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Uzi Meshulam's "Mishkan Ohalim": A Contemporary Apocalyptic Messianic Sect in Israel

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The phenomenon of recurrent and active messianism has been part of Jewish history for 2,000 years. Appearing first among the Dead Sea sects before the destruction of the Second Temple, it continued through the Bar-Kokhba revolt, the Middle Ages, the aftermath of the expulsion from Spain, the Sabbetai Zevi episode, and up to the present day, with the emergence of a number of apocalyptic messianic cults in the modern state of Israel.

Given the incessant failures, disappointments, and chagrin over erroneous calculations of the End, what accounts for the resilience of active messianism is the utopian vision it affords to its believers, most of whom have low material or spiritual status. The cycles of war, destruction, and persecution that were endured by the Jewish people resulted in yearning for the homeland and anticipation of a messiah who would redeem them from their travails. It is particularly during times of crisis that active messianic expectations undergo intensification, usually taking on radical, revolutionary, or apocalyptic forms. Such active messianism is distinct from the utopian expectation of redemption. Whereas active messianism's redemptive scenario is predetermined—that is, offering a clear time scheme for the End of Days, which in turn leads people into atypical and often violent behavior—"normal" messianism, despite its belief and expectation of the coming of the Messiah, does not generally alter everyday behavior.

It is noteworthy that following the Holocaust, a traumatic event without parallel in Jewish history, almost no active "religious" messianic consciousness developed; instead, the expectation of a radical, utopian transformation was directed toward the "national" utopia of a reestablished state of Israel. Yet it is precisely in the state of Israel that active Jewish messianism has reemerged.

Although Israeli forms of active messianism stem from various causes, they can be characterized in general as manifestations of frustration and protest. In this sense, they demonstrate a continuity with past expressions of messianism, which almost always emerged against a background of persecution and deprivation. Here, too, in keeping

with historical patterns, active messianism takes the form of radical changes in its adherents' way of life.

Religious-messianic discourse in Israel was renewed in 1974 with the establishment of Gush Emunim, which equated "redemption" with full Jewish sovereignty over the land. This movement, however, remained largely within the boundaries of practical realism and did not venture into the cultism and chiliastic calculations that usually characterize active messianism. Although Gush Emunim included messianic motifs in its rhetoric and terminology, its substantive activity should actually be viewed in the framework of nationalist political activism.¹ This said, it should be noted that some leading figures in Gush Emunim were also involved in the so-called Jewish "underground," which in 1980 planned to blow up the mosques on the Temple Mount. The premise behind that idea, based on kabbalistic teachings, was that such an action would ignite a comprehensive war against Israel—and at that point, when the Jewish nation would be on the brink of destruction, God would intervene on behalf of His chosen people (the process of redemption having already begun) and usher in the End of Days. The Jewish underground constituted the first link in this projected chain of events, and its members actually carried out a series of attacks against Arabs.

Other, smaller messianic cults have emerged in Israel, whose main focus was the issue of secularization. Each group has had its own calculations of the End; all have agreed that only religious repentance could ensure the Jewish people's survival during the upcoming apocalyptic war of Gog and Magog.² For example, Rabbi Meir Kahane, leader of the Jewish Defense League in America and later the Kach movement in Israel, played an important role in generating this sort of religious-messianic discourse. In his book *Forty Years*, written in the early 1980s, Kahane set forth an apocalyptic vision according to which the End of Days would arrive within a span of 40 years from the establishment of the state of Israel. If the Jews did not acknowledge this reality, undertake religious repentance, and begin to rebuild the Temple, he warned, redemption would come only in the aftermath of terrible catastrophes known collectively as the "birth pangs of the Messiah" (*hevlei mashiah*). Kahane, certain that the great majority of Jews would not in fact heed his words, fulminated against the faithless "Hellenizers" whom he held responsible for the upcoming calamities.

What radical messianic groups in Israel have in common is a tension between the group and the secular framework of the surrounding society, which refuses to acknowledge the messianic option. Thus, any given messianic group is a manifestation of extreme spiritual distress amid the reality of secularization and the power of the secular establishment.

Messianic believers in Israel direct a special animus against the Orthodox religious establishment that refuses to accept them and their faith. Deemed especially loathsome is the compromise that the Israeli Orthodox establishment has made with the secular-democratic state. Thus, the Jewish underground in its day rejected the religious establishment's failure to consider the notion of rebuilding the Temple, which in its view effectively arrested the messianic momentum. Kahane, too, rejected this policy and excoriated the phenomenon of secularism. "End of the Millennium" cults in Israel have warned of the imminent destruction of the secular world and have simultaneously attacked the religious establishment.

In the case of Uzi Meshulam and the Mishkan Ohalim ("Tent Encampment") move-

ment, kabbalistic beliefs were used to demarcate the "rabble"—defined as Gentiles and their secular Jewish cohorts who cunningly manipulated the people of Israel with the aim of preventing the redemption, and who therefore had to be eliminated. Going beyond this, however, the group also viewed the *religious* establishment in Israel as part of the same "rabble." Meshulam's group thus represented a radical protest against both the secular Ashkenazic establishment and those religious bodies that worked hand in hand with it. In addition, Mishkan Ohalim offers an interesting case study of how, under certain conditions, "normal" messianic faith can become more activist and even violent.

The Judaism associated with Meshulam and his followers is a messianic and esoteric kabbalistic religion. Their ways are not "ways of pleasantness" and their paths are not "paths of peace." Rather, the enormity of protest that is bound up with their faith represents the antithesis of public Judaism in Israel, whose established nature is grounded both in the compromises it has forged with the surrounding society and its dissociation from fanatical beliefs.

In March 1994, what began as a simple dispute between Meshulam and one of his neighbors escalated into a violent protest involving Mishkan Ohalim and the police. As the dispute grew more heated—among other things, a Molotov cocktail was thrown at police—approximately 100 members of Mishkan Ohalim fenced off the compound surrounding Meshulam's house and synagogue in the town of Yehud. Police put the compound under siege; Meshulam, taking advantage of the wide media coverage, pressed his demand for the establishment of a government committee to investigate the fate of the "missing Yemenite children," who, he charged, had been snatched from their parents in immigrant camps during the early days of Israeli statehood.³ After 47 days of violent protest, police charged into the cordoned-off area—in the process killing Shlomi Asulin, one of the movement's activists. Eleven of the active participants in the gathering eventually received extended prison sentences; Meshulam was sentenced to eight years in jail.

Despite its high profile at the time, very little was reported about Mishkan Ohalim's worldview and beliefs. Like other activist messianic groups, it combined a radical messianic vision and powerful feelings of frustration. What made it distinctive was its additional element of ethnic resentment against Israel's Ashkenazic establishment. Although it was numerically small (a police report of 1996 estimated that there were about 40 hard-core supporters out of a total of some 300 registered members),⁴ Mishkan Ohalim's potential for violence was significant, given its belief in conspiracy theories, its application of messianic doctrines from the world of Jewish mysticism, and its resentment over the disdain shown to Meshulam by the Israeli rabbinical establishment. According to eyewitness testimony about the events, members of the group had threatened collective suicide as a means of sanctifying the name of God (*kidush hashem*)—an act that had been carried out by other contemporary radical messianic groups, notably James Jones' People's Temple Group in Jonestown, Guyana, and the Branch Davidians led by Vernon Howell (a.k.a. David Koresh) at Waco, Texas.⁵

Meshulam's apocalyptic vision was remarkably similar to the historical patterns of spiritual revolt that are described so well in Norman Cohn's *The Pursuit of the Millennium*.⁶ In his role of preacher, Meshulam incited his followers against state

institutions. These, he claimed, had perpetuated horrendous injustice, particularly against Jewish immigrants from Islamic countries. Although the "siege of Yehud" was a violent high point, the true struggle, in Meshulam's preaching, would culminate only after the rooting out of the Jewish people's hidden internal enemies.

What follows is a more detailed depiction of Meshulam's beliefs, as documented in a series of sermons recorded on audiocassettes.

The central motif of Meshulam's worldview is that of the rabble, or "mixed multitude," known in Hebrew as the *'erev rav*. The phrase, taken from Exodus 12:38 ("And a mixed multitude went up also with them . . ."), is traditionally understood to refer to non-Jewish Egyptians who joined the children of Israel in the exodus, and who were later held responsible for much of the "murmuring" and acts of incitement against Moses and God. Meshulam, however, referred to the rabble in a nonbiblical context, basing himself on interpretations to be found in kabbalistic works such as the *Ra'ya mehemna* and the *Tikunei hazohar*.⁷

"I do not know if there is another generation like this in Israel whose teachers deserve the imprecations that these deserve"—thus historian Yitzhak Be'er recounts what is written in the Zohar about the rabble. Both Be'er and Yeshayahu Tishbi argue that the "'erev rav" cited in the Zohar and in works of commentary on the Zohar refers to the 13th-century leaders of the Jewish community in Spain, who are identified in these antiestablishment texts as corrupters of religion and morality.⁸ Indeed, they are said to have been accomplices in a Gentile plot to destroy Israel: their corrupt leadership and "idolatrous" practices had caused the removal of divine providence from the Jewish people. With the redemption would come the eradication of this rabble from the world. Apparently, the author of *Ra'ya mehemna* awaited the imminent fulfillment of his eschatological vision and hoped that he would witness the downfall of the rabble and the rewarding of the "proper ones" (*hakesherim*) of Israel.⁹

Meshulam's apocalyptic redemptive vision, similarly derived from the Zohar, involved a struggle in the divine world between good and evil forces. This struggle would end with a) the fall of Samael (the personification of evil), whom he likened to the rabble; b) revenge against the rabble; and c) the redemption of Israel. In the meantime, Meshulam regarded himself as a warrior in a cosmic struggle in which all means, including violence, were legitimate. In fact, the use of violence against those perceived to belong to the rabble was a religious imperative.

Meshulam also made reference to kabbalistic terms such as "emanations" and "core." According to the world of images in the Lurianic kabbalah, one must descend to the impure elements in order to rescue the "sparks" and emanations of the divine.¹⁰ For example, as Nathan of Gaza interpreted the conversion of Sabbetai Zevi to Islam, he had thereby penetrated the corrupt world so as to dissolve it from within and rescue its divinity.¹¹ In similar fashion, Meshulam declared that one must destroy the corrupt world of the rabble by descending into it and dissolving it from within. This penetration of the realm of the impure is achieved by adopting some of its ways. Specifically—although he did not advocate violating any halakhic norms—Meshulam claimed (falsely) to have done military service in the celebrated Israel Defense Forces general staff commando unit (*sayeret matkal*) and to have made a "daring" foray into the state archives. In his hands, he told his followers, were the sparks whose revelation would demolish the corrupt Zionist world.

The rabble, according to Meshulam, are low and satanic individuals who are nonetheless difficult to identify because they are concealed among the people of Israel. Their purpose is to lead the people astray and thereby destroy them.¹² In the messianic era, Meshulam claimed, a composite of Mashiah ben-Yosef and Mashiah ben-David would emerge to lead the redemption.¹³ The goal of the rabble, he explained, was to try to divide this composite Messiah. At this point in his analysis, current events came into play:

The Gaon of Vilna says that the rabble's main goal is to pair Esau and Ishmael [the impure emanations] and to separate the two Messiahs by means of agitation. We see this in practice today: whatever the Esau-Gentile does not demand, the rabble incites him to do. . . .

Those who incite the Ishmaelites and Esau to demand that Jerusalem be internationalized—they are the rabble. The rabble will demand that the Americans insist on the Israeli government's holding elections. The Americans will say that they . . . will withhold budgets [if the Israeli government does not comply]. The rabble will . . . advise the Ishmaelites—the Palestinians—to raise a fuss in the United States with their backing. The borderline that divides West and East Jerusalem disturbs them: they do not want the people of Israel to have West Jerusalem. They want all of Jerusalem to be "international." International, that is, for the entire world except for Israel. . . .¹⁴

The ostensible attempt to internationalize Jerusalem was a particularly grave matter in Meshulam's eyes, since he believed that the Messiah would arrive precisely at the border between the two parts of Jerusalem. Thus, the purported attempt to erase the line was seen as a deliberate attempt to delay the Messiah's coming. In his words, "the two Messiahs [Mashiah ben-Yosef and Mashiah ben-David] preserve Jerusalem. Their place is at the borderline, at the Western Wall. Dominion, according to the Gaon of Vilna, is in the hands of the composite of the two Messiahs, with Mashiah ben-David at the head."¹⁵

Because the rabble delayed the coming of the Messiah, Meshulam called for an active struggle against it, preaching violent resistance against the state:

The Gaon [of Vilna] says that the main purpose of our war is to shatter the power of the rabble and eradicate it from Israel. The rabble is our greatest enemy. . . . The Gaon says that the war against the rabble is the most difficult and bitter war, and that we must prevail with all our might in this war. Whoever does not actively participate in the war against the rabble becomes an accomplice of the emanation of the rabble. The rabble must be fought. If you see the leadership of the rabble, you must fight them. Whoever does not actively participate in the war against the rabble becomes an accomplice of the rabble's emanation, and would better have not been created.¹⁶

In another recorded sermon, Meshulam enumerated five categories of the rabble as these appear in the Zohar:

1. *Amalekites*: The Amalekites are the head that harms the Jewish people. They are the head of the impure emanation. That is to say, the heads of the people; and their sign is their apparatus of power, the Mapai [Labor party] establishment. An organized mafia, child-snatchers, a corrupt mafia.

2. *The fallen (nefilim; cf. Gen. 6:4)*: The fornicators. The souls of the rabble who continue to whore after good women. They are those who want free prostitution, who run

stores that sell sex items, and who want to show [sex education] on television to children. . . .

3. *Strongmen (giborim)*: These are the generation of the Tower of Babel [*dor hape-lagah*], the ones who dress themselves up and call themselves haredi [ultra-Orthodox] or religious—but they are not genuinely religious. They build synagogues and houses of study, not for the sake of God [*leshem Hashem*] but rather for their own aggrandizement [*la'asot shem le'azman*]. They mislead the generation in worship of God; their waters are not the waters of Torah but waters of the Flood. They are devastating the land and making barren the study of the Torah; their students are fleeing their yeshivas¹⁷ to learn in a different place. . . .

4. *Ghosts (refaim)*: This is what is today defined as Samael. [Reading from the Zohar]: "These are the rabble that infiltrate Israel. If they see the people of Israel in time of distress, they ignore them. And when they have the power to save Israel, they do not come. They are lax with the Torah, keeping their distance from it and from all those who are occupied with it in order to do business with idolaters. . . ." They demonstrate in favor of opening movie houses on the Sabbath, and demonstrate against religious coercion. . . .

5. *Giants ('anakim)*: They scorn those who uphold the Torah, and mock them. They are the ones who return the world to chaos. They and the ghosts cause[d] the destruction of the Temple. . . .¹⁸

Meshulam's scale of severity, it should be noted, was in descending order. Hence, the Amalekites—the Mapai establishment—were the worst. In his sermons, Meshulam reminded his disciples of the biblical commandment to blot out the seed of Amalek (Deut. 25:19) and noted that "there is a generation of Jews that is always proper in its ways—and then there is the rabble, which is an impure emanation, and which is the majority here [in Israel]."¹⁹

In Meshulam's view, the state has been set up deliberately to uproot and undermine Jewish practice. "This state does not take care of the Jewish people. . . . [There was a deliberate effort made by the state] to remove people from Sabbath observance, and every aspect of holiness and Torah was vilified. A Jew is a son of Torah [*ben-Torah*]. But they belittle those who devote themselves to the Torah, they think that an academic is more important than a ben-Torah. This is Gentile thinking. This is the thinking of the Russian tsar."²⁰

Doctrine and Group Dynamics of Mishkan Ohalim

How did members of Mishkan Ohalim try to apply their leader's teachings?

Meshulam espoused a literal apocalyptic message that was associated with violence. In this respect, Mishkan Ohalim was similar to other apocalyptic movements, including Christian movements such as the Branch Davidians and James Jones' People's Temple group in California and later in Guyana. These movements preached a literal messianic faith announcing the impending End of Days, and they were pursued by anticult movements and by the authorities. As noted, they ultimately ended in acts of collective suicide.

Although Meshulam's disciples say that there are no motifs dealing with personal redemption or even the coming of the Messiah in their religious doctrine or public

struggle, one can, in fact, distinguish conspicuous motifs of apocalyptic prophecy. For instance, disciples speak of the cruel war of Gog and Magog that will bring the world as we know it to an end. According to Ora Shifris, a spokeswoman for Mishkan Ohalim, "we are facing terrible times. A world war and dire catastrophes in the near future. The war of Gog and Magog. This is written in the Zohar, and these are things that come true."²¹ According to a special police report, Meshulam and his followers were heard to assert that "one should encourage the war of Gog and Magog among the rabble, since the redemption will come after this war and only the believers will survive." The report also noted that Meshulam had instructed his followers to prepare for a third world war by hoarding food and necessities. Police believe that a statement by Meshulam that "this week will be a week of the plagues of Egypt on all of the rabble" was connected with an act of arson carried out against the telephone exchange in Petah Tikvah in October 1994.²²

One of the characteristics of apocalyptic movements is *totalism*: they do not envisage an improvement of the current situation but rather a total transformation that will usher in a world of perfect harmony, social justice, and peace. The passage from the corrupt present to the eternal future is to be accompanied by great calamities, which are, as noted, the birth pangs of the redemption. Apocalyptic triumph goes hand in hand with the ultimate, bloody war, which serves to destroy the agents of corruption and purify the sinful world.²³ Justice will prevail, and the corrupt past will be replaced by a perfect future. But the paradigm of *vengeful redemption* is also conspicuous in this vision. Oppressed Oriental Jewish communities—the *mizrahim*—were to gain superior status over the Ashkenazim and the secularists; the supremacy of the Jewish tradition would be recognized, whereas the culture of the rabble would be eradicated. In brief, the redemptive future would feature a role reversal: *mizrahim* once again receiving the honor that was due to them while the Ashkenazic rabble would be destroyed.

Indications of this philosophy of vengeful redemption can be seen in an open letter written by Meshulam's disciples that was published in the movement's bulletin in March 1995. The letter was headed "And It Was Reversed" ("Venahafokh hu"), an allusion not only to the upcoming Purim holiday (cf. Esther 9:1) but also to the anticipated reversal of roles that would come about when "the government of wickedness" that had "imprisoned a great saint of the world" would be replaced by "the humble ones" who would "inherit the earth and delight in the abundance of peace" (Ps. 37:11).²⁴

Millenarian-apocalyptic movements anticipate redemption as coming about at the juncture of the perfect time and the perfect place.²⁵ In the case of Meshulam's group, the time was imminent and the place was the land of Israel, whose inhabitants were to receive an eternal blessing of spiritual well-being. Yet only some of the inhabitants would be around to enjoy this blessing. There is a basic dualism in apocalyptic movements regarding believers and nonbelievers. Only the former (the "sons of light") will enjoy redemption, whereas nonbelievers (the "sons of darkness") will perish.²⁶ This dualism energizes members of the movement, adding as it does a meaningful eschatological dimension to current sociopolitical divisions. Whatever their current status, believers see themselves as future survivors, destined to be saved by God's grace when the rest of the corrupt world undergoes destruction.²⁷

It follows that apocalyptic messages often have inherent antinormative implications. The violence immediately preceding the End of Days, for example, is anticipated as being directed initially against the "chosen ones," since these form the spiritual vanguard struggling against the forces of corruption. Hence the willingness to relinquish normal constraints regarding the use of violence: the chosen ones must be allowed to defend themselves against the forces arrayed against them.²⁸

The literature on apocalyptic movements often speaks of group "enthusiasm." Enthusiastic believers expect tangible results from God. They believe that their faith will convey them from this world into a higher and more exalted one. The leader of an apocalyptic movement convinces his followers that they will be saved from destruction. At the same time, however, it is incumbent upon them to live a pure, modest, and even ascetic life. What usually occurs is an oscillation between excessive rigor and antinomianism. The enthusiasm does not necessarily take a violent form. Enthusiastic believers can behave in two different ways: their belief can uphold them and unite them with others in faith; yet it can also arouse paranoia, fear, and the dehumanization of those of whom God does not approve. The movement's activism may also be reinforced by external factors such as the persecution of its members.²⁹

Millenarian movements tend to be ecstatic, with the sense of redemption accompanied by emotional release. Rituals are often intensely enthusiastic, involving the externalization of feelings. At the same time, violent antinomian tendencies may be manifested, among other things, by the destruction of objects or mass suicide.³⁰

The faith of Meshulam's followers in the imminent coming of the Messiah was intensified by a sense of persecution at the hands of the authorities. Mishkan Ohalim's paranoiac nature was pronounced. Believing themselves to be persecuted and menaced by the authorities, its believers behaved violently, which in turn called forth punitive measures from the authorities. The result was a closed circle of self-fulfilling prophecy: Meshulam's followers felt threatened and thus took steps to defend themselves. Meshulam himself stressed to his followers that they should return fire only if attacked. Yet because of their sense of persecution, everything in their eyes became a deliberate provocation. Moreover, as noted, the sense of persecution strengthened their belief that they were the elect and that the government was trying to silence them. Meshulam, for his part, often emphasized that the General Security Services were pursuing him because of his struggle to expose the fate of the lost Yemenite children. He claimed that security investigators told him that he would be eliminated unless he ceased his activities.³¹

During the group's gathering at Yehud, paranoia was combined with an atmosphere of ecstatic joy. Each evening, the participants burst into loud song accompanied by trumpet and organ. As a writer for the daily *Ha'aretz* noted: "It appeared that they were in a sort of ecstasy as they moved about, singing songs accompanied by the trumpet, egging themselves on with shouts and hymns, and gesturing in every direction with firearms and other weapons as if they were eager to provoke the police."³² Similarly, the audiocassette recordings of Meshulam's sermons also feature his disciples' fervent praying. Meshulam's words are accompanied by loud cries of approval, and each sermon ends with the lusty singing of hasidic songs.

As with other messianic-apocalyptic groups, Mishkan Ohalim also displayed a suicidal tendency. During the siege at Yehud, there was concern, both among the police

and among movement members, that the climax could be an act of collective suicide. *Kidush hashem* would have been the justification of such an act. Although martyrdom traditionally is mandated only when a Jew is faced with the demand to transgress one of three cardinal prohibitions—idolatry, incest, or murder³³—the grounds have often been interpreted more broadly. According to historian Yisrael Yuval, the Jewish millenarian tradition also draws a direct link between martyrdom and vengeful redemption. That is, redemption is regarded as an expression of revenge against the Gentiles: martyrdom is a means of extorting God to bring about the redemption, since it necessitates a blood revenge for those who have died in the sanctification of His name.³⁴

It appears that Meshulam's followers did link the possibility of violent martyrdom with the coming of the messianic era. One of his disciples at Yehud, for instance, said in a newspaper interview:

Rabbi Uzi says to us that if we do not return fire, it's as if we are committing suicide, and that's like Christianity, where you turn the other cheek. I am not afraid of dying, because my fate is whatever God has allotted to me. The main thing is to die as a Jew. For me, death is part of life, and the world to come is not really death, because for us there is no end, only a passage. It is here, in this situation, that I am perfected. This is *kidush hashem*, and it's also connected to the transmigration of souls, as the Rabbi explained, and the nearness of redemption, for which the Rabbi wishes to make us, his disciples, worthy.³⁵

Martyrdom, then, is a manner of death that expresses revenge, which in turn makes the disciple worthy in the coming messianic age (when, according to tradition, the righteous will be resurrected).

Group members often referred to the fate of those in the David Koresh cult who had committed mass suicide a year earlier, and threatened that much blood would be shed in the event that the police entered the demarcated area.³⁶ Meshulam declared: "Take your positions. Whoever wants to can leave and whoever doesn't can stay here, to kill or be killed." He announced to the police that "no one will come out of here alive. . . . If our demands are not met, there will be a massacre here a hundred times larger than the massacre at Hebron."³⁷ A leaflet distributed near the house echoed this theme: "How can we prevent a recurrence of events like the massacre in Hebron . . . this time in a version many times worse?"

In the end, police intervention prevented mass fatalities. Yet two years after the Yehud siege, Meshulam's followers still implied their willingness to commit acts of violent martyrdom. An article in their newspaper *Ohalei Ya'akov* asked: "What sort of miserable establishment is it that is prepared to let its citizens martyr themselves . . . ? Are the lives of Jews in Israel so cheap??? Let no one say 'we didn't know.'"³⁸

At the time of the siege, Mishkan Ohalim seems to have been in an intermediate stage between passivity and activism. On the one hand, group members were estranged from the state of Israel and its institutions, explicitly refraining from involvement in politics. On the other hand, Meshulam had no objections to his followers' serving in the army (although it was reported that Shlomi Asulin, who was killed during the police intervention, was an army deserter).³⁹ In his words, "the members of the organization serve in the IDF in all its units, in the standing army and in the reserves, not for the sake of the state, which we do not recognize, but for the sake of the people of Israel, the Torah of Israel, and the sanctification of the Name."⁴⁰ Meshulam

further instructed his followers to go out and work rather than spending all of their time in Torah studies; movement activities were to be carried out during their free time. This, then, was a movement whose members did not behave in a totally cultic manner. Following the siege at Yehud, those who were not arrested continued to conduct their lives as usual.

Once some of the activists had been released from jail, Mishkan Ohalim showed a return to messianic anticipation. Members launched extensive propaganda activity regarding the issue of the missing Yemenite children that included public gatherings, political lobbying, and the recruitment of supporters from the academic and cultural worlds. Such activity can be seen as a means of evading the cognitive dissonance resulting from the failure of Meshulam's apocalyptic predictions. Indeed, members of messianic movements are often undaunted by prophecies that fail to come true. On the contrary, their religious faith may be intensified as they go about reinterpreting the signs and attempting to recruit new members.⁴¹ Thus in August 1997, some three years after the events at Yehud, Mishkan Ohalim members delivered a videocassette to the government television network that depicted the opening of four graves in which Yemenite children, according to official records, were buried. Three of the graves appeared to be empty. In the aftermath of continuing public discussion concerning the fate of the missing Yemenite children,⁴² some members of the movement appear to have reverted to violent activity.⁴³ The impression gained in a conversation that I conducted with movement members at that time was that they were anticipating a miraculous event to occur within the next two months, to coincide with the Sukkot holiday.⁴⁴ If in fact movement members were responsible for acts of violence during this time, these would appear to have been connected to their belief in the necessity to "hasten the End" in the period just before redemption.

Apocalyptic movements have a more marked tendency toward violence when they are headed by a charismatic and "messianic" leader. Given the danger that faith in them may weaken if, for example, their prophecy fails to come true (although, as pointed out, the opposite often occurs), such leaders often intensify their oratory to increase followers' enthusiasm and anxiety.⁴⁵ Believers, for their part, accept their leader's behavior no matter how strange, irresponsible, egotistical, or even destructive.

Meshulam was a charismatic religious leader who made his pronouncements with great fervor, in the form of prophecy about the imminent future. His movement was based on his exclusive leadership, and his believers were prepared for self-abnegation and even self-sacrifice in his service. For example, in demanding improvement of Meshulam's conditions in prison, his supporters were willing to launch an extended hunger strike.⁴⁶ Meshulam's disciples also believe that their rabbi is blessed with supernatural powers, with prophetic and healing capabilities.⁴⁷ Following his dictate, one of his most prominent supporters, Yaakov Seville, refused to let his wife, who was ill with breast cancer, receive chemotherapy treatments: she subsequently died of her illness.⁴⁸ This loss did not weaken Seville's faith in Meshulam. On the contrary, he became one of Mishkan Ohalim's main spokespeople.

Meshulam did all that he could to actualize and glorify his leadership. He spoke and wrote of himself in the third person; even in prison he went about dressed in a robe, holding a royal staff in his hand. He boasted of the "divisions"—an alleged

quarter of a million supporters—that would be at his disposal on the Day of Judgment, and he spoke many times of his extensive ties both abroad and within the domestic security services.⁴⁹ In a newspaper interview given during the gathering at Yehud, he remarked: “There is no need to tell me who you are. I know everything about you. Trust me; I see like an X-ray machine.”⁵⁰ According to Ora Shifris:

He knows everything, even what will happen when the Messiah comes. Word for word. He knew that there would be a miracle during the Gulf War. He said in advance that missiles would fall, but that nothing would happen. There are many other things that the Rabbi says, but one may not talk about them with people who are not within the fold, because it is mystical and it may harm them.⁵¹

Another admirer, by the name of Gadi, says of him:

Rabbi Uzi is more than a father to me. My father brought me into this world—Rabbi Uzi will bring me into the next. I go about all the time with my eyes cast downward so that, God forbid, I won't dare look at him. I'm not capable of understanding everything that he does, because what he does is higher than we are capable of understanding. . . . I am nothing, I'm nullified before him. I negate all of my will before him. First I do, without understanding—after that I strive to understand.⁵²

As previously noted, millenarian-apocalyptic movements emerge during periods of discontent and political helplessness. In the search for a coherent value system, a new cultural identity, and a renewed sense of self-respect, such movements set themselves against the ruling or alien powers. Their antiauthoritarian attitude is manifested not only in opposition to the regime but also in the rejection of its ideology, whether normative, philosophical, or religious. It follows that, in many instances, their ideology becomes violent and leads to a struggle between the rulers and the ruled.⁵³

Among Meshulam's disciples, it appears that frustration caused by a low social status, combined with gaps in modernization among different strata in Israel, produced feelings of inferiority. It is important to note that, among all of the people that I spoke with, what is recalled most of all is the deep frustration felt by those who underwent what is described as a forced separation from the Jewish religion—the reference here is to the early days of the state—which included the “cutting of [their] sidelocks” and the alleged kidnapping of children from immigrant camps. These experiences gave rise to an explicit hatred toward the establishment, and may have been what originally drew Meshulam's supporters to a messianic fantasy in which the prevailing order would be reversed.

Resentment against the ruling order can also develop as the result of newly formed desires and the perceived inability to fulfill them. The gap between “haves” and “have-nots” becomes a major source of anger, compounded by the fact that the have-nots are essentially compelled to act according to rules that they would like to reject.⁵⁴

The campaign to free Meshulam from prison—which included a number of violent acts, such as the attempted murder of a prison warden—can best be understood in this light. Members of Mishkan Ohalim felt frustrated by the fact that, whereas their public struggle was supposed to earn them an exalted status, they were in fact persecuted, thrown in jail, and isolated from the rest of the world. To obtain a pardon from prison or good conditions while incarcerated, for example, they had to behave in accordance with Israeli law, which they did not recognize.

A further source of frustration was Mishkan Ohalim's alienation from the religious establishment. Uzi Meshulam, who was taught by his grandfather (a well-known kabbalist in Yemen), was never officially ordained, and he and his disciples were ostracized by major figures in the national-religious establishment.⁵⁵

In July 1999, Meshulam was released from prison after receiving a pardon for health reasons. This pardon was granted on condition that he severely limit his public activities. Meanwhile, during the course of his imprisonment, Mishkan Ohalim had partially disintegrated. The Shifris family, who were leading spokespeople and ideologues for the movement, came under suspicion of being undercover agents and were expelled. And in April 1999, a statement was released to the media in which it was announced that the struggle on behalf of the missing Yemenite children had been discontinued.⁵⁶

Initially fueled by resentment of the state and the religious establishment, Mishkan Ohalim is in many ways similar to other millenarian-apocalyptic movements. Unlike others, it did not spin out of control (despite some violent episodes) to end in an act of mass suicide. The future of this movement, however, is still an open question.

Notes

1. On Gush Emunim, see Janet Aviad, “The Messianism of Gush Emunim,” in *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*, vol. 7, *Jews and Messianism in the Modern Era: Metaphor and Meaning*, ed. Jonathan Frankel (New York: 1991), 197–213; Gideon Aran, “From Religious Zionism to Zionist Religion: The Roots of Gush Emunim,” in *ibid.*, vol. 2, *The Challenge of Modernity and Jewish Orthodoxy*, ed. Peter Y. Medding (Bloomington: 1986), 116–143.
2. See Motti Inbari, “Hishuvei kez yehudiyim likrat shevat 2000,” in *Mashiah lo ba*, ed. David Ariel-Yoel, Mia Leibowitz, and Yehoram Mazor (Tel-Aviv: 2001).
3. During the course of “Operation Magic Carpet,” approximately 50,000 immigrants from Yemen were brought to Israel and housed in temporary camps (*ma'abarot*). Conditions in these camps were primitive, and infants and young children were often taken from their parents either when they fell ill or when (as the parents were told) they had to undergo medical tests. All accounts agree that at least several hundred infants and children “disappeared” during the early years of Israeli statehood: the charge made by Meshulam and others is that these children were sent for adoption, either in Israel or abroad. For an account of the issue and Meshulam's involvement with it, see Felice Maranz, “The Jews Who Slipped Off the Magic Carpet,” *Jerusalem Report* 5, no. 2 (2 June 1994), 16–17.
4. See report by Inspectors Tali Rubin and Moshe Barekat, “Kevuzat Meshulam: do'h mishtarti,” prepared by the intelligence division of the police under deputy commissioner Hezi Leder, 21 April 1996 (hereafter: “Do'h mishtarti”).
5. See Stuart A. Wright (ed.), *Armageddon in Waco* (Chicago: 1995); James D. Tabor and Eugene V. Gallagher, *Why Waco? Cults and the Battle for Religious Freedom in America* (Berkeley: 1995); and Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: 1982), 102–120.
6. See Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (New York: 1970).
7. See Yitzhak Be'er, “Hareka' nahistori shel haRa'ya mehemna,” *Zion* 5, no. 1 (1940), 1–44.
8. *Ibid.* See also Yishayahu Tishbi, *Mishnat hazohar*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem: 1949), 686–692.
9. *Ibid.*, 692.

10. See Gershom Scholem. *Devarim bego* (Tel Aviv: 1975), 256–261.
11. Gershom Scholem claimed that this was the explanation offered by Sabbetai Zevi himself. See Scholem's *Mehkarim umekorot letoledot hashabtaut vegilguleha* (Jerusalem: 1974), 9–67. Yehuda Liebes disagrees with Scholem and argues that this concept is attributable to Nathan of Gaza, not Sabbetai Zevi. See his *Sod haemunah hashabtaut* (Jerusalem: 1995), 27.
12. See Uzi Meshulam, "Musar 'erev rav" cassette 936 (Feb. 1996).
13. On the two messiahs, see Yosef Heinemann, "Mashiah ben-Efrayim viziya mizrayim shel benei efrayim betereim 'et," *Tarbiz* 40 (1971), 450–461.
14. Meshulam, "Musar 'erev rav," cassette 936. These words were spoken in 1992 and relate to actual events of that time.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*
17. The reference here is to the "hesder" yeshivas of the religious Zionist establishment, which combine yeshiva study with service in the Israel Defense Forces.
18. Meshulam, "Musar 'erev rav," cassette 937 (Feb. 1992).
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*
21. Private conversation with Ora Shifris, July 1997.
22. See "Do"ḥ mishtarti."
23. See Yonina Talmon, "Millenarian Movements," *Archives européennes de sociologie* 2 (1966), 156–200.
24. The letter appeared in *Ohalei Ya'akov* 2 (Adar II/March 1995), 10. Gershom Scholem points out that the Book of Psalms is often used as a source in apocalyptic writings; see *Devarim bego* 262–269.
25. See Talmon, "Millenarian Movements," 167–168.
26. *Ibid.*
27. See Thomas Robbins and Anthony Dick, "Sects and Violence." in Wright (ed.), *Armageddon in Waco*, 243.
28. *Ibid.*, 240.
29. *Ibid.*, 242.
30. See Talmon, "Millenarian Movements," 168–169.
31. See *Even maasu habonim* I (April 1994), 1. This subject is reiterated in all of Mishkan Ohalim's publications.
32. See *Ha'aretz* (25 March 1994), A-2.
33. See "Kiddush Ha-shem and Hillul Ha-shem," *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: 1971), 10:977–986.
34. See Yisrael Y. Yuval, "Hanakam vehakelalah, hadam veba' alilah," *Zion* 58, no. 1 (1993), 33–90.
35. See *Yedioth Ahronoth*, magazine supplement (29 April 1994), 13.
36. See *Ha'aretz* (25 March 1994), A-2.
37. On February 25, 1994, Baruch Goldstein, a physician from the settlement of Kiryat Arba, murdered 29 Arabs who had been reciting Ramadan prayers in the Cave of the Prophets in Hebron. This massacre occurred about a month before the events at Yehud. On the massacre, see Ehud Sprinzak. *Bein mehaah huḥ-parlamentari leteror: alimut politit beyisrael* (Jerusalem: 1995), 101–103.
38. *Ohalei Ya'akov* 18 (Tamuz/July 1996), 1.
39. This was reported by Tamar Eichner in *Maariv* (11 May 1994), 15.
40. *Even maasu habonim*, 1.
41. See Leon Festinger, Henry W. Riecken, and Stanley Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails* (Minneapolis: 1956), 3–32.
42. Following a lengthy investigation, an Israeli court released an interim report in August 1997, in which it was stated that most of the missing children had in fact died of malnutrition or disease. Many refused to accept these findings. For instance, Moshe Katzav, then serving as minister of tourism (and today Israel's president) stated:

The families of the children must know all the details of what occurred in those dark days, when things happened in Israel that are fitting for regimes of the darkest kind and not for a newly revived state that is taking its first steps. . . . I have no doubt that children were illegally handed over for adoption and that infants were illegally hidden. Things happened out of simple malice and a sense of superiority and superciliousness (quoted in *Ha'aretz* [18 Aug. 1997], A-1).

43. Suspicions were raised that members of Mishkan Ohalim were responsible for burning down a gas station (see *Ha'aretz*, 4 Aug. 1997), for damaging traffic lights around the country (*Maariv*, 6 Aug. 1997), and for placing an explosive charge in the Petah Tikva courthouse (*Yedioth Ahronoth*, 19 Aug. 1997).
44. The date was probably not coincidental: the Haftarah portion read on the intermediate Sabbath of Sukkot (Ez. 38:18–39:16) features a prophetic description of the war between Gog and Magog.
45. See Robbins and Dick, "Sects and Violence," 245–246.
46. See *Kol ha'ir* (12 April 1996), 23.
47. See "Do"ḥ mishtarti."
48. See *Iton Yerushalayim* (15 July 1994), 25–26.
49. See "Do"ḥ mishtarti."
50. Quoted in *Yedioth Ahronoth*, magazine supplement (29 April 1994), 11.
51. *Ibid.*
52. *Ibid.*, 13.
53. See Peter Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound: A Study of "Cargo" Cults in Melanesia* (London: 1957), 225–227.
54. *Ibid.*, 247.
55. See *Al hamishmar* magazine supplement (8 April 1994), 2.
56. According to the *Israel Wire* (19 April 1999), a "close associate" of Meshulam said that "Meshulam feels betrayed by the families of the missing children, and he therefore is no longer able to endure the hardships of the struggle and the consequences of his continued struggle" (www.israelwire.com/w/990419/99041915.html).