

Pursuing the Millennium Jewish Fundamentalism in Israel

deep emotional kinship with the fundamentalists, Sharon and several other Likud and far-right secular nationalist leaders joined the hue and cry against Rabin and his government of “criminals,” “Nazis” and “Quislings.” Declaring that “there are tyrants at the gate,” Sharon likened Oslo to the collaboration between France’s Marshal Pétain and Hitler and said that Rabin and his foreign minister, Shimon Peres, were both “crazed” in their indifference to the slaughter of Jews.

The struggle between the religious—in its fundamentalist form—and the secular, between ancient and modern, ethnocentric and universal, is a struggle for Israel’s very soul. The Gush settlements are at the heart of it. The struggle is intensifying and is wholly unresolved. The fundamentalists can never win it; they are simply too backward and benighted for that. But, appeased, surreptitiously connived with, or unashamedly supported down the years by Labor as much as by Likud, they have now acquired such an ascendancy over the whole political process, such a penetration of the apparatus of the state, military and administrative, executive and legislative branches, that no elected government can win it either. Meanwhile, they grow increasingly defiant, lawless and hysterical in pursuit of the millennium.

The Zionist-colonial enterprise has always had a built-in propensity to gravitate towards its most extreme expression. And what, with the rise of the Begin and Shamir, the Sharons and now a new breed of super-Sharons, has been true of the whole is bound to be even more true of its fanatical, fundamentalist particular. Its latest manifestation is the so-called “hilltop youth”; these sons and daughters of the original, post-1967 settlers, born and reared in the closed, homogenous, hothouse world of their West Bank and Gazan strongholds, surpass even their elders in militancy. In keeping with time-honored, Sharon-approved Zionist tradition, they have taken to seizing and staking out hilltops as the sites of settlements to come, and, in every neighborhood they claim as their own, they forcibly prevent the Palestinians from harvesting the fruit of their ancestral olive groves. There is surely worse—much worse—to come.

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Graffiti painted by Israeli settlers in the West Bank city of Hebron. Photo: CPT

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In the minds of many Westerners, Muslim fundamentalism has replaced communism as perhaps the greatest single “threat” to the existing world order. From this perspective the Palestinian intifada becomes just another episode in a “clash of civilizations.” For them, there is an intrinsic link between Palestinian “terrorism” and, say, the al-Qaeda bombing of an American warship off Yemen. Almost totally absent from such arguments is any inclination to examine Jewish fundamentalism, or so much as to ask whether it, too, might be a factor in the conflict over Palestine, one of the reasons why it seems so insoluble.

There is, in fact, a great ignorance of, or indifference to, this whole subject in the outside world, and not least in the United States. This is due at least in part to that general reluctance of the mainstream American media to subject Israel to the same searching scrutiny to which it would other states and societies, and especially when the issue in question is as sensitive, as emotionally charged, as this one is. But, in the view of the late Israel Shahak, it reflects particularly badly on an American Jewry which, with its ingrained, institutionalized aversion to finding fault with Israel, turns a blind eye to what Israelis like himself viewed with disgust and alarm, and unceasingly said so.

American Jews, especially Orthodox ones, are generous financiers of the shock troops of fundamentalism, the religious settlers; indeed a good 10 percent of these, and among the most extreme, violent and sometimes patently deranged, are actually immigrants from America. They are, says Shahak, one of the “absolutely worst phenomena” in Israeli society, and “it is not by chance that they have their roots in the American-Jewish community.” It was from his headquarters in New York that the Lubavitcher Rebbe, the late Menachem Schneerson, seer of possibly the most rabid of Hasidic sects, the Chabad, gave guidance to his many followers in both Israel and the United States.

The ignorance or indifference is all the more remiss in that Jewish fundamentalism is not, and cannot be, just a domestic Israeli question. Israel was always a highly ideological society; it is also a vastly outsized military power, both nuclear and conventional. That is a combination which, when the ideology in question is Zionism in its most extreme, theocratic form, is fraught with possible consequences for the region and the world, and, of course, for the world’s only, Israeli-supporting superpower.

ly, total Holiness embraces every Jewish person, every deed, every phenomenon, including Jewish secularism, which will be one day swallowed by Holiness, by Redemption.”

It goes without saying that the Gush consider any American-sponsored Arab-Israeli peaceful settlement to be a virtual impossibility; but furthermore, any attempt to achieve that impossibility should be actively sabotaged. For them, the Oslo Accords, and the prospect of the “re-division” of the “Land of Israel,” was a profound, existential shock. It was, said Rabbi Yair Dreyfus, an “apostasy” which, the day it came into effect, would mark “the end of the Jewish-Zionist era [from 1948 to 1993] in the sacred history of the Land of Israel.” The Gush and their allies declared a “Jewish intifada” against it. The grisly climax came when, in the Ramadan of February 1994, a doctor, Baruch Goldstein, Israeli but Brooklyn-born-and-bred, machine-gunned Muslim worshippers in Hebron’s Ibrahimi Mosque, killing 29 of them before he was killed himself. This was no mere isolated act of a madman. Goldstein was a follower of New York’s Lubavitcher Rebbe. But what he did reflected and exemplified the whole milieu from which he sprang, the religious settlers, and the National Religious Party behind them. There was no more eloquent demonstration of that than the immediate, spontaneous responses to the mass murder; these yielded nothing, in breadth or intensity, to the Palestinians’ responses to their fundamentalist suicide bombings, when these first got going in the wake of it. Many were the rabbis who praised this “act,” “event” or “occurrence,” as they delicately called it. Within two days the walls of Jerusalem’s religious neighborhoods were covered with posters extolling Goldstein’s virtues and lamenting that the toll of dead Palestinians had not been higher. In fact, the satisfaction extended well beyond the religious camp in general; polls said that 50 percent of the Israeli people, and especially the young, more or less approved of it.

The “Jewish intifada” also turned on other Jews. Yigal Amir, who assassinated Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in November 1995, was no less a product than Goldstein of the milieu from which the latter sprang. As in other religious traditions, the hatred Jewish fundamentalists nurtured for Jewish “traitors” and “apostates” was perhaps even greater than it was for non-Jews. Rabin, and the “left,” were indeed traitors in their eyes; they were “worshippers of the Golden Calf of a delusory peace.” And in a clear example of their

national rights of the Gentiles in our country." What he calls "messianic realism" dictates that Israel has been instructed to "be holy, not moral, and the general principles of morality, customary for all mankind, do not bind the people of Israel, because it has been chosen to be above them." It is not simply because the Arabs deem the land to be theirs that they resist this process—though, in truth, it is not theirs and they are simply "thieves" who took what always belonged to the Jews—it is because, as Gentiles, they are inherently bound to do so. "Arab hostility," says another Gush luminary, Rabbi Eliezer Waldman, director of the Kiryat Arba settlement's main yeshiva, "springs, like all anti-Semitism, from the world's recalcitrance" in the face of an Israel pursuing "its divine mission to serve as the heart of the world."

So force is the only way to deal with the Palestinians. So long as they stay in the Land of Israel, they can only do so as "resident aliens" without "equality of human and civil rights," those being "a foreign democratic principle" that does not apply to them. But, in the end, they must leave. There are two ways in which that can happen. One is "enforced emigration." The other way is based on the biblical injunction to "annihilate the memory of Amalek." In an article on "The Command of Genocide in the Bible," Rabbi Israel Hess opined—without incurring any criticism from a state Rabbinate whose official duty it is to correct error wherever it finds it—that "the day will come when we shall all be called upon to wage this war for the annihilation of Amalek." He advanced two reasons for this. One was the need to ensure "racial purity." The other lay in "the antagonism between Israel and Amalek as an expression of the antagonism between light and darkness, the pure and the unclean."

For the Gush, there is a dimension to the settlements beyond the merely strategic—the defending of the state—or the territorial—the expansion of the "Land of Israel" till it reaches its full, biblically foretold borders. Settlements are the citadels of their messianic ideology, the nucleus and inspiration of their theocratic state-in-the-making, the power base from which to conduct an internal struggle that is inseparable from the external one—the intra-Jewish struggle against that other Israel, the secular-modernist one of original, mainstream Zionism, which stands in their path. The Gush must make good what Rabbi Kook taught: that the existing State of Israel carries within itself "the Kingdom of Israel, the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth; consequent-

Like its Islamic counterpart, Jewish fundamentalism in Israel has grown enormously in political importance over the past quarter-century. Its committed, hard-core adherents, as distinct from a larger body of the more traditionally religious, are thought to account for some 20 to 25 percent of the population. They, and more particularly the settlers among them, have acquired an influence, disproportionate to their numbers, over the whole Israeli political process, and especially in relation to the ultra-nationalist right, which, beneath its secular exterior, actually shares much of their febrile, exalted outlook on the world. It is fundamentalism of a very special, ethnocentric and fiercely xenophobic kind, with beliefs and practices that are "even more extremist," says Shahak, "than those attributed to the extremes of Islamic fundamentalism," if not "the most totalitarian system ever invented."

Like fundamentalism everywhere, the Jewish variety seeks to restore an ideal, imagined past. If it ever managed to do so, the Israel celebrated by the American "friends of Israel" as a "bastion of democracy in the Middle East" would, most assuredly, be no more. For, in its full and perfect form, the Jewish Kingdom that arose in its place would elevate a stern and wrathful God's sovereignty over any new-fangled, heathen concepts such as the people's will, civil liberties or human rights. It would be governed by the Halacha, or Jewish religious law, of which the rabbis would be the sole interpreters, and whose observance clerical commissars, installed in every public and private institution, would rigorously enforce, with the help of citizens legally obligated to report any offense to the authorities. A monarch, chosen by the rabbis, would rule and the Knesset would be replaced by a Sanhedrin, or supreme judicial, ecclesiastic and administrative council. Men and women would be segregated in public, and "modesty" in female dress and conduct would be enforced by law. Adultery would be a capital offense, and anyone who drove on the Sabbath, or desecrated it in other ways, would be liable to death by stoning. As for non-Jews, the Halacha would be an edifice of systematic discrimination against them, in which every possible crime or sin committed by a Gentile against a Jew, from murder or adultery to robbery or fraud, would be far more heavily punished than the same crime or sin committed by a Jew against a Gentile—if, indeed, the latter were considered to be a felony at all, which it often would not be.

All forms of "idolatry or idol-worship," but especially Christian ones (for

traditionally Muslims, who are not considered to be idolaters, are held in less contempt than Christians), would be “obliterated,” in the words of Shas party leader Rabbi Ovadia Yosef. According to conditions laid down by Maimonides, whose Halacha rulings are holy writ to the fundamentalists, those Gentiles, or so-called “Sons of Noah,” permitted to remain in the Kingdom could only do so as “resident aliens,” obliged under law to accept the “inferiority” in perpetuity which that status entails, to “suffer the humiliation of servitude,” and to be “kept down and not raise their heads to the Jews.” At weekday prayers, the faithful would intone the special curse: “And may the apostates have no hope, and all the Christians perish instantly.” One wonders what the Jerry Falwells and Pat Robertsons think of all this; for it is strange, this new adoration by America’s evangelicals of an Israel whose Jewish fundamentalists continue to harbor a doctrinal contempt for Christianity only rivaled by the contempt which the Christian fundamentalists reserve for the Jews themselves.

Fundamentalists come in a multitude of sects, often fiercely disputatious with one another on the finest and most esoteric points of doctrine, but all are agreed on this basic eschatological truth: It is upon the coming of the Messiah that the Jewish Kingdom will arise, and the twice-destroyed Temple will be reconstructed on the site where the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa mosques now stand. One school of fundamentalists, the Hanedim, believes that the Messiah will appear in His own good time, that the millennium, the End of Days, will come by the grace of God alone. The Shas party is their largest single political component. Their position has in it something of the traditional religious quietism, which, historically, opposed the whole idea of Zionism, immigration to Palestine and the establishment of a Jewish state.

The other school, less extreme in outward religious observances, is more so, indeed breathtakingly revolutionary, on one crucial point of dogma: the belief that the coming of the Messiah can be accomplished, or hastened, by human agency. In fact, the “messianic era” has already arrived. This messianic fundamentalism is represented by the National Religious Party, and its

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progeny, the settlers of the Gush Emunim, or Bloc of the Faithful, who eventually came to dominate it. Its adherents are ready to involve themselves in the world, sinful though it is, and, by so doing, they sanctify it. Except for the symbolic skullcap, they have adopted conventional modern dress; they include secular subjects in the curricula of their seminaries.

According to the teachings of their spiritual mentor, Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda Kook, the Gush, or at least the rabbis who lead it, are themselves the collective incarnation of the Messiah. Since, in biblical prophecy, the Messiah was to appear riding on an ass, he identified the ass as those errant, secular Jews who remain in stubborn ignorance of the exalted purpose of its divinely guided rider. In the shape of those early Zionists they had, it is true, performed the

necessary task of carrying the Jews back to the Holy Land, settling it and founding a state there. But now they had served their historic purpose; now they had become obsolete in their failure to renounce their beastly, ass-like ways—and to perceive that Zionism has a divine, not merely a national, purpose.

The mainstream secular Zionist leadership had wanted the Jewish people to achieve “normality,” to be as other peoples with a nation-state of their own. The messianics—and indeed, though for

emotional more than doctrinal reasons, much of the nationalist right—hold that that is impossible; the Jews’ “eternal uniqueness” stems from the covenant God made with them on Mount Sinai. So, as Rabbi Shlomo Aviner, a Gush leader and head of a yeshiva that studies the ancient priestly rites that would be revived if and when the Temple were rebuilt, put it, “while God requires other, normal nations to abide by abstract codes of ‘justice and righteousness,’ such laws do not apply to Jews.” Since Zionism began, but especially since the 1967 war and Israel’s conquest of the remainder of historic Palestine, the Jews have been living in a “transcendental political reality,” or a state of “metaphysical transformation,” one in which, through war and conquest, Israel liberates itself not only from its physical enemies, but from the “satanic” power which these enemies incarnate. The command to conquer the Land, says Aviner, is “above the moral, human considerations about the