Cultural Wars and Communal Perseverance: Jewish Fundamentalism in Our Time

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Abstract

The Corona epidemic highlighted the position of the Orthodox communities within the larger Jewish, and non-Jewish, populations. It exacerbated Jewish cultural wars, and the divisions between the ultra-Orthodox and other groups, including the other fundamentalist Jewish camp, the Nationalist Orthodox. The article explores the rise of the fundamentalist movements, their developments, beliefs, and characteristics, and places the reaction of the different camps to the pandemic within larger cultural contexts.

Keywords: Judaism, Orthodoxy, Haredim, Ultra-Orthodoxy, Zionism, Nationalism.

1. Introduction

As the Corona epidemic began unfolding in March 2020, a number of *Haredi*, ultra-Orthodox, leaders expressed their opinion that the pandemic came as a punishment, a retribution for the lax morality of women and other members of the community. "The Corona Pandemic-Measure for Measure" announced posters in Haredi neighborhoods in Jerusalem. "You have taken your crowns of your heads and replaced them with wigs, and retribution came swiftly – measure for measure. You have walked the streets exposed, instead of wearing dresses that fully cover your entire bodies..."[1] To those who read the ultra-Orthodox *pashkvils*, wall posters, such public chastising does not seem out of line. They fit well with the language and content of public discourses in ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods, where the writers

1 Cf. Anshel Pfeffer (2020). *Haaretz*. April 28. See: https://www.haaretz.co.il/health/corona/.premium-MAGAZINE-1.8803930

refrain from using electronic means of communications and often air their concerns and arguments via wall posters. With the appearance and proliferation of the Corona virus, the posters made use of Covid-19 to promote a message of austerity and modesty, in line with the values of the community.

The epidemic highlighted the position of the ultra-Orthodox communities within the larger Jewish population, the cultural wars among Jews and the divisions between the ultra-Orthodox and other groups in the Orthodox community, including the other fundamentalist Jewish camp, the Nationalist Orthodox. The chastising and arguments that developed have drawn on a long history of Jewish fundamentalism that started in the early nineteenth century.

This article will explore the two Jewish fundamentalist communities: the separatist ultra-Orthodox, and the more culturally acculturated but politically radical Nationalist Orthodox groups. Those segments of Judaism have been on the rise in the last generation, demographically, institutionally and politically. They have attracted much media attention as well as made their way, in fictionalized forms to popular Jewish literature, TV series and movies.

Jewish fundamentalists are currently prominent on the Israeli political scene, supporting Right Wing governments and affecting national policies. Declarations and actions of some members of the groups in relation to Israeli society and policies have gone even beyond the Jewish community, affecting the image of Israel on a global level. Likewise, the ultra-Orthodox reaction to Corona public regulations has reinforced their image as separatist group among Jews and non-Jews alike.

While many have paid attention to Jewish fundamentalism, especially in its depiction in popular TV series, movies, and novels,[2] few have been aware of the history and development of the Jewish fundamentalist movements and the varied characteristics of the many groups that make up these camps. This paper aims to place the movements within a larger social, cultural and religious context in which they have evolved and to which they have reacted. The paper will point to two major camps of contemporary Jewish fundamentalists that differ from each other in their theologies, communal structures, lifestyles, and political choices. This has been evident, perhaps as never before, in their different reactions to the Covid-19 epidemic.

One can define Jewish fundamentalists as those taking affirmative religious stands in face of secularization and liberalization of Jewish life: those upholding and strengthening tradition in face of other options in Jewish culture. Jewish fundamentalists insist on the validity and authority of the Jewish sacred scriptures, see special merits in studying the texts as central to Jewish life and identity, and

2 See, for example, the global success of the mini-series *Unorthodox*, which aired on Netflix, in 2020, during the Corona epidemic: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt9815454/

are protective of the narratives the texts offer. Both groups are eschatologically oriented, but while the Zionist-Orthodox believe in taking an active role in history, the ultra-Orthodox have often objected to such attempts.[3] While the ultra-Orthodox take their model from the *alter heim,* Eastern European Jewish society before Communism, Nazism and emigration brought it to an end, Zionist Orthodox groups have come instead to promote the Land of Israel as a focal point of their political vision.[4]

2. Fundamentalist Ultra-Orthodoxy

The demographically largest of the religious fundamentalist movements within contemporary Judaism is ultra-Orthodoxy.[5] This diverse fundamentalist movement started in Central Europe, in the nineteenth century, in reaction to movements of acculturation and liberalization.[6] It spread to Jewish communities in other parts of the world, changing and evolving in response to new environments and challenges.

Until the turn of the nineteenth century, Jews did not define themselves as 'orthodox.' Matters changed in the early nineteenth century when leaders of more militant forms of reactive traditional Judaism appeared on the scene and declared themselves 'orthodox' in contrast to what they considered to be the erring reformers. Until secular and liberal alternatives appeared in Jewish society, Jews could move away from the faith by converting to another religion, but they could not choose, on an individual basis, how they defined their tradition and in what forms they observed it. Now, such choices became possible. In Western and Central Europe, as well as in the New World, many Jews liberalized, easing up or giving up completely on daily observance of their tradition. A number of rabbis and layperson made deliberate efforts to bring Judaism to par with the cultural norms of urban Christian European societies.[7] Those deciding to uphold traditional Jewish forms considered such liberal reformers misguided, if not outright traitors. They set out to create a more stern and uncompromising version of traditional Judaism that would save the Jewish community from disintegration.

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3 Cf. Aviezer Ravitzky (1996). *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, chapter 4.

4 On the ethos of ultra-Orthodox society, see Menachem Friedman (1991). The Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) Society. Jerusalem: Jerusalem Institute.

5 Cf. Friedman (1991).

6 Cf. Jacob Katz (1973). *Out of the Ghetto: the Social Background of Jewish Emancipation*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

7 Cf. Michael Mayer (1995). *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

The term ultra-Orthodoxy has not been a self-designation. Most members of this camp prefer instead terms that express their understanding of themselves as the most loyal followers of the Jewish faith, using at times 'Torah Camp,' or *Haredim*, Eager to Follow God, to emphasize their zealous commitment to the highest standards of Jewish observance. Michael Silber has pointed out that the ultra-Orthodox reacted not only to the rise of Reform or secular forms of Jewish life, but also to the appearance of acculturated forms of Orthodoxy whose holders had wished to make observant forms of Judaism compatible with modern life.[8] The ultra-Orthodox believe that even minor attempts at acculturation or reform could be the beginning of a slippery slope, decline in commitment and deterioration in the standards of observing the faith that would eventually lead to the complete disintegration of the tradition. The first ultra-Orthodox leaders lashed out at early Orthodox thinkers, such as Moses Mendelssohn, and even at Samson Raphael Hirsch and Azriel Hildesheimer, who were, in fact, founders of firm forms of Judaism and militated against reforms of the faith.[9]

If Moses Mendelssohn was the thinker most associated with the beginning of a moderate, acculturated form of Jewish Orthodoxy, Moses Sofer (Schreiber) of Pressburg (Bratislava), known as the Hatam Sofer (1762-1839), was the early founder of ultra-Orthodoxy. Spiritual leader of the utmost Eastern urban center of the Habsburg Empire, Sofer established a yeshiva that became a bastion of anti-modernism in Central and Eastern Europe. The Hatam Sofer pun on a Talmudic ruling, "Kol hadash asur min ha Torah," the Torah forbids all new things, became a battle cry of ultra-Orthodoxy. It has reflected the dialectics of the new movement, which has come about within the context of modernity yet carried a banner of opposition to modernism and acculturation, and while thoroughly opposing reforms, made profound theological and practical changes in the tradition. It was perhaps not surprising that the Hatam Sofer held expectations for the imminent arrival of the Messiah to usher in a global righteous age and bring about the redemption of Israel. It stood in contrast to the views and hopes of newly emerging circles of liberal Jews, who adopted progressive millennial views and hoped to build the Kingdom of God on Earth through education, the spreading of the values of the Enlightenment, technological advancement, and political reforms. The Hatam Sofer believed that the Messianic era would not be ushered in through human efforts, but rather

8 Michael Silber (1992). The Invention of Ultra-Orthodoxy: the Emergence of a Tradition. In edited by Jack Wertheimer (Ed.) *The Uses of Tradition: Jewish Community in the Modern Era*. New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, pp. 23-82.

9 Cf. Maoz Kahana (2015). *From the Noda BeYehuda to the Hatam Sofer: Halacha and Thought in Response to the Challenges of the Time*. Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar.; On Hirsch, Hildsheimer and the rise of German Jewish neo-Orthodoxy, see Mordechai Breuer (1992). *Modernity within Tradition*. New York: Columbia University Press.

through divine intervention and busied himself in trying to calculate the exact date of its arrival.

In that, ultra-Orthodoxy has been similar to the ideologies and attitudes of fundamentalist movements that have come about in other religious traditions in the late Modern era. Like other such movements, ultra-Orthodoxy should be understood as a reaction to modernism, liberalism, and pluralism. If in previous generations, there was more leeway for rabbis, and laypersons, to balance the demands of day to day life with those of tradition and the *halakha*, now regulations and standards have become more stringent and greater emphasize put on separation from outside cultures including other groups of Jews.[10]

In their declared ideology as well as in their own minds, the ultra-Orthodox created nothing new. They have seen themselves as merely preserving the customs and faith of their fathers and forefathers, which, they have asserted, had remained unaltered throughout the ages. Religious traditions, however, are dynamic by nature and fundamentalist groups, such as the ultra-Orthodox, tend to be particularly active in re-designing their traditions in order to make them more insular and immune to outside influences. While opposing innovations, ultra-Orthodox leaders and groups have implemented huge changes in Jewish customs and standards of observance as well as in the relation between different groups of Jews.[11] For example, the ultra-Orthodox unwillingness to recognize more acculturated or accommodating rabbis as legitimate has brought the older concept of, *More deAtra*, local rabbis as the authoritative halachic figures in their own territories, to an end. The dynamic nature of fundamentalism is also evident in the significant developments that have taken place as new generations of ultra-Orthodox have come on the scene. As a generalization, the movement has become increasingly stricter and demanding throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Its leaders have militated against, and partially withstood, within their communities, the influence of a number of central ideological movements of the late modern era, such as nationalism, or equality for women. In July 2020, the Israeli Institute for Democracy released the findings of a survey it has taken among ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israel. A vast majority among the 863 members of the community, who participated in the survey, expressed, in different degrees, separatist and non-egalitarian views on the roles of women and men in the community.[12]

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10 For similar attitudes among Christian fundamentalists, see George Marsden (1982). *Fundamentalism and American Culture: the Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925*. New York: Oxford University Press.; Cf. Timothy Weber (1983). *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming: American Premillennialism*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan

11 Cf. Jacob Katz (1998). *A House Divided: Orthodoxy and Schism in Nineteenth Century Judaism*. Waltham: Brandeis University Press.

12 Cf. Or Kashti (2020). *Haaretz*. See: https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/education/.premium-1.8999355

At the same time, the movement also manifests enormous inner diversity. While for many observers ultra-Orthodoxy seem, from the outside, like a homogeneous camp, it is in fact a large and diverse religious-cultural movement. Divisions have to do with the areas from which the ultra-Orthodox have arrived from, as well as between Hasidic and non-Hasidic forms of leadership, authority and worship. The camp is composed of numerous communities that share the basic cultural values and adhere to the same narratives on the course of Jewish history, yet differ in the leaders they follow, as well as small details of appearance and customs. There are also varying shades of separatism from the outside culture. These communal divisions often result in inner struggles, the building and dissolving of coalitions and public institutions, and even verbal and physical skirmishes. For example, most ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israel lend their support to political parties that represent their interests vis a vis the Israeli government. However, a minority group considers such political maneuvers to be in violation of the community's values and boycotts the elections.[13]

While positioning themselves in opposition to modernity and the general culture, the ultra-Orthodox have chosen, especially since World War II, to live their lives in large cities. They have made extensive usage of modern technology and international transportation. This has allowed them to build global networks and unite over common causes. Most ultra-Orthodox Jews are of Eastern-European origins, and many of them consider traditional Eastern-European customs to represent normative Judaism. The separatist communities in Germany were more acculturated than the ultra-Orthodox groups in Eastern-Europe, and they encouraged their male members to obtain general education and professional training, alongside Jewish traditional schooling, a reality that made some Eastern European leaders treat them with suspicion.

By the turn of the twentieth century, the Germans and Eastern-Europeans cooperated in establishing political bodies that came to represent the conservative elements of Orthodox Judaism in the public and political spheres. By that time, the ultra-Orthodox were reacting strongly to the rise of the Zionist movement, and especially to its Orthodox wing, *Hamizrahi*.[14] Leaders of ultra-Orthodox communities, such as the *Munkatcher Rebbe*, Chaim Elazar Spira (1868-1937) and the *Satmar Rebbe,* Joel Teitelbaum (1887-1979) shared the conviction that the Jews were forbidden 'La'alot Bahoma,' to re-enter history as active agents. They therefore opposed the Zionist agenda vehemently, viewing it as a futile and dangerous attempt. The

13 Cf. Friedman (1991).

14 Michael Silber (1992). See also Motti Inbari (2016). *Jewish Radical ultra-Orthodoxy Confronts Modernity*. New York: Cambridge University Press. On ultra-Orthodox life and institutions, see Samuel Heilman (2000). *Defenders of the Faith: Inside Ultra-Orthodox Jewry.* Berkley: University of California Press.

founding of an ultra-Orthodox party, Agudat Israel, came to present a political alternative to Zionist voices.[15] While inner divisions, such as between Hasidic Jews and 'opponents,' non-Hasidic ultra-Orthodox did not disappear, Eastern and Central European traditionalists were now willing to put aside some of their differences and cooperate in order to fight the modernists and strengthen the ideological and spiritual walls around their communities.

After World War I, Agudat-Israel became active in a number of Eastern and Central European countries and in Palestine, expressing opposition to the Zionist movement in international forums. Still, in the mid-1920s, the ultra-Orthodox party begun, on a pragmatic basis, to cooperate with the Zionist establishment. Its leaders wished to get their share of certificates for immigration to Palestine, as well as budgets and allocations of land.[16] This created a backlash among the more radical elements of the ultra-Orthodox in Jerusalem. In 1937, Amram Blau (1894-1974) and others, established *Neturei Karta*, Defenders of the City, a group that in the 1950s-1960s galvanized ultra-Orthodox antagonists of the newly created State of Israel and organized demonstrations in Jerusalem against the desecration of the Sabbath. This group gave voice to a minority within the ultra-Orthodox. Most chose to operate within the system in order to protect their community's interests, including its growing separatist educational institutions. Avraham Yishaya Karelitz (1878-1953), known as the *Hazon Ish*, emerged as a spiritual leader, giving voice to ultra-Orthodoxy at large, in opposing the conscription of women, as well as of male yeshiva students, to the Israeli military.

The deferment from conscription of yeshiva students and young women, which the Israeli governments granted to its ultra-Orthodox coalition partners, proved crucial to the educational, occupational, and economic development of the community. Since the 1950s, studies in *yeshivot*, rabbinical academies, previously a privilege of a small elite, became routine for all young men. While Zionist Orthodox also engage in some rabbinical studies, for the ultra-Orthodox it has become a way of life. Men continue their studies after marriage, while their wives work for a living.[17] As a rule, the ultra-Orthodox remain in coalition governments, whoever heads them, to ensure the continuation of this arrangement and the integrity of their communities.

Many observers thought, in the aftermath of WWII, and the Holocaust, that ultra-Orthodoxy would not be able to overcome the deadly blows that the Nazi death machine and the Communist regimes have dealt the traditionalist Jewish

15 On Agudat Israel, see Gershon Bacon (1996). *The Politics of Tradition: Agudat Yisrael in Poland*. Jerusalem: Magness Press.

16 On Agudat Israel, see Gershon Bacon (1996). *The Politics of Tradition: Agudat Yisrael in Poland*. Jerusalem: Magness Press.

17 On ultra-Orthodox life and institutions, see Samuel Heilman (2000). *Defenders of the Faith: Inside Ultra-Orthodox Jewry*. Berkley: University of California Press.

communities in Eastern Europe. However, to the amazement of many, including the ultra-Orthodox themselves, the community has risen up, like a phoenix, from the ashes of destruction and suppression, showing signs of vitality and growth. Contrary to warnings, America, Israel and centers in Australia, Canada, England and Belgium, proved to be congenial to the reconstruction and thriving of ultra-Orthodox communities. While previously traditionalist Jews, who settled in the New World, saw a need to acculturate quickly in order to accommodate successfully to their new environments, the post-Holocaust ultra-Orthodox migrants saw matters differently. They wished to maintain many of their customs, including their distinctive attire, and build an independent educational infrastructure that has enhanced the community's ability to retain most of its children within the fold.[18]

The separatist, seemingly archaic, character of ultra-Orthodox societies brought sociologists and anthropologists, as well as journalists, writers, and film producers, to take special interest in the various aspects of their lives.[19] Some are fascinated by the arranged marriages that are the norm in the community, while renegade female writers, such as Yochi Brandeis or Judith Rotem, point to the sometimes difficult position of women, who are married of young, and who carry most of the burden of raising large families.[20] Ultra-Orthodox women give birth to averagely five and a half children in the United States and seven children in Israel, about three times more than liberal Jewish women in these countries. Especially in Israel, most ultra-Orthodox live economically frugal existence. In spite of an impressive network of mutual aid and extensive government support, many in community live in poverty, depriving themselves of the luxuries of Western consumer societies.[21]

Relationships between the ultra-Orthodox community and the liberal segments of Israeli society have become strenuous. Many secular Jews resent the separatist nature of the ultra-Orthodox community, and the refraining from economic activity of so many ultra-Orthodox men. Likewise, the ultra-Orthodox have not celebrated Israeli civil holidays and have not recited prayers for the safety and well-

18 Cf. Friedman; Heilman There is an extensive literature from the perspective of women on the division of labor in the ultra-Orthodox community.

19 Cf. Janet Belcove-Shalin (Ed.) (1995). *New World Hasidism*. Albany: SUNY Press.; Cf. Deborah Feldman (2012). Unorthodox: the Scandalous Rejection of my Hasidic Roots. New York: Simon and Schuster.; Cf. Lis Harris (1995). Holy Days: The World of a Hasidic Family. New York: Touchstone.; Cf. Samuel Heilman (1992). *Defenders of the Faith: Inside Ultra-Orthodox Judaism*. New York: Schocken Books.

20 There is an extensive literature from the perspective of women on the division of labor in the ultra-Orthodox community. For example, Judith Rotem (1992). *Distant Sister: the Women I Left Behind*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society.

21 See *Life Apart: Hasidism in America*, Documentary, by Menachem Daum and Oren Rudovsky, New York, 1997.

being of the state. The exempt from military service has been a huge source of contention in a country that has had ongoing conscription since its inception.[22]

Still, the community has been on the growth. In addition to a remarkable demographic growth, since the late 1960s, it received unexpected reinforcements from a post-modernist movement of return to tradition that has brought tens of thousands of young men and women to abandon open liberal societies and join the more conservative ultra-Orthodox.[23] Rejecting much of the modernist worldview, which their grandparents' generation had embraced, the new adherents included artists, soldiers, former Kibbutz members, and children of the veteran Israeli elites and, in America, also academicians and professionals. The growing trend has boosted the morale of the ultra-Orthodox. Here are liberal Jews turning their backs on the freedoms and opportunities embodied in the open, secular society, 'coming back' into the fold. A number of ultra-Orthodox groups and leaders decided to create venues of outreach in order to further enlarge the community's ranks. Their mode of evangelism is based on the understanding that becoming observant and joining ultra-Orthodox life is a long process involving extensive studies. For that purpose, they have created a large number of *yeshivot* for beginners, a novelty in Jewish life.

The growth of the ultra-Orthodox community and the self-understanding of its members, who see themselves as representatives of the true and authentic tradition, has affected the more acculturated Zionist Orthodox. The trend since the 1960s has been towards more rigid observance and greater acceptance of ultra-Orthodox norms. By the 1980s, Zionist Orthodox have attempted to combine both sets of values and standards.[24] The *Hardalim*, ultra-Orthodox Zionists, coupled ultra-Orthodox norms of piety and observance with a messianic nationalist faith. Many in the Settlers movement have promoted this combination.

In the 1980s-2010s, the veteran, almost exclusively *Ashkenazi*, ultra-Orthodox community, was both strengthened and challenged by a large movement of religious revival and return to the roots of *Mizrahi* Jews in Israel. Previously, most Jews from Middle Eastern and North African countries were mildly traditional, with only a minority choosing secular outlooks or adhering to Orthodox norms. The new movement changed that reality and brought tens of thousands of *Mizrahi* Jews to adopt both ultra-Orthodox standards of piety and anti-modernist stands.[25]

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22 On Israeli liberal resentment of Haredi society, see Shahar Ilan (2001). *Haredin LTD*. Jerusalem: Keter.

23 Cf. Lynn Davidman (1993). *Tradition in a Rootless: Women Turn to Orthodox Judaism*. Berkley: University of California Press.

24 On the background to this trend, see Gideon Aran (1991). Jewish Zionist Fundamentalism: Gush Emunim, the Bloc of the Faithful in Israel. In Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Eds.). *Fundamentalisms Observed*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, pp. 62-128.

25 Cf. Nissim Leon (2009). *Gentle Ultra-Orthodoxy: Religious Renewal in Oriental Jewry in Israel*. Jerusalem: Yad Yitzhak Ben-Zvi.

The movement also promoted ethnic pride and the preservation of *Mizrahi* culture and tradition. It created parallel political, educational, rabbinical and welfare institutions similar to those of the veteran ultra-Orthodox community and used its new political power to obtain extensive government support.[26]

The political influence of the ultra-Orthodox has been on the rise in Israel. As a rule, the ultra-Orthodox parties offer the government backing in matters that relate to security, foreign-policy, and the economy, in exchange for allowing them exemption from military service, cultural autonomy and financing for separate educational and housing systems. Ultra-Orthodox parties often became essential members of the coalition, and the budgets allocated for their community's educational and housing projects have grown considerably. Similar developments have taken place on the local level, such as in Jerusalem's municipal politics, where the ultra-Orthodox have successfully demanded, in return for their support, to have their neighborhoods closed to traffic on the Sabbath and holidays. This has affected the character of Jerusalem, where many neighborhoods and schools have become ultra-Orthodox. Outside of Israel, the ultra-Orthodox as a rule do not run for offices but lend their support to those candidates that respect their cultural separatism and educational autonomy. The Zionist Orthodox have also been active on the political front and have promoted an educational network for culturally acculturated, modernist Orthodox Jews.

3. The Nationalist Zionist Orthodox

Zionist Orthodoxy has come on the scene a short while after the rise of political Zionism. The group represented a minority voice within both Jewish Orthodoxy and Zionism. Its proponents established HaMizrahi, a moderate political party that saw its mission in carving a niche for observant Jews who supported the Zionist agenda. HaPoel Hamizrahi, which combined Labor Zionism with moderate observance, became a larger political party, although the two parties united after the birth of the state of Israel. This Moderate stand on politics and piety ended after the June 1967 war. While many Jews reacted with joy to the Israeli victory, seeing in it a triumph of the Zionist project at large, for many in the Zionist Orthodox camp it signified a messianic development. Already during the war, the chief military rabbi who was known for his accommodating rulings, Shlomo Goren, appeared near the Wailing Wall blowing a *shofar*, ram's horn, as if to announce the beginning of Messianic times. About a year after the war, a group of a few dozen Zionist Orthodox,

26 On Mizrahi ultra-Orthodox, see David Lehmann and Batia Siebzehner (2006). *Remaking Israeli Judaism: the challenge of Shas*. New York: Oxford University Press.

headed by Rabbi Moshe Levinger (1935-2015), settled in Hebron, disregarding government regulations. In October 1974, this early attempt turned into a large movement. Thousands marched, and hundreds settled, in newly established posts in what had been the West Bank of Jordan, and for the settlers has become Judea and Samaria.[27] For the Zionist Orthodox enthusiasts, building their homes in these areas embodied a messianic purpose. They were taking steps towards the building of David's Messianic kingdom. The Settlers adopted Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook as their spiritual leader and source of inspiration. The son of a chief rabbi and a mystic, Abraham Isaac Hacohen Kook, Zvi Yehuda took his father's teachings a few steps further.[28] The Land of Israel has become a central component and a focal point of his and his disciples' theology.

The Settlers' Movement received an enormous boost with the rise of the Likud to power in 1977, moving from a handful of small caravan towns to nicely built neighborhoods subsidized by government funding. The Zionist Orthodox have mobilized politically to defend their settlements from possible restrictions that the Israeli government might impose and to ensure government support for the enlargement of the settlements project. In spite of the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, the settlers' community has grown considerably, reaching hundreds of thousands of people. It has created its own subculture, complete with its own dress code, a mixture of countercultural attire and ultra-Orthodox norms, and independent media ventures.

While the settlers' community is devoted to Israel and its sons play a growing role in its military, members of the community have at times taken the law into their hands. In 1983, the Israeli security services discovered cells of underground militants among the Settlers that were stocking arms and ammunition in preparation for a possible clash with the Israeli state and its security forces, in case of an Israeli attempt to withdraw from the occupied territories and evacuate the settlements.[29] There have also been at times incidents of violence directed against Palestinians, allegedly in retaliation against terrorist acts directed against Jews. These have included the destruction of trees, injuring mayors of Palestinian towns, and even incidents that resulted in fatalities. While most settlers have not resorted to underground activities or to sabotage or harassment of Palestinians, the settlers'

27 On the gradual up hazard building of a large infrastructure of settlements, see Gershom Gorenberg (2007). *The Accidental Empire: Israel and the Birth of the Settlements, 1967-1977*. London: Macmillan.

28 Cf. Gideon Aran (1997). The Father, the Son and the Holy Land. In R. Scott Appleby (Ed.). *Spokesmen for the Despised: Fundamentalist Leaders of the Middle East*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, pp. 294-327.

29 Cf. Ehud Sprinzak (1991). *The Ascendance of Israel's Radical Right*. New York: Oxford University Press.; Cf. Robert I. Friedman (1992). *Zealots for Zion: Inside Israel's West Bank Settlement Movement*. New York: Random House.

camp as a whole has stood on the radical side of the Israeli political and ideological spectrum and many have come to see it as a potential obstacle to a peace agreement and to an atmosphere of reconciliation between Arabs and Jews.

4. Preparing to Build the Temple

Of special concern for peace-hopefuls, in Israel and other countries, as well as security services, has been the possibility that Messianic oriented radical Jews or Christians might heart the Muslim mosques on the Temple Mount and bring about a regional doomsday.[30] In order to appreciate this fear, one has to examine the role of the Temple and the Land of Israel in Jewish, as well as Christian and Muslim thought.

The Temple in Jerusalem had been a central institution in Israelite religion, as well as in the Judaism of the Second Temple period. For Jews of that period, the Temple served as the ultimate spiritual point on earth, a place where it was possible for them to atone for their sins and reconcile with God in a definite manner. Pilgrimages to the Temple in Jerusalem were essential rites. The Temple developed into a unifying symbol for a growingly diverse Jewish community around the Mediterranean world.[31] The destruction of the Temple in 70 CE created therefore a serious vacuum in Jewish communal and spiritual life. Instead of a physical temple, rabbinical Judaism put its premium on sacred texts, and promoted a "temple in time," as the weekly Sabbath had become a holy day, similar in sanctity to a holy place. Jews purified themselves in honor of the Sabbath and entered the holy day in the same manner they would enter a holy place, cleaning their bodies, wearing special cloths, preparing festive meals, lighting candles and recite special prayers. Synagogues, "houses of gatherings" in Hebrew, came about during the Second Temple period and developed, after the Temple's destruction, into houses of worship and learning, where Jews prayed and read sacred texts.

Still, Jews prayed to God to gather them back to Zion, rebuild Jerusalem, recreate the Temple and enable them to atone for their sins and reconcile with God. The Temple came to symbolize redemption. Rabbis have spent time on issues relating to the Temple, its measures, sacrificial system, and the alms and donations presented to it. Most rabbinical authorities throughout the Middle Ages and Modern Era have viewed the Temple Mount as being as sacred as it was when the Temple

30 Yaakov Ariel (2001). Doomsday in Jerusalem? Christian Messianic Groups and the Rebuilding of the Temple. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 13, No. 1. Spring, 1-14.

31 Yaakov Ariel (2016). Tempel. In Dan Diner (Ed.). *Enzyklopädie jüdischer Geschichte und Kultur*. Bd. 6, pp. 62-65.

was standing.[32] The Mishnah, the post-Biblical compilation of lore and law, outlined the various degrees of sanctity of areas on the Temple Mount and the rituals of purification people needed to perform in order to enter these areas. Jews have been required to purify themselves with the ashes of a Red Heifer before entering the Mount, although there are no longer red heifers to be found. Rabbis have also feared that Jews might step on restricted sacred ground, such as the Holy of Holies, onto which ordinary Jews, and even ordinary priests, are not allowed to enter. Most Jews have accepted the rabbinical ban and saw entrance to the Temple Mount as taboo. However, Jews had not much to say about the manner in which the Temple Mount was governed. Between the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE and 1967, the Temple Mount had been ruled by Pagans, Christians and Muslims. In the seventh and eighth century C.E., the new rulers of the city have turned the mountain into a sacred Muslim site, building a number of mosques and chapels.[33]

In June 1967, when Israel conquered East Jerusalem, including the Temple Mount, the results of the war symbolized to many Israelis an historical victory, the realization of an old dream. However most Israelis did not wish to rebuild the Temple. By this time, the Temple Mount was a Muslim site, administered by a Muslim *Waqf* (religious endowment) and both secular and observant Jews had no interest anymore in building the Temple. The Israeli government proclaimed its wish to maintain the *status quo ante bellum* on the Temple Mount as well as in other Muslim and Christian holy sites. The chief Israeli rabbis of that time, Yitzhak Nissim and Issar Unterman, even issued a declaration that Jews were forbidden to enter the Temple Mount. In 1967, voices, such as that of Shlomo Goren, who wished to establish a synagogue on the Temple Mount, were in the minority. The mood in Israel changed after the war of 1973. Paradoxically, external threats to Israel's territorial gains, whether through war or peace negotiations, have inspired Jewish religious nationalists to take a proactive stand, including their determination to see the Temple rebuilt.[34]

Not all Jewish settlers in the West Bank have been interested in building the Temple in an immediate way. Similarly, not all Jewish Temple Builders are settlers. However, the Temple Builders' Movement has shared a great deal in its theology, ideology, and community with the Settlers' Movement. Since the 1980s, both movements have been part of Israel's Radical Right and currently many of the would-be Temple Builders live in settlements.

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32 Cf. Mishnah, Tractate *Middot*. Measures. Translated by Jacon Neusner (1988). New Haven: Yale University Press, pp. 873-882.

33 On the Temple Mount, see Yitzhak Reiter (2001). *Sovereignty of God and Men: Sanctity and Political Centrality on the Temple Mount*. Jerusalem: Jerusalem Institute.

34 Cf. Motti Inbari (2012). *Messianic Religious Zionism Confronts Israeli Territorial Compromises*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Groups of Temple-Builders reinterpreted Jewish texts, placing greater emphasize on sacred space than most Jews had done in the Middle Ages and Modern Era. Rejecting the understanding that the building of the Temple should be left for the Messiah to accomplish at the Fullness of Time, radical Zionist Orthodox thinkers have declared the traditional rabbinical ban on entering the Temple Mount to be erroneous and null.

The first organization of Temple-Builders was the Temple Mount and Land of Israel Faithful. Led by Gershon Solomon, a disabled IDF veteran and a lawyer, the Temple Mount Faithful gave voice at its inception, in the 1970s, to a large variety of Jews interested in the building of the Temple. Its periodic attempts to enter the Temple Mount, and organize prayers there, have enjoyed much media coverage. In the 1980s, Rabbi Joel Bin Nun, a leader of the now defunct *Gush Emunim*, the Settlers' major organization in the 1970s, established an institute for the halachic study of the building of the Temple. In a series of publications he pointed to what he considered to be the merits of the Temple and the sacrifices therein, which he believed would help reconcile God and humanity, and would therefore help bring about a messianic age. Other groups that formed during the 1980s-2010s, have included, among others: *Reshit-Yerushaliim*, Jerusalem First, an Academy for Studying Jerusalem and the Temple; *Ha Tnuaa Lekinun ha Mikdash*, the Movement for the Building of the Temple; *Yeshivat Torat HaBayit*, The Temple-Laws Yeshiva; *El Har Adonai*, Unto the Mountain of the Lord; *Ha Tnuaa LeShihrur Har HaBayit*, the Movement for the Liberation of the Temple Mount; and *Yeshivat Ateret Cohanim* The Priest's Crown Yeshiva.[35]

Jewish movements that have strived to build the Temple would not have carried their activities the way they did if it were not for evangelical Christians providing encouragement and assistance. Christian thinkers had traditionally seen the Temple as redundant after Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross and interpreted the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE as resulting from the Jewish unwillingness to acknowledge Jesus' role and mission. The idea that the Jews should go back to Palestine and rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple became predominant among Christian Messianic groups, especially pietist and evangelical Protestants. After the 1967 war, evangelicals with messianic yearnings have come more than before to expect the building of the Temple at the end of the current era, in preparation for the return of the Messiah to earth. In such scenarios, they often expect Antichrist, an imposter of the Messiah, to achieve global power and initiate the building of the Temple. The Temple, or rather its rebuilding, seemed to evangelical Christians to be the one event standing between this era and the next.

In the late 1970s and the 1980s, premillennialist Christians and groups of Orthodox Jews, holding to an expansionist and messianic visions, including the building

35 Cf. Motti Inbari (2009). *Jewish Fundamentalists and the Temple Mount*. Albany: SUNY Press.

of the Temple, discovered each other. Such Christians have received reassurance for their messianic faith from Jews who were studying the Temple rituals, and manufactured utensils for sacrificial purposes according to biblical or Talmudic measures. Similarly, Orthodox Jews received reassurances from interest and support, which Christians demonstrated. Initially, Jewish proponents of the building of the Temple did not appreciate the Christian faith more than Christian messianic groups appreciated the intrinsic value of the Jewish faith, but they saw such details as being beside the point. The important thing for them has been the Christian willingness to support their work.[36]

Christian proponents of building the Temple have made efforts to discover the exact site of the Temple. Some have searched for the lost Ark of the Covenant, adding a touch of adventure and mystery to a potentially explosive topic. The search for the "Lost Ark" has inspired a number of novels and a movie based in part on a real life figure. Some premillennialist evangelicals have also searched for the ashes of the Red Heifer, which are necessary, according to Jewish law, in order to allow Jews to enter the Temple Mount, while others have supported Jewish attempts at breeding red heifers or began breeding such heifers on their own.

Pat Robertson, the renowned leader of the 700 Club and a one-time presidential hopeful, offered his support and hospitality to Gershon Solomon. In August 1991, the 700 Club aired an interview with Solomon. Robertson described Solomon's group as struggling to gain a rightful place for Jews on the Temple Mount. "We will never have peace," Robertson declared, "until the Mount of the House of the Lord is restored."[37] Solomon, for his part, described his mission as embodying the promise for a universal redemption. "It's not just a struggle for the Temple Mount, it's a struggle for the . . . redemption of the world," he declared.[38]

Examination of the mutual enchantment between evangelical Christians and Orthodox Jews, such as Robertson and Solomon, shows mutual influences. Solomon, for example, claimed to have divine revelations, not unlike those among evangelical charismatic Christians. Jewish would-be builders of the Temple have also changed their opinion on Christians, impressed by the keen Christian interest and support.[39] Those Christians, they discovered, were more enthusiastic about the prospect of building the Temple than most Jews. The theology and message of people, such as Gershon Solomon, has come to include Christians as important participants in the divine drama of salvation. Resurfacing the traditional Jewish idea that since the days of Noah all of humanity is in covenant with God, Jewish

36 Yaakov Ariel (2013). *An Unusual Relationship: Evangelical Christians and Jews*. New York: New York University Press, pp. 198-213.

37 Cf. Robert I. Friedman (1982). *Zealots for Zion.* New York: Random House, pp.144-145.

38 Ib.

39 Cf. Ariel (2013).

radical thinkers of the Settlers Movement are claiming that Christians too have to strive and make an effort towards the advancement of the messianic times.

In assessing the tensions embodied in the struggle for the Temple Mount, one needs to take into consideration also the strong feelings of the local Muslim community and the support and sympathy of Muslims worldwide. An adversarial symbiosis has developed between Muslims and the Jewish and Christian Temple Builders. The agenda of some Jewish and Christian groups that wish to change the status quo on the Temple Mount, has served to fuel and enhance Palestinian territorial claims. Throughout the 1970s-2010s, the Temple Mount, or the Haram al Sharif, became a symbol of national liberation for Palestinian Muslims and their regard for the Mount has become even more pronounced. Sovereignty over the Mount played a prominent part in the peace talks that took place between Palestinians and Israelis in the late 1990s, and Ariel Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount in September 2000 served as a starting point of the Second *Intifada*. Protecting the Temple Mount mosques became a priority for the Israeli security services. Even symbolic attempts to claim the Temple Mount as a Jewish site have had explosive consequences. On *Sukkot*, the Feast of the Tabernacles, October 1990, the Temple Mount Faithful planned to enter the Temple Mount, and this time to lay a corner stone for the future Temple. The police, however, refused to allow them entrance and they left the place. But Muslim worshipers on the Mount felt threatened, and threw rocks at Jewish worshipers in the Wailing Wall. The atmosphere became volatile, as Muslim demonstrators chased the small police unit out of the Mountain, and Israeli anti-riot police stormed the area a short while later. Dozens of demonstrators and police officers were killed or wounded. The possibility that acts inspired by groups holding to messianic hopes would bring about a mini-apocalypse therefore became a concern for those taking interest in the developments in the Middle East. Should the mosques be seriously damaged, all hell will break loose.

Laboring towards the rebuilding the Temple concerns groups of nationalist Orthodox and represents their larger religious nationalist agenda. This is not the case for most members of the ultra-Orthodox communities. The differences between the two camps reached a crescendo during the first months of the Corona epidemic.

5. Ultra-Orthodox and Nationalist Orthodox in Corona Times

During the first months of the Corona epidemic, the differences between Nationalist 'modern' Orthodoxy, and the more separatist ultra-Orthodox became evident as never before. Both Orthodox streams are committed to preserving Jewish identity and tradition. Both believe in the need to maintain the *Halacha* and observe Jewish law and Jewish rituals. The movements differ, however, in the means to achieve that goal and over their understanding of the place of observant Jews vis a vis the

open non-observant, or non-Jewish society. The Corona pandemic sharpened the different paths the two communities have taken, enhancing rift and animosity.

As the Corona pandemic unfolded the Zionist Orthodox, in Israel, America, and other countries, reacted in a manner not much different from non-Orthodox Jews and non-Jews in the communities around them. This was true both in the measures they took in the private sphere as well as the public. The realities of the Corona Pandemic forced almost all Jewish groups to modify their religious rituals.[40] To the ultra-Orthodox, it took longer to realize the scope and danger of the plague and to adapt to the newly introduced rules and regulations of keeping distance, covering faces and avoiding gatherings. Leading rabbis were initially reluctant to permit their followers to follow the Corona prevention guidelines, which meant closing synagogues, or altering modes of prayer. Likewise, yeshivot remained open even as other academies and schools shut their doors. Some rabbis changed their minds and asked community members to comply with the regulations, which many of them did, even if belatedly and reluctantly.

This resulted in particularly high numbers of sick and dying in the ultra-Orthodox communities. It did not help that members of the community have lived in poor and crowded homes and neighborhoods, and that the celebrations of religious rituals, which are important to members of the community, are often marked by physical proximity of multiple participants. Many in the more liberal Jewish communities chastised the ultra-Orthodox. So did the national Orthodox. They pointed a finger at the ultra-Orthodox as betraying the Jewish dictum of putting safety of life above all. Zionist Orthodox clearly cast their vote in the modernist ballot, and felt morally superior to, as well as more sophisticated than the separatist ultra-Orthodox.

Coming to the defense of the ultra-Orthodox, Shaul Magid wrote: "The Haredim are certainly aware of avoiding danger. The question is more about authority – who gets to determine danger and who gets to dictate what activities need to cease in light of it."[41]

Conclusion

The Corona epidemic has highlighted the differences between the Haredim, ultra-Orthodox and the Zionist national Orthodox as never before. Granted, there are

40 Cf. Ejewish Philantrophy (2020). Preserving these moments. A call to action for the American Jewish Community. July 24, 2020. See: https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/preserving-these-moments-a-call-to-action-for-the-american-jewish-community/

41 Shaul Magid (2020). Covid19, Haredi Judaism, and Magical Thinking. *Tablet.* April 30, p. 2.

strong similarities between the worldviews of the ultra-Orthodox and Zionist Orthodox. Both groups relate with owe to the Jewish sacred texts as the foundation of their religious tradition. Both view the biblical narratives as the basis of what they consider the special relationship between God, the people of Israel, and, especially in the case of the Zionist Orthodox, the Land of Israel. Both communities are messianic in their theologies and yearnings, directing their lives towards the arrival of the Messianic times.

However, the two groups have promoted different paths to achieve that goal. National Orthodox have participated in the Zionist endeavor, at first as minor participants. Since 1967, the Zionist Orthodox have become more nationalist and right wing than most other segments of the Jewish population. The ultra-Orthodox have traditionally resented the politically pro-active expansionist Zionist agenda, although they too see themselves as troopers in God's army, struggling, through prayers, studies and righteous lives to bring in the Messianic age. A number of ultra-Orthodox groups, most notably the Hasidic group Chabad, have become engaged in outreach, wishing to bring more people to fulfil the commandments as a means of ushering in the Messianic times.

While in the last decades the Zionist Orthodox have strengthened their standards of daily observance and commitment to studying rabbinical texts, the two communities are far removed from each other in their life choices, lifestyles, and areas of residency. The two streams of Judaism have different sources of authority and relate very differently to the non-Orthodox world. The Zionist Orthodox have embraced Modern science, incorporated liberal education alongside the study of sacred texts, and have allowed women a growing amount of traditional education. While Zionist Orthodox women also cover their hair and body, they study, obtain degrees, and build secular careers. Women of both communities are committed to pro-creation with the aim of enlarging the community and ensure the continuity of the Jewish people. Except that the growth of the number of Zionist Orthodox children has been motivated in no small measure by nationalist concerns over Israel's demographic strength.

The Corona pandemic created a dramatic rift between the Zionist Orthodox and the ultra-Orthodox. The dangers of the disease forced both groups to show their colors and identify as either: a separatist community that has its own norms, sources of authority and priorities; or as a modernist community, part of a larger civic society, abiding by the standards and laws of the land. Already in middle months of 2020, as the Corona epidemic spread globally, it become apparent that the pandemic and its devastating effects highlight the character of the Orthodox communities as well as altered it in some measures.

Only when the plague is over will we be able to assess the full scope of the challenges that the communities have faced and examine the long-range effects of

the pandemic to the inner life of the community, as well as to its relationship with the Zionist Orthodox and with non-Orthodox Jews.

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