

So burning the granaries of Jews was justified. The certainty of the Sicarii meant that all means were justified to attain their objectives, even if it meant the death of their compatriots.

Ironically, not all of the Sicarii wished that the confrontation be located in Jerusalem. The Zealots, led as they were by the high priests of Jerusalem (thus their emphasis on the Temple), were more committed than the Sicarii. Indeed, Sicarii elements actually left Jerusalem in 66 C.E. — four years before the destruction of the Temple — and helped capture the Herodian fortress of Masada, where they were later joined by the Zealots, ultimately provoking the mass suicide of Masada's 960 defenders.

The story of Masada, interestingly, does not appear in the Talmud, although the story of Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai — who urged the Romans to enable the establishment of the Yavneh Academy — is very well documented. Perhaps the talmudic rabbis understood that the saga of Yavneh, which enabled the reconstitution of Jewish life in the post-Temple period, holds more enduring value to the Jewish people.

Today's Sicarii

Today, there are shadowy groups who ominously call themselves the Sicarii. These unrelated "Sicarii" groups are best known for terrorizing Modern Orthodox grade-school children in Beit Shemesh and attacking police in Mea Shearim — even throwing cement blocks from rooftops at police during the High Holiday season. In years past, these same groups attacked the homes of peace activists.

I have known Alon for nine years, since
he was selected by the IDF to join a
think tank I run (the Washington
Institute for Near East Policy). He
previously served as the head of
Sayeret Matkal, the IDF's elite
commando force, and he has
impressed many with the skills of a
natural leader: bravery, moderation,
professionalism, and the capacity for
balanced and forward-thinking
consideration.

Discussion

Bringing together a myriad of voices and experiences provides *Sh'ma* readers with an opportunity in a few very full pages to explore a topic of Jewish interest from a variety of perspectives. To facilitate a fuller discussion of these ideas, we offer the following questions:

- How might we change the discourse on challenging and charged Jewish conversations to reflect that complex issues cannot be defined simply in dichotomous, "win-lose" ways? How might we approach a discussion of how Israel can recognize such complexity?
- 2. Is passionate devotion the province only of the devoutly religious? What price do liberal Jews pay for their lack of religious certainty? Is our tolerance for others grounded in our inability to be certain of our own beliefs?
- 3. Is there a relationship between uncertainty and tolerance? If so, what is it? What would be the dangers of that relationship?
- 4. What is the basis for your understanding of pluralism, and what are its limits?

More significant than what these groups call themselves, however, is their belief that they, like the Sicarii of old, can silence moderates. Some fringe settler groups (such as the Hilltop Youth) today feel the same sense of self-righteous certainty that all of Israel's problems stem from its enemies within.

The closest inheritor of the Sicarii mantle - which Israeli officials have not yet addressed appropriately — is a group known as "Price Tag." This shadowy group, which also invokes the name of Sicarii, seeks to exact a "price" from Palestinian civilians by burning their fields, vandalizing their other properties, and attacking Israeli security forces in retaliation for any action they perceive to be against the interests of the settlement movement, including the removal of settlement outposts deemed illegal by Israel's own law. This group may be as small as a few dozen people, but it is possible that they are enjoying the tacit support of a wider group. They have become increasingly brazen, even vandalizing mosques.

Israel Defense Forces (IDF) Brig. Gen. Nitzan Alon, until recently deputy commander of the IDF Central Command (Israel's military authority in the West Bank), has said that more needs to be done to stop this group. As Alon concluded his term as deputy commander last summer, he declared, "Even today, an extremist minority, small in number but not in influence, could bring about a major escalation via acts that are dubbed 'price tag,' but amount to terrorism. [These acts] should not just be condemned for their inherent injustice and stupidity; they must be stopped, and their perpetrators arrested."

In July 2011, settlers attacked Alon's military jeep at Tapuah Junction. They also protested outside his family's moshav home in an effort to intimidate his family members. Yet, this extreme settler group's assault on an IDF army base inside the West Bank several months later stunned even the military. An IDF spokesman attributed the attack to rumors of an imminent eviction of settlement outposts.

In the years leading up to the destruction of the Second Temple, no one stood up to the Sicarii. As the rabbis say, *sinat chinam*, senseless hatred, destroyed the Second Jewish Commonwealth. If the Third Jewish Commonwealth is to endure, the people and their institutions must stand up against the new, violent hatred of "Price Tag" and other modern "Sicarii" groups, just as they do to Palestinian terrorism.