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**(Re-)Making the State: Religious Zionism, Religious Violence, and
Israel in the 21st Century**

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May 4, 2020

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Acknowledgements

On the first day of my first semester at Macalester, I walked into Barry Cytron's classroom. My recollection is that we read and discussed a Philip Roth story that morning, and while I may or may not have that right, I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that my experience in Barry's class changed the trajectory of my four years here and perhaps — who knows! — the trajectory of many years to come. Without Barry, this project never would have happened. He gave me such encouragement and warmth, and, when I had made virtually no progress on the paper in December, the books that were the bedrock of my study.

I would like to thank the three members of my committee for their guidance and support: Bill Hart, as calm an advisor as anyone could ever wish to have, Susanna Drake, the consummate teacher and a true role model, and Andy Overman, whose spirit and generosity were such gifts this spring. It is people like them who will make Macalester such a difficult place to depart.

Lastly, I would like to thank Claire Howland and Liam McMahon, my friends from the first days of our first year course, with whom I traveled in Israel and Palestine after our semesters abroad last May. I could not have asked for more thoughtful, more resilient, or more joyous companions. To them, to the rest of my crew here, and to my family in Portland and Cleveland, thank you. I am lucky beyond compare.

Abstract

Israel's triumph and seizure of land in the Six-Day War paved the way for a religious Zionist movement based around territorial conquest exemplified by the ideology of Meir Kahane. Over the next 30 years, but particularly during the Oslo period in the mid-1990s, that movement organized and used targeted religious violence to gain power and solidify its place in Israeli society. Building on Shaul Magid's work, I propose that Kahane's ethics of violence have been adopted by or allowed to flourish within the modern State of Israel — a response to historic and present Jewish precarity centered on ethnocentric survival.

I. Introduction

For people who want to see peace and equality between Israelis and Palestinians, this is — to put it lightly — a dispiriting time. While Israel’s founding was unquestionably violent, as all settler colonial projects are, the Israeli violence that followed the 1967 war was different in nature than the violence that preceded it — born less out of political necessity than religious imperative. As Israel’s position in the Middle East calcified in the final decades of the twentieth century and the country moved towards normalizing relations with its geographic neighbors, the violence by Israelis outside of the state apparatus was increasingly committed in the name of religious Zionism rather than narrowly political or secular Zionism — in the name of greater Israel, a textual concept, rather than the state of Israel, a political construct. This violence was trained against Palestinians and liberal peace supporters with particular zeal during the Oslo period of the mid 1990s and continues to be felt strongly to this day. It is in large part responsible not only for changing the course of Israeli history, but also for changing how Israel is viewed by and functions within the wider world.

There is an important distinction to be made here. During the early decades of the twentieth century, Jewish paramilitaries — which are exalted with plaques and museums that dot the Tel Aviv land and streetscapes — engaged in systematic violence in their efforts to bring about a Jewish state in historic Palestine. For decades after its founding, various Israeli leaders and Jewish officials in the U.S. and elsewhere encouraged and facilitated Christian evangelical support for the country predicated on Israeli control of the West Bank. Since its inception, Israel has used its enormous and exceptionally well-financed military to commit acts of violence against individuals and sovereign states both in the Levant and well beyond it. But these leaders have not in the same way encouraged religious violence. Some leaders have tolerated it, others

have tried to take advantage of it, others have even courted it, but even these leaders have acted in response to it. This violence, abhorrent as it is, has not been executed randomly or without forethought.

The ecosystem of Jewish violence that has sunken Israel today more deeply than ever into an expansionist and fundamentalist project in historic Palestine — not to mention the political ecosystem of the global right — is comprised of a number of religious and political actors who have over the last half century focused intensely on expanding their power within the state and their influence outside of it. The ethics of Jewish violence that they adhere to and have taught, as well as the political strategies that they have used, must be interrogated with the utmost seriousness. However far outside of the mainstream figures like Meir Kahane and Yitzhak Ginsburgh once were, it is difficult to argue now — as Israel prepares to annex large swaths of the West Bank and steadily alienates the liberal diasporic establishment — that their vision of radical religious zionism and Jewish strength-by-force is not central to the functioning of the Jewish state. It is similarly difficult to argue that the individual actors those rabbis inspired, like Baruch Goldstein and Yigal Amir, were not successful in their attempts to dramatically alter the course of Israeli history and all that hinges on it.

This paper is an attempt to understand how Israel slid from where it was in 1993, when Yitzhak Rabin shook Yasser Arafat's hand to such fanfare on the White House lawn, to where it is today: an explicit ethno-state that routinely and brazenly flaunts international law, cozies up to illiberal leaders and is firmly ensconced in partnerships with reactionary elements that have not traditionally been all that interested in fighting antisemitism. It is an attempt to identify how religious Zionism has developed, why it has become powerful in Israel, and to what end it has used violence to buttress or extend its religio-political goals. This is certainly not the first

exploration of Jewish violence, the effects of unsanctioned public violence on Israel or the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, or the network of right-wing actors that have so significantly impacted the religious and political landscapes of Israel since statehood. It is, however, a new attempt to connect the dots: to trace a particular strain of the theological and ideological development of Jewish fundamentalist violence, and pinpoint exactly how it has altered the fate of the country and all that is connected to it. It is a story about how a particularly abhorrent strain of Jewish theology gained influence in Israel, and, ultimately, how it might be stopped.

II. Jewish Violence

Judaism and violence — Jewish violence, violence perpetrated against Jewish people, and Jewish teachings on violence — go back a very long way. There is neither the time nor the space in this paper to extensively outline the developments in Jewish thinking and teaching on violence throughout history, though many scholars have taken on such projects to great effect. One such scholar is Robert Eisen, Chair of the Department of Religion at George Washington University, who provided in his book *The Peace and Violence of Judaism: From the Bible to Modern Zionism* a five-part breakdown of the different “thought worlds” on peace and violence in Judaism: the Bible, rabbinic Judaism, medieval Jewish philosophy, Kabbalah, and modern Zionism. Eisen’s central takeaway is that, within each thought world, ambiguity reigns. There is ample textual evidence supporting both violent interpretations of Judaism as well as peaceful ones, whether in rabbinic Judaism or modern Zionism. But whether we judge particular strains of thinking within these different thought worlds as valid or not, moral or not, the focus for people interested in understanding why Israel looks the way it does today must be on figuring out why certain interpretations of Jewish scripture have been adopted by people who have changed the course of Israeli society. That work necessitates grappling with textual analysis like Eisen’s, but

also historical accounts of the people behind particular movements like religious Zionism. Anthropological work like Robert Friedman's is instructive, as are studies like those of the late Hebrew University political science professor Ehud Sprinzak that deal directly with the historical course of Jewish violence in Israel.

Taken together, these scholars dispel the notion that Jews are somehow an atypically peaceful, intellectual, or physically timid group of people. This stereotype of Jews as primarily concerned with civic, academic, and spiritual pursuits, shrinking in the face of danger, both underwrites a number of antisemitic tropes and has loomed large in the psyche of diasporic Jews and Israelis over the years. To an extent, understandings of Jews and specifically Jewish Israelis as intrinsically nonviolent have been intentionally constructed: Israel has not historically taught its public school students an accurate account of how the state was created, minimizing the extent to which the early Zionists used systemic and intricately-planned violence to menace the British rulers of Palestine and drive the Palestinians off of their land (Peled-Elhanan 2012). Those schoolbooks refer to Palestinians as terrorists who debase themselves by using violence in attempting to achieve goals that should be pursued with speeches and letters. When Rabin was murdered in Tel Aviv in 1995, Israelis were stunned by the idea that their prime minister could be killed by a Jew. To many, it seemed anathema to what the state of Israel represented — especially in contrast to the majority-Arab countries in its region (Peleg 1997).

The construction of Jews as essentially nonviolent has been equally persistent in the European and American diasporas. The nonviolent nature of Jews has been held up as evidence of Jewish exceptionalism: where gentiles kill, Jews are peaceful. No less a figure than Jean-Paul Sartre wrote in the aftermath of the second world war that Jews are “passionately hostile to violence,” and that the “sense of justice and of reason which they put up as their sole defense

against a hostile ‘brutal, and unjust society’ is perhaps... the true mark of their greatness” (Sartre 117-118). Sprinzak, summarizing work done by Israeli academics Israel Bartal, Elimelech Horowitz, and Ze’ev Greese writes that while Jewish diasporic history has been full of violent episodes, “Jewish historians had intentionally done their utmost to conceal [them]” (Sprinzak 289).

These endeavors have not been particularly helpful to anyone. Scholars such as Paul Breines have documented at length how the idea of Jews as preternaturally nonviolent is a myth, and that Jews have frequently turned to violence in certain conditions. As a result, violence is interwoven throughout Jewish history just as it is interwoven throughout the histories of so many major religious groups. There is a tradition dating back to the first centuries C.E. of Jews killing other Jews, Jews killing Romans, Jews killing Christians, and so on and so forth (Shahak, Mezvinsky 114). In recent history alone, Jews have been disproportionately active in violent political organizations — often fighting fascism and other forms of political repression. There is even a storied history of Jewish mob activity in the United States that runs parallel to similar histories of the Irish and Italian mobs. The idea that Jews are nonviolent, or that the Jewish people have only ever used violence in self-defense, is erroneous — a product of a particular presentation of history designed, as presentations of history are so often designed, to serve particular ideological ends. What is clear, however, is that this portrayal of Jews as nonviolent has significantly influenced a range of Jewish and non-Jewish actors. Kahane, as I discuss in detail in the coming pages, argued forcefully that Jewish non-violence — which becomes associated with political liberalism and pluralism in the post-World War II United States — was a result of centuries of abuse Jews suffered in the diaspora that made them timid, weak, and unable to properly advocate for themselves in a world full of antisemitism and hate.

Instead of insisting that Jews are superior because they are not violent and choose instead to direct their energies towards other endeavors, it is imperative that we take the ideologies and theologies of Jewish violence at face value and interrogate them as best we can. That is what this paper does, focusing on the role that extremist Jewish violence has played in transforming Israeli society over the last many years. I do not explore the impact of wars waged by or for the state as a political construct, but instead focus on acts of violence committed by individuals or non-governmental organizations in the name of Judaism itself or of Eretz Israel as a biblical or historical concept. By definition, this violence is not random, nor is it the work of the mentally ill. When Israelis say that they are killing for God, we must, if we are ever to resolve the conflict between Israel and Palestine, listen to them. This study starts with the Six-Day War, recognizing that the seizure of the religiously important West Bank was a watershed moment that dramatically altered the course of Israeli civic, political, and religious life (Sprinzak 9). The outcome of the Six-Day War changed Israel's positionality to such an extent that it significantly impacted the practice of Judaism both in the country and beyond it (Wilf 2017). All of a sudden, a physical redemption on the land of Eretz Israel was on the table.

Before launching into the substance of this paper, it is important to define — as best we are able — the two titular terms. Many scholars have toiled trying to define religious violence, especially, as religion itself is a relatively new term, in historical context (Asad 1993). For the purposes of this project, I want to consider several of University of Chicago professor Bruce Lincoln's theses on religious and violence. The starting point, broadly, is that religious violence is morally justified — that it is intimately connected to discourses that seek to frame violence as an ethical imperative on behalf of a particular theological or ideological project. Oftentimes, that ethical imperative is expressed in terms of the sacred and the profane: when a social group that

considers itself sacred has interests opposed by another group, that group is often constructed as profane and, as a result, held responsible for the violence it suffers. Important for the purposes of this paper is Lincoln's tenth thesis, in which he writes that the odds that a group will turn to violence depend on the "extent to which it feels itself to have been wronged; the extent to which it experiences those wrongs as unbearable and intractable; and its ability to define itself and its cause as righteous, even sacred" (Lincoln 94). Religion, Lincoln notes, is more often than not deployed to prevent violent action. But because of its strong links to questions of morality, its capacity for launching violent action is enormous. If you are steeped in the Israel-Palestine conflict, several of Lincoln's points on religion and violence might be familiar.

The religious Zionist movement, meanwhile, emerged as a current in the larger Zionist movement during the middle of the eighteenth century. Its proponents, notably rabbis like Yehudah Alkalai, Zvi Hirsch Kalischer, and Isaac Jacob Reines, saw the settlement of Palestine in religious, rather than strictly political, terms. They believed that bringing Jewish people to Eretz Israel was a positive step towards redemption, and wanted to ensure that any state established in the name of the Jewish people there would have a religious character. Sandwiched between the much larger secular Zionist movement, which did not see its project in theologically redemptive terms, and the Orthodox movement, comprised largely of individuals who were anti-Zionist and refused in measure to recognize the legitimacy of the secular state, the religious Zionist movement did not enjoy a particularly large amount of power in the formation of Israel's political and religious life. Religious Zionists were not traditionally as antagonistic towards the secular state as Orthodox Jews, and, more importantly, did not hesitate to involve themselves in state affairs — running for political office, trying to pass legislation, affect public school curriculum, and so on.

The events of 1967, namely the Israeli takeover of Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Mount Sinai, pushed religious Zionism in a more explicitly redemptive or messianic direction. All of the sudden, seemingly out of nowhere, the state of Israel was in control of much of Eretz Israel — including a number of sites mentioned in the Torah that were previously inaccessible to Israeli Jews. Dov Waxman has written that the Six-Day War was in itself a “quasi-religious” experiences for Jews, an awe-inspiring triumph that instantaneously credited the religious Zionist movement and expanded the then-narrowly held belief that it was possible for Jews on Earth to do or contribute to God’s work (Waxman 2017). It was in this era that Rabbi Zvi Yehudah Kook, building off of the theological work of his father, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, began to shepherd the energy of the religious Zionist movement towards establishing and running settlements in the West Bank in an attempt to ensure that Jews would settle the newly won land and that the state of Israel would not be able to vacate it. From then on, each settlement was a step towards redemption, each step towards a Palestinian state the opposite.

It was into this milieu that one of the most notable advocates of Jewish violence stepped when he arrived in Israel in 1971. Meir Kahane was born into an Orthodox family in Brooklyn in 1932, a world away from the euphoria that swept through the Jewish world in 1967. The specter of the Holocaust — death, destruction, and near-unbearable Jewish fragility — marked the first phase of Kahane’s life as he studied in Jewish schools and participated in several Jewish youth movements, including the religious Zionist Bnei Akiva movement (Magid 2019). Kahane’s father, Charles, was a rabbi who wrote extensively and was a close associate of the Revisionist Zionist movement led by Ze’ev Jabotinsky — a hugely influential Zionist leader who split from the mainstream movement headed by the likes of David Ben-Gurion over the issue of whether Zionists should insist on settling all of Eretz Israel or accept a state on only part of it. Kahane

was ordained at Mir Yeshiva and went on to receive degrees in political science, law, and international relations from Brooklyn College, New York Law School, and New York University respectively. His main interest, though, was in Jewish thought, politics, and Zionism — and before the end of his third decade, he was beginning to develop his thinking on all three fronts.

The political contexts of both Israel and the United States throughout the '60s shaped Kahane's thinking considerably. Where Kahane was a conservative who located his early Zionism somewhere between the revisionist and religious movements, the American Jewish establishment had turned decisively in the post-war years towards liberalism and non-violence — a turn that Kahane, who spent time during his 20s trying to rally Jewish support for the Vietnam War, despised (Kaufman 1971). Kahane believed, like Jabotinsky, that Jews needed to fight to gain land, respect, and the safety that they entailed. Kahane defended this position with religious teachings, but he also understood the need for Jewish violence in a practical manner. He felt that non-violence had failed Jews prior to the Holocaust, was failing Jews again in the Soviet Union, and was in fact an affront to God's intention for the Jewish people. In 1968, Kahane became a public figure when he founded the Jewish Defense League (JDL) in New York City to “do the job that the Anti-Defamation League should do but doesn't”: protect Jews in America and beyond with force (Gershen 1968). The JDL menaced black rights groups and Soviet interests in its first several years of existence, at times with bombs and other lethal means. The FBI designated it as a right wing terror group in 2001.

The leading Kahane scholar Shaul Magid has characterized Kahane's ethics of Jewish violence as being threefold: violence as management, violence as politics, and violence as subject-formation (Magid 2015). All three of these units are essential to understanding both why Kahanist figures like Baruch Goldstein used violence during the Oslo period, as well as how that

use of violence transformed — or remade — Israeli society. In Magid’s formulation, the first ethic of violence, violence as management, relates primarily to antisemitism. Kahane felt that antisemitism was ineradicable, endemic to gentiles no matter the historical situation. As Magid highlights, this view of antisemitism as endemic was a significant difference between Kahane and Zionists like Theodor Herzl, who believed that antisemitism was largely a product of Jews migrating to non-Jewish societies and could thus be combated through the establishment of a Jewish state. Kahane felt that antisemitism could not be eradicated through peaceable statemaking, and instead would have to be proactively combated through use of force. No other option for combating this omnipresent antisemitism had been proven credible, least of all American-style assimilation, which Kahane considered a form of Jewish death in itself.

Kahane advocated for the use of violence in several ways. The first was to point to the Bible, wherein the Israelites used violence to great effect, to make a theological argument that violence was an imperative for Jews. “The Bible says that there is a time for war and a time for peace,” he said. “Sometimes the Bible commands Jews to go to war... When you are in danger, then it is an obligation to go to war; you have to go to war” (Mergui, Simonnot 1985). Kahane regarded violence not only as an option for Jewish survival, a tool to stave off omnipresent antisemitism and a second Holocaust, but as a “the crux of covenantal responsibility” (Magid 2015). Kahane’s understanding was that Jews who could not be counted upon to fight when other Jews were in danger — and Jews were always in danger, as a fact of life — were embarrassing or humiliating God himself. He felt that people unwilling to use violence to fight for the Jewish people were not acting as true Jews, but were acting instead out of an emasculated, fearful, confused position brought about by centuries of violence and suffering.

Kahane's contempt for the American Jewish establishment was likely as foundational to this belief as his reading of the Bible was. In 1971, for instance, he wrote that "an assimilation of intellect that led [the American Jew], in his ignorance and that of his leaders, to believe that so many of the liberal, pacifist, and universalist ideals that he swore were Jewish were in reality foreign, gentile, and at total variance with true Judaism" (Kahane 100). The diaspora had stripped Jews of their "self-respect" by forcing them to turn "the Christian cheek" when subjugated. But non-violence was not true Judaism. "It was not in the role of Mahatma Gandhi that the Jews fought at Massada; the men of Bar-Kochba and Judah Maccabee never went to a Quaker meeting," Kahane wrote. "The Jews of old... understood the concept of the Book and the Sword" (Sprinzak 208). Reclaiming violence, then, was in accordance with Biblical teaching and also a way for Jewish people to reclaim a kind of masculinity that they lost when ghettoized in the diaspora.

Turning away from the diaspora, back to the homeland, gave Jews an opportunity to reclaim their self-respect and, in the process, please God (Sprinzak 208). Kahane made this belief explicit in a 1976 letter to members of his far right Kach political party when he wrote to them that "God created this state not for the Jew... [but] because He, be blessed, decided that He could no longer take the desecration of His name the laughter, the disgrace and the persecution of the people that was named after him" (Sprinzak 180-181). The State of Israel was, in Kahane's telling, a total repudiation of the diaspora, with its "humiliations, defeats, persecutions, second class status of a minority" (Sprinzak 181). God's creation of the state was not a reward for the Jewish people, who were mainly undeserving given their conduct in the diaspora, but rather the provision of an opportunity for Jews to shake off that diasporic malaise, become powerful in a militaristic sense, and honor God. Not to put too fine a point on it, Kahane wrote in

the same letter that a “sovereign Jewish state which provides the Jew... a military of his own and a victory over the defeated Gentile in the battlefield... is *kiddush hashem*” (Sprinzak 181).

Another way in which Kahane advocated for the use of violence was a practical appeal centered on its political currency. This is what Magid describes as violence as subject-formation. Kahane tells a story in *The Story of the Jewish Defense League* in which his group holds a rally against “reverse discrimination” at the City College of New York, is surrounded by a large group of furious protesters, including liberal Jews, and successfully pushes them back. After the end of the demonstration, Kahane writes, he was approached by four conservative Christian students who, impressed, asked if they could join the JDL (Kahane 114). This was illustrative: the projection of strength and the use of violence worked. Because Kahane felt that there was nowhere in the world that Jews could live safely, including Israel, it was up to Jews to raise the stakes on antisemitism. People could be antisemitic, in other words, but there would be a steep price to pay. The stakes for the Jewish people, Kahane thought, were already incredibly high. He titled his 1971 book *Never Again!* — re-launching a phrase that quickly became ubiquitous in post-conflict societies from Argentina to Guatemala — because he thought that a second Holocaust was imminent as Christian Holocaust guilt exhausted itself and Israel showcased its military power (Magid 2015). To Kahane, “never again” referred not only to the need to prevent a second Holocaust, but also to the need for the Jewish people not to be lulled into a false sense of security in a world dominated by the antisemitic other (Breslauer 33). Kahane’s desire to reconstitute Jewish biblical identity aside, deterrence-through-violence was a pragmatic strategy.

The last way in which Kahane advocated for violence was through his particular understanding of Zionism and the place of the Jewish people in Palestine. To hear Kahane speak about conflict between Israel and Palestine could be a jarring experience: he recognized

Palestinian claims to the land of Israel as politically legitimate, and even sympathetically referenced the right of return in a 1985 interview in which he told a pair of French journalists that Palestinians from places on the coast like Haifa and Jaffa “want to go home. They don’t want to go to Nablus. Or to Jericho. They want to return home” (Mergui, Simonnot 1985). Politically, Kahane’s commitment to the Israeli cause was all but nonexistent. But it did not matter. That is because Kahane believed that Israel’s claim to the land it was occupying in Palestine was not a political claim based on Jewish history in the region or the Jewish refugee crisis that followed the second world war, but a Biblical claim based on a commandment from God. Politically, Jews had no better a claim to the land than anyone else. But God’s word transcended political claims, and thus the Jewish people were charged with seizing control of Eretz Israel — and doing so by any means necessary. Writing last year, Magid described Kahane’s activism as one of “maximal territorial conquest founded on the mandate of revelation” (Magid 2019). Violence was encouraged explicitly.

Upon his immigration to Israel in 1971, Kahane wanted to train that violence against Palestinians and other Arabs. The point of a Jewish state, he felt, was total Jewish supremacy in strength and numbers. Kahane believed that Israeli citizenship should be limited to Jews, and wanted to give all non-Jews living in Eretz Israel just three extremely undesirable options: remain as “resident strangers” with none of the rights afforded to citizens, leave voluntarily with some sort of compensation, or be forcibly removed (Kahane 250). This was what God wanted. The *raison d’être* for the state of Israel’s existence, Kahane argued, was so that Jews, his chosen people, could finally be as powerful and autonomous as he had meant for them to be. It was for that reason that violence, as a pure expression of Jewish power, was considered “covenantal responsibility” (Magid 2015). Kahane embraced violence against the enemies of Jewish

supremacy on every level, micro and macro. The day after he was elected to the Knesset in 1984, the highpoint of his personal political career, Kahane led a victory march directly through the Muslim quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem during which his supporters terrorized vendors and residents — destroying property and telling Arabs that they “the end of their stay in the Holy Land was near” (Sprinzak 145).

This kind of violence had nothing to do with self-defense as it is routinely defined in courts of law. To Kahane, however, all Jewish violence qualified as self-defense. Jewish people had been victimized so brutally and so consistently by non-Jews that it was only reasonable to expect that they would go on being victimized — casting all Jewish violence against non-Jews as self-defense preemptively. Kahane argued that “Jewish violence in defense of Jewish interest is never bad,” but rather in keeping with the idea that Jews should look out for Jews and forget about the best interests of everyone else (Sprinzak 209).

But this violence that Kahane encouraged was not only about self-defense, or subject management. It was about something more. It is important to note, in this context, that Kahane was a practitioner of Jewish violence throughout the time that he was a theologian of Jewish violence. That is in part because, after so much violence suffered at the hands of gentiles, he felt that violence was healing in a way that peaceful political gains could never be. It was this core belief, which Kahane acted upon so frequently, that has led the various scholars to compare his politics to those of Frantz Fanon (Magid 2015). Both Kahane and Fanon believed that it was necessary to “rebuild the subject after the emasculation of the ghetto,” and while the ghettos the two men were trying to break free of were very different, they both believed that retribution could be one of the truest forms of emancipation (Magid 2015). This is not to argue that Kahane and Fanon were equally legitimate moral actors, it is only to further illustrate why Kahane felt

that violence in and of itself was so desirable for the Jewish people. Given this analysis, it is helpful to add a fourth ethic of violence to Magid's three: violence as redemption. Not redemption in a strictly biblical sense, not future redemption, but active, present redemption on Earth — a kind of subject formation.

Kahane's views on violence and Israel were shared by only a small part of the global rabbinic community, but it is worth exploring for a moment longer how Kahane defended his position on violence in the arena of rabbinic law. One of Kahane's chief theological influences was Moses ben Maimon, or Maimonides, a Sephardic philosopher and Torah scholar who was active in the twelfth century. Maimonides' *Mishnah Torah* is one of the major works of halacha, influential in a number of later works that built upon it and equally influential in practice in certain Jewish communities. Kahane and a number of his contemporaries advocated that Israel adopt a Maimonidean form of halacha, and they leaned on it heavily to justify their program of violence against non-Jews — both inside Eretz Israel and beyond its borders. Rabbi Yisrael Ariel, founder of the Temple Institute, a man who served as chief rabbi of the settlement of Yamit on the Sinai Peninsula before Israel evacuated it, argued in the 1980s in a defense of the Jewish Underground that “anyone who searches through Maimonides... [for] the concept ‘you shall not murder’ or the concept ‘holy blood’ with regard to the killing of a non-Jew will search in vain, because he will not find it. It follows... that a Jew who kills a non-Jew... is exempt from the prohibition ‘you shall not murder’” (Masalha 132). There is room to argue about the proper interpretation and application of Maimonides' musings on murder — the key line translates roughly as “an Israelite who kills a resident alien is not sentenced to death in the court of law” — but Kahane and others took it as an invitation to the kind of violence against gentiles that they

saw as sanctifying elsewhere (Masalha 132). The results over the last half century have been horrific.

Kahane's is not the only voice in this paper, but to center him as much as I have in a discussion of the relative triumph of religious Zionism and religious violence in Israel is perhaps to give him too much credit. We could tell the story of the development of religious Zionist theology through the lives and works of a number of other rabbinical leaders in the settler movement in the decades following the Six-Day War. I have chosen to focus on Kahane for two reasons. The first is that a number of leading scholars on Jewish violence and fundamentalism are increasingly insisting that we recognize how successful Kahane was in disseminating his theology and ethics. Magid, for instance, published an article in the American Jewish magazine *Tablet* in 2019 titled simply, "Kahane Won" (Magid 2019). The second is that Kahane's influence, practically speaking, is easy to trace. By starting a political party and by so heavily influencing the likes of Baruch Goldstein, we can use Kahane's legacy as a throughline to trace the how the movement he has come to represent seized power in Israel and has reoriented diaspora Jewry, Christians, and many others in how they view and interact with the — now officially — Jewish state.

Kahane's following has not as of yet become mainstream in Israel society, but — as I explore in the following pages — it has strongly influenced the religious Zionist movement that makes up the backbone of the Likud Party (Magid 2019). There is no reason to believe that the current Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu himself shares Kahane's theological fanaticism, but interpretation of Jewish history and stance on Jewish violence has echoes of Kahane's own views. In a January speech commemorating the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, Netanyahu told an audience at Yad Vashem that, "for many, Auschwitz is the ultimate symbol of

evil. It is certainly that... But for the Jewish people, Auschwitz is more than the ultimate symbol of evil. It is also the ultimate symbol of Jewish powerlessness.” He would go on to say that the horrors of Auschwitz is “what can happen” when “our people have no voice, no land, and no shield” (Netanyahu 2020). What Netanyahu is intuiting here is clear: the Jews now have land and a shield, the state of Israel and its spectacularly well-financed military complex, and they thus have a voice as well. Violence, or the threat of violence, returns here as salvific and, given the occasion Netanyahu is commemorating, moral as well.

III. Goldstein, Amir, & the Maturation of Kahanism

Kahane immigrated to Israel in 1971, chased out of the U.S. by a suspended prison sentence, FBI surveillance, and, perhaps, faltering state of his movement in New York City. Almost immediately upon arriving, Kahane founded a political party called the League — which he later renamed Kach after an old Irgun slogan — and distributed JDL literature in Hebron, calling on the city’s mayor to stand trial for the 1929 massacre of the city’s Jews. As his popularity grew, particularly after the Camp David Accords agreed to by one of his former heroes Menachem Begin, Kahane quickly accrued a following that pursued his violent ideology by attacking random Arabs and assaulting leftists (Sprinzak 211). Kahane himself was elected to the Knesset in 1984, and enjoyed a considerable amount of popularity among young people (Sprinzak 146). The Kach Party was banned from standing in the 1988 national election two weeks before election day due to a new law that precluded parties found to be inciting people to racism, but polling suggests that, had they been allowed to stand, Kach might have become the third largest in the Knesset behind only Labor and the Likud (Freedman 2000). The decision to bar the party from participation was at once a show of strength from the secular state as well a sign of how influential the coalition Kahane represented was becoming.

Nowhere was Kahane more popular than in a settlement just in the West Bank where one of his closest followers was a middle-aged man who, like him, was originally from Brooklyn. Born into an Orthodox family in Brooklyn's Bensonhurst neighborhood in 1956, Benjamin Goldstein attended Jewish Day School and then went on to study medicine at Yeshiva University. From an early age, he found common cause with Kahane — training in Kahane's fledgling Jewish Defense League throughout his time at Yeshiva, graduating with his M.D. in 1981, and then, two years later, at the age of 27, leaving New York for Israel. Goldstein's immigration, like most everything else in his life, was an ideological matter. He eventually settled in the West Bank settlement of Kiryat Arba, an outpost of some 7,000 religious settlers founded in the aftermath of the Six-Day War when fundamentalist rabbi Moshe Levinger occupied a hotel in Hebron and refused to leave until the Israeli government allowed him and his followers to start the settlement.

The significance of Kiryat Arba to the Jewish settler movement at large is difficult to overstate. The settlement lies on the outskirts of Hebron, which, as the home of the Tomb of the Patriarchs, is considered the second holiest city in Judaism. But for all of the historical and religious significance of Hebron, the significance of Kiryat Arba is very much located in its own origin story. That story — of how Kiryat Arba came to be taken over by Levinger and his followers — is both complicated and instructive. In 1968, in the immediate aftermath of their occupation of the West Bank, Israeli government officials, in violation of international law, cautiously began to make plans to construct and populate Jewish settlements across the West Bank. The Labor government's logic was that, because Jews had lived in Hebron and other areas south of Jerusalem long before the state of Israel's establishment in 1948, their "construction there amounted to a 'reclamation' project" (Ephron 42). This kind of logic was commonplace

throughout the liberal Israeli establishment; David Ben-Gurion, then retired, said after the war that while he did not favor annexation, Hebron, Jerusalem's "sister city," was an exception (Shindler 2018). But while the government moved slowly, attempting to strike a balance between its desire to control the West Bank and its apprehension about appearances and logistical challenges, a newly emphatic settler movement led by Kook emerged to take matters into its own hands. Kook, later an enthusiastic supporter of Kahane's political career, had a familiar and straightforward take on the 1967 war and the meaning of its result: "the Holy One gave us the land through obvious miracles," he told Orthodox cabinet members in the war's aftermath, and, "He'll never take it from us" (Gorenberg 112). The country's military success in Eretz Israel was a sign that Jews were on the precipice of redemption, the reclamation of the entirety of the Holy Land, if only they were allowed to settle it. They were not eager to wait for a stamp of approval from Golda Meir.

One of those rabbis not interested in biding his time was Levinger, who at this point was working at a moshav east of Tel Aviv and heavily involved with Kook's Gush Emunim. In the spring of 1968, Levinger decided to go to Hebron himself. He recruited a group of followers, had them pose as Swiss tourists, rented rooms in a venerable old hotel on the city's main street owned by a former Palestinian Arab mayor, and announced that he was going to hold a passover seder (Pedahzur, Perlinger 72). The seder, which took place nearly 30 years to the day after the British forced the last remaining Jews out of Hebron in the midst of the Arab Revolt, went off without a hitch. After its completion, however, things took a turn. Levinger sent a telegram to Yigal Allon, Israel's minister of labor and future acting prime minister, that he and his followers were not leaving. He had, in effect, as Ami Pedahzur and Arie Perliger argue in their book *Jewish Terrorism in Israel*, established an Israeli settlement inside of the the Al-Naher Al-

Khaled Hotel. The government appeared paralyzed, though some in it, like Allon, who had communicated with one of the rabbis there alongside Levinger before the operation, may have been privately pleased (Ephron 68). They stalled for six weeks, under pressure from Levinger and his ideological allies, before announcing that they would allow the settlers to move to a military base on the outskirts of the city. A year-and-a-half later, in the aftermath of a deadly Palestinian attack in the area, Meir gave the group permission to set up the permanent settlement of Kiryat Arba adjacent to Hebron (Shindler 2018). The settlers, and the religious Zionist movement they represented had learned an important lesson: they could bully the Israeli government into yielding to their demands. All it took was a clear demonstration of strength and will.

Kiryat Arba would prove to be just the first of a number of Israeli settlements and settler activities that would engulf Hebron in sectarian strife in the coming years. In 1979, two years before Goldstein's arrival in Kiryat Arba and two years after the election of a rightwing Likud government, a group of settlers led by Levinger's equally zealous wife Miriam marched into the middle of Hebron and occupied the Al-Dabouia building, a former Ottoman police station and Jewish hospital — re-establishing a Jewish foothold within the city proper and setting up an organization to facilitate Jewish settlement within the historic city center. As had happened just over a decade previously, the Israeli authorities were slow to react — not eager to recognize the action, but unwilling to expel the settlers and alienate Orthodox supporters. Palestinian shopkeepers on Al-Shuhada Street appealed for relief to the Israeli Supreme Court, arguing that the settlers were both illegally trespassing and harassing residents, but were rebuffed (Kretzmer 117). With no opposition from the legal system, Israeli residency inside the Old City was

officially sanctioned in 1980; the settlements of Beit Romano and Tel Rumeida were established shortly thereafter.

In this environment, where Jewish settlers were guarded by IDF soldiers and violence was commonplace, Kahane's Kach Party and its particular logic of Jewish violence — violence as salvation — took hold. Goldstein, the former Jewish Defense League soldier, found his place. He immediately became involved with Kach Party politics upon his arrival in 1983, and, a year later, was third on the party list for the national election that boosted Kahane — listed first — to the Knesset for the first time. Goldstein's service to the Kach Party would continue on Kiryat Arba's town council. Outside of politics, Goldstein was making his way as well. He changed his name to Baruch, was married — by Kahane — to a Soviet immigrant named Miriam, had four children, and put his medical degree to use: treating Israeli soldiers during the country's invasion of Lebanon shortly after arriving, and taking care of fellow Jewish settlers who had been attacked by Palestinians in Kiryat Arba and the surrounding area. Goldstein's line of work, as well as his political and religious commitments, put him into direct, daily contact with the effects of Palestinian violence against settler Jews and engrained ever more deeply within him a critical precept of Kahanism: violence against Jews is an affront to God, and so is responding to that violence with docility.

Goldstein, like Kahane, was virulently bigoted — anchoring himself in a kind of theologiocally-based Jewish supremacy that quickly put him on the radar of the Israeli security agency Shabak (Gorenberg 62). While serving as a doctor with a military unit in Lebanon shortly after his immigration, Goldstein announced that he was “not willing to treat non-Jews” — a proclamation that gained him notoriety to the point that a group of Druze soldiers in his battalion asked that their commander reassign him in case they needed urgent medical attention and he

refused to provide it (Shahak, Mezvinsky 96). Goldstein was reassigned. This was not the only case in which Goldstein refused to treat gentiles, in fact, he was reassigned at a different point from a post with the regional Hebron brigade because he made clear that he would not treat wounded or ill Arabs (Shahak, Mezvinsky 96). Goldstein continued his practice of refusing to treat gentiles while working in Kiryat Arba, and engaged in other bad behavior as well. He was at one point arrested for knocking over a shelf of Qurans at the Tomb of the Patriarchs (Ephron 63).

Still, Goldstein mainly held himself in check. Scholars, in attempting to explain why he took the action he did on February 25, 1994, point to several events. All have to do with themes of Kahanism. One has to do with Kahane himself. On November 5, 1990, after giving a speech to a group of Orthodox Jews at a Marriott hotel in Midtown Manhattan, Kahane was assassinated by an Egyptian-American named El Sayyid Nosair. Goldstein immediately called for retribution against Palestinians in literature he distributed in the area, and, though he did not seek vengeance personally, his 1992 town council campaign was punctuated by his allegation that Palestinians were seeking to inflict a second Holocaust against Jews and that Israel's "treasonous politicians were preventing the army from operating effectively against them" (Gorenberg 63). As the Oslo process proceeded, and the future of settlements like Goldstein's came under threat, violence on both sides of the conflict increased. In December 1993, two prominent ideological allies of Goldstein, Mordechai and Shalom Lapid, were killed in a drive-by shooting perpetrated by Hamas members. Goldstein delivered a eulogy at their funeral and not only called for vengeance, but went further in the Kahanist tradition — blaming himself and everyone listening to him for not preempting the murders through violence. Goldstein's friend Dan Be'eri said that Goldstein "expressed great sorrow in his pained view that because we were apathetic and had refrained

from vengeance, we were guilty of their deaths... on the metaphysical level, before heaven” (Gorenberg 204). At least once, the service was interrupted by anti-Palestinian chants from those assembled.

Violence as salvation. Violence as a means of reclaiming true Jewish identity, of washing away the emasculation suffered in the diaspora and the increasing emasculation of life in the West Bank, of a group of people unloved by a state apparatus intent on giving their land away. In the days leading up to February 25, Goldstein reportedly told friends that he had a plan to stop the peace process (Gorenberg 206). Few people, though, if any, knew what he was about to do. February 25 was an important day — a Friday during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, as well as the Jewish holiday of Purim — and Goldstein awoke early to start it. He dressed in his army reservist uniform, grabbed his military-issue assault rifle, and, by 5 a.m., was at the Tomb of the Patriarchs. Shortly after arriving, he made his way past the Jewish prayer area and into the Ibrahimi Mosque, where hundreds of Muslims were preparing to engage in morning prayer. He hid behind a column, waited until the worshippers were prostrated, their heads touching the ground in prayer, and then opened fire. Several minutes later, Goldstein was dead — beaten to death by a group of Palestinians, one of whom had knocked him out with a fire extinguisher. But the damage had been done: with the aid of his assault rifle, Goldstein had fired more than 100 rounds — four magazines — some 200 seconds. 29 completely defenseless Palestinians were dead and more than 100 others were wounded; Goldstein had shot a number of worshippers in the back, he had shot others as they desperately tried to flee through the doors of the mosque (Ephron 62).

There is certainly something to be said for the fact that Goldstein committed his act of terror with an IDF-issued rifle while wearing his army reservist uniform. While the attack was

not in any way sanctioned by the state, the state certainly was implicated in it. The military had provided the materials, and Israeli governments dating back nearly three decades had ensured a radical Jewish presence in the heart of the Palestinian West Bank, but even on a more granular level, it was difficult to avoid the conclusion that Israel had gone out of its way to protect Goldstein and ensure that he would be able to torpedo its peace process with the Palestinians. This is the main argument that Israel Shahak and Norton Mezvinsky make in their chapter on Goldstein in the book *Jewish Fundamentalism in Israel*: Goldstein's repeated refusals to treat non-Jews as a military officer were openly insubordinate and well worthy of court martial, not to mention a violation of his oath as a doctor. The fact that he was not only allowed to continue to serve, but was actually accommodated time and again for his theology, meant that the Israeli military and political establishments were — consciously or not — sympathetic to it. They argue that Goldstein's case, as well as Israeli policy towards Palestinians and other Arab nations more broadly, proved that identity formation for secular Jews in Israel was linked in some way to the Kahanist belief in the fundamental antisemitism of the non-Jewish other.

The truth is that Israel was in deep with Goldstein. As a skilled doctor who rushed to the side of Jewish victims of Palestinian violence around Hebron, Goldstein was so valued by the military that one regional commander recommending promoting him in late 1992 with a glowing review that stated in part “if there's any officer worthy of being promoted in the Judea, Samaria, and Gaza area, it is without a doubt, Dr. Baruch Goldstein” (Ephron 63). In fact, had he stayed the course, Goldstein would have been promoted, from the rank of captain to that of major, on Israel's independence day of April 14 (Shahak, Mezvinsky 100). Goldstein had ultimately, in a sense, done exactly what Moshe Levinger had done when he squatted in the Park Hotel in 1968: call the secular government's bluff. His melding of religion and state — by his decision to

murder worshippers on a Muslim holy day in an Israeli military uniform — was in every sense a Zionism that saw devotion to land as moral and just and the state as nothing but a potential roadblock. Goldstein was not disregarding the state, but rather stretching it to ensure that it would accommodate his particular belief system — which is exactly what it did.

Rabin was horrified by what Goldstein had done, and he knew that the political consequences could be devastating, but he was unable or unwilling to fully grasp the gravity of the worldview that Goldstein represented. Speaking in the Knesset shortly after the massacre, he said that he never could have imagined that an event would transpire, and, even more tellingly, called Goldstein “mentally ill” (Gorenberg 204). This blinders-on response was not limited to the prime minister. Others in the Israeli establishment preferred the theory that Goldstein had become unglued because he had been around so much misery and gore, Jew and Arab alike (Shahak, Mezvinsky 99). Goldstein was certainly a fanatic, and he had certainly seen his share of violence and suffering, but to call him mentally ill — and minimize or delete his personal agency or the coherence of his ideology — was dangerously misguided. Goldstein clearly believed, as did many others both in his life and unknown to him, that his aim of stopping the peace process and transfer of land was holy. Goldstein’s decision to mount his attack on Purim, seen by Kahanists as a celebration of the triumph of Jews over their enemies, was no coincidence (Gorenberg 206). To him, the responsibility of a Jew was to fight against the pervasive, perennial threat posed by the antisemitic other. To not fight would have been to dishonor Kahane and to dishonor God. A month before the massacre, Goldstein had told a documentary filmmaker that, for Jews, there is “a time to kill and a time to heal” — an echo of Kahane’s edict that there is a “time for war and a time for peace” (Newsweek 1994). This, with Palestinians attacking Jews in

Eretz Israel and the Israeli government preparing for a peace that would likely put redemption out of reach, was a time to kill.

In a sense, this question — of the Jewish character of Goldstein’s action — engulfed the debate that raged over it in Israel in the following days. Rabin took to the floor of the Knesset to announce to the nation that “we say to this horrible man and those like him: you are a shame on Zionism and an embarrassment to Judaism” (Plen 2019). Others in the government, perhaps those reconciling themselves more fully to the ideological core of Goldstein’s action, went further: attempting to cast him out of Judaism entirely. Speaking in the Knesset several days after the massacre, Minister of Foreign Affairs Shimon Peres said “A Jew who is a murderer is a murderer. He is not a Jew. A Jew who is a Nazi is a Nazi, not a Jew. A man who claims to be a Jew and sneaks up from behind and shoots worshippers in the back... I am appalled” (Loushy, Sivan 2018). Shortly thereafter, Peres segued into an impassioned defense of the peace process — over shouted objections of Likud and other right-wing members watching from their seats. Even within the nominally secular government, there appeared to be an understanding that Goldstein would be judged through a religious lens. That alone was telling. At a critical moral crossroads, Israel was going to condemn or praise one of its citizens based on whether it found him to be properly Jewish or not.

In Kiryat Arba, Levinger was on the scene to argue for a very different interpretation of Goldstein’s action than Peres had offered. On the day of the massacre, at the Kiryat Arba municipality, secretary of the Council of Judea, Samaria, and Gaza Uri Ariel proposed passing a resolution condemning the massacre. Levinger, who a *Yedioth Ahronoth* journalist described as in a “good mood” that day, argued instead that the Israeli government should be condemned for putting Goldstein under “unbearable mental pressure” (Shahak, Mezvinsky 99). This theory —

that the horrific violence perpetrated by radical Palestinians coupled with Rabin's plan to give away the West Bank drove Goldstein to madness — was repeated by other settler leaders, including those associated with the Yesha Council (Sprinzak 2). Levinger was careful not to describe what Goldstein had done as murder, since under halacha the killing of a non-Jew by a Jew does not qualify as such — just pious Jewish doctors are prohibited from treating gentiles unless they are forced to do so under threat of punishment. Levinger won the debate, and later said that he was “sorry not only about dead Arabs but also about dead flies” (Shahak, Mezvinsky 100).

In this spirit, and in further rebuke of what was being broadcasted from the Labor-led Knesset, Goldstein was mourned in his community in Hebron as if he were himself a deity. At his funeral, the procession of which began in Jerusalem, Ariel said by way of eulogy, “Did he kill innocent people? The same supposedly innocent people slaughtered innocents in 1929... The whole city of Hebron slaughtered Jews then. Those are the ‘innocent people’ who were killed” (Gorenberg 205). Ariel's eulogy finished with the proclamation that Goldstein was a “holy martyr,” and that “The Jews will inherit the land not by any peace agreement but only by shedding blood” (Shahak, Mezvinsky 102). This kind of moral justification, a necessary component of religious violence in Lincoln's construction, was omnipresent. Back in Kiryat Arba, that notion of moral justification fit easily into the Kahanist conception of Jewish violence as perpetually provoked, never uncalled for. Dov Lior, the Chief Rabbi Kiryat Arba and a disciple of Kook, said that Goldstein had acted “for the sake of Jewish honor and to sanctify the name of Heaven,” and later compared him favorably to the martyrs of the Holocaust (Gorenberg 205). Among Lior's greatest hits in later years was a proclamation that Jews should be prepared to give up their lives to protect their communal presence in Hebron, as well as a Maimonidean proposal

that the Israeli government pay Beduoin citizens to vacate the country for their “native land” of Saudi Arabia and Libya (Sprinzak 106, Ynet 2011). Goldstein did exactly what Lior advocated — he laid down his life in the quest for Jewish redemption. It was an act of *messirut hanefesh*, or total devotion to God, for which Goldstein wrote that he expected to be redeemed (Ephron 67). In response, many of Goldstein’s associates in Kiryat Arba, who had respected him immensely in life, seemed to feel after his death the same sense of guilt that Goldstein himself felt after the deaths of Mordechai and Shalom Lapid (Sprinzak 3). If only they had acted more boldly in their lives, if only they were as bold as Goldstein was in his pursuit of the sanctification of God, his ultimate sacrifice might have been avoided.

Goldstein may have acted alone, but, in reality, he had an army behind him — and that army was not limited to the confines of Kiryat Arba. Within 48 hours of the massacre, religious neighborhoods in West Jerusalem were plastered with posters and literature “extolling Goldstein’s virtues and complaining that he did not manage to kill more Arabs” (Shahak, Mezvinsky 100). In the following months, settler children arriving in Jerusalem from Gaza and the West Bank wore buttons announcing that “Dr. Goldstein cured Israel’s ills” (Shahak, Mezvinsky 101). A crowd in excess of a thousand people turned up to the funeral, which was planned down to the last detail through the office of Israeli president Ezer Weisman, many of them Kahanists from the city. But it was not just religious Zionists and racists who venerated Goldstein. When push came to shove, the Israeli military stood behind the murderer as well. After the funeral, Goldstein’s tomb was given a guard of honor as it proceeded to its resting place in the Meir Kahane Memorial Park in Kiryat Arba. As for the Israeli public broadly? There was certainly heartache and condemnation in the aftermath of the massacre. But a public poll conducted found that Goldstein’s action had made half of Israeli Jews more sympathetic than

they had been before to the plight of the settlers — and half of the same polling universe was actually supportive of the murder spree if it was described only as the “Patriarch’s Cave Operation” (Shahak, Mezvinsky 104).

Goldstein drew support in the United States as well — not least from his old friends and allies at the Jewish Defense League. An old section on the organization’s official website stated that the JDL “will never be ashamed to say that Goldstein was a charter member” (Jewish Defense League 2003). The JDL too characterized Goldstein as a martyr in the “Judaism’s protracted struggle,” wrote that his action was “a preventative measure against yet another Arab attack on Jews,” and argued that he could not be labeled a terrorist because he himself faced an “imminent terrorist threat” (Jewish Defense League 2003). Kahane’s organization was aggressively making the case for one of his central ethics of Jewish violence: that, given the intractable antisemitism of the gentile, violence committed by the Jew is never unwarranted and never overly gratuitous. It is always self defense. At the same time, the JDL also pursued Levinger’s primary argument: that Goldstein was driven to madness by Arab terrorism and the Israeli government’s inability to stop it (Jewish Defense League 2003).

The episode was a crystallization of two competing ethics of Judaism in Israel — one which condemned Goldstein’s violence as “murder,” one which exalted it and refused to characterize it as such — and a clear indicator of how the adherents of the latter ethic had seized a position of immense power within the confines of Israeli socio-political life. The fact that the state granted Goldstein an honor guard in death, be it to sanctify him or to mollify his followers, spoke volumes. What conveyed that point even more clearly is what happened next. The expectation, given the timing of the attack, the existing Oslo process, and the fury at the likes of Rabin and Peres, was that Israel would remove all of the Jewish settlers from Hebron. In the film

The Oslo Diaries, Peres' deputy Yossi Beilen describes waiting up at home late into a Friday night for the announcement that Israel was clearing Hebron of settlers. But while the likes of Dan Ephron have written that Rabin was interested in the possibility, the government ultimately decided to let the settlers stay put.

Perhaps that decision was due in part to the cultural bias that Shahak and Mezvinsky highlight. It is more than likely, however, that Rabin's decision stemmed primarily from a desire to prevent more bloodshed. Just more than two weeks after the massacre, as Rabin contemplated removing the settlers from Hebron, three rabbis held in high esteem in settler communities, Avraham Shapira, Shaul Yisraeli, and Moshe-Zvi Neria, issued a ruling stating that it was "forbidden for a Jew to take part in any activity which aids in the evacuation [of any part of Eretz Israel]." The rabbis cited a Maimonides line that reads "Even if the King orders you to violate the laws of the Torah, it is forbidden to obey" (Gorenberg 77). For observant soldiers, the ruling presented a dilemma that their commanders were not eager to explore: in the event of an evacuation order, would loyalty to the secular army win out? Or God and Torah? This was not merely a theoretical concern. In 1984, two-and-a-half percent of the votes that the Kach Party received in the national election that lifted Kahane to the Knesset came from active duty IDF soldiers (Sprinzak 145). They were considered the "supreme authorities" of thousands of Israeli soldiers (Sprinzak 249). This rabbinic ruling, pitting the secular state against religious dictate, God against the metaphorical King, was unprecedented in the history of the state of Israel.

The secular left in Israel, identifying the ruling as a grave threat to their legitimacy, was enraged. The state attorney general, Michael Ben-Yair, wanted to investigate the rabbis for illicit incitement (Sprinzak 250). But on the religious right, the ruling had a great deal of support. Shortly before it was issued, a former Chief Rabbi of Israel, Shlomo Goren, had ruled that

Israelis had to be “ready to die rather than allow the destruction of Hebron” (Sprinzak 248). Lior, on the ground in Kiryat Arba, issued roughly the same ruling — that Jews should be prepared to die to protect their presence in Hebron. In response to the government’s deliberations, plans were made to mobilize thousands of fundamentalist activists to travel to Hebron and put their bodies between the settlers and the army — the reliance of which, on such a mission, could not necessarily be guaranteed anyway. Goldstein’s violence, which drew religion and state so closely together, was exposing the stakes of the power struggle between the two. To leave Eretz Israel to the Arabs, these rabbis insisted, was to violate God. Extremism experts like Sprinzak told Rabin and his cabinet what they were beginning to realize anyway: they would have to accept the likelihood of Jewish deaths, military, civilian, or both, in any evacuation mission (Gorenberg 77). Rabin ultimately decided that removing the settlers from Hebron would be more dangerous than letting them stay there and risking the trust of his Palestinian partners. Beilen called the decision “inconceivable,” but again, the settlers and their ideological allies had flexed their organizational muscle (Loushy, Sivan 2018). Violence as politics.

What happened after this non-decision was only too predictable. Though the national government did ban the Kach and Kahane Chai parties and take a series of measures designed to curb settler violence around Hebron, Goldstein’s action had exactly the impact he had desired: more violence, more oppression, and serious new challenges for the peace process. In the month following the massacre, the IDF killed 13 Palestinian civilians in Hebron alone (B’tselem). More than the targeted violence against Palestinians in the following months, though, the structural violence against Palestinians in the city was staggering. The local government put the Palestinian residents under curfew, restricted Palestinian movement, and installed checkpoints within the city limits — all to protect the roughly 450 Israeli settlers living in the midst of some 120,000

Palestinians from violent retribution (Plen 2019). One of the measures taken by the government on behalf of the settlers was to close Al-Shuhada Street, the main market street leading up to the Tomb of the Patriarchs, to all Palestinian residents. It remains closed to Palestinian businesses to this day, and is constantly guarded by IDF soldiers.

As if all of that was not enough, the Israeli government took another step that pleased the settler community and religious Zionists watching around the country and world greatly: it divided the Tomb of the Patriarchs. Palestinians and other Muslims in the region were incensed — both with the bloodshed and Israel’s response to it, which even Arafat condemned as “hollow and superficial” (Ephron 76). After waiting the 40 days prescribed for mourning by Islamic law, Hamas launched a series of deadly suicide bombings and other terror attacks inside of major Israeli cities like Jerusalem and Tel Aviv that claimed the lives of more than 120 people in a two-year period, galvanizing opposition to the peace process on the Israeli right and quieting enthusiasm for it on the left (Gorenberg 207).

Goldstein’s attack had paid dividends. The settlers were more entrenched than they ever had been before in Hebron, the peace process was threatened, and the display of force in the Tomb of the Patriarchs, linked by Kahanists to all of the violence perpetrated against Jews in Hebron in the preceding decades and centuries, had sanctified God. In 1995, a year after the massacre, a number of rabbinic leaders decided to present their theological defense of Goldstein in book form. They titled their project *Baruch Hagever*, which, translated, means both “This Man, Baruch,” as well as “Blessed Is The Man” (Gorenberg 207). A number of luminaries of the Kahanist and Kookist movements penned chapters of the book, praising Goldstein and insisting on the halachic right of Jews to kill non-Jews without judgement. One of the chapters was penned by Kahane’s son Benjamin Ze’ev Kahane, leader of the Kahane Chai political party, who

argued forcefully that the real culprit of the Goldstein massacre was not the Arabs who were living in Hebron, but rather the secular Jewish establishment that had not dealt with them forcefully enough to begin with. “The real war is not with the Arabs, but with the Hellenized Jews,” Kahane wrote. “The people really responsible for the bloodshed are Jews scared by the Gentiles and attached to distorted Western ideas” (Sprinzak 264-265).

The younger Kahane went on to write that the “culture war” between liberal, secular, Westernized Jews and true Jews his movement represented was “more intense than the Hasmonean one” (Sprinzak 265). Kahane expanded the orbit of what qualified as debased Judaism to include democracy writ large, along with non-violence and pluralism — which he classified only as “fear of the gentile.” He was, in effect, taking one of his father’s base arguments further than his father ever had, arguing that Jews who through their timidity in dealing with the Arab population of Palestine had incited Goldstein’s massacre were so scarred by their experiences in the diaspora and so lacking self-respect that they were not really Jews at all. The battle for Israel, then, was portrayed as coming down to Jews following God and a cabal of gentile-loving actors eager to sell them out. The effect of this presentation was dramatic: if certain Jews were not Jewish, but rather gentiles, then spilling their blood could be redemptive from a Kahanist perspective. Benjamin Kahane was not a major figure in Israeli politics, but the ideas he advanced in *Baruch Hagever* quickly hit the mainstream. A handful of months after the book’s publication, major figures like Netanyahu would appear at a rally on Zion Square in Jerusalem during which Rabin was depicted by Likud supporters in an SS uniform and compared to Adolf Hitler. The message was simple: Rabin was a traitor — and a mortal threat — to Jews.

Rabin, in many ways, was a member of the hated old guard in Israeli public life: a secular Zionist who was a proponent of the military and state violence but had absolutely no love for

settlers or their theology tied to territorial conquest. The son of Ukrainian Jewish immigrants to Mandatory Palestine, Rabin grew up in Tel Aviv, joined the Haganah at 14, and played a significant role in the 1948 war that secured the Israeli state. Nearly two decades later, he would make his name nationally by commanding Israeli forces to victory in the Six-Day War — a success that launched his political career as ambassador to the United States. Rabin clashed repeatedly with settlers in the Gush Emunim movement during his first stint as prime minister, and, after leaving office in disgrace over a personal banking scandal, he wrote in his autobiography that settlers were a “cancer in the body of Israeli democracy” (Ephron 68). Over the next fifteen years, during which time he staged a political comeback that saw him elected again as prime minister in 1992, Rabin would make zero attempt to hide his contempt for the settlers — publicly disparaging them as “kugelagers” and “propellers” (Sprinzak 253). From the man whose military genius helped make the prospect of a Jewish Eretz Israel a real possibility, Rabin’s vitriol for the settlers and their cause was an especially bitter pill to swallow.

After returning to government with a comfortable victory over Yitzhak Shamir’s Likud, Rabin’s Labor Party decided to get serious about the peace process. It stopped all settlement construction in the West Bank and Gaza, and, in August 1993, agreed to the first Oslo Accord — recognizing the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people and promising to withdraw Israeli military forces from the Gaza Strip and Jericho. Rabin and Yasser Arafat signed the agreement in Washington in August; Arafat, who the Israeli state had previously considered a terrorist, landed in Gaza City to head up the newly-formed Palestinian National Authority (PA) the next year. Under the framework of the agreement, Israel would eventually transfer governing authority to the PA and withdraw from the other major Palestinian cities in the West Bank. A number of Palestinians, including Palestinian

refugees living in other Arab countries, blanched at the agreement — doubting the sincerity of Israel’s promise to halt settlement construction or its willingness to engage fairly in negotiations over the Palestinian right to return, Jerusalem, or final borders. For religious Zionists, however, who believed that the triumph of 1967 was the beginning of a return to full Jewish control of Eretz Israel, it was a near-apocalyptic setback.

This was the theological and political environment in which Goldstein was driven to action in the Tomb of the Patriarchs, and in which the settler community mobilized so ferociously — more ferociously than it had even when Israel evacuated the Yamit settlement in the Sinai Peninsula in 1982. Now that Israel was preparing to hand over the bulk of the West Bank to the Palestinians, drastic action was required. Sprinzak saw Goldstein’s act as an expression of “messianism in crisis,” a particularly violent, Kahanist response to what Leon Festinger has termed prophecy failure (Festinger, Riecken, Schachter).

Apart from Goldstein, who never wanted to die but sacrificed his life due to the circumstances he found himself in, other figures on the religious right were advocating for drastic action as well. The group Chai Ve-Kayam, established by a former Jewish Underground leader, told settlers to dissociate from the government completely: to stop paying taxes and to refuse the authority of government dictates and actors. Individual, scattered acts of violence were encouraged. In one document, the group’s leader Yehuda Etzion wrote that the Jews “must choose between loyalty to a misguided government and loyalty to your people and the Eternity of Israel” (Sprinzak 225). The theme only hinted at by the rabbinic rulings in the aftermath of the Hebron massacre — that the secular leaders of Israel were illegitimate because they were somehow less than Jewish — was coming into the open. The entire state apparatus, including the security apparatus, was under siege.

As tensions in Israel rose, those for and against the peace process began to make more and more explicit attempts to define Israel as either primarily a political project or primarily a religious one. At one point during parliamentary debate, Netanyahu, now the Likud leader, addressed Rabin, saying, “‘The Bible,’ you said, ‘is not our deed to the land.’ But I say the Bible is our deed to the land. It is our mandate, our certificate of ownership” (Loushy, Sivan 2018). Religious settlers spread out across the West Bank have for years interpreted the Bible in the same way, and they have always been able to call on theological backing for their position. In a 1985 interview, Kahane told two French writers that “The biggest fascism is... to believe that one has a right to come back here solely because one lived here 2,000 years ago. The legitimate reason why we have the right to come back here is that we are Jews” (Mergui, Simonnot 1985). To Kahane, the Jewish claim on Eretz Israel was a religious claim, not a historical or political one. The centrality of this divide is difficult to overstate. Rabin, as Netanyahu highlighted in that Knesset speech, had absolutely zero interest in the logic of religious Zionism and was frequently disdainful of it. In a television interview in the last year of his life, he asked his interviewer rhetorically, “What is zionism these days? Some hill outside Ramallah?” (Loushy, Sivan 2018).

But though Rabin was winning himself and his peace partners international acclaim — which came in the form of a shared Nobel Peace Prize in 1994, not six months after the Hebron massacre — he was struggling to hold the center. Discussions over the Biblical pretext for Israel’s occupation of the West Bank surged into the mainstream rhetoric of center right political actors, while the rabbinic right was in a state of total revolt against both the peace process and its architects. On a certain level, this should not have been surprising. In addition to Festinger’s theory of prophecy failure, it is worth recalling Lincoln’s tenth thesis on religion and violence holding that the “factors that determine whether a group will embark on violent action include:

the extent to which it feels itself to have been wronged; the extent to which it experiences those wrongs as unbearable and intractable; and its ability to define... its cause as righteous, even sacred” (Lincoln 94). The religious right in Israel certainly defined its cause as sacred, and believed that it was being betrayed by a government diametrically opposed to its desire to sanctify the land of Eretz Israel and honor God in the process.

This attitude towards the government was widespread in the post-Hebron environment. Meir Kahane had been dead for nearly four years when a group of more than one thousand Orthodox rabbis convened in May 1994 to weigh in on the peace process, but it was impossible not to hear echoes of his doctrine when the group wrote that “anyone who can stop this ‘agreement’ and does not do so, breaks the rule ‘you shall not stand idle when there is danger to your brother!’” (Sprinzak 252). The message here, as in Kahane’s writing, was clear: Jews who did not stand up and fight when their fellow Jews were threatened were debased — if they were even Jews at all. That fight was what God sought when he gifted Jews a state in the Holy Land, and now that the state was being run by people who wanted to make peace with the enemy and compromise Jewish strength and control, it was up to true Jews, Maccabean Jews, to salvage the project.

The right-wing attempt to portray Rabin and Peres as gentiles — which would reach its apex when Rabin was depicted in the SS uniform — was a months-long effort with backing from wide swaths of the religious Zionist movement designed to delegitimze them and the secular state by extension. As early as 1993, immediately following the signing of Oslo I, rabbis began openly writing about the possibility of putting the Israeli government on trial according to *din rodef*. A *rodef* is a person who intends to imminently kill another person, a *moser* is a Jew who intends to betray the Jews or unnecessarily turn over Jewish property to gentiles. Halachic law

holds that Jewish people are compelled to kill the *moser* and the *rodef* if they are able. In February of 1995, in the aftermath of a deadly series of Hamas suicide bombings in both Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, Yesha's Rabbinical Council formally took up the question of whether the government could be put on trial according to *din rodef* and *din moser*. One of the three rabbis who wrote on the issue was Dov Lior of Hebron, joined by Eliezer Melamed and Daniel Shilo. The tone of their letter was ominous: "Is it not the obligation of the community's leaders to warn the head of the government and his ministers that if they keep pursuing the agreement, after the terrible experience of stage one (Oslo I)... they will be subject.... to the Halakhic ruling of *din moser*" (Sprinzak 254). The rabbis were, in short, telling Rabin and Peres to cut off the peace talks and stop the return of Eretz Israel — the Jewish property in the *moser* construction — to the Palestinians, or face severe consequences according to religious law.

As Sprinzak notes in his tremendously thorough account of the Oslo period, this rabbinic discourse around Rabin and Peres was not limited to Israel. When the cabinet secretary Shmuel Hollander visited New York in 1994 to observe the High Holy Days, Orthodox rabbis told him that Rabin was a *moser* and *rodef* and that his peace partner Yasser Arafat was a successor to Hitler (Shifer 1995). That sentiment did not represent the entire American rabbinate, but, as in Israel, influential religious leaders were taking these extremely incendiary claims public. Rabbi Abraham Hecht, who led a large synagogue in New York, said in the fall of '94 that any person who killed Rabin would be "doing the right thing," because the prime minister "deserves to die" (Shamir, Sa'ar 1995). Hecht laid out his argument in technical terms: "He who intentionally transfers living people, money, or property to strangers, commits, according to the Halakha, a crime punishable by death. Maimonides maintained that he who kills such a person is doing the right thing." The throughlines are easy to pick out: the reliance on Maimonides, familiar from

Kahane's writing, the sense that killing — perhaps the ultimate act of violence — would please God, and a clear moral justification necessary to take such action.

Sprinzak's argument is that, in retrospect, it was only a matter of time before someone attuned to these discussions about the treason of Rabin and Peres attempted to do what they believed was prescribed in halacha and kill them. As it happened, that person was a young university student from the city of Herzliya named Yigal Amir. Born into a large Orthodox Yemini family in the Tel Aviv suburb of Herzliya, Amir attended a Haredi elementary school and a prestigious Haredi yeshiva in Tel Aviv before joining the IDF. While in the military, Amir volunteered to serve in the Golani Brigade — a well known combat unit — and was deployed in the West Bank. This was the period of the First Intifada, an uprising that both inflamed Amir's hatred for the Palestinians and emboldened him to act violently towards them. Amir quickly won himself a reputation as exceedingly hostile to the Palestinians his unit made contact with. Boaz Nagar, who served alongside Amir, said that "Yigal was the enforcer with a capital E. Hit them hard, hit here, push there. Destroy stuff. He enjoyed badgering them just for fun" (Ephron 38).

But Amir was not merely a hotheaded young soldier. He was also a talented student of Jewish scripture who read widely and, as his five years in the military progressed, began to locate himself within the particular theological tradition pioneered by Kahane. While Amir felt by the end of his service that Zvi Yehuda Kook was not strident enough, Amir found inspiration in the words of far right rabbi and Knesset member Binyamin Elon — who wrote that "contrary to the passive approach, which holds that Divine Will is the sole instrumentality, we must learn to fathom God's Will and 'come to the help of the Lord' [Judges 5:23] and 'act with God'" (Ephron 39). What God wanted, in other words, for the Jewish people to actively and aggressively pursue their interests — His interests — in the West Bank and beyond it. Amir read

and owned a copy of *Baruch Hagever*, the tribute to Baruch Goldstein penned by the luminaries of the Kahanist right, and he internalized the logic that the book propelled: violence to protect the Jews and serve Biblical dictates is holy, necessary both to reconstruct a great Jewish past and to construct a great Jewish future. In the Amir family, Yigal was not alone in his reverence for Goldstein: Guela Amir, Yigal's mother, was one of the early pilgrims to Goldstein's grave in Kiryat Arba.

By the time Amir returned home from the military, the Intifada had given way to a peace process set to recognize the P.L.O. and return its leadership to the West Bank and Gaza. Amir, who had followed the major rabbinic rulings on Rabin and Peres, considered the change in direction treasonous. At the dinner table one night, he suggested to his father Shlomo that someone was, one way or another, going to have to stop Rabin in his tracks. Shlomo Amir, who worked as a religious scribe copying passages of Torah, replied that "only through prayer and Torah study will the government collapse. And if it does not, it is not God's will" (Ephron 40). Shlomo's was exactly the kind of passivity that Kahane detested — weak, emasculated, Hellenized Jewish practice — and that Yigal, after reading Binyamin Elon and *Baruch Hagever*, had broken with. It would be up to a man of action, someone bold enough to act with God, to give Rabin what he deserved for selling out the Jewish people.

In the fall of 1993, as the first Oslo Accords were being agreed to and signed, Amir enrolled at Bar Ilan University, the country's leading religious university, to study law and computer science. He also devoted a considerable amount of time to studying halakha in the university's seminary and organizing to stop the peace process. In seminary sessions, Amir often focused his lines of inquiry on Jews who betray or endanger other Jews — Rabin — and what should happen to them (Ephron 49). Outside of those sessions, Amir helped stage increasingly

audacious protests against the government. His group stopped traffic on a highway, depicted Rabin with blood on his hands, depicted him in a keffiyeh, and compared him to Vichy French leader Philippe Pétain. He also began participating in weekly protests outside of Rabin's apartment in Tel Aviv. As the calendar turned to 1995, and the peace process advanced, Amir's level of participation in radical right movements increased. He traveled to Hebron and other hotspots to participate in demonstrations, and spoke frequently to friends and student gatherings on campus about the *din moser* and *din rodef* rulings against Rabin and Peres. He told Benny Katzover, a former leader of Gush Emunim, that the government could only be toppled by force (Sprinzak 279).

There is no evidence that a rabbi at Bar Ilan or anywhere else gave Amir explicit permission to kill Rabin. But the general Halakhic condemnations of the prime minister, along with Amir's own Halakhic training, gave him the next best thing. The inflection point came in the fall of 1995. Rabin and Arafat had come to terms on Oslo II, and Rabin now needed to get the agreement ratified by the Knesset in what was projected to be a very close vote. Both sides mobilized. On the afternoon October 6, following a meeting of some 20 rabbis and scholars in Safed, a group led by former Kahane loyalist Avigdor Eskin gathered at Rabin's residence to place a death curse called *Pulsa diNura* on the prime minister (Winer 2013). According to the curse, if Rabin deserved to die, he would be dead within a month. That night, tens of thousands of right-wingers gathered on Zion Square in Jerusalem for a frenzied anti-government rally. The crowd threw burning torches at police, chanted "death to Rabin," and "in blood and fire, we will expel Rabin," and burned pictures of the prime minister. Amir was among those in attendance.

From the balcony of the Ron Hotel above the square, Netanyahu, who had been advised to calm the crowd, instead gave an incendiary speech — calling Arafat a "murderer" and

accusing Rabin's government of "bowing down to him" (Kirk 2016). He called for new elections, arguing that because Rabin was on the votes of Arab-Israeli lawmakers to ratify the agreement, any such ratification would be illegitimate. Netanyahu was making, however softly, a case that Kahane would have smiled upon: Arabs had no real rights in the Jewish nation. Their votes should not count. The Likud leader spelled it out clearly when he told the baying crowd that "the Jewish majority of the state of Israel has not approved the agreement" (Ephron 164). Netanyahu would later claim that he was not aware of the ugliest elements of the demonstration that night, but what happened after the demonstration was in itself another warning shot: thousands of attendees marched straight to the Knesset, where lawmakers were debating the agreement. A group of them attacked Rabin's car, ripping off its hood ornament. While the prime minister was not in the car, Binyamin Ben-Eliezer, who served as Construction and Housing Minister, said that he felt more threatened inside the car than he ever had during his long military career (Ephron 164). The Knesset ratified the agreement by a razor thin 61-59 vote, but *Haaretz* reporter Chemi Shalev would later say that "the writing was on the wall" (Kirk 2016).

The government knew that it needed a show of force of its own — and on the night of November 4, just two weeks before Israel was set to begin vacating parts of the West Bank, 100,000 people gathered on Kings of Israel square in Tel Aviv to rally for peace. It was an enormous, and to Rabin, unexpected, display of support. The prime minister spoke last at the rally, stayed on stage to sing a popular 1960s era peace song with other performers and politicians, sung the national anthem, and then departed. Amir was waiting. Having considered moving against Rabin several times previously, he had resolved that now was the time to act — and had been to a mikvah the day before to prepare himself for his own death. That morning, he had told his brother Hagai that he would try to kill the prime minister at the rally. Now, the

moment had arrived. Amir made his way to within feet of Rabin's Cadillac, giving himself a clear view of the staircase down which Rabin would descend to get to his car after the conclusion of the event. As Rabin walked past his position, Amir found an opening in the ring of bodyguards walking with the prime minister and fired three shots. Two hit Rabin in the back. He died just over a half hour after arriving at a hospital.

Israel was in a state of absolute shock. It was one thing when Palestinians and Israelis were fighting over Temple Mount, or when settlers and Hamas members sparred in the West Bank. It was quite another when an Israeli Jew gunned down the Israeli prime minister in the heart of secular, liberal Tel Aviv. Leah Rabin blamed Netanyahu for her husband's death, and scores of Israelis felt similarly (Kirk 2016). But to some extent, Netanyahu's failure to condemn the rhetoric deployed against Rabin was the result of a political calculus that told him that the religious right was now too powerful a force in Israeli politics to be reckoned with. That movement, inspired by Kahane and his ideological allies, was at the core of the assassination. Amir, who was taken alive by Rabin's security, wasted no time in explaining just how central rabbinic action was to his decision to act. "If not for a Halakhic ruling of *din rodef*, made against Rabin by a few rabbis I knew about, it would have been very difficult for me to murder. Such a murder must be backed up" (Sprinzak 277). Amir despised Rabin — for his role in the peace process, his contempt for settlers, his refusal to properly respond to IDF deaths in Lebanon, and so on — but it was the delegitimization and terror campaigns waged by the Kahanist right that gave Amir the courage and the theological basis on which to act. He could construct his cause, thanks to the rabbis who issued the *din rodef* ruling, as sacred.

Because he could construct his cause as sacred, Amir was unrepentant after he carried it out. He told investigators that he did not regret killing Rabin and "would do it again right now,

for God, for the nation, and for the country,” and later told an associate that he felt “terrific” (Ephron 195). Hagai Amir, arrested and ultimately convicted as his brother’s accomplice, more circumspect but no less familiar with the doctrine, wrote to his parents that “as far as I know, what [the assassination] means for the people of Israel is, at the end of the day, positive” (Ephron 197). While the assassination cast a pall over Israel, a familiar group celebrated: the Kiryat Arba settlers, one of whom told the news media that all Jewish people should celebrate the fact that Rabin, “head of the traitors, got what he deserved” (Ephron 192). At Rabin’s funeral, U.S. President Bill Clinton said that Rabin was a victim of “hate,” and that “we must learn from his martyrdom that if people cannot let go of the hatred of their enemies, they risk sowing the seeds of hatred among themselves” (Clinton 1995). But it was not merely a matter of Yigal Amir hating Palestinians, or even a matter of his hating Rabin. It was a matter of Amir finding the religious law and rabbinic writing he needed to construe his hatred as morally justified and to believe that the truly Jewish thing to do was to take action: to kill Rabin, and to protect the Jewish people in the land of Israel.

There is disagreement about the effect that the assassination had on the peace process. Many actors, including President Clinton, believe that Israel and Palestine would have achieved a lasting peace had Rabin lived (Morris 2016). The political mishandling of the fallout by Rabin’s successor Peres is inarguable; he first failed to call an early election when support for Labor and peace surged in the aftermath of the assassination, allowed Netanyahu to begin to repair his public image, and then finally did call an election only to lose what appeared to be an insurmountable lead in the polls and hand control of the government back to the Likud. That, for all intents and purposes, was the end of the Oslo process. Israel did turn over control of major cities in the West Bank to the newly-created Palestinian Authority, but continued to expand

settlement efforts in the West Bank and maintain an iron grip over the political and security apparatus of the P.A. Some scholars like Benny Morris have pointed to the failure of subsequent peace efforts under the likes of Ariel Sharon to argue that Israel and Palestine would not have ultimately reached a final peace even if Rabin had lived, but we cannot know for certain.

What we know for certain is that while the undermining of the peace process ended the frenzy of violence designed to stop it, religious Zionism did not return to its pre-Kahane roots in the years following Rabin's assassination. In more moderate religious Zionist quarters, there was a striking amount of denial over the role that the movement played in Rabin's death. A recent study found that half of religious Zionist youths believe that Amir did not kill Rabin at all, but that a conspiracy of some sort was responsible for the prime minister's death (Blau 14). In more radical circles, there was celebration. Goldstein's gravesite became a shrine that greeted thousands of visitors each year and hosted Purim celebrations during which revelers would dress up like doctors and put on fake beards to commemorate the anniversary of the massacre (BBC 2000). In fact, it became such an attraction for Jewish fundamentalists that the Israeli government ultimately took action — dismantling the shrine under the cover of a law banning monuments to terrorists in 1999 (Trousion 1998).

What is more telling, though, is what has happened to the people that the likes of Goldstein and Amir were trying to protect: the settlers. In 1995, there were 134,000 settlers living in the West Bank. Now, there are more than 434,000 — plus some 300,000 more living in Palestinian East Jerusalem (PeaceNow 2020). Since Rabin's assassination, more than 130 settlement outposts have been established and granted extraordinary economic, infrastructure, and security privileges by the Israeli government. The Likud has been in power for all but five years since Rabin's death; Netanyahu himself has now served as prime minister for eleven

straight years. The current prime minister is not known to have any deep religious convictions of his own, but he is, as an agile, successful politician, closely attuned to power centers on the Israeli right broadly, and his courtship of the Kahanist right shows the extent to which that element has accrued power and influence in Israeli society. As a result, there is no serious peace effort to speak of and outright Israeli annexation of the West Bank seems a more likely possibility with each passing day.

IV. Discussion

Israel is far from the only state to perpetrate systemic violence against its neighbors and marginalized citizens. The United States is a primary example, but there are others in most every part of the world. What makes violence in Israel distinctive is that it is often explicitly Jewish violence — a strategy responding to the material conditions of the success of 1967 theorized and mainstreamed by rabbinic authorities and their followers to sanctify God. The modern Israeli right has largely adopted Kahane's ethics of violence: the three that Magid identifies, violence as management, violence as politics, and violence as subject-formation, as well as the ethic of violence as redemption that I have identified here. Much of the violence perpetrated in Israel and Palestine, against Jews and Palestinians alike, has been in keeping with multiple of these ethics. Both Baruch Goldstein and Yigal Amir, for instance, believed their grand acts of violence to be redemptive for themselves personally as well as aligned with Kahane's belief that the spilling of gentile blood was redemptive for the Jewish psyche crushed under the weight of diasporic oppression. Both also used violence as politics to stop the peace process and mainstream their radical views. You could make arguments that their acts pulled from the other two ethics of violence as well.

But it is not only Goldstein and Amir who have used Kahane's ethics of violence to great effect. The truth is that this violence is commonplace among religious Zionists in Israel today. I will use one case as illustrative of many, a case that has not had the outsize impact of the Hebron massacre or the Rabin assassination, but shows clearly how this violence is used in Kahanist terms. In October of last year, a group of masked settlers from Yitzhar attacked activists from the organization Rabbis for Human Rights who had come to Burin, a village outside of Nablus, to help the Palestinian residents there harvest their olives (Johnston 2019). The volunteers they attacked came from both Israel and the United States, and a number of them were Jewish. One was an 80-year-old rabbi, who told *The Times of Israel* that he had "feared for his life" (Magid 2019). The settlers finished their mission by setting fire to hundreds of olive trees. This was just the beginning of a spree of violence from the Yitzhar settlers: in the following days, they threw stones at another group of Palestinian farmers and even went after Israeli Border Police officers (Roth-Rowland 2020).

What are we to make of this violence? What are we to make of these settlers, and a number of other settlers like them, literally drawing blood on nonviolent Jewish activists in the West Bank? This is clearly violence as redemption — an impervious display of strength by Jews deferential to Maccabean and Maimonidean precepts against both Palestinians who live on land they consider theirs and the liberal Jews who, by virtue of supporting them, are akin to gentiles. The Palestinians and liberal Jews — who often get constructed as self-hating Jews, or even explicitly as antisemites — are not favored by God like the true Jewish people are. It sanctifies God, therefore, for the true Jews, his favored people, to physically dominate the non-Jews around them. These settlers are not rogue actors. Their conduct may not be appreciated by many in the Israeli government and even more in the Israeli public, but the settlers are

supported to the hilt economically and militarily by the government and rarely face serious consequences for their lawless action. They are an integral part of Israel's policy in Palestine, a policy which has at its root the logic of "maximal territorial conquest founded on the mandate of revelation" that Kahane pushed during his life. It is their organization, violence, and resulting entrenchment that has made the idea of a Palestinian state on 100 percent of the West Bank a nonstarter and kept the goal of recreating a Jewish Kingdom of Israel alive.

Some in the Israeli media have formulated the country's current situation in Gramscian terms, writing that Israel is in the midst of a struggle for the "national popular" pitting the secularists and statists against the religious nationalists for whom the Bible, in Netanyahu's words, is the deed to the land. This binary can be useful, and certainly captures the contours of the longest-running debate about the character of the Israeli project, but it does not capture what the secularists have lost in the last 20 years — how far right the Overton window has moved, and how that movement has changed Israel's relationship with the diaspora and its place in the world (Leifer 2020). It is telling that at a time when Netanyahu is weaker politically than he has been in years, the major opposition party to the Likud is led by a former IDF chief of staff who ran a campaign ad boasting that he was responsible for bombing Gaza back to the "stone ages" in 2014 (Abunimah 2019). Benny Gantz may be identified as a center-left politician, but his territorial politics are functionally no different than Netanyahu's: he has promised to strengthen settlements, spoken of a "unified Jerusalem," and promised that Israel's border will be the Jordan Valley (Times of Israel 2019). On the issues of land and the Jewish character of the state, there is no meaningful disagreement. The religious nationalists, for the time being, at least have triumphed.

This political constellation, in which the religious right plays such an outsized role, has had a staggering impact on the religious and political viewpoints of young Israelis. With increased funding from Likud governments reliant on their support, religious organizations in Israel have made incursions into the non-religious public education system to the point that a 2017 study found that classes in Jewish education received 119 times more funding than classes in democracy or coexistence (Molad 2017). Increasingly, classes in Jewish education are being taught by representatives of religious organizations who offer their services to the schools for free. Ram Vromen, who founded an organization called Secular Forum to promote secular education, told *The New Yorker* last year that the Jewish Studies class taught by religious organizations “quickly escalated to them teaching bar-mitzvah-preparation classes, classes in family values, and even leading discussions about the assassination of Rabin” (Margalit 2019). The recent education minister Naftali Bennett once said that “learning Judaism and excelling in it is more important, in my opinion, than learning math or science,” the current education minister Rafi Peretz is full in favor of annexation (Margalit 2019).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this lurch towards a theocratic public education system appears to be having an impact on how young Israelis see the world. According to a study conducted by the nonpartisan Israeli Democracy Institute two years ago, roughly two thirds of Israeli Jews aged 18 to 34 identify as right wing as opposed to just under half of Israeli Jews aged 35 or older. The younger an Israeli Jew is, the more likely they are to support Netanyahu. It is the oldest group of Israeli Jews, those 65 years of age and older, who are most likely to oppose Netanyahu and the ethnonationalism that he represents (Adkins, Sales 2019). On multiple levels, these dichotomies can be connected to the theological campaign waged during the Oslo period. It seems as if many of the Israeli Jews who came of age politically during the Oslo

period and after its conclusion have reacted to the failure of the peace process and the ascendance of Hamas by accepting and embracing a fixed reality in which peace is not possible and therefore not desirable. Meanwhile, the groups in Israel most likely to subscribe to religious Zionism, the Orthodox and the Haredi, have become substantially larger, more conservative, and more involved in Israeli society over the last several decades (Fischer 10-15). At their most extreme, this cohort of young, post-Oslo religious Zionists looks like the Hilltop Youth — a group of violent West Bank settlers pursuing a Kahanist strategy for “a present, physical redemption on the land” (Carton 2011).

Whether or not Israelis are themselves becoming more religious, they are increasingly subscribing to a political ideology constructed through a prism of theology, ethnocentrism, and religious supremacy. People around the world — not least diaspora Jews in the U.S. and elsewhere — have responded in kind. Gallup polling data shows that 71 percent of Americans who regularly attend religious services are sympathetic to Israel as opposed to just 49 percent of those who never attend. Among white evangelical Christians, that number is 87 percent (Newport 2019). It is not any coincidence, then, that Israel has allied itself strongly with the evangelical-backed presidential administration of Donald Trump or with other ethno and religio-supremacist regimes ranging from Hungary to Myanmar. Increasingly, Israel’s leadership is offering support to governments engaged in Holocaust denial (Heller 2019, Salem 2015, Times of Israel 2019). What seems to matter most is that those governments support Israel’s land claims in the West Bank and violence against the Palestinians — that it supports the true Jews and their true, aggressive, militaristic Jewish causes.

There can be, at this moment, no question that the strain of religious Zionism represented by Kahane is embedded in the Israeli mainstream. When Moshe Levinger died in 2015, his

family received a letter of condolence from Netanyahu. It memorialized Levinger as “an outstanding example of a generation that sought to realize the Zionist dream, in deed and in spirit, after the Six-Day War” (Kershner 2015). More offensive still — and vastly more meaningful — was Netanyahu’s decision early in 2019 to make an electoral pact with the Kahanist political party Otzma Yehudit, or Jewish Power (Halbfinger 2019). Otzma Yehudit’s platform is familiar: annexation, throwing non-Jews out of Israel, and banning sex between Jews and Arabs. An Otzma Yehudit candidate has not yet made it into the Knesset, but the fact that the Israeli prime minister would so publicly court a Kahanist party after the Kach was banned just 30 years ago is perhaps as clear a representation as there is of how Kahanism is once again becoming normalized in Israeli political life.

What does this mean for Israel in the long run? Kahane and his followers did not believe that peace with the Palestinians or the Arab world at large was possible for one simple reason: Arabs, like all gentiles, hate Jews. Kahane’s dream was not annexation, per se, but rather that Israelis and Jews around the world would wake up to this fact and behave accordingly. “We may not enjoy hearing it, but the truth is that there will not be a sincere de jure peace with the Arabs,” Kahane said. “The Arabs intend to wipe us out; we must be strong enough to stop them” (Magid 2019). Peace is not possible in Kahane’s construction of the world. What does this mean in practice? Perpetual occupation. Perpetual violence. Perpetual war. It is a horrifying prospect, and it is not, by any means an unrealistic one. Israel has occupied the West Bank and Gaza alone for more than 50 years. The result is a system of Israeli domination and Palestinian subjugation so thorough, so developed, that to untangle would be a herculean feat. Kahane expressed his views starkly, but many who condemn him share, at least to an extent, his extraordinarily dim view of the non-Jewish other. How many Israeli Jews think that there

should be a free, autonomous Palestinian state? Public opinion polling is muddled, as is the issue, but perhaps half (Policy and Survey Research 2018). How many think that a free Palestinian state should, like all other free states, be able to arm itself? Considerably, considerably fewer (Jewish Virtual Library 2019).

Israel is one of the world's most powerful nation states, but its national character is defined by the precarity that marked its establishment and has marked the experience of the Jewish people for centuries. That precarity is still a fact. Kahane's belief that the relative safety Jews enjoyed in the U.S. during his lifetime would ebb as the Holocaust faded from our collective memory does not seem so unreasonable at a moment in which antisemitism is resurgent in both here and in Europe, when synagogues are attacked and vandalized on a regular basis and the New York City Commission on Human Rights has to launch an advertising campaign with the words "Jewish New Yorkers belong here" (NYC Human Rights 2020). The question for Jews, now and always, has been about how to understand this precarity and how to respond to it. Kahane traced the precarity of Jewish life to the intractable antisemitism of gentiles and the related collapse of Jewish power — a process that did nothing less than pain God.

Thus the violence of the occupation and the violence of the ongoing Israeli state-making process honors God by showing that his favored people have re-emerged, even if in a limited capacity, with strength. That occupation was engineered by state violence and upheld by state planning, but hardened, outside of direct state control, by settlers pursuing Kahanian goals and government officials sympathetic to them: land linked to violence linked to redemption. Each of these three concepts is crucial: without the settler project in the West Bank made possible by the extent of Israel's victory in the Six-Day War, Kahane's project may well have sputtered. But

Israel's incursion into the West Bank via its settlers has brought violence to the fore — giving the state and its most extreme actors cover with which to pursue violence for reasons both political and personal. There is redemption within that violence, just as there is redemption in creating a Jewish ethnostate that has the power and will to dominate the gentiles around it.

The idea of Kahane as a decolonial figure squares uncomfortably with the settler-colonialism that launched and has sustained the state of Israel. Kahane's belief in the power and necessity of violence against the gentile squares even more uncomfortably with the violence that Israel is perpetrating against the non-Jews most vulnerable to their military might: the Palestinians — not only in the West Bank, the heartland of Eretz Israel, but also in Gaza, land that is far less significant to religious Jews. Kahane felt that Jewish violence against the other might restore the Jewish psyche to its former Maccabean glory, and whether or not that is true — and whether or not that transformation is desirable to begin with — it seems clear that the occupation has dramatically affected the Jewish psyche in Israel and beyond. The logic of salvation through violence is now deeply embedded in Israeli public policy, the attitudes of its young people, and its positionality in the world. The ethics of Kahanian violence, management, politics, subject-formation, and redemption, are represented by and operate within the apparatus of the state — a particularly ethnocentric response to the historic and present precarity that has marked and continues to mark the Jewish experience.

V. Conclusion

The state of Israel was founded out of a series of horrific circumstances: the bone-chilling persecution of Jewish people, the imperial and colonial instincts of the era's Western powers, and the ethnic cleansing of Palestine. Those facts are not changing. At the same time, it is vital that Jewish people in Israel and around the world recognize that the character of the state has

changed markedly over the last half century and especially the last 25 years. Religion may seem like the culprit for this change, but it is not so simple. Religion, as Lincoln writes, is more likely to discourage violence than encourage it — and religion’s role in Israel’s turn towards Kahane’s brand of territorial Zionism is complicated. Kahane’s political commitments were informed by his reading of history and the material conditions he grew up in as much as they were informed by his reading of halakha. It was a war waged for statemaking purposes that transformed the stature and possibilities of religious Zionism, and statecraft that supercharged the opposition to secularism, nonviolence, non-messianism 30 years later. It is the interplay between religion and social conditions that has changed Israel, and it is at that same intersection where it can be changed again.

I am not Israeli, nor do I have any concrete connection to the land of Palestine, so it is not my place to say what exactly should happen there. I do want to suggest, however, that if we believe that the problems in Israel and Palestine are radical, the solutions must be radical as well. There are organizations across the region, both religious and secular, trying to unravel the threads of persecution, colonialism, imperialism, and ethnic cleansing that brought the state of Israel into being and loom so large in its present character. There are political efforts like Ayman Odeh’s Joint List that are engaged in that same fight, trying to lift up the voices of the oppressed and build a pluralistic society. They are marginal voices at this moment, but so was Meir Kahane’s in 1971. What those efforts must keep in mind, though is the Kahanist blueprint: organization, violence, and audacity. It may not be exactly the one that the Israeli left and its partners want to follow, but their movement cannot neglect the role of religion nor violence in its calculations. For the state of Israel and Jewish people around the world, the themes of management, politics, subject formation, and redemption are paramount. Now more than ever,

the Jewish community that Kahane does not represent must rise up and fight to define them — articulating and demonstrating a more powerful response to that experience of precarity than his ethnocentric survivalism.

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