

Extremism in Israel Is Fueled by a Growing Ultra-Orthodox Movement in the U.S.

By Allan C. Brownfeld, Washington Report, Jan-Feb 2001. Allan C. Brownfeld is a syndicated columnist and associate editor of the Lincoln Review, a journal published by the Lincoln Institute for Research and Education, and editor of Issues, the quarterly journal of the American Council for Judaism.

In the years since the end of World War II, an ultra-Orthodox Jewish community has seen dramatic growth in the U.S. and has been influential in fueling extremism and terrorism in Israel.

While fewer than 100,000 Orthodox European Jews entered the country after 1945, their effects were profound. "Only the religious believers had a clear and unshakable answer to the question of why be a Jew," Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg has written. These particular believers, according to Hertzberg, "asserted the most uncompromising, separatist version of the Jewish religion. For the first time in modern American history, the secular humanistic impulse of American Jewry faced the challenge of a vibrant, charismatic and almost completely antithetical belief system with institutions and folkways of its own. Most American Jews surely thought they had left all that behind in Europe decades earlier."

In his book *Jew Vs. Jew*, Samuel Freedman, a professor of journalism at Columbia University, shows that the divisions among American Jews are profound: "To say that American Jews differ on the issue-recent polls find about two-thirds favoring the land-for-peace formula-is to see only the surface of a widening chasm. The poll numbers in many ways mask the reality. Aside from an energetic and visible leadership, the Jews who support the Oslo agreements are largely those disengaged from Israel in all but sentimental ways. The opposition, resting disproportionately in the Orthodox population, is the segment of American Jewry most involved with Israel, most committed to it in concrete actions. This passionate minority has dominated the peace issue, influencing events from the halls of Congress to the settlements of the West Bank, arguing on grounds of both security and Torah that Israel must never surrender the lands won in 1967. And while the right wing of American Jewry has expressed itself primarily through political activity, its fringe elements have repeatedly turned to inflammatory rhetoric and violent acts both in the U.S. and Israel. Yigal Amir's trail to the murder of Yitzhak Rabin, it might be said, was one partly blazed by American Jews."

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Some of the violence which has taken place in Israel has, in fact, been perpetrated by Orthodox American Jewish immigrants. In 1980, a terrorist band known as the Jewish Underground, including an American immigrant named Ezra Rapaport, tried to assassinate three Arab mayors of West Bank towns with car bombs. Two years later, another American, Alan Goodman, opened fire on Muslim worshippers at the Dome of the Rock, killing one Palestinian and provoking rioting.

"The lineage of American extremists," writes Freedman, "led directly to Kiryat Arba's doctor, a former New Yorker named Baruch Goldstein. Goldstein studied with Meir Kahane. He closely followed Alan Goodman's attack at the Dome of the Rock. And on Feb. 25, 1994 he enacted a more successful version of it, shooting to death 29 Muslim worshippers at a mosque in Hebron. An American Hasidic rabbi in the West Bank city of Nablus, Yitzhak Ginsburg, oversaw the publication of a memorial book glorifying

Goldstein as 'the Saint, may God avenge his blood.' One of those who read it was Yigal Amir."

In American Orthodox Jewish circles there were a number of prominent individuals who encouraged such extremism. A figure widely respected in Orthodox circles, the Talmud scholar Herschel Schachter of Yeshiva University, asserted that Rabin hated God and Torah. Another Yeshiva professor, the rabbi and medical ethicist Moshe Tendler, delivered the eulogy at Meir Kahane's funeral.

Nor have right-wing pressure and terrorist acts been confined to Israel and Palestine. On the same morning of Goldstein's massacre in early 1994, extremists placed bombs inside the Manhattan offices of two liberal groups, the New Israel Fund and Americans for Peace Now. When the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations scheduled a memorial service for Rabin at Madison Square Garden in December 1995, they were pressured by Oslo foes to ban any reference to the "peace process" in the event's program or speeches. Even at that, both the Zionist Organization of America and Agudath Israel of America boycotted the event.

The case of Baruch Goldstein highlights the connection between Jewish extremism in the U.S. and Israel. Goldstein, a militant Zionist from New York, had been a member of the Jewish Defense League (JDL), founded by the late Meir Kahane. Kahane urged his followers to emigrate to Israel and called for the removal of all Arabs from the West Bank. After the violent mass murder at Hebron, Goldstein was viewed as a hero by many of the Israeli settlers. At his funeral, Rabbi Yaacov Perrin declared that, "One million Arabs are not worth a Jewish fingernail." Shmuel Hachohen, a teacher in a Jerusalem college, said: "Baruch Goldstein was the greatest Jew alive, not in one way but in every way. There are no innocent Arabs here. He was no crazy. Killing isn't nice, but sometimes it is necessary."

Kahane's Nuremburg Laws

Goldstein's hero, Meir Kahane, had moved to Israel in 1971 and was popular enough to win a seat in the Knesset under the banner of his Kach Party. He developed legislation for The Prevention of Assimilation Between Jews and Non-Jews and for the Sanctity of the Jewish People. It called, among other things, for separate beaches for Jews and non-Jews and for an end to mixed summer camps and community centers. His legislation, much like Nazi Germany's Nuremburg Laws, declared that, "Jews are forbidden to marry non-Jews. mixed marriages will not be recognized in the countries in which they were held. Jews are forbidden to have sexual relations of any sort with non-Jews."

In the U.S., the extremist Orthodox milieu can be seen through the story of Harry Shapiro, a socially awkward loner who grew up in a Conservative Jewish family in Jacksonville, Florida. He ultimately became ultra-Orthodox and found an ideological home in right-wing Jewish politics. So intense were his feelings that he staged a phony bombing of a Jacksonville synagogue where Shimon Peres was to speak on behalf of the Oslo accords.

The forces which led to Shapiro's violent act are to be found throughout Jewish institutions across the U.S. As a young man, Shapiro attended Hebrew high school classes and United Synagogue Youth meetings at the Jacksonville Jewish Center. Samuel Freedman reports that, "Rabbi Dov Kentof turned a USY campout into a simulated mission with the Israeli army, ending with anthems around the bonfire. Week after week in the classroom he narrated the Jewish epic of persecution and the

resistance, from Masada and Bar Kochba through the Warsaw ghetto uprising and the Final Solution, covering one wall with photographs of Jewish corpses." Shapiro recalled years later that, "These were totally new reasons to be Jewish. This was more about feelings and emotions-being proud you're Jewish, not letting a Holocaust happen again. It affected my soul."

In March 1982, Shapiro's parents joined a two-week tour of Israel led by David Gaffney, rabbi of the Jacksonville Jewish Center. On the group's first full day in Israel, after the scheduled stops at Carmel Winery and Weizmann Institute, Rabbi Gaffney persuaded the driver to head further south along the Mediterranean coast, through Gaza, into Sinai, and finally to the Jewish town of Yamit, the center of resistance to the peace treaty with Egypt.

The Camp David accords of 1979 had stipulated that Israel would withdraw from the Sinai Peninsula it had captured in 1967 as a condition for Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's signing a separate peace. One of the Israeli settlements in Sinai was Yamit, a community of 2,500. As many of Yamit's residents ultimately departed, they were replaced by loyalists of Gush Emunim (Bloc of the Faithful, the radical settlers' movement), many of them transplanted Americans.

The Shapiros were emotionally moved by their visit. Later, they told their children about Yamit. Harry dwelled on a photograph of the war memorial, proof of all he had learned in Rabbi Kentof's class about the price of Jewish survival. In 1984, Harry Shapiro flew to Israel. He sought out the Gush Emunim faithful and from them he learned that Israel's victory in the 1967 war was God's will, the Torah's words, that Jews were to abide in all of Eretz Israel.

When he returned to the U.S. and entered Yeshiva University, Shapiro embraced the philosophy of Meir Kahane. He faithfully read *The Jewish Press*, an Orthodox paper published in Brooklyn. In an open letter to rabbis, Avraham Hecht, who led 2,000 congregants in Brooklyn as rabbi of Shaare Zion synagogue and 540 colleagues as president of the Rabbinical Alliance of America, declared: "The Torah permits the most extreme action against those who harm our fellow Jews."

Rabbi Hecht said that surrendering any of the Land of Israel violated halakah (Jewish law), and anyone who did so could be killed as a rodef, "one who pursues a Jew trying to kill him." Asked by *New York Magazine* to clarify what sounded like a religious death threat, Hecht explained: "All I said was that according to Jewish law, any one person-you can apply it to whoever you want-any one person who willfully, consciously, intentionally hands over human bodies or human property or the human wealth of the Jewish people to an alien people is guilty of the sin for which the penalty is death. And according to Maimonides-you can quote me-it says very clearly, if a man kills him, he has done a good deed."

Completing a Circle

It was in this atmosphere that Harry Shapiro went about his life. "Rabbi Hecht's theology," writes Samuel Freedman, "completed a circle for Harry. Years ago, Gush Emunim had taught that God granted Eretz Israel to the Jews; then Meir Kahane demonstrated how one could hate Jewish leaders in the name of loving the Jewish people; and now Harry understood the penalty for disobeying divine commandment, 'The Torah is our deed to the land,' Harry put it. 'Who is man to give it back?' Never able to join the battle against Arabs in Eretz Israel, Harry decided to carry it against a Jew on American ground."

Harry Shapiro admits his guilt. "I placed gunpowder in a pipe," he told the court. "I placed it in a house of worship. I threatened the life of a human being with it. I called 911 and issued a threat to keep Mr. Peres from speaking." Shapiro now occupies a cell in a medium-security prison in Jessup, Georgia. He appreciates the printouts his brother sends him from a Web site honoring Meir Kahane.

Early in the 20th century, the Orthodox in America gave every indication of withering to a vestige. As late as 1955, sociologist Marshall Sklare dismissed the Orthodox experience in the U.S. as "a case study of institutional decay." Now, we have witnessed an Orthodox renaissance. With less than 10 percent of the Jewish population, the Orthodox disproportionately affect the larger community. Orthodox educators often staff the day schools and Hebrew schools of the Conservative and Reform movements. In 1956 10 prominent religious scholars issued an *issur*, a prohibition against Orthodox participation in any joint rabbinical organizations—a direct blow against such umbrella groups as the New York Board of Rabbis and the Synagogue Council of America. In 1979, a vigilante group calling itself TORAH-Tough Orthodox Rabbis And Hasidim—spray-painted swastikas and anti-Semitic slurs on the only Conservative synagogue left in the ultra-Orthodox Brooklyn stronghold of Borough Park. In 1984, the Agudath Harabonim ran advertisements just before the High Holy Days urging Jews "not to pray in a Reform or Conservative Temple whose clergy have long rebelled against numerous sacred laws of the Torah and mislead thousands of innocent souls."

The Halakhic instrument promoted by ultra-Orthodox rabbis, both in Israel and the U.S., that ultimately convinced Yigal Amir that he should kill Yitzhak Rabin was the ancient Jewish doctrine of zealotry. The doctrine maintains that under the most extreme circumstances, a God-loving Jew can kill another person without asking permission:

The doctrine of zealotry goes back to the first biblical Jewish zealot—Pinchas Ben-Eleazar. As told in the Bible, Pinchas, acting in awe of God, killed Zimri, who had prostituted in public with a Midianite girl. Pinchas's problem was that the killing was totally unauthorized and he acted out of an uncontrollable momentary drive. And yet, in spite of the severity of the act, which was denounced, according to the Talmud, by the people's elders, it was forgiven by God. The reason given was that Pinchas "was zealous for my sake among them." God instantly terminated a plague that had already killed 20,000 Jews. Pinchas' entire line of ancestors were made priests of Israel. The prophet Elijah is also described in the Bible as a zealot who killed in his wrath 400 priests of Baal, a Canaanite god. Yigal Amir convinced himself that in killing Rabin he was acting in the best tradition of Jewish zealotry.

For the ultra-Orthodox, both in Israel and the U.S., a form of "messianic Zionism," which makes control over the biblical Land of Israel a religious mandate, has been growing. In his book, *Terror in the Mind of God: the Global Rise of Religious Violence*, Professor Mark Juergensmeyer notes that Jewish activists "have been convinced that their violent acts have been authorized as weapons in a divine warfare sanctioned by God. Dr. Baruch Goldstein's massacre at the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron in 1994 was described as a military act. One of his supporters explained, 'It goes back to biblical times,' indicating that the present-day Arabs are simply the modern descendants of the enemies of Israel described in the Bible for whom God has unleashed wars of revenge."

Thus far, the organized American Jewish community has done nothing to isolate the advocates of such violent extremism within its ranks. A vocal and extreme minority, sadly, has often been embraced in the name of an illusory "Jewish unity." Any "unity"

purchased at such a price has within it the seeds of long-term disintegration.

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