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# Messianic Movements and Failed Prophecies in Israel - Five Case Studies

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# Messianic Movements and Failed Prophecies in Israel

## Five Case Studies

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Motti Inbari

**ABSTRACT:** This article examines several examples of messianic individuals and movements in Israel that have had to confront the failure of their predictions of imminent collective Redemption. These case studies suggest that individuals who expect Messiah's immediate coming, but who do not share this conviction with others, may experience greater freedom to reinterpret their prophecy and then proselytize a new vision of Redemption. When a small group's predictions are publicized widely and then fail, its members may find themselves facing a particularly sharp crisis of faith because of social pressure and may decide to abandon both the prophecy and group membership. Participants in large and diffuse messianic movements may become anxious when events begin to indicate that their predicted Redemption will fail, thus they are likely to adjust the prophecy and take steps to actualize it.

A failed prophecy constitutes a critical turning point in the history of any messianic or millenarian<sup>1</sup> movement; thus, the subject of prophetic failure is critical to an understanding of messianic or millennial faith.<sup>2</sup> In this article, I present examples of ways that messianic movements in Israel of various sizes responded when their predictions of messianic Redemption failed, and I analyze the discourse that emerged from the resulting cognitive dissonance.<sup>3</sup>

This research addresses three major types of messianic crises. The first section reviews how two individuals—Rabbi Yisrael Ariel, founder of

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the Temple Institute, and Roger Walkwitz—did not share their predictions with others and were able to overcome the error of their calculations while keeping their faith. Solitary individuals who experience prophetic failure may have greater freedom to reinterpret their prophecies and then proselytize for the renewed expectations. The second section examines what happened when a small group of believers—Avraham Sheinman and Operation Homeward, and Yaacov Oved and his small group—faced the failure of their predictions that had been made public. Members of small groups whose prophecies are publicized may abandon the group when the prophecy fails. The third section explores the emergence of cognitive dissonance when participants in the messianic movement Gush Emunim became concerned about the possible failure of predictions, even though failure was not yet certain. Participants in large, diffuse movements facing the imminent failure of their valued prophecies may be able to adjust their prophecies and take actions to fulfill them.

Finally, I identify social conditions that promote the continuation, revision or abandonment of a failed prophecy, thus enhancing analysis and understanding of the dynamics of prophetic failure as social phenomena.<sup>4</sup>

### **INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCE OF PROPHETIC FAILURE**

I present here two cases of individuals who experienced pronounced failure of personal prophecies yet managed to reinterpret and reinforce their faith, largely because their unpublicized prophecies had not been subjected to public scrutiny and criticism. Struggling alone and without public pressure, these believers were able to adjust their expectations and then proselytize for their revised visions of messianic collective Redemption.

#### **Rabbi Yisrael Ariel and the Temple Institute**

Rabbi Yisrael Ariel (b. 1939) founded the Temple Institute (Machon HaMikdash) in the Jewish Quarter of Old City Jerusalem in 1987. The Institute runs various Jewish religious enterprises including a museum, a publishing house, *yeshivas* for youth and young adults, college preparatory curricula, and a project that seeks to reproduce sacred objects used in the ancient Temple. It is one of several movements promoting construction of the Third Temple.<sup>5</sup> The formative moment in Ariel's life came when he was a soldier in the Israeli army's 1967 conquest of the Temple Mount (Har HaBait), thus his description of these events offers an opportunity to understand his spiritual and political development.

An Orthodox Jew, Ariel is a graduate of Jerusalem's Mercaz HaRav Yeshiva, where students are motivated to political action by the belief that the Jews' return to the Land of Israel under the auspices of a secular

Zionist movement reflects the first stage in God's plan. Accordingly, they emphasize the holiness of both the Land of Israel (*Eretz Yisrael*) and the State of Israel (*Medinat Yisrael*). According to Rabbi Zvi Yehuda HaCohen Kook (1891–1982), who helped found the *yeshiva* in 1924 and led it from 1953, the Land of Israel is an organic entity imbued with its own will and holiness and united with the entire Jewish people—present, past and future: the Jewish people and the land are one. Therefore, no Jew has a right to give away any part of the land, since it does not belong to any one Jewish group.<sup>6</sup> The move toward recoupling the land and its people emerged from early twentieth-century political Zionism, which accomplished the establishment of the secular State of Israel in 1948. If the tool to implement God's will is Jewish nationalism, it follows that the State of Israel—even if it is secular—should be sanctified as part of the messianic process.<sup>7</sup> The time will come when secular Jews will realize their mistake, repent and transform the State of Israel into a theocracy, thus reinstating the sacrificial work on the Temple Mount.<sup>8</sup> Currently, the Temple Mount itself is a Muslim place of worship, al-Haram al-Sharif (the Noble Sanctuary), whereas the Western Wall is a Jewish place of worship. The only Jewish ritual activity possible on the Temple Mount is silent, solitary prayer.<sup>9</sup>

During the period of tension preceding the 1967 Six-Day War, Ariel was on military reserve duty in the Paratroopers Brigade when he found himself among the forces leading the Israeli advance toward the Western Wall and the Temple Mount. Running excitedly toward the holiest sites of Judaism aroused in him a profound messianic fervor.<sup>10</sup> As the Israeli army staged a stunning victory and entered the Temple Mount, Ariel was convinced that Messiah would arrive that very day to rebuild the Temple. This elation was a critical combination of education and experience: from Mercaz HaRav Yeshiva he had learned that the State of Israel was the beginning of Redemption, and with the Israeli army's victory he experienced the return of his ancestral home to Jewish control.

That night Ariel was stationed as a guard at the entrance to the Dome of the Rock, considered to be the place where Solomon's Temple once stood. He waited in fervent expectation of a miracle that would realize the biblical prophecies of Redemption, having no doubt that at any moment he might meet Messiah in the flesh. He felt privileged to be stationed there on this fateful night, when he would experience the appearance of Divinity, transcendental yet utterly real, as the Temple descended from heaven, complete and ready, to its rightful place on the Temple Mount.

But nothing happened. The night passed, weeks and months followed, and Messiah failed to appear. Ariel was filled with messianic disappointment, but that disappointment sparked a spiritual reckoning that led him to revise his expectation: Messiah would come only when

the Temple was standing. The traditional Orthodox belief that Messiah would build the Temple had to be mistaken. Construction of the Temple was a task incumbent upon the Jewish people to create conditions for the coming of Messiah.

Through the years, the more I studied the more I began to understand that we had only ourselves and our own inaction to hold accountable: G-d does not intend for us to wait for a day of miracles. We are expected to act. We must accomplish that with which we have been charged: to do all in our power to prepare for the rebuilding of the Holy Temple, and the renewal of the divine service.<sup>11</sup>

In Ariel's description of his psychological and spiritual state in 1967 it is possible to identify characteristics of cognitive dissonance, which threatened his fervently held messianic beliefs. Messiah's failure to appear immediately after the war did not weaken Ariel's resolve; on the contrary, his faith in Redemption only strengthened. His introspection led him to identify his error in personal prophetic interpretation and to find a tactical solution to his spiritual crisis that mandated a different course of action to realize Redemption. The Temple must be replaced not by God but by humans working according to God's plan. Ariel took the religious Zionist principle of human activism to its ultimate conclusion and created the Temple Institute to reach the goal of reestablishing the Temple, thereby accomplishing the condition for messianic Redemption.

The Temple Institute's basic premise is rooted in the traditional religious requirement that Jews observe all 613 commandments of the Torah (collectively, the Mosaic Law), many of which concern the Temple and the order of ritual sacrifice. Performing these commandments is a necessity of religious law (*halakha*), yet without the Temple some two hundred of these commandments cannot be observed. In order to practice all the commandments it is imperative to reconstruct the Temple.

To begin such work religious preparation is required, yet studies in this field have been neglected. Ariel claims that even if the Israeli government were to permit Jewish religious worship on Temple Mount, it is doubtful whether *halakhic* authorities could be found who could execute the ritual actions relating to the Temple. Training must be provided for worthy individuals and appropriate frameworks for study must be opened; hence Ariel established the Temple Institute as an academic research base—a sort of *halakhic* technical college—equipped with laboratories, lecture halls and research programs.<sup>12</sup> The Institute's activities reflect the belief that human effort can expedite the building of the Temple.

Ariel's demand that the Temple be established here and now may be seen as the product of his coping with cognitive dissonance caused by the gulf between his upbringing, education and elation over the Jewish

return to the Temple Mount, and the fact that messianic Redemption did not immediately follow the military victory.

### **Roger Walkwitz and Messianic Judaism**

Another example of an individual believer who managed to overcome personal prophetic failure with faith intact is Roger Walkwitz (b. 1929), a missionary active in the Messianic Judaism movement. Although the life stories of Yisrael Ariel and Roger Walkwitz are quite different, they share some common points, and the manner in which each recovered from failed prophecies is remarkably similar.

Walkwitz and his wife Naomi gave much of their lives to Christian missionary work. For thirty years these two Presbyterians lived among the native tribes of the Philippines, converting many to Christianity. Over time, however, the couple left their denomination and joined the Messianic Jews, though they have maintained an independent theological position and do not identify entirely with this movement.

In 1967 Roger Walkwitz was living in the cornfields of the Philippines when news of the Six-Day War reached his village. In an interview he described to me how he listened anxiously to a small transistor radio as news came in from the Middle East. He was profoundly concerned for the fate of the State of Israel.<sup>13</sup>

Walkwitz's interest in Israel is based on Dispensationalism, a belief found among evangelical Christians that Endtime events will occur in the near future, and the appearance of Christ on Earth will occur in two phases. In the first, Christ will meet true believers—those who have been born again and have accepted him as their personal redeemer—when they are drawn up to him from Earth, an event known as the Rapture of the Saints. The faithful who died before the Rapture will rise from their graves and join Jesus in the air. True believers will spend seven years in the air with their Messiah (in another version, three and a half years), while the Earth undergoes a time known as the Great Tribulation. This period will include natural disasters—earthquakes, extensive flooding, volcanic eruptions, famine and plague, as well as wars, insurrections, revolutions and the rule of terror over extensive parts of the world. The Jews will return to their land before and during this period “in unbelief,” without accepting Jesus as Messiah. They will establish a State, far removed from the desired kingdom of God, which will be a mere stage in developments preceding the appearance of Christ on Earth. During the Great Tribulation, a false messiah will arise as a leader among the Jews, who will accept him as their redeemer. He will build the Temple, reinstate ritual sacrifice, and introduce a reign of terror. Two-thirds of the Jewish people will be annihilated during this period, which will end when Jesus returns to Earth with the true believers. He will defeat the false messiah, begin a reign of global justice and establish his capital in Jerusalem.

During this thousand-year kingdom peoples and nations will live on their own lands, until Satan launches one final rebellion before being crushed forever. The world will undergo cosmological, geological and climatic changes. God the Father will join his son Jesus in running the planet. The final judgment day will come, sin and death will be vanquished, and a miraculous age of peace will begin.<sup>14</sup>

These were the beliefs Roger Walkwitz held the evening he heard over the radio that the Israeli army had recaptured the Temple Mount. He believed that the apocalyptic predictions, and above all the Rapture of the Saints, would occur that very night. "I had always been taught that once the Jews take Jerusalem, the Messiah will come. So when Jerusalem is conquered the Antichrist will appear and the Church will be taken into the heavens."<sup>15</sup> Walkwitz went to sleep that night fully expecting to awaken in the heavens with the Lord. When morning came, he discovered to his profound disappointment that the end had not come and the world remained unchanged. Days and weeks passed and still nothing transpired.

Walkwitz underwent a searing process of disappointment. He was forced to confront the fact that his personal prophecy had failed. His psychological process, lasting a decade, led him to conclude that although the events of the Endtime were imminent, they would not occur immediately due to the Church's inferior spiritual condition. He reasoned that the early Church introduced substantial distortions into the teachings of Jesus in order to distance itself from Judaism, thus twisting the teachings of the Son of God, a Jew who lived a Jewish way of life. Although Protestant Christianity attempted to correct some of Roman Catholicism's profound doctrinal errors, its teachings became distorted as well. According to Walkwitz, the proper way to bring the kingdom of God closer is through repentance, which requires that true believers once again follow a Jewish way of life, as did Jesus. Only by living a Jewish way of life, as it was lived before the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., can the faithful prepare the way for Jesus to return and redeem the world.

In 1995 Walkwitz established the Asia Pacific Messianic Fellowship to preach his new theology. He is active in drawing new members to this faith, with most coming from the Christian populations of East Asia, and the Philippines in particular, where he has spent most of his life. Walkwitz claims that his movement numbers several hundred individuals. Every year an international conference in the Philippines attracts dozens of participants. He also flies dozens of his supporters to Israel each year for a visit.<sup>16</sup>

### **Individual Responses to Personal Prophetic Failure**

In the cases presented above, the disappointment experienced by Yisrael Ariel and Roger Walkwitz did not weaken their messianic expectations

but merely motivated them to imbue their faith with new theological interpretations. That they were neither obliged to give an accounting to others nor subjected to public criticism and ridicule may have facilitated sober analysis of their failed prophecies and identification of tactical solutions. Each adopted a new approach involving human effort in cooperation with a divine plan, as opposed to expecting divine intervention alone, and continued with their faith. I should emphasize that the process of reinterpretation for both individuals was highly protracted, taking place over decades, but after they found theological solutions for their failures both began to preach their new understandings with vigor, recruiting hundreds of supporters.

In these cases, the two men's revised strategies are ideological correlates of each other, insofar as both attempt to create a kosher/fitting place in which Messiah may dwell. Both Yisrael Ariel and Roger Walkwitz have concluded that the ground must be prepared for the arrival of the King.<sup>17</sup>

### **SMALL GROUPS, PUBLICITY AND PROPHETIC FAILURE**

In contrast, the following case studies involve two small messianic movements active in Israel prior to 2000. Both groups' predictions were well publicized, and subsequently both leaders were unable to provide satisfactory explanations for the failure of their prophecies. The ensuing public criticism contributed to pressures members felt to abandon those predictions, and the movements disintegrated.<sup>18</sup>

#### **Avraham Sheinman and Operation Homeward**

The first movement involved a group of eschatologists called Operation Homeward led by Avraham Sheinman (b. 1957), a resident of the Har Bracha settlement in Samaria (northern West Bank). The movement's supporters included a group of students of Rabbi Meir Kahane (1932–1990), founder of the Kach movement, an extreme rightwing Jewish effort to transform Israel into a *halakhic* theocracy and expel Arabs from the Whole Land of Israel (*Eretz Yisrael HaShlema*). Kahane was assassinated in Manhattan in 1990 by an Arab assailant. In 1994 the Israeli government banned Kach as a terrorist organization after one of its members, American-Israeli settler Baruch Goldstein (1956–1994), fatally shot dozens of Palestinians at a mosque in the Cave of the Patriarchs in the West Bank city of Hebron. The Kach movement, however, has continued in other expressions.

Sheinman was born in Philadelphia to a Conservative Jewish family. His father was active in Meir Kahane's Jewish Defense League (JDL). Sheinman himself joined the JDL at age twelve and met Kahane. He later immigrated to Israel and settled in Har Bracha, where he worked



in public relations. Over time, he developed a three-pronged eschatology: (1) Kahanist messianism, which predicted that during the End of Days, Jews in Diaspora would be able to escape destruction only by moving to Israel;<sup>19</sup> (2) these events would occur following the global collapse of computer networks at the end of 1999, reducing humankind to a base and lawless existence; and (3) the populace's anger at the emerging chaos would be directed at the usual victims—the Jews. Sheinman based this belief on a kabbalistic prophecy that in the Hebrew year 5760 (2000 C.E.) the “countdown” would begin toward the Redemption of Israel. The prophecy appears in two books, *Hesed LeAvraham* and *Galia Raza*, attributed to a group of sixteenth-century mystics in Galilee who developed kabbalistic literature as disciples of “the Ari,” Rabbi Yitzhak Luria (1534–1572). According to the prophecy, 240 years before the sixth Hebrew millennium, a flood would cover the entire world.<sup>20</sup> Sheinman concluded that the meaning of “flood” (*mabul*) in this passage could also refer to a flood of disasters. The Jewish year 5760 would coincide with the Gregorian year 2000.

Sheinman contacted a Jerusalem rabbi who told him that according to kabbalistic sources the amount of water in a ritual purification pool (*mikveh*) is 5760 *beitzim* (“eggs,” a Talmudic unit of measure), and that this number contained a secret clue to a terrible event that would befall the world—a global cleansing that would remove the “forces of impurity, as is written in the Zohar.” This cleansing was due to occur “at the end of the 5,760th year of Creation.”<sup>21</sup> Sheinman did not pay any particular attention to this until his brother sent him material from the United States warning of the “Y2K” crisis involving a breakdown in computers and computer networks at the beginning of 2000. Seeing the grave threat to global economic and social stability, Sheinman developed a deep sense of imminent doom and began to argue that the countdown to danger presented in the ancient Jewish texts was a factual certainty.<sup>22</sup> He did not claim to have received a divine prophecy or have information as to when Messiah would arrive. Rather, he interpreted ancient Jewish sources as stating that within a given period of time, natural and human-made disasters and international conflicts would occur with previously unknown frequency and ferocity, destabilizing the economic, social and physical foundations of the world. These events were liable to erupt around the year 5760/2000.

In a newspaper interview Sheinman explained: “In such a situation of chaos in the world, people will look for someone to blame. The natural victim is the Jews, who always become the scapegoat.”<sup>23</sup> Israel was not safe from the Y2K threat but, since Israel was akin to Noah’s Ark floating above the flood, only by immigrating to Israel could Jews save themselves. “Here in the Land there is a special Providence. The sources hint at revolution and confusion in the world, and state that ‘in this Land I shall grant peace.’ We are not like the other countries, because

there could be tragedy there. There might be problems here, but not to the same degree. Just like in Noah's Ark."<sup>24</sup>

By his own count, Sheinman had ten followers in 1999.<sup>25</sup> As the prophesied date drew near, he and his friends wrote a booklet detailing their apocalyptic predictions and published it on the Internet.<sup>26</sup> Sheinman greatly expanded his website. As 1 January 2000 came and went, the group did not remove its website immediately, but after about two months it was discontinued. After the prophecy's failure Sheinman moved from his apartment and disappeared. A year later I met him by chance in Jerusalem and asked him to explain the failure of his prophecy. He was reluctant to discuss the matter, but he did say, "All the signs showed that this is what should have happened. The chance it would happen was greater than the chance that it would not."<sup>27</sup> He did not continue his eschatological activities.

The case of Sheinman and his supporters shows that a small group that publicizes an eschatological prediction may find it difficult to maintain cohesion when the prophesied event does not occur. After the Y2K crisis failed to produce the apocalyptic chaos the group had predicted, and as the world's computer systems maintained normal operations, group members continued to spread their message over the Internet. Within a few months, however, the group was unable to overcome the resounding failure and members' passion waned. I should emphasize that the failure of his prophecies did not divert Sheinman from his support of Meir Kahane's movement in Israel. The fact that Sheinman was part of a larger religious tradition provided him with a faith-based context that enabled him to accept his prophetic failure while remaining a fervently devout Jew.<sup>28</sup>

### **Yaacov Oved, the Beatnik Messiah**

Another small group whose prophecy failed to materialize was led by Yaacov Oved, a mild-mannered and eloquent man whose eschatological calculations were rooted in a profound understanding of apocalyptic thought. A group of followers formed around him, but the group was not sufficiently united to withstand prophetic failure and it subsequently disintegrated.

Oved is a music producer who spent many years in Toronto. He is married with six children, though his family did not support his predictions. During the two or three years he preached his message, Oved claimed he attracted a group of 30 to 40 supporters, though on the occasions I met him there were just two or three with him. In my opinion this reflected the true number of his disciples.<sup>29</sup>

Oved revealed his predictions in two books, *The Absent Truth* and *God and the Atom*, and he distributed high-quality audiocassettes. His followers placed signs along highways throughout Israel warning of the

impending war of Gog and Magog.<sup>30</sup> To make sure they could be reached at all times, they purchased three mobile telephones (that were disconnected after the prophecy failed).

In one of his newsletters, Oved prophesied that the war of Gog and Magog would begin on 27 Tishrei 5760 (7 October 1999), after which “a process of the purification of Creation” would begin by means of “the uprooting of evil from the world and salvation of the People of Israel.” First, several Arab nations would attack Israel, later to be joined by many nations including Russia and China. To avoid the apocalyptic inferno, people needed to fight the “evil instinct” through cultivating mercy and selfless love. “Selfless love means loving when someone does not deserve to be loved—despite bad behavior toward you, you respond to hatred with love, and thus you love without a reason. Mercy is to give and to enjoy while giving, that is to say—to enjoy the enjoyment of your fellow.” According to Oved, acceptance in the world to come required every Jewish male to perform three main actions: be circumcised, use phylacteries (*tefillin*) in everyday prayer, and observe the Sabbath. “Faith in God means mercy, selfless love, honesty, dignity, patience, understanding, truth, and modesty. The evil impulse is pointless hatred, deceit, evil, anger, hatred, vengeance, dispute, war and pride—idol worship.”<sup>31</sup>

Oved’s remarks were calm, gentle and pleasant in style and content—so much so that he gained the epithet, “beatnik messiah.” Oved was so certain of his beliefs that he urged the public to test his word. According to a newsletter:

On 17 Tishrei 5760, it will already be possible to test whether Yaacov Oved’s prophecy is a lie, since this is not a prophecy of disturbance or an evil decree that can be revoked through penitence and changing actions, but rather a prophecy announcing a date on which evil will begin to be eliminated from the world through the annihilation of the evil impulse and the removal of evil from the world, so that only good shall remain, and there is no return from this date.

He continued by stating that anyone who receives a prophecy from God must proclaim it or face death:

Since if this is a lie, what has he done, after all, in the short time that remains? He explains to people the importance of laying phylacteries and keeping the Sabbath, the importance of the unity of the Jewish people and of coming to peace with each other, how to fight the evil impulse and its properties. . . . So what is the problem? If it emerges in the end that he was lying to us about the date, then in the meantime dozens and hundreds and thousands of people have drawn closer to God. And on that day and date if nothing happens, he will run away with fear that people will rise up and kill him.<sup>32</sup>

Oved's actions on the "day of the apocalypse" were recorded by a journalist. On 7 October 1999, before the Hebrew date of 27 Tishrei arrived, Oved made his way to the studio of Radio Scala in Tel Aviv. He announced that the war of Gog and Magog would erupt at 6:00 that evening with the appearance of three stars (marking the new day according to the Hebrew calendar). At 4:00 P.M. he arrived at the studio and sat down by the microphone, so that when the war broke out he would be able to go on air live and tell the public what to do. The following is an excerpt from an article by Alon Hilo from the newspaper *Tel Aviv* describing Oved's actions beginning at 5:50, ten minutes before the "moment of truth."

"If I had had any doubt, I would not have done what I did. God prophesied. Since the Second Temple was destroyed prophecy has been given to minors and fools, but many people are unfamiliar with the real ruling that states that before messiah arrives, prophecy will return to Israel." Five minutes before the fated time, Oved says: "This is not a prophecy of some disaster, but a prophecy that seeks to save man from the evil of creation that is inherent in everything in us."

*So there is not going to be a war of Gog and Magog?*

"God, blessed be He, will do as He wills. We must pray to Him to take us through this period with understanding and mercy, that we might learn to love each other as He loves us." The telephone rings again. "Not yet, man. There's still time. Three stars haven't come out yet. At any second the state of Creation could change."

*Are people already complaining to you?*

"Not yet." The telephone rings again. "When the stars come out," Oved explains with meek resignation. "Look, what I received, that's what I did, with my whole heart. I didn't make up anything by myself." He rocks restlessly in his chair. He asks for a glass of water. "I'm saying that I received it. It was the real thing," he repeats.

*Maybe it was Satan who came to you in disguise?*

"That's impossible, the message was clearly one of love, giving, and peace."

*18:00*

Oved suddenly gets up and says that he must go out urgently to make an important private call. He rushes out of the room toward the nearby Pinsker Street. [He] takes his mobile phone and moves quickly toward Allenby Street. His gleaming white shirt flashes for a moment in the twilight and then becomes a blurred white stain, making its way at great speed toward the busy street."<sup>33</sup>

Oved returned to his home and family and vanished from the public scene. His profound conviction had led him to state publicly that if

his prophecy failed he could be considered a false prophet. The group was unable to recover from that failure and his followers scattered. Six months after group activists' telephones were disconnected, I called a number and managed to speak briefly with a woman who refused to identify herself and declined to discuss the group in detail, but who stated that this incident was a passing episode and that the group had made a mistake in supporting Yaacov Oved's predictions.<sup>34</sup>

### **Publicity Involving Small Messianic Groups and Their Failed Prophecies**

The two cases above show that when a small messianic group's prophecies fail, it may face a serious crisis and find it difficult to survive. Both of these were small groups with a handful of members who faced strong pressures from family, friends and the media after the failure of the prophecies. Perhaps because of these pressures the members felt compelled to give up faith in the prophecies and move on with their lives.

### **A LARGE MOVEMENT CONCERNED TO PREVENT FAILURE OF PROPHECY: GUSH EMUNIM**

Gush Emunim ("Bloc of the Faithful") is a rightwing movement whose roots reach back to the aftermath of the 1967 Six-Day War, when Moshe Levinger, a disciple of Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook and future leader of Gush Emunim, founded Qiryat Arba, a settlement adjoining the ancient city of Hebron. This settler movement was formalized and called Gush Emunim by young religious Zionists in March 1974 following the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Led by a group of graduates of Mercaz HaRav Yeshiva under the leadership of Kook, the movement managed to secure the support of secular public figures such as poet Naomi Shemer (1930–2004) and retired General and former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon (b. 1928), who saw the settlers as continuing their own history of settlement and Zionism. The continuing goal of Gush Emunim is to settle and annex areas in the West Bank and Gaza occupied by Israel following the Six-Day War—areas it considers part of the biblical Land of Israel—in order to prevent Israeli withdrawal as part of future Arab-Israeli peace efforts.

Mercaz HaRav Yeshiva promotes the belief that the return of the Jews to the Land of Israel under the auspices of the secular Zionist movement is the first stage in God's plan of Redemption (the spectacular 1967 Israeli victory is understood as an even more advanced stage in that process). The Land of Israel and the State of Israel are both intrinsically holy and they complement and complete each other. This has not always been reflected in reality, however.

The 1978 Israeli-Egyptian peace process, Israel's 1982 withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula, and the Madrid Conference (1991) and Oslo Accord (1993) leading to Israel's withdrawal from parts of Judea and Samaria all conspired to force many Gush Emunim supporters to confront the erosion of their basic beliefs regarding the character and destiny of the State of Israel. This profound theological crisis was intensified by the 2005 demolition of Jewish settlements during Israel's disengagement from the Gaza Strip. The fundamental religious dilemma was profound: how could a State that uproots Jewish settlements and hands over parts of the biblical Land of Israel to Arab rule be considered absolutely sacred? What sublime religious meaning could be attributed to the actions of a secular State that is unaware of its purpose and threatens to destroy by its own actions the chance of realizing the messianic hope?

According to the settler rabbis, the messianic process was tilted off course by the State of Israel's refusal to acknowledge its divine mission, and a solution was to reinforce the Jewish bond with the Temple Mount and the idea of establishment of the Third Temple as a manifestation of messianic realization. In 1996 the Committee of Yesha Rabbis (from settlements in the West Bank and Gaza) ruled that Jews are permitted and even encouraged to enter the Temple Mount. The Committee imposed restrictions regarding specific areas of entry and urged visitors to undertake special ritual purification before doing so. Every rabbi was encouraged "to go up himself, and to guide his congregants on how to do so in accordance with all the constrictions of *halakha*."<sup>35</sup>

The ruling, however, is contrary to longstanding religious edicts as well as the position of the Chief Rabbinate and the opinion of the majority of Haredi (Ultra-Orthodox) rabbis, all of whom assert that it is a grave religious transgression for Jews to enter the Temple Mount. According to *halakha*, all Jews must be ritually cleansed before entering the Temple. During the Second Temple Period (536 B.C.E.–70 C.E.), they were cleansed by "sin water," or water mixed with the ashes of a ritually sacrificed red heifer. Since the destruction of the Second Temple, red heifers have not been available. Moreover, the precise dimensions of the Temple have been lost, including the location of the *Kodesh Kodashim*—the Holy of Holies—identified as the dwelling place of *Shekhina*, the Divine Presence. Entry into this area was absolutely prohibited except for the High Priest (who was cleansed with "sin water" before performing his sacred duties) on the Day of Atonement. Since the location of the Temple is no longer known and since red heifers are unavailable, numerous *halakhic* rulings prohibit Jews from entering the entire Temple Mount area, even though this area is known to be bigger than that of the Temple itself.<sup>36</sup> Accordingly, a Jew who enters the Temple Mount incurs the penalty of *karet* (divinely imposed death penalty).

Concern among Gush Emunim adherents at the possible failure to establish “Greater Israel” led to strengthened religious practice and intensified messianic expectation as some members of the Committee of Yesha Rabbis began to teach that the faithful were facing the ultimate test. An increasing number of religious authorities, including leaders of the settlers movement, began to interpret Israel’s withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza as divine punishment for lack of attention to the Temple Mount, due to the rabbinical prohibition against entering the site. For example, Dov Lior (b. 1933), rabbi of Qiryat Arba and a leader in contemporary religious Zionism, stated:

We, who believe in reward and punishment and in Divine providence, must know that one of the main reasons why we are suffering torment is the profound apathy among large sections of our people concerning the Temple Mount in general and the construction of the Temple, in particular.<sup>37</sup>

The fear of further concessions to Palestinians led to practical measures designed to thwart any such developments. In 1996, during the high point of opposition among settlers to the Oslo process, the Committee of Yesha Rabbis issued its bold ruling urging all rabbis to acknowledge that it was permissible for Jews to enter the Temple Mount, a necessary response to “the facts that are being established on the ground by the Arabs.”<sup>38</sup> The *halakhic* prohibition against entering the site and the resulting lack of Jewish presence there had led the Israeli government to consider the site as being one that could be easily relinquished. Accordingly, if masses of Jews began entering the Mount to pray, it would be harder for the government to transfer it to the Palestinian Authority.<sup>39</sup> In 2003 the Temple Mount was reopened to Jewish visitors after a three-year closure following the Al-Aqsa Intifada.<sup>40</sup> Every day since, dozens if not hundreds of Jews (mainly students from the nationalist *yeshivas*) visit the Temple Mount and engage in solitary prayer. According to Israeli police records, some 70,000 Jews visited the site between November 2003 and October 2004.<sup>41</sup>

This example shows that the settler rabbis’ decision to permit Jews into the Temple Mount and the massive number of such visits since 2003 reflect the potential cognitive dissonance faced by the Gush Emunim movement. The demand to enter the Temple Mount was a logical response to the fear of prophetic failure resulting from the desire to see Israel move toward religious Redemption on the one hand and the realities of the peace process on the other. According to the Gush Emunim perspective, the Arab-Israeli peace process, along with the secular State of Israel’s relinquishment of territories, threatened to foil the anticipated Redemption. Gush Emunim activists responded by focusing on the Temple Mount and heightening messianic expectations in an

attempt to accelerate the process of Redemption and prevent the failure of the predicted collective salvation.<sup>42</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This article has sought to fill the gap in the study of messianic and millennial anticipation by providing case studies of three major types of messianic crisis situations and the ways in which individuals, small groups and diffuse movements in Israel have coped with failed prophecy.

Individuals who are privately convinced Messiah will appear at a particular time but who are then disappointed may identify a tactical explanation for their error and experience a strengthening of faith. They may successfully revise the prophecy and then proselytize to attract others to a movement they believe will create the necessary conditions for redemptive fulfillment. Because they did not publicly promote the prophecy that failed, they do not face pressure to admit its failure. In the case of small groups whose predictions are publicized, however, members may find themselves facing a particularly sharp crisis, since they cannot avoid social criticism and scorn. They may be unable to devise a means to cope with the failure and maintain their group cohesiveness. In large and diffuse messianic movements facing increasing signs of failed prophecy, members may experience the stress of cognitive dissonance even though failure is not yet certain. Group leaders may reinterpret scriptural sources and encourage intensification of members' activities with the aim of preventing the failure of prophecy concerning Redemption.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> In this study of Jewish and Israeli cases, I prefer not to use the terms "millennialism" or "millenarianism" to describe prophetic End of Days beliefs, due to Christian connotations of these terms. I use "messianism" to describe similar beliefs in an anticipated collective Redemption, often considered to be accomplished miraculously through divine intervention—or by human effort cooperating with divine will and acting according to a divine plan—since this is the term usually used in Jewish traditions and studies. See Catherine Wessinger, "Millennialism with and without the Mayhem," in *Millennium, Messiahs, and Mayhem: Contemporary Apocalyptic Movements*, ed. Thomas Robbins and Susan J. Palmer (New York: Routledge, 1997), 47–59, for a discussion of definitional categories building on the classic definition of "millennialism" provided by Norman Cohn.

<sup>2</sup> See Lorne L. Dawson, "When Prophecy Fails and Faith Persists: A Theoretical Overview," *Nova Religio* 3, no. 1 (October 1999): 60–82; Jon R. Stone, "Prophecy and Dissonance: A Reassessment of Research Testing the Festinger Theory," *Nova Religio* 12, no. 4 (May 2009): 72–90.



<sup>3</sup> “Cognitive dissonance” refers to the distress caused when two contradictory ideas, or cognitions, are held simultaneously. In the case of a messianic or millennial individual or group, cognitive dissonance is said to occur when a fervently held belief appears to be contradicted by empirical evidence. Cognitive dissonance theory argues that persons will be highly motivated to resolve this tension, either by abandoning the original belief, changing or reinterpreting the belief, or taking the position that the original belief was correct but not fully understood at the earlier time. In the case of messianic or millennial predictions, believers have a variety of options, including the conclusion that the prophecy was fulfilled in a spiritual manner, or that believers’ shortcomings prevented the prophecy from being fulfilled. Leon Festinger is a pioneer in cognitive dissonance theory, particularly in his co-authored book, Leon Festinger, Henry W. Reicken, and Stanley Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails: A Social and Psychological Study of A Modern Group That Predicted the Destruction of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956); see also Jon R. Stone, ed., *Expecting Armageddon: Essential Readings in Failed Prophecy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> Other scholarly works on this topic include: Gordon Melton, “Spiritualization and Reaffirmation: What Really Happens When Prophecy Fails,” *American Studies* 26, no. 2 (1985): 17–29; Joseph F. Zygmunt, “Prophetic Failure and Chiliastic Identity: The Case of the Jehovah’s Witnesses,” *American Journal of Sociology* 75, no. 6 (1970): 926–48; Richard Singelenberg, “It Separated the Wheat from the Chaff: The ‘1975’ Prophecy and Its Impact among Dutch Jehovah’s Witnesses,” *Sociological Analysis* 50, no. 1 (1989): 23–40; Jane Allyn Hardyck and Marcia Braden, “Prophecy Fails Again: A Report of a Failure to Replicate,” *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 65, no. 2 (1962): 136–41; Diana Tumminia, “How Prophecy Never Fails: Interpretive Reason in a Flying-Saucer Group,” *Sociology of Religion* 59, no. 2 (1998): 157–70.

<sup>5</sup> Other movements include Chai Vekaim headed by Yehuda Etzion; the Movement for the Establishment of the Temple; and the Temple Mount Faithful headed by Gershon Solomon. For further details on the different movements see Motti Inbari, *Jewish Fundamentalism and the Temple Mount: Who Will Build the Third Temple?* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Aviezer Ravitzky, *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism*, trans. Michael Swirsky and Jonathan Chipman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 122–44.

<sup>7</sup> Ravitzky, *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism*, 136–41.

<sup>8</sup> Dov Schwartz, *Faith at the Crossroads: A Theological Profile of Religious Zionism*, trans. Batya Stein (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 156–92.

<sup>9</sup> See Shmuel Berkovitz, *The Temple Mount and the Western Wall in Israeli Law* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Institute for the Study of Israel, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> “Two Thousand Years in One Instant: An Interview with Rabbi Yisrael Ariel,” *Or Chazer* 7 (5751/1991). The interview was reprinted in full in *Yibaneh Hamikdash* 44 (5751/1991), 15–17, and *Yibaneh Hamikdash* 45 (5751/1991), 18–19 (in Hebrew). For a recent recounting of the meaning given to his 1967 participation in the retaking of Temple Mount, see “Jerusalem Day: Reflections by Yisrael Ariel” (English subtitles) (Jerusalem: Temple Institute, 2009), posted on YouTube at

<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uBS9K-pT12k>> to commemorate Jerusalem Day, 21 May 2009.

<sup>11</sup> Yisrael Ariel, *Prayerbook for the Temple (Sefarad Ritual) B* (Jerusalem: Karta, 1996), 526 (in Hebrew). The translation is taken from the Temple Institute's website: <<http://www.templeinstitute.org/about.htm>>.

<sup>12</sup> Unsigned, "Codex," *Yibaneh Hamikdash* 29 (5750/1990), 19–23.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Roger Walkwitz, 12 March 2007, Gainesville, Florida.

<sup>14</sup> Yaakov Ariel, *On Behalf of Israel: American Fundamentalist Attitudes toward Jews, Judaism, and Zionism 1865–1945* (New York: Carlson Publishing, 1991), 1–25.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Roger Walkwitz, 12 March 2007.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Roger Walkwitz, 12 March 2007. See also *Roger Walkwitz, According to Roger: My Journey Into Bible Truth* (Quezon City, Philippines: self-publication, 2009).

<sup>17</sup> I thank Deborah Halter for highlighting this point.

<sup>18</sup> As a point of comparison, see Kenneth Newport's description of how Florence Houteff and her executive council eventually disbanded the General Association of the Davidian Seventh-day Adventists, after the publicized prediction of apocalyptic events based on the prophetic biblical interpretations of her husband, Victor Houteff (1885–1955), failed to materialize in 1959. Kenneth G. C. Newport, *The Branch Davidians of Waco: The History and Beliefs of an Apocalyptic Sect* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 95–114.

<sup>19</sup> For a description of the main features of Kahanist ideology, see Aviezer Ravitzky, "The Roots of the Kahanism: Consciousness and Political Reality," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 39 (1986): 90–108. It is worth noting that Kahane himself had eschatological emphases; accordingly it is hardly surprising that his students continued this approach. See Meir Kahane, *Forty Years* (Brooklyn: Institute of the Jewish Idea, 1983).

<sup>20</sup> Rachel Elior, *Galia Raza: Critical Edition*, Institute of Jewish Studies Research Project, Publication Series A (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Press, 5741/1981), 61–68 (in Hebrew).

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Avraham Sheinman, 30 October 1999.

<sup>22</sup> Sheinman based his analysis on a website written by Gary North, a rightwing conservative American and active participant in the Christian Reconstructionism movement. See <<http://www.garynorth.com>>, accessed 10 June 2009. For further details on evangelical Christian responses to the Y2K crisis, see Douglas E. Cowan, "Confronting the Failed Failure: Y2K and Evangelical Eschatology in Light of the Passed Millennium," *Nova Religio* 7, no. 2 (November 2003): 71–85.

<sup>23</sup> Lili Galili, "The Americans Are Also Looking for Jewish Cults," *Ha'aretz*, 7 November 1999, 1, 10 (in Hebrew).

<sup>24</sup> Website <<http://noahark2000.com>>, now defunct.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Avraham Sheinman, 30 October 1999, in Jerusalem.

<sup>26</sup> Gershom Gorenberg, "The Kosher Franchise at the End of the Universe," *Jerusalem Report*, 15 February 1999, 50.

<sup>27</sup> An Interview with Avraham Sheinman, March 2001, Jerusalem. For further discussion of this case, see Motti Inbari, "When Prophecy Fails: Jewish Eschatologists

Nearing the Millennium,” in *The War of Gog and Magog: Messianism and Apocalypse in the Past and in Modern Times* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Acharonot Publishers, 2001), 298–312 (in Hebrew).

<sup>28</sup> See Robert W. Balch, Gwen Farnsworth, and Sue Wilkins, “When the Bombs Drop: Reaction to Disconfirmed Prophecy in a Millennial Sect,” *Sociological Perspectives* 26, no. 2 (1983): 137–58; Robert W. Balch, John Domitrovitch, Barbara Lynn Mahnke, and Vanessa Morrison, “Fifteen Years of Failed Prophecy: Coping with Cognitive Dissonance in a Bahai Sect,” in Robbins and Palmer, *Millennium, Messiahs, and Mayhem*, 73–92.

<sup>29</sup> Interviews with Yaakov Oved, October 1998 and May 1999, Tel-Aviv.

<sup>30</sup> The earliest reference to the battle between Gog and Magog is Ezekiel 38:2–3. This battle is associated with the End of Days in subsequent Jewish traditions. An interesting aspect of Oved’s interpretation was his belief that during the war of Gog and Magog aliens from outer space would be revealed to the public at large.

<sup>31</sup> Unsigned leaflet, “The Prophecy of Redemption,” Kislev 5758 (October 1998) (in Hebrew).

<sup>32</sup> Unsigned leaflet, “The Prophecy of Redemption.”

<sup>33</sup> Alon Hilo, “He Didn’t Even Call,” *Iton Tel Aviv*, 15 October 1999.

<sup>34</sup> Telephone conversation, 8 May 2000.

<sup>35</sup> Decision of the Committee of Yesha Rabbis, 18 Shevat 5756 (7 February 1996) (in Hebrew).

<sup>36</sup> For further discussion of *karet*, see Israel M. Ta-Shma, “Karet,” *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Geoffrey Wigoder, vol. 10 (Jerusalem: Macmillan, 1971), 788–89. On the *halakhic* debate concerning entering the Temple Mount, see *The Oral Law*, 10 (5728/1967) (in Hebrew); Shaul Sheffer, *The Temple Mount: Crown of Our Glory* (Jerusalem: Yefe Nof, 5729/1968), 61–68 (in Hebrew). A list of thirty *halakhic* rulings prohibiting Jews from entering the Temple Mount was collected by scholars at Ateret Cohanim yeshiva and collated in the booklet, *Iturei Cohanim*, 16 (5746/1985) (in Hebrew). The list includes the ruling issued by the Chief Rabbinate in 1967. In a groundbreaking step, leaders of the Haredi public added their names to this ruling, as did Rabbi Zvi Yehudah Kook, head of Mercaz HaRav Yeshiva.

<sup>37</sup> *Yibaneh Hamikdash* 111–12 (5757/1996), 4 (in Hebrew).

<sup>38</sup> Decision of the Committee of Yesha Rabbis, 18 Shevat 5766/1996.

<sup>39</sup> Decision of the Committee of Yesha Rabbis, 18 Shevat 5766/1996.

<sup>40</sup> The second Palestinian uprising that began in September 2000.

<sup>41</sup> This figure is mentioned in a letter from Minister Tzahi Hanegbi published in *Yibaneh Hamikdash*, 206/7 (5765/2005), 9 (in Hebrew). It may be assumed that most of those who visit the Temple Mount do so for religious reasons, since there has not been any dramatic resurgence of Jewish tourism to the site.

<sup>42</sup> Motti Inbari, “Religious Zionism and the Temple Mount Dilemma,” *Israel Studies* 12, no. 2 (2007): 29–47.