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“A Natural Act of Vengeance”

Settler Violence and Two Types of Jewish Fundamentalism

by Tomer Persico

The short video, filmed on a mobile device, focuses on a group of Jews praying against a backdrop of burning houses. We know there are at least ten because we hear them recite the *Kaddish*, and that is generally allowed only in the presence of a minyan.

It is the night of February 26, 2023, and those present are a small number of the hundreds of young Jews who entered the Palestinian village of Hawara, set dozens of houses, businesses, and cars on fire, and attacked the villagers. According to residents, 75 buildings and 95 cars were burned that night. Dozens of Palestinians were injured.¹

The Jews who participated in the pogrom in Hawara did so in revenge for the murder of Hillel and Yagel Yaniv, two brothers who had been driving on Route 60, through the village, when they were slain by a Palestinian terrorist. These arsonists are members of a younger generation of settlers, part of a novel social and theological circle

KURT HOFFMAN

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within Religious Zionism, the development of which can be traced over the last two decades. Though ideologically distinct, these settlers enjoy the support of another, much more prominent Religious Zionist group that emerged over the same years and currently occupies the highest echelons of the Israeli government. Together, they form a large part of the ideational basis for present-day settler violence in the West Bank.

In this essay, I will argue that sociological and ideological developments since Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in 2005 have given rise to Religious Zionist circles maintaining fundamentalist interpretations of Jewish tradition and rejecting both the authority of the State of Israel and the notion that the state has messianic significance, which had been the signature claim of Religious Zionists since the 1970s. Focusing on the post-*mamlakhti* Hardal group and the anti-*mamlakhti* Hilltop Youth, I will show the connections between their political convictions and their religious ideas, and argue that the latter are as dangerous to Judaism as the former are to the state.

THE THREE PHASES OF RELIGIOUS ZIONISM IN ISRAEL

The Hardal and the Hilltop Youth represent the latest chapter in the story of Religious Zionism, which can be divided into three broad periods: Mizrachi, Kookist, and the present. The Mizrachi movement, under the leadership of Rabbi Yitzhak Yaakov Raines (1839-1915), dates to the very beginning of the Zionist movement. It was characterized by moderate Orthodoxy, a socialist economic worldview, and a dovish political approach.

The impact of Israel's phenomenal victory in the Six Day War led to the rise of the Kookist theological framework as the central ethos of Religious Zionism. Kookism, named for Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook's (1891-1982) nationalist and messianic interpretation of the thoughts of his father, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935), perceived the post-1967 settlement project in Judea and Samaria as the expression of the will of God, manifesting the process of redemption through the control of his Chosen People over the Promised Land. In this framework, the State of Israel became a holy vessel, and its expanding sovereignty over the land represented the adhesion of the divine reality with the earthly one, in a deterministic redemptive process from which there could be no return. This is known as the *mamlakhti* or "statist" approach, asserting that the Israeli state, though secular in civic nature and populace, is the "seat of God" on earth and the main vehicle for realization of divine will, and indeed humanity's redemption.

Kookism dramatically changed the map of Israel by inspiring the settling and all but formally annexing of Judea and Samaria. However, over time, as it solidified as a

movement, its messianic momentum waned. Kookism also suffered a series of ideological and theological defeats with the withdrawal of the State of Israel from the Sinai Peninsula as part of the peace agreement with Egypt (1982), from Palestinian population centers in the West Bank with the Oslo Accords (1994-95), from southern Lebanon (2000), and finally, from the Gaza Strip with the destruction of Gush Katif and the so-called "disengagement" in 2005.

This last event was a fatal blow for many Religious Zionists, for whom the democratic and liberal state of Israel had become suspect, if not outright worthless, as an instrument of redemption. Kook's teachings ceased to be a viable ideological framework, and no other emerged to take its place. This marked the beginning of the third period of Religious Zionism, as the movement disintegrated and its members dispersed in different directions, including progressive liberalism (feminist and pro-LGBTQ rights), anti-liberal nationalist ultra-Orthodoxy (Hardal), libertarianism, Kahanism, settler vigilantism, and neo-Hasidism. Simultaneously, as the movement splintered, the integration of mainstream Religious Zionists into the Israeli general public increased, and as their interests and identities shifted, *halakhah* became less central to their lives in both social and theological terms.

This is the political and social context that gave rise to the two groups addressed here. In contrast to a Kookist approach, the post-*mamlakhti* Hardal (an acronym for National Religious Haredi, *HaRedi Dati Leumi*) approach does not give unequivocal support to the Israeli state and its secular apparatus, and, though not part of the Haredi public in sociological terms, adopts the stern observance and rejection of modernity associated with the Ultra-Orthodox. These Hardalim tend to reside in more hardline settlements such as Beit-El and Kedumim; are represented politically by Israel's current Finance Minister, Bezalel Smotrich; and are distinct from an older, but still *mamlakhti* version of Hardal, led today by Rabbi Zvi Tau.

"Hilltop Youth" is a generic name used to describe decentralized communities of teenagers and young adults living in the Occupied Territories of Judea and Samaria. They generally reject the political and religious establishments, incorporate Hasidic teachings and practices, and strive to live according to their own standards of authenticity. The fact that they dwell mainly in outposts considered illegal even by the State of Israel underscores their unruly and liminal ethos. They do not recognize the Knesset's authority, thus transforming the Religious Zionism of their parents into a fundamentalist post-Zionism. Zvi Sukkot, a current member of Knesset, originated from within these groups, but because of his entry into politics, he is ipso facto considered by the group to have conceded to and/or been coerced into the state apparatus.

These two circles present a new type of Jewish religiosity: nationalistic, extremist, yet not state-oriented and at times anti-Zionist. With varying levels of *halakhic* strictness, their members base their relationship to the Land of Israel on a literal

and exclusivist interpretation of the Bible, and reject the liberal order, its values and republican mechanisms. Their shared ultimate goal is the elimination of Israel as a democratic state with a secular and liberal public sphere, and the establishment in its place of a *halakhic* theocracy. Their growth out of Religious Zionism hints at the identity crisis this public has been experiencing since the disintegration of the Kookist theological framework, and they represent a significant challenge to the bourgeois majority of the public.

The anti-*mamlakhti* Hardal and the Hilltop Youth maintain distinctly fundamentalist religiosities, by which I mean frameworks of belief and social strategies typical of religious groups seeking to preserve their identity in the face of modernity. Fundamentalism is characterized in part by the constraining of a religious tradition into a limited and rigid framework of principles, propositions that are considered the “fundamentals” of the faith, or its one “authentic” essence. This requires uncompromising submission to the authority of the Holy Scriptures, which themselves are interpreted selectively and literally, and a refusal to tolerate other layers or elements that would allow any interpretive flexibility. Fundamentalism also entails a consolidated view of history, according to which what was once, is now, and always will be, meaning that everyday reality today is fundamentally the same as it was thousands of years ago. This position allows followers to import and transplant the past into the present, and to accept ancient values and social norms verbatim from the Holy Scriptures. Fundamentalist groups with both messianic and universal pretensions also attempt to shape the social and political world beyond their borders, according to the same theological foundations and search for authenticity.

These two circles present a new type of Jewish religiosity: nationalistic, extremist, yet not state-oriented and at times anti-Zionist.

The fundamentalism of the non-*mamlakhti* Hardal and the Hilltop Youth is the most extreme view that has emerged in the wake of the demise of Kookism as Religious Zionism’s ideological framework. These groups teach and promote an antagonism towards the values of the modern West; a longing for a mythical past while looking forward to a redemptive future that will restore it; a clear hierarchy between men and women, as well as between Jews and non-Jews; a desire to turn the State of Israel into a theocracy; the pursuit of religious authenticity; and a glorification of revenge, though their precise positions on the last two are distinct, as I’ll discuss below.

In both its statist and non-statist versions, the Hardal does not amount to more than 15% of religious Zionists—around 1% of all Jews in Israel—but it is viewed sympathetically by many, including secular, traditional, and ultra-Orthodox Jews.

Its advantage over the rest of Religious Zionism is its religious certainty, the clear answers it gives to the question of Jewish identity, and its uncompromising confidence in its vision. In the scattered landscape of Religious Zionism, such fundamentalists stand out not only for their right-wing and reactionary politics, but for their theological decisiveness.

Significantly, these fundamentalist conceptions of Judaism leave little to no room for other Jewish identities. Indeed, even while being no less selective than other groups in their interpretation of the scriptures, the Hardal and the Hilltop Youth presume themselves to hold the final, exclusive, and definitive understanding of Judaism, viewing other Jewish groups as erroneous and temporary mishaps, if not deliberately heretical saboteurs. They continually strive to affirm and actualize their worldview in Israel, and in the case of the Hardal, are aided by generous government budgets allowing them to influence secular school system curricula, and to make inroads into secular towns and neighborhoods by settling within them.

For example, the Midbara K’Eden yeshiva in Mitzpe Ramon tried to cancel the town’s Pride Parade in June 2022, following the words of the yeshiva’s head rabbi, Tzvi Kostiner, that LGBTQ people should “go home” and be “fought,” as they are “evil, evil, evil, evil and more evil.”² Kostiner also told the police that he would have “no control” over the yeshiva’s students were the parade to pass close to it,³ thus using the threat of violence to push the police towards forbidding the event. Pointedly, the yeshiva was founded in 2008 with the explicit intention of influencing its secular surroundings. (Ultimately, the parade did take place, with increased police protection, after changing its route.⁴)

More than posing a threat, violent at times, to the lives and ways of life of other Jews in Israel, these fundamentalist Jewish groups twist the Jewish tradition into an abominable chimera, mixing biblical literalism, ethno-nationalism, and theological obsessions similar to those of American evangelical Christians, morphing Judaism into a toxic creed that is unrecognizable and unapproachable by the vast majority of living Jews. All this, as noted, is sometimes done with the calculated aid of governmental budgets. To better understand these groups, I will now analyze their respective activities and theologies.

POST-MAMLAKHTI HARDAL

The most prominent spokesperson and ideological strategist for post-*mamlakhti* Hardal is also its political leader, Israel’s current finance minister, Bezalel Smotrich. I will use his thinking as a framework to elucidate this group’s agenda and sensibilities.

After growing up in the West Bank settlement of Beit El, Smotrich now lives just outside the official borders of the Kedumim settlement, also in the West Bank, in a house that was built illegally.⁵ He is the father of seven and a longtime political activist. He was arrested as part of the resistance to the Disengagement Plan from the Gaza Strip in 2005, later organized the homophobic “Beast Parade” in opposition to Jerusalem’s Pride Parade, and, before entering politics, was one of the founders of Regavim, an NGO that attempts to monitor and halt illegal construction of settlement houses by Palestinians and Israeli Arabs. Yes, the irony is completely lost on him.

In 2017, Smotrich presented his master plan for resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In his Decisiveness Plan (or Subjugation Plan; the Hebrew title can be translated either way), he proposed to offer Palestinians—both those who are citizens of Israel and those who live in the occupied territories—three options: surrender and agree to become residents with reduced voting rights; emigrate elsewhere; or resist and be subjected to the full force of the IDF.

His essay uses practical and utilitarian language to present its case and to claim that this is the only realistic path that Israel can take.⁶ What it does not mention is that Smotrich’s plan is based not on geopolitical assessments but on an ancient Talmudic text. This can be learned from a speech he gave in August 2016, in front of an audience of like-minded Hardal Religious Zionists.⁷ In this speech, Smotrich refers to a narrative according to which, when Joshua came to conquer the Promised Land, he sent three epistles to the peoples living in it, offering them the very same options that appear in his plan.

Smotrich then further asserts:

There is one absolute and correct truth, that is the one and only basis [for existence] with which everybody must comply. This is the basis for Joshua’s approach when he entered the Land, which I seek to adopt even today. The foundation of our absolute truths is faith in the Torah . . . the Torah of Moses—which will not be replaced, and over which no other will be given—for the Creator, Blessed be His name, is the one and only basis on which we must establish belief in the righteousness of the path and the fighting spirit of the IDF. The fact that, in the circles of *Haaretz* [newspaper] and in the general headquarters of the IDF, there are those who think differently, cannot be any excuse . . . simply because we are right, and they are wrong.

In this speech, Smotrich displays the key characteristics of fundamentalist religiosity: a literal understanding of scripture that reduces a rich religious tradition into a rigid and simplistic framework; a uniform perception of history, by which what was true thousands of years ago is also valid today; and a desire to shape contemporary

life according to ancient ways. Together, these produce a call for one-dimensional submission to the authority of the Holy Scriptures, which Smotrich demands of the IDF as well.

Smotrich’s actions further show that he has absolutely no hesitations in holding, let alone expressing, his beliefs. In October 2021, Smotrich shouted across the Knesset floor to the Arab MKs, “You’re only here by mistake, because Ben Gurion didn’t finish the job and throw you out in 1948!”⁸ This statement underscores his conviction that the Arab inhabitants of Israel have no inalienable right to stay in their homes. In April of that same year, he expressed doubt about the legitimacy of Arab citizens of Israel voting in elections for the Knesset, writing in his Twitter account that, “A true Muslim must know that the land of Israel belongs to the people of Israel. In time, those who don’t will not stay here,” and later stating that, “Arabs are Israeli citizens, at least for now.”⁹ In March 2023, after the display of Jewish violence in Hawara, he stated that the village of Hawara should be “wiped out,”¹⁰ expressing the principle from his Decisiveness Plan by which Palestinians who oppose the Jewish settlement of the land of Israel must be eliminated.¹¹

Take note: Smotrich wishes for all these policies to be implemented by the Jewish state. When describing his plans for Hawara, he took care to state that, “The state should do it, not, God forbid, regular people,” thus rejecting the actual means by which the village was subjected to the pogrom it suffered. Though he shuns most Israeli state institutions and civic frameworks, Smotrich nevertheless envisions a role for the state itself. For the post-*mamlakhti* Hardal, the state is the vessel for divine will in the world today, hovering, as it were, disconnected from its material existence and living populace. Revenge is a planned and regulated enterprise to be conducted by the (divinely imbued) state.

Smotrich, and other post-*mamlakhti* Hardalim, seek a religious life that draws its authentic bona fides from a selective and literal interpretation of its scriptural corpus. The parts they emphasize tend to be either older (providing legitimization through seniority) or opposed to contemporary values (providing legitimization through differentiation). This type of selective interpretation of the Jewish tradition, dogmatic and uncompromising as it is, can now be found for the first time in the highest ranks of the Israeli government, giving it the political power it needs to change the face of the country. It is intolerant of different Jewish identities and of people who identify as LGBTQ (Smotrich once called himself a “proud homophobe”), and it creates an atmosphere in which violence toward Palestinians by extremist actors is considered acceptable, if not outright advocated. Given more power, the post-*mamlakhti* Hardal poses a clear threat to Israel’s democracy and to its liberal public sphere.

Smotrich still sees value in the Israeli state, but such is not the case with the so-called Hilltop Youth. The members of this milieu are a disorganized group of radicalized young Jews who seek to topple the Israeli government and to establish what they believe would be an ideal “Torah State.” As such, they are very different from their Religious Zionist parents, Hardal or otherwise.

These groups are dispersed mostly in illegal outposts in Judea and Samaria. They do not accept the vast majority of Religious Zionist rabbinical leadership and seek freedom from the Israeli political and religious establishment, a social and theological position based on their desire to live what they consider an authentic life. Deriving their sense of authenticity not only from a fundamentalist interpretation of the Holy Scriptures, but also from a romantic longing for a nonconformist and “natural” life, they see material constraint and proximity to nature as tenets of a life that is closer to the Bible and truer to their own inner essence.

These groups are not *halakhically* observant in the manner known as Haredi or ultra-Orthodox, as they are uninterested in the piety of the punctual and detailed. Theirs is a neo-Hasidic religiosity, concerned with self-expression and experience. In this, they are part of the late 20th-century Contemporary Spirituality (or New Age) scene, except that they are also enthusiastically violent, and most are committed, to differing extents, to the heteronomous authority of *halakhah*.

There has always been a violent fringe to the Settler Movement, and it has long benefitted from lax enforcement by Israeli authorities. What is exceptional about the Hilltop Youth is their lack of any restraint, their refusal to cooperate at all with the Israeli armed forces, and the fear they instill in the ranks of the soldiers who are, among other things, protecting their lives.

They understand their violent acts, which they sometimes call the “price tag” policy, as revenge for Palestinian terror or for government demolition of the illegal outposts in which they live, but above all as an assertion of authority and territorial sovereignty and an expression of authentic Jewish existence. Their violence commonly includes the uprooting of olive trees and similar acts of vandalism towards Palestinians, but it has at times also been deadly, most famously in the July 2015 arson attack in the Palestinian village of Duma. A young settler has since been convicted of burning alive and murdering three members of the Dawabsheh family in this attack.¹²

The violence of the Hilltop Youth can also take the form of a prolonged outburst of animosity. After the death of a member of this circle in a car crash following a police chase in December 2020, hundreds of Hilltop Youth went on a three-month rampage, damaging property and wounding Palestinian villagers throughout Samaria in

nightly raids, smashing Palestinian cars at makeshift roadblocks, stoning and wounding members of the Israeli police and army—all in all, engaging in more than forty recorded acts of arson, vandalism, and violent attacks.¹³

These are but anecdotal examples of an ongoing reality that reached its apex, at least for now, with arsonist pogroms at Hawara and other sites. As mentioned above, the pogrom in Hawara followed the murder, by a Palestinian terrorist, of two brothers who were driving through the village. It is important, however, not to catalogue this as a prosaic case of a quid pro quo “blood feud,” and not only because Israel is the sovereign power in the area and is supposed to uphold the law. While Palestinian terrorism has its own ethnocentric, national, and religious motivations, this form of Jewish terrorism is the result of the development of a specific settler counterculture, arising over the last 20 years out of the lore of specific extremist rabbis: Yitzchak Ginsburgh and Dov Lior.¹⁴ Analysis of the former’s teachings will elucidate this cultural development.

Ginsburgh, born in 1943 and a member of the Chabad Hasidic court, is one of the most fruitful and brilliant rabbis and kabbalists of our time. In his writings, he presents a theology harboring an imminent messianic tension and promotes an aspiration toward a spiritual-*halakhic* revolution, at the end of which the State of Israel would be a theocracy headed by a king from the House of David. Ginsburgh’s teachings draw from Chabad theosophy, but are also significantly influenced by German Romanticism, particularly in his promotion of ideals such as spontaneity, introspection, a division of humanity into races, and a return to nature.¹⁵

Ginsburgh builds on the theological idea of God’s desire to manifest in matter (*dira batachtonim*, “dwelling below”), emphasized in Chabad teachings, to theologially elevate his followers’ relationship with nature as a supreme ideal, particularly in the form of contact with nature in the Land of Israel. He teaches that “our soul’s desire since we were expelled from Eden is to live again a life that is reconciled with the body, with matter, and with nature! Rather than wanting to overcome nature, we are drawn to meet it.”¹⁶ In direct opposition to generations of *halakhic* rulings and regulations, Jews are not charged with the subordination or sublimation of nature, but with the command to align themselves with it—if not, as we shall presently see, to surrender to it altogether.

One’s return to nature cannot be complete without a return to one’s inner nature. Such a return is reflected in individual spontaneity, as well as in the expression of one’s natural passions. At the fore of our natural, basic, and spontaneous passions,

They understand their violent acts as an assertion of authority and territorial sovereignty and an expression of authentic Jewish existence.

Ginsburgh specifies, lies the urge for vengeance. After Baruch Goldstein, a settler from Kiryat Arba, entered the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron with his military-issued rifle on Purim day, 1994, and opened fire on Muslim worshippers, murdering 29 and wounding over a hundred, Ginsburgh wrote:

Those who deeply understand will see that the purpose of everything is to reconcile with the natural “being,” and to live it as a reflection of the “True Being,” that is, the Lord, Blessed be He. In reality, this objective is hidden, and in Israel, in effect, it already radiates: the glory of Israel is the glory of God. That is why in Israel, revenge takes on a special depth of God’s revenge.¹⁷

According to Ginsburgh, Goldstein exacted “revenge” on the Palestinian worshippers. It was, of course, an unspeakably horrific act of vigilante violence, but it is precisely

because the massacre was unsanctioned, illegal, and indeed irrational, that it must be considered, Ginsburgh explains, a natural and spontaneous expression—“beyond reason and knowledge”—of Goldstein’s soul, a deed that should be regarded as the height of authentic self-transcendence and self-expression.¹⁸ Further, the Jewish soul, according to Chabad, is “part of God from above,” and its breaking into manifest existence in an anarchic and irrational manner constitutes both contact with the most basic and natural of its strata, and, because God dwells down below, the height of divine revelation.

This Romantic neo-Hasidism has become widespread in Hilltop Youth circles. Their longing for a life “close to nature” can seem like the embrace of a simple, ecologically oriented lifestyle.¹⁹ The liminal frontier areas allow them an unmediated encounter with what they consider “the wild,” enhancing their religious experience and granting



The liminal frontier areas allow them an unmediated encounter with what they consider “the wild,” enhancing their religious experience and granting it a stamp of authenticity.

it a stamp of authenticity. Thus, according to Menachem Natura, a 17-year-old from the Bat Ayin settlement:

Contact with the natural world allowed me to mature. My friends, who study in the usual settings, are connected to a chair, a table, or the Internet all day. They don't know, for example, what nature is. They hardly ever meet a tree. Don't know what it is to just sit in front of a tree and contemplate. A breeze. Growth [of nature]. I credit this contemplation for my ability to discover God from a deeper place.²⁰

This countercultural posture rejects the authority of the state, the “bourgeoisie,” and at times, modern science.²¹ What differentiates it from being simply another obvious strand of New Age spirituality is the integration of *halakhic* observance, and the added rejection of modern humanistic and democratic values, dispatched in outbursts of violent revenge. The end goal, toppling the current, liberal and democratic Israeli state and instituting a theocracy, is also not usually found among hippies.

Ginsburgh's lore, translated into action on the hills of Judea and Samaria, ameliorates an old tension, accentuated severely in modern times, between adherence to our feelings and compliance with heteronomous *halakhah*: his hilltop adherents are given license to express their basest urges as religio-nationalist violence. Such “natural” violence is not only considered kosher, but is regarded as a climactic religious revelation, with the added benefit of reinforcing their Jewish identity, as its religious significance derives solely from the fact that they are Jews, and as such, can express an inner divine reality through these acts of uninhibited, wild, “natural” violence. As one member of these circles put it, “for some, being an authentic Jew is attacking an Arab village; for others, it is composing a new Hasidic poem about love.”²²

Spontaneous violence against non-Jews is therefore sanctified and considered among the most profound of religious acts. Rebellion against the authority of parents and rabbis, as well as the authority of the state, is seen as a return—from an exilic life within the establishment to an ancient and natural holy land. The emphasis on inner passions and their connection to nationalism and a rebirth of the collective might be drawn from German Romanticism, but it serves as an endorsement of authentic Judaism, which has seemingly been delivered from the detached alienation of Western culture into a natural connection to the land, the people, and the most basic human impulses.²³ Individuals within the Hilltop subculture thus see themselves not as religious-nationalists, not even as citizens of the State of Israel, but as “rooted” Jews living on the land of their ancestors as their ancestors lived, while externalizing their most violent urges.

SUMMATION

On the night of February 26, 2023, among the burning houses in the Palestinian village of Hawara, Rafael Lebor, a resident of Yitzhar, where R. Ginsburgh's main yeshiva is located, recorded himself on his cellphone. Excited and proud about the pogrom in progress around him, Lebor told the camera:

There is something really exciting about this. What the army is unable to do, what the police will never ever do, simple Jews come and carry out a natural act of vengeance. Set fire to whatever they can.²⁴

Lebor's attitude is distinctly anti-*mamlakhti*, opposed to established authority and indeed established morality. It also demonstrates a Romantic celebration of down-to-earth straightforwardness (“simple Jews”), and of course, nature. The violence is meaningful not because it conforms to tradition, but because it subverts the laws of the state and humanistic morality and allows participants' most base emotions to erupt in all their roughness; for Jews to return to a presumed natural simplicity. It is a new conception of Judaism, born of a Hasidic-Romantic amalgam: anarchic, racist, and violently fundamentalist.

The grassroots, “natural” undertakings of the Hilltop Youth complement Smotrich's established post-*mamlakhti* Hardal activism. As we saw, Smotrich agrees that a gruesome revenge must be exacted on Hawara and its residents, but in his view, it is the duty of the state and not “regular people” to “wipe out” the village. He does not share the Romantic *cum* Hasidic ethos of the Hilltop Youth, but rather, bases his particular type of fundamentalism on a literal interpretation of Jewish scriptures, and prefers to change the Israeli state from above, not below. Either way, the groups share an end goal: the termination of secular democratic Israel and the establishment of a *halakhic* theocracy.

At this time, these groups are at the height of their political and social influence in Israel, with a prominent minister representing one, other ministers (such as the Kahanist Itamar Ben-Gvir) extremely sympathetic to the other, and the entire political system subject to significant levers of pressure that they exert on it. As demonstrated above, both groups recognize the legitimacy of no Jewish identity or interpretation of the Jewish tradition save their own; are not inclined to tolerate other views; and are willing to use violence to carry out their fundamentalist theologies. As such, they pose a threat not only to the future of Israel as a democracy, but also to the character and moral stature of Judaism itself. For these groups to become the face of Judaism in Israel, or even one of its dominant expressions, would be a historically consequential event with devastating repercussions.

Even as we recognize the threat they pose, we must remember that these groups represent a small minority among the Jews in Israel. Their strength lies not in their numbers, but in their ideological fervor and their presumption to lead the “People of Israel.” Over the last few months, hundreds of thousands of Israelis—representing many more—have taken to the streets in outright rejection of this vision, and in a desperate attempt to maintain not only Israel’s democracy but the integrity of the Jewish tradition. I believe that they will only succeed if they are able to present a powerful and positive interpretation of Judaism, one that roots democracy and the liberal order within, and indeed originating from, the Jewish tradition.

In order to do so, it is paramount that they—we—understand the structure and aims of our fundamentalists, as this essay has tried to do, realizing as well that while fundamentalism might be a conceivable outgrowth of tradition, it threatens to be its end, for its entire *raison d’être* is to constrict diversity and to stifle change. Israelis and non-Israeli Jews opposed to the post-*mamlakhti* Hardal and Hilltop Youth must deepen their engagement and relationship with our tradition, erecting a formidable framework of meaning that includes humanism and liberalism as the very building blocks of Judaism, and offering a coherent and confident answer of our own to the ongoing challenge of modern Jewish identity in these very challenging days in the State of Israel.



Endnotes

- 1 The video can be seen here: <https://twitter.com/1717Bazz/status/1629913405845905411>. Eyewitness reports on the events of that night can be found at Einav Halabi, “Amazement in Hawara at the Settlers’ Rampage: ‘They Shouted Death to Arabs and Burned Vehicle after Vehicle,’” *Ynet*, February 27, 2023.
- 2 Hanan Greenwood, “Don’t be ashamed to say - gays go home!’: A recognized rabbi in an unusual attack against the LGBT community” (Hebrew), *Israel Hayom*, May 5, 2022.
- 3 Ilana Curiel, “Rabbi of the yeshiva in Mitzpe Ramon: I will not have control over the opponents of the Pride Parade, and I will not prohibit them to approach it” (Hebrew), *Ynet*, June 29, 2022.

- 4 Bar Peleg and Josh Breiner, “Pride Event in Southern Israel Draws Hundreds After Police Lift Restrictions,” *Haaretz*, July 1, 2022.
- 5 Yotam Berger, “West Bank Home of Israeli Lawmaker Who Championed Land-Grab Law Built Illegally,” *Haaretz*, March 1, 2017.
- 6 Bezalel Smotrich, “The Decisiveness Plan: The Key to Peace Is with the Right” (Hebrew), *Hashiloach* 6 (2017).
- 7 Bezalel Smotrich, “Eliminate Arab Hope” (Hebrew), *Besheva*, February 8, 2016.
- 8 “Smotrich to the Arab MKs: You are here because Ben-Gurion did not finish the job,” *Srugim*, October 13, 2021.
- 9 Jonathan Liss, “Smotrich: Arabs are Israeli citizens and have representation in the Knesset, at least for now” (Hebrew), *Haaretz*, April 26, 2021.
- 10 Paul Goldman and Aina J. Khan, “Israel should ‘erase’ Palestinian village, minister says after settler rampage,” *NBC News*, March 1, 2023. Smotrich later denied that he meant the whole village must be destroyed.
- 11 When asked in a 2017 private conversation if he intended to wipe out whole families, including women and children, Smotrich replied, “In war, as in war.” See Tomer Persico, “Why Religious Zionism Is Growing Darker,” *Haaretz*, May 16, 2017.
- 12 Hagar Shezaf, “Israeli Supreme Court Rejects Appeal of Israeli Who Murdered Palestinian Family in 2015,” *Haaretz*, August 1, 2022.
- 13 Gideon Levy and Alex Levac, “Israeli Settlers Beat a 78-year-old Palestinian Farmer with Clubs. Then They Came Back to Attack His Family,” *Haaretz*, January 8, 2021; Hagar Shezaf, “Under the Pretext of Protesting the Death of Sandak: Dozens of Violent Acts against Palestinians in the West Bank” (Hebrew), *Haaretz*, January 11, 2021; Michael Sfar, “How Do You Say Ku Klux Klan in Hebrew?” (Hebrew), *Haaretz*, January 2, 2021.
- 14 See Tomer Persico, “Neo-Hasidic Revival: Expressivist Uses of Traditional Lore,” *Modern Judaism*, 34(3), 2014, 278-308.
- 15 Shlomo Fischer, “Radical Religious Zionism: From the Collective to the Individual,” in *Kabbalah and Contemporary Spiritual Revival*, ed. Boaz Huss (Beer Sheva: Bialik Institute, 2011), pp. 285-309; Tomer Persico, “The Connection Between Baruch Goldstein, Habad’s Kabbala and Romanticism” (Hebrew), *Haaretz*, February 19, 2014.
- 16 Quoted in Shlomo Fischer, “The Moral Crisis of Spirituality” (Hebrew), *Eretz Acheret* 26 (2005).
- 17 Yitzchak Ginsburgh, *Baruch Ha’Gever*, ed. Israel Ariel (n.p., 1994).
- 18 Shlomo Fischer, “Nature, Authenticity, and Violence in Radical Religious Zionist Thought” (Hebrew), in *Generations, Locations, Identities: Contemporary Perspectives on Society and Culture in Israel*, eds. Hannah Herzog, Tal Kochavi, and Shimshon Zelinker (Tel Aviv: Van Leer & Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2007), pp. 421-454.
- 19 Tomer Persico, “The Hilltop Youth Are Not Rebelling, They Are Simply Seeking Their Lost Authenticity” (Hebrew), *Haaretz*, January 20, 2016.
- 20 Shoshana Greenfield, “Dear Children in Cheap Shacks” (Hebrew), *Nekuda* 303 (2007), pp. 44-46.
- 21 For a detailed study of such settler counterculture, see Joanna Steinhardt, “American Neo-Hasids in the Land of Israel,” *Nova Religio*, 13:4 (2010), pp. 22-42.
- 22 International Crisis Group, “Leap of Faith: Israel’s National Religious and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict”, Report no. 147, p. 18.
- 23 Tomer Persico, “Neo-Hasidism” (Hebrew) in *Or Hozer: The World of Hasidism*, ed. Avishar Har-Shefi, Bar-Ilan University Press, 2022, pp. 460-501.
- 24 Posted on Twitter by DemocraTV, February 26, 2023.