banker stared at me with his pair of blue eyes in a look of endless astonishment. He had never heard such strange views. On the spot, I decided I would write a series of articles on the subject. They were published serially in Haolam Hazeh, and did not cause an uproar.

Some time later, however, Yehoshafat Harkabi, a former head of Military Intelligence and at the time a historian at the Hebrew University, wrote a book in the same vein, and the dam burst. The Zealots' rebellion against Rome, he wrote, was an act of madness. In present-day terms, they could be called extreme right-wingers. Sensible people such as King Herod Agrippa II warned of the futile adventure against the huge military might of the Roman superpower. But the Zealots silenced those voices, murdered whoever spoke against the rebels and seized control over the Jewish community. When the Romans laid siege to Jerusalem, in 70 C.E., Zealot groups burned one another's stores of grain, certain that they were not needed because the Almighty himself would redeem his holy city.

One of the sensible people who remained in the city-gone-mad was Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai; he rightly predicted the future. Ben Zakkai pretended to be dead, had himself smuggled out of town in a coffin, approached the Roman commander and requested permission to settle in Yavneh and open a spiritual center there.

This was out-and-out treason against his people: deserting the front, cowardliness, maintaining contact with the enemy, collaboration. When I was an adolescent, I was a member of the Irgun pre-state underground, and we organized a mock trial of him. He was found guilty of treason and was sentenced to death. The Zealots were our heroes.

But the Jewish people's collective wisdom in fact hailed Ben-Zakkai's treason. The tendency is to think that his move allowed for the preservation of Judaism during the 2,000 years of Diaspora. In other words: His treason saved the people. His act was the patriotic one. The Jewish community was able to remain on its land and flourished until the appearance of the next madman, Bar Kochba, another member of the extreme right, to use today's terminology.

The Maccabees' historical fate was better. They are favorably etched in the Jewish consciousness, whereas the Zealots' activities are recalled in the mourning of Tisha B'Av. The Maccabees' activities, on the other hand, are celebrated during the holiday of Hanukkah, and the Zionist movement has hailed them as freedom fighters who liberated the Jews from oppressive and alien rulers.

And indeed, in contrast with the Zealots and Bar Kochba, the Maccabees had a realistic view of the political situation of their day. They made alliances and managed the rebellion wisely. But the Maccabees' war, in the second century B.C.E., was first and foremost a civil war. We say the Maccabees conducted a murderous campaign against the Hellenists - but who were the Hellenists? They were the people who accepted the most enlightened and advanced

culture of their day, something equivalent to the status today of American or Western culture in general.

The "national religious" camp of those days and what would be considered today as hilltop youth regarded the Hellenists as traitors, precisely the way today's leftists are branded. (This, however, did not stop the Hasmonaean kings, who succeeded the Maccabees, from adopting Greek culture themselves, as some of their names show ).

A scoundrel's refuge

Many centuries later, the baton of crazy messianism passed to Shabbetai Zvi. His teachings captivated, with the speed of wildfire, Jewish masses around the world. Only a small number of Jews dared oppose this madness, and they were the "traitors" of those days. When the bubble burst, and the so-called messiah converted to Islam, it became clear that his opponents had been right. But this did not move the masses to endear them. On the contrary, as Gershom Scholem tells us, after Shabbetai Zvi's disgrace, his opponents were hated even more.

And we still haven't mentioned the arch-traitor, the prophet Jeremiah, who preached for surrender. He was a real defeatist, from the moment of his birth, and for this, the right-wing rulers of sixth and seventh century B.C.E. Judah tossed him into a pit of mud. Yet, his words were incorporated into the Bible while those of his adversaries were forgotten.

One can draw countless examples from the histories of other peoples too. At times of crisis, the real patriots, those who call for peace and compromise, in short the "lefties," are considered traitors, whereas the nationalists of all types, the warmongers, the inciters of hatred, are perceived as patriots. It is of them that the British philosopher Samuel Johnson said that "patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel."