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OpEd: Israel Must Beware of Hard-Right's Messianism

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FORT LEE, New Jersey — The recent news story on the exhumation of the graves in Gaza, purportedly to find hostage remains, gave me the chills. The macabre images of 16 torn up cemeteries — headstones smashed and graves left opened and disheveled — pounded my head as if someone had taken a hatchet and smashed me to smithereens. Why did I feel this way, when the visceral memories of Hamas's rape, murder, and mutilation of Israeli civilians in the October 7 massacre remain so fresh in my mind? Certainly I was short on sympathy, because just days before the graveyard story made headlines, Hamas released sadistic videos of the bodies of two male hostages purportedly killed in Israeli airstrikes over Gaza, without even confirming whether or not they had died.

The cemetery story, however, which pointed to the damage to gravesites since the start of Israel's counteroffensive following the Hamas rampage in southern Israel, gave me pause to think. I was concerned that since disinterment is a war crime, these actions would add fodder to the International Court of Justice's inquest into Israel's alleged genocidal war conduct, launched earlier this month at the request of South Africa as the petitioning party. Sadly, my foreboding centered on something much deeper than the tactical aspects of war and Israel's ability to defend itself before the world court. This is because the desecration of cemeteries, paradoxically, adumbrates messianic visions among the far right. In fact, Bezalel Smotrich and Itamar Ben-Gvir, both far-right ideologues in Netanyahu's cabinet, have never tried to hide their wish to exile the Palestinians from Gaza. In their thinking, such an expulsion of the Palestinian population would allow Israel to return to its biblical borders. Then they would rebuild Gaza solely with Jewish inhabitants.

Herein lies the danger.

It is impossible to carry out a messianic game plan without a strict adherence to the doctrine of "by any means necessary."

Let us review the events in the past months. The massive displacement of the Gazans, many of whom had to uproot themselves multiple times in the course of just weeks, naturally causes geographic disorientation for the displaced residents. However, the destruction of habitats, schools, and hospitals, along with the disruption in the supply of electricity, water, food, fuel, and internet and phone access, quickly plunges a population into desolation and despair. In such a state, wherein basic sustenance is scarce, many will cling to spiritual imagery and symbols. Cemeteries serve that purpose, for they provide psychological relief when physical relief is not forthcoming. In providing a place to inter the dead, graveyards symbolize the last vestige of human connection to survivors' loved ones. When cemeteries are destroyed, there is nothing to keep people on their land, for their departed loved ones can no longer be found around the corner, down the block, or reasonably close to home. This makes the so-called voluntary resettlement of that population both feasible and expedient. Certainly, it would be a victory for the far-right members of Bibi's cabinet.

Ben-Gvir and Smotrich have placed Israel in an untenable predicament. These literalists have influenced the prosecution of a war that arguably has abandoned Israeli hostages in favor of placing the Palestinian population on the fast track to expulsion. Most Israelis and Diaspora Jews find this appalling — and if they don't, the world will. And the world certainly will broadcast its displeasure on the streets, on the university campuses, and in everyday life.

Indeed, Jewish history has documented the suffering of Jews whose fate was as bad as, and sometimes worse than, the Gazans. The Jews were targets of Hitler's planned extermination campaign. They were targets of the Spanish Inquisition. They were targets of pogroms in Eastern Europe. And most recently, they were targets of the Hamas massacre. My fear, however, is that messianic thinking, particularly among victims of atrocities, may prompt the destructive psychological reaction of identifying with the aggressor.

This is so because in their zeal to save their people, messianic leaders will do so at any cost — even if it entails expulsion of an entire population. In truth, messianism, borne in the throes of calamity, often is entwined with a need to turn the tables on victimhood, to oppress others to feel empowered once again. This defense mechanism has practical value, as it allows victims to stop blaming themselves for having succumbed to the aggressor. Nevertheless, this dangerous cycle, where the victim becomes the aggressor, must be broken. If it is not, I fear for those who become aggressors, for they will be judged so harshly and unsparingly that they will find themselves victims yet once again.

Would it not be wise to denude the Israeli messianic cabinet members of their power, so that their actions do not dig a cavern for Israel, and for the diaspora Jews around the world, that is so deep from which they may never climb out?

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This article appeared initially in *The Jewish Standard* of New Jersey. Amy Neustein, Ph.D., of Fort Lee is the author/editor of 16 academic books. She is working on *Moral Schisms: When Institutions Defy Jewish Law*, to be published by Oxford University Press.