



# Jewish Fundamentalism in Israel

New Edition

**Israel Shahak** and **Norton Mezvinsky**

with a new introduction by **Norton Mezvinsky**

*'A thorough assessment of this phenomenon in modern Israel  
...This book should be a wake-up call.'*

*The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*



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## Preface to the New Edition

My co-author and good friend, Israel Shahak, died on July 3, 2001. Hence, I write this new introduction without his help and good counsel. Israel Shahak was a knowledgeable, highly intelligent scholar who knew in-depth the subject matter of this book. As a great humanitarian and human rights activist, he felt a great responsibility to criticize what he considered to be negative aspects of the state of Israel and/or Israeli Jewish society, both of which he loved and in which he lived. Gore Vidal referred to Israel Shahak as the “latest – if not the last – of the great prophets.” Edward Said saw him as one of the “most remarkable individuals in the contemporary Middle East.” Noam Chomsky regarded him as “an outstanding scholar, with remarkable insight and depth of knowledge.” I dedicate this up-dated introduction to Israel Shahak. Were he still alive, he would have added to it substantively.

What Israel Shahak and I wrote in our article “Jewish Fundamentalism in Israel: Present and Future,” published in February, 2001 in the German scholarly journal, *Welttrends*, is still true today: International news media coverage of the state of Israel regularly omits essential facts, lacks sophisticated analysis and is thus too often misleading. This is especially so in regard to the reporting and commentary about Jewish fundamentalism. The views of fundamentalists, when presented by the mainstream media, have almost always come from their enemies. Even more critical, there is still a paucity of information about Jewish fundamentalism. Too many people outside the state of Israel are fearful of being negatively critical of any aspect of Judaism, lest they be accused of being anti-Semitic. The situation within the state of Israel is different. Negative criticism of Judaism is abundant in the Israeli Hebrew press. If published in translation outside of Israel, most of this criticism would most likely be considered anti-Semitic. Religious strife among Jews is one of the most discussed topics in Israel and outside of the media.

Between 1985 and 2000 two social trends caused changes in Israeli Jewish society. These trends and the polarizing backlashes that developed therefrom both affected and were affected by Jewish fundamentalism. The first trend was the wish of many Israeli Jews for a resolution of the Arab–Israeli conflict and for lasting peace.

The wish was to make certain concessions for the sake of achieving a situation without war. Within the context of the Oslo process, Israel withdrew from parts of territories, occupied since 1967, and allowed Palestinians living there more autonomous rule but not sovereignty. Following that withdrawal more Israeli Jews recognized the Palestinian National Authority and the need for a Palestinian state of some sort. A backlash occurred, because many Israeli Jews are chauvinists who feel pride in the display of Jewish power and considered it to be compensation for centuries of Jewish humiliation. These chauvinists perceived the change that occurred to be a national humiliation. The religious zealots, that is, Jewish fundamentalists, among these chauvinists regarded the change as an insult to God. They directed their anger not only against the Arab enemies but even more against the Jewish traitors, whom they allege have weakened the national will. Such feelings were among those that motivated Yigal Amir to assassinate Prime Minister Rabin and Baruch Goldstein to massacre Palestinian civilians in Hebron. The comparative results of the elections of 1992 and 1996 showed that the proportion of Israeli Jews who opposed further concessions increased steadily. In the 1992 election, for example, 61 Knesset members supported the Oslo process. In the 1999 election the number dropped to 46 in spite of Barak's victory over Netanyahu in the election for prime minister. In order to further his plans, Barak had to consider forging agreements with right wing parties; he looked to two fundamentalist parties, Shas with 17 Knesset seats and Yahadut Ha'Tora with 5 Knesset seats. These two Haredi parties have usually been concerned solely about religious matters and, provided that their wishes are met on these issues, they have been most often willing to accept almost any foreign and/or economic policies. The National Religious Party (NRP), which had 6 Knesset seats after the 1999 election, traditionally has put foreign policy, and especially support of the religious settlers in the West Bank, above everything.

The second trend was connected to the increased modernization of Israeli Jewish society. Between 1985 and 2000 Israel as a country grew richer. This was largely the result of the country's adoption of modern technologies, based upon computers. The rich adopted increasing European and American lifestyles. Many Israeli Jews were in this time period also influenced by Eastern Asiatic lifestyles, especially those of India and Thailand. All of this resulted in the adoption of new styles of dress and music appreciation as well as changes in sexual habits by a part of the Jewish Israeli population. Another symptom was the growing number of Israeli Jews who refused to be married by a rabbi. All of these changes were bitterly and vocally opposed by rabbis, especially fundamentalist rabbis, as being contrary to Judaism. Israeli Jews who

adopted new lifestyles became consciously more secular and often anti-religious. One bit of evidence for this was the appearance and achievements of the Shinui Party, whose main plank emphasized principled opposition to the influence of the Haredi Parties in general and to their rabbis in particular. In the 1999 election Shinui won 6 Knesset seats.

Influenced by sermons of popular rabbis, the poorer classes and many traditionally religious Israeli Jews not only refused to adopt or to participate in the visible changes; they reacted to them with fierce resentment. The previous social conflict that erupted typically occurred over seemingly petty matters as well as over more serious issues. Fundamentalist members of the Knesset, for example, concerned about the increase of homosexuality compared homosexuals and lesbians to animals and vowed that “when in power” they would order compulsory psychiatric treatment for homosexuals and lesbians. To cite another example, Jewish fundamentalists demanded that all streets on which they lived and on which a synagogue existed should be closed on the Sabbath. For political reasons and because of potential Haredi rioting, municipal and state authorities often accepted such demands. This acceptance caused a secular backlash in many neighborhoods which resulted in fights among Jews.

In the struggle that emerged, and has remained, over the trend towards modernity and the opposing backlash, the fundamentalists have had a distinct advantage. They have remained united and have continued to stand on the same principles, over which their secular opponents with different outlooks have been (and still are) divided. A powerful group of non-fundamentalists Jews, moreover, supported fundamentalists into the twenty-first century either because of their reverence for the Jewish past or because they believed the supposed Oslo peace process could only be furthered with fundamentalist help. This changed to a great extent after September 28, 2000 and the beginning of the second Intifada.

The gap between the rich and the poor in Israeli Jewish society has been an additional complicating factor since 1985. Most rich Jews in Israel have been (and still are) secularists. This fact has helped promote fundamentalism among poorer Jews. Throughout the 1990s it was widely believed that peace, based upon the Oslo Accords, would benefit to a lesser extent the middle-income class and would tend to make the poor poorer. The belief has been based upon the fact that the minimum wage in Israel is much higher than the wage in Arab countries. This wage difference influenced Israeli companies to close many of their factories, located in poorer Israeli towns, and to open factories in Jordan or Egypt where the average wages range between 10 to 70 per cent of the Israeli minimum wage. Prior to 2000 the peace treaties with Jordan and Egypt had already

led to further impoverishment of the Israeli poor. The opposition to the Oslo peace process, therefore, was understandably greater among the poorer Israeli Jews than among the rich. Numerous rabbis attributed the Oslo peace process to a loss of faith in Judaism among the rich and have in this way won adherents to Jewish fundamentalism among the poor.

Most supporters of the Oslo Accords insisted that this agreement would solve all existing problems. Its advocates often tried to deny or suppress important facts. One example of this was the existence of Islamic fundamentalism and its ideas about Palestine. The Syrian scholar, Sadiq J. Al-Azm described this belief well in his essay "The View from Damascus," published in the *New York Review of Books* on June 15, 2000: "Palestine is a Waqf—a place divinely consecrated for religious purposes – which the Almighty has reserved permanently for the Muslim Umma, the religious community. By this logic, in other words Palestine is an endowment made by God to the Muslim Umma and may not be transferred, tampered with or squandered by any person, government or generation." This belief parallels that held by Jewish fundamentalists about the land of Israel. The people who read the popular, Hebrew newspapers have known for some time that this view has continued to be widely prevalent among Palestinians and has influenced the Palestinian National Authority and Arafat himself. In more recent years this idea has been central in the position of Hamas, the Islamic Palestinian political party in the West Bank and Gaza. The existence of Jewish fundamentalism legitimizes the spread of Islamic fundamentalism and vice-versa.

The division of Jewish fundamentalism into separate groups, each with its own political party and its own rabbis, has remained significant. The quarrels between the parties and rabbis have hurt Jewish fundamentalism. The corruption of certain religious politicians, moreover, too often tolerated and even encouraged by rabbis, have brought disrepute to and have slowed Jewish fundamentalism's rate of growth.

The growth of Jewish fundamentalism has also been hurt by the increase in the freedom of expression in Israeli Jewish society since the mid-1980s. The Hebrew press has continued to wield great influence in Israel. Over five million copies of Hebrew-language newspapers are sold every Friday, the day of biggest sale. The Russian-language press has also flourished since the mid-1980s. Many Israeli Jews have consistently purchased two newspapers, one national and one local, on Fridays. Only about 1 per cent of the papers sold have been specifically religious; the rest have remained secular. The editors of the secular papers discovered some time ago that attacking Jewish fundamentalism and publishing scandalous articles about rabbis sells papers. Some fundamentalists, although

the number is small, have refused (and still refuse) to buy and read secular newspapers. The Hebrew press has most likely deterred some potential converts to fundamentalism by pointing out, for instance, that much of the money obtained by religious, political parties goes to leaders and/or rabbis and only relatively small amounts go to poorer Jews. Some fundamentalist rabbinical leaders have ordered former secular Jews who converted to fundamentalism to stop reading the secular Hebrew papers, which allegedly can lead Jews to hell.

The political situation in Israel and the occupied territories changed drastically after September 28, 2000, the day of then Defense Minister Ariel Sharon's fateful visit with hundreds of armed police to the Al-Aqsa Mosque – Temple Mount area, in East Jerusalem. This visit ignited new violence and was soon followed by terrorist acts, committed by some Palestinians against Israeli Jews and by the Israeli Defense Forces against Palestinians. The new violence, which has lasted to date and has affected almost every aspect of Israeli and Palestinian societies, has been responsible for more killings and wounding of Jews and Palestinians than had occurred in any previous period of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. (The estimate is that three to four times as many Palestinians have been killed and a much larger ratio wounded than has been the case with Israeli Jews.) Jewish fundamentalists in Israel have been affected by the recent developments and have contributed to them. Some Jewish fundamentalists, both Haredi within Israel behind the green line and messianic settlers in the West Bank, have been killed and wounded by Palestinian suicide bombers since the second Intifada began. At times some of the religious settlers have attacked, killed and wounded Palestinians during this same time period. This two-sided violence has firmed even more the resolve of those Jewish fundamentalists who seek to expand Israeli Jewish control over the West Bank and beyond and who wish to “transfer” Palestinians by moving them forcefully off all or most of the land that they occupy.

Jewish fundamentalists have recently fortified and reiterated their advocacy. The expanded violence and newly generated fear after September 28, 2000 have promoted support for this advocacy from more Israeli Jews, American Jews and Christian Zionists. Noting this development, Ze'ev Chafets, longtime contributing editor of the *Jerusalem Report*, wrote in April, 2001:

The Arabs can't destroy Israel, but the rabbis can. The rabbis can do that by turning Israel into the kind of political entity that Jews lived in for 2,000 years, by turning it into a place governed by clerical law and clerical thinking which had become so backward and xenophobic that Israel won't be able to function as a state.



What Rabbi Eliezer Waldman, the head of a religious school in the West Bank settlement of Kiryat Arba, wrote in his June 21, 2002 *Jewish Press* (New York) article is not only typical; it also received more attention in the United States and Israel than previous similar statements:

The unique attachment of the Children of Israel to the Land of Israel cannot be compared to the ties of any nation to its land. Our attachment originates in the Divine Plan of the Creation of Heaven and Earth. Our hand is destined to bring life to the Jewish people, and the Jewish people are destined to bring life to the Land. Just as the Jewish nation, when in Exile, is described as “dry bones in a graveyard” (Ezekiel 37:11:12), in the same manner the Land of Israel, without the Jewish people is decreed to G-d to be “a desolate land” (Leviticus 26:32). These divine decrees are the reality of the rebirth of state of Israel, being nurtured by the faith, courage and from the hills of Judea and Samaria. This light is meant to pierce the darkness of the countries surrounding the Land of Israel with a Divine blessing of progress and human values.

Let us say clearly and strongly: we are not occupying foreign territories in Judea and Samaria. This is our ancient home. And thank G-d that we have brought it back to life. Unfortunately, some of our ancient towns in YESHA are still illegally occupied by foreigners, interfering with the Divine process of redemption of Israel.

Our responsibility to Jewish faith and redemption commands us to speak up in a strong and clear voice. The Divine Process of uniting our people and our Land must not be clouded and weakened by seeming logical concepts of “security” and “diplomacy.” They only distort the truth and weaken the justice of our cause, which is engraved in our exclusive national rights to our land. We are a people of faith. This is the essence of our eternal identity and the secret of our continued existence under all conditions.

When hiding our identity, we were humiliated and trodden upon. The redemption process, bringing us back home to our land, has also brought back to our true self, which can no longer be hidden. We have brought back to the world stage, putting us back into a position of responsibility from which we will never shirk again. Only this clear courageous and consistent expression of our position will eventually impress both friend and foe to respect the eternal reality of the Jewish people and the Land of Israel.

It is also clear that increasing numbers of Israeli and diaspora Jews have since September 28, 2000 objected to ideas and advocacies of Jewish fundamentalists. Nevertheless, Israeli Justice Minister Yosef Lapid was probably correct when in a December 19, 2003 statement he described the Jewish settlers in the West Bank and Gaza as “barbaric” and accused them of having de facto control in Israel and of wanting to drive Palestinians out of the West Bank and Jordan.

Although supportive of Ariel Sharon as prime minister most of the time, the militant West Bank religious settlers and their political party, the National Religious Party, have consistently objected to any indication of the government’s uprooting a few, small settlements. In 2003 many of these fundamentalist settlers criticized Prime Minister Sharon for using the word “occupation.” As Shaul Goldstein, a settler leader from the Gush Etzion settlement bloc, said, “I was very, very surprised by the prime minister, and angry, I don’t feel like one who occupies area. It’s our area, our homeland.” In 2003 another troubling factor for many of the messianic settlers was the security fence that Sharon has been so intent upon building between Israel and the West Bank. Although much of the debate over the fence had focused upon its effect upon Palestinians, it has been (and continues to be) a disturbing factor for these settlers. Many of the settlers still worry that, even with the changes in the construction plans, some of the settlements may be on the wrong side of this physical barrier and will have to be evacuated. The settlers worry, moreover, that the fence may in time constitute a border for the new Palestinian state, which they oppose, on some of the present land of the West Bank.

The economic slump in Israel, which began at the end of the year 2000 and has continued to date, has affected Jewish fundamentalism and its adherents in the state of Israel. Israeli Jews are still experiencing one of the worst recessions in the country’s history. Many Israeli Jews blame the recession upon Palestinians and their second Intifada with its suicide bombings and other violence. Because of this, numerous Israeli Jews, some of whom previously criticized aspects of Israel’s harsh treatment of Palestinians, changed and have become supportive of the religious fundamentalist idea of Israel retaining full sovereignty over all the West Bank and controlling with a heavy hand, if not transferring out, all Palestinians residing there. (In supporting this idea, non- or anti-religious Israelis do not accept the total rationale of the fundamentalists.) The government’s austerity budget and the cuts in the settlers’ package of benefits and tax concessions constitute another factor. For many religious settlers, who moved to the West Bank not only for ideological reasons but also in order to enjoy