

Rene Girard: Haredi draft crisis scapegoat theory

Polymath René Girard (1923–2015) identified the universal propensity to unite around the victimization of a scapegoat as a trait inherent to human sociality. Fixation upon a single object of scorn temporarily suspends the capacity for intragroup conflict. As a release valve prevents the destabilization of a pressurized system, so the scapegoat preserves the internal harmony of the group.

The Haredi draft debate narrative has been framed as the failure of a minority group to accept their responsibility to serve the society which grants the freedom to exercise the rights that those self-same responsibilities ensure: They cannot enjoy military protection without contributing to the necessary human cost. According to Girard, the unconscious tendency to ascribe blame to the accused serves to solidify and stabilize the beliefs and behaviors of the group, making the act of accusation more important than the substance. Thus, it matters less whether the claim is valid, as much as that the claim has been made.

Such an inherently simplistic claim assumes the interchangeability of the Haredi with any other demographic. Consider the anthill where worker ants, infertile and superfluous to immediate survival, serve and protect the male ants, who by the same metric appear to undertake very little work in the colony. This narrative assumes that a practical atheist serves an equivalent function to an ultra-Orthodox Jew. In a secular schema, such groups – measured in material terms alone – are interchangeable entities. However, through the eyes of faith, the latter serve a preeminent function vital to the perpetuation of Israeli statehood. For the very existence of the Haredi forms a direct unbroken link to the Abrahamic covenant.

The Haredi stand as a bulwark against the encroaching secularization that threatens to undermine the very essence and symbolic mission of the nation state of Israel. Their refusal to bend or yield to public opinion epitomizes the Jewish spirit, which looks to God alone for their identity, purpose and hope. Their refusal to genuflect at the altar of secularism testifies to the existence of a God who has chosen a people as his own. For the Haredi embody Jewish identity to the farthest degree, standing as a sign of contradiction to all those who have strayed from the path of life.

The Haredi students recognize in their teachers an authentic vision of the world that surpasses the tenets of secularism in all its conflicting dimensions. Truth concerning the nature of reality is imparted through the Torah so that it stands as the measure of all moral choices. Moral courage as the first of human qualities safeguards the application of all other virtues. The Jewish hope refers to the reality of what lies far off, yet that which, tempered in the fire of absolute devotion, bears witness to an imperishable inheritance of a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God.

Such a demonstration of courage by the Haredi further cements their scapegoat status, insofar as it compels them to stand apart from the group. To return to Girard, as the same way a lightening conductor disperses the electrical energy, so the apportioning of blame upon the conduit of the group's wrath safeguards against the potentially catastrophic effects of intragroup conflict. Plato linked courage to proper perspective as knowing what not to fear. Torah study and prayers to God are far more important to Israel's security than the IDF. The Torah teaches that perfect obedience triumphs over death, transfigures the mortal into the immortal, assimilates the temporal into the eternal. Courage is the devotion to a perfect love of truth that feels no sorrow at the prospect of leaving everything behind.

The personal witness to truth inspires the Haredi to develop the courage that will serve them throughout life beyond formal education. It follows that moral courage can only ever be identifiable in hindsight: it arises somewhere between duty and devotion. The courageous individual merges with the hope toward which they travel. It is cultivated in clarity of being, purity of conviction, steadfastness of spirit.