

# WHAT FUTURE FOR ISRAEL IN THE GRIP OF RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM?

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Allan Brownfeld, editor of the quarterly journal of the American Council for Judaism, provides some useful historical background information regarding the "Religious Zionism" movement, the big winner -- and "kingmaker" -- in last week's Israeli elections.

Israel's Nov. 1 election represents a dramatic turn in the direction of religious extremism. In 1984, Israel outlawed Meir Kahane's Kach Party for racism and incitement to violence. Now, Kahane's followers will hold important positions in the new government. The Israeli newspaper Haaretz declared, "Kahane won. Israel is now closing in on a right-wing, religious authoritarian revolution." When he was in the Knesset, Kahane advocated Nuremberg-like laws which would make marriage—and sexual relations—between Jews and non-Jews illegal.

Few Americans understand the nature of the religious extremism which is growing in Israel. The growth of religious Zionism is, in reality, a rather recent phenomenon. Traditionally, Orthodox Jews held that only the Messiah could bestow Jewish sovereignty in Palestine. Religious Jews firmly opposed the Zionist movement. The conventional rabbinic doctrine maintained that Jews had a duty to wait patiently until the Messiah led them back to Palestine. The return, they said, would be at the end of days. According to this view, since God sent the Jews into exile to punish them for their sins, only God had the power to lead them back.

Rabbi Hayom Eleazor Shapira, a Hungarian Hasidic leader, argued that migration to the Holy Land, in abandoning "faith in miraculous redemption from heaven," pre-empted the Messiah. Zionism, he declared, violated Orthodox Jewish law. Rabbi Shapira called the Zionists "evil forces (who) have become stronger." Efforts at "forcing the End," he maintained, were "a sacrilege."

Slowly, there has been a dramatic growth of religious extremism in Israel, which has manifested itself in vigorous opposition to the peace process and has played a key role in the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and the murder of 29 Muslims at prayer by the American-born follower of Meir Kahane, Baruch Goldstein. One of the big winners in the Nov. 1 Israeli election was Itamar Ben Gvir, leader of the Otzma Yehudit (Jewish power) party. For many years, he had a portrait of Baruch Goldstein hanging on his living room wall.

In an important book, "Jewish Fundamentalism In Israel," Israel Shahak and Norton Mezvinsky trace the history of Jewish fundamentalism and identify the messianic tendency which they believe to be the most dangerous.

Israel Shahak, a Holocaust survivor, was a professor at the Hebrew University and a leading human rights activist. Norton Mezvinsky was a professor of history at Central Connecticut State University who has written and lectured extensively on the modern Middle East.

The authors point out that, "The adherents of Jewish fundamentalism in Israel oppose equality for all citizens, especially non-Jews. The respected Israeli sociologist Baruch

Kimmerling declared, “The value of the (Jewish) religion, at least in its Orthodox and nationalistic form that prevails in Israel, cannot be squared with democratic values. No other variable —neither nationality, nor attitudes about security, nor social or economic values, nor ethnic descent or education—so influences the attitudes of (Israeli) Jews against democratic values as does religiosity.”

What particularly concerns the authors is the total contempt which Jewish fundamentalists show toward non-Jews. Rabbi Kook the Elder, the revered father of the Messianic tendency in Jewish fundamentalism, said, “The difference between a Jewish soul and souls of non-Jews —all of them in all different levels—is greater and deeper than the difference between a human soul and the souls of cattle.”

Rabbi Kook’s entire teaching, which is followed devoutly by, among others, those who have led the settler movement on the occupied West Bank, is based upon the Lurianic Cabala, the school of Jewish mysticism that dominated Judaism from the late 16th to the early 19th century. “One of the basic tenets of the Lurianic Cabala,” the authors write, “is the absolute superiority of the Jewish soul and body over the non-Jewish soul and body. According to the Lurianic Cabala, the world was created solely for the sake of Jews; the existence of non-Jews was subsidiary. If an influential Christian bishop or Islamic scholar argued that the difference between the superior souls of non-Jews and the inferior souls of Jews was greater than the difference between the human soul and the souls of cattle, he would incur the wrath of all and be viewed as an antisemite by most Jewish scholars regardless of whatever less meaningful, positive statements he included.”

According to the ideologies which underlie Gush Emunim, the militant West Bank settler group, non-Jews have “satanic souls.” Common to both the Talmud and Halacha, Orthodox religious law, is a differentiation between Jews and non-Jews. The late, highly revered Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, who headed the Chabad movement, explained that, “The difference between a Jewish and a non-Jewish person stems from the common expression: ‘Let us differentiate.’ Thus, we do not have a case of profound change in which a person is merely on a superior level. Rather, we have a case of ‘let us differentiate’ between totally different species. This is what needs to be said about the body: the body of a Jewish person is a totally different quality from the body of (members) of all nations of the world...A non-Jew’s entire reality is only vanity. It is written...The entire creation (of a non-Jew) exists only for the sake of the Jews...”

Rabbi Yitzhak Ginsburgh, who wrote a chapter in a book in praise of Baruch Goldstein, who killed 29 Arabs at prayer, speaks freely of Jews’ genetic-based, spiritual superiority over non-Jews. “if you saw two people drowning, a Jew and a non-Jew, the Torah says you save the Jewish life first.” Ginsburgh states, “If every simple cell in a Jewish body entails divinity, is a part of God, then every strand of DNA is a part of God. Therefore, something is special about Jewish DNA...If a Jew needs a liver, can you take the liver of an innocent non-Jew passing by to save him? The Torah would probably permit that. Jewish life has an infinite value.”

Shahak and Mezvinsky point out that, “Changing the words ‘Jewish’ to ‘German’ or ‘Aryan’ and ‘non-Jewish’ to ‘Jewish’ turns the Ginsburgh position into the doctrine that made Auschwitz possible in the past. ...The similarities between the Jewish political and messianic trend and German Nazism are glaring. The Gentiles are for the messianism’s what the Jews were for the Nazis. The hatred of Western culture with its rational and democratic elements is common to both movements...”

Jewish religious extremists believe that God gave all of the Land of Israel (including present-day Lebanon and other areas) to the Jews and that Arabs living in Israel are viewed as thieves. Rabbi Israel Ariel, a fundamentalist leader, published an atlas that designated all lands that were Jewish and need to be liberated. This includes all areas west and south of the Euphrates River extending through most of Syria, much of Iraq and present-day Kuwait.

When it comes to Baruch Goldstein's murder of 29 Palestinians at prayer, fundamentalists refuse to acknowledge that such an act constitutes "murder" because, according to Orthodox law, "the killing by a Jew of a non-Jew under any circumstances is not regarded as murder. It may be prohibited for other reasons, especially when it causes danger for Jews." When asked if he was sorry about the murdered Arabs, militant rabbi Moshe Levinger declared, "I am sorry not only about dead Arabs but about dead flies."

In a eulogy for Goldstein, Rabbi Dov Lior stated that, "Goldstein was full of love for fellow human beings. He dedicated himself to helping others". Authors Shahak and Mezvinsky write that, "The terms 'human beings' and 'others' in the Halacha refer solely to Jews."

Shahak and Mezvinsky wrote their book in 2000. For the future, they feared the growth of such religious extremism. They note that, "It should not be forgotten that democracy and the rule of law were brought into Judaism from the outside. Before the advent of the modern state, Jewish communities were mostly ruled by rabbis who employed arbitrary and cruel methods as bad as those employed by totalitarian regimes. The dearest wish of the current Jewish fundamentalists is to restore this state of affairs."

Now, the religious extremists Shahak and Mezvinsky warned us about in 2000 are about to come to power. As the Israeli newspaper Haaretz declared (Nov. 2, 2022): "In recent years, Israel has become terrifyingly more extreme. Everything we were warned about is happening right before our eyes. Kahanism has been legitimized and spread."

Moshe Halbertal, a Hebrew University Jewish philosopher, told Thomas Friedman of The New York Times that, "The Torah stands for the equality of all people and the notion that we are all created in God's image. Israelis of all people need to respect minority rights because we, as Jews, know what it is to be a minority—with and without rights. This is a deep Jewish ethos, and it is now being challenged from within Israel itself."

How will Jewish Americans react to these developments? And will the U.S. government reconsider the billions of dollars of aid it provides to Israel, a prosperous country? Time will tell. Those who tell us that Israel and the United States share "common values" will have an increasingly difficult time defending that.

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