
Motti Inbari, Dr.

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In 1965 a septuagenarian ultra-Orthodox Rabbi named Amram Blau married a young French convert to Judaism twenty-six years his junior. The marriage became a major scandal that deeply fractured the extremist anti-Zionist Orthodox community of Jerusalem known as the Neturei Karta, an Aramaic term for the “Guardians of the City.” The name comes from a Talmudic story (Palestinian Talmud 1:7 [76c]) in which certain rabbis were sent around the Land of Israel after the destruction of the ancient Jerusalem Temple to reestablish Jewish learning there. When they arrived in a certain city in which there was no learning, they asked for the guardians of the city. They were brought the armed city guard, after which the rabbis exclaimed, “These are not the guardians of the city. These are the destroyers of the city!” When they were asked whom they would consider guardians of the city, they replied, “Scribes and scholars, as it is written (Psalms 127:1), Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor on it in vain; unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman keeps vigil in vain.”

The story is understood by the Neturei Karta as a mashal or parable with a moral lesson: The scribes and scholars of the narrative are the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community who represent the divine will. The armed city guard is the Jews attempting to build up the city of Jerusalem and the State of Israel through Zionist activism. The Zionists labor in vain and in fact progress only toward their own destruction because it is God alone who can bring Redemption to the people and the land of Israel. Any attempt to force the messianic advent will only bring disaster. The role of the Jewish people, therefore, is to remain passive and await the arrival of the long-anticipated Divine Redemption. Any attempt to hasten it is an act of rebellion against the will of God.

Most of world Jewry today is supportive of the Zionist project, though this was not always the case. Before the Holocaust, most Jews in the world were indifferent if not unfriendly to Zionism. The reason hearkens all the way back to the destruction of the ancient Temple in Jerusalem and the failure of a subsequent Jewish revolt against the Roman Empire that nearly destroyed the Jewish people. As a result of these twin fiascos, the surviving Jewish leadership effectively “re-tooled” Judaism from an ardent and even militant expression of messianic activism to one that extolled messianic passivity. The sages of the Talmud determined that it was Jewish destiny to await the inevitable but mysterious coming of the messiah who would serve God in redeeming the Jews and the entire world. Trying to hasten that redemption

would only anger God and bring about horrific divine punishment. And in fact a few messianic movements in the Middle Ages, such as the famous case of the false messiah Shabbtai Tzvi in the seventeenth century, did indeed bring disaster to tens of thousands of Jews who abandoned their homes and possessions to follow the messianic pretender to the Holy Land. They lost their livelihoods and their lives in the process.

The Holocaust drastically changed that perspective. Most of the Jewish world that had opposed Zionism was destroyed in the death camps, and most Jews who survived came to believe that the creation of a state in which Jews would be in control of their political destiny was the only way to ensure Jewish survival in a new and more dangerous world.

Today, only two Orthodox Jewish groups continue to vehemently oppose Zionism. These are the Neturei Karta founded in Jerusalem by Rabbi Amram Blau and the Satmar branch of Hasidism originally led by Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum. Both communities are extremely insular and difficult to penetrate by anyone who is not of them. What’s more, the writings they produce about themselves and their leaders are highly tendentious and hagiographic. That is why the scandalous wedding of Rabbi Blau and Ruth Ben-David is of interest. The affair infuriated the nine children from Blau’s deceased first wife Hinde who died less than a year before the “vort,” the traditional engagement agreement for the new marriage, was signed. The children essentially shunned their father and his new wife and took most of the community with them. When Blau died ten years later while his new wife Ruth Ben-David was in Australia, they buried his body alongside his first wife. Ben David was unable even to attend the funeral.

Ben-David was in possession of Blau’s personal archive, but she never allowed the valuable cache of original papers to come into the possession of the family and community that rejected her. Some years after her death, those archives were transferred to Boston University through the intermediation of Elie Wiesel. This is something of a coup, since it is rare that original papers and correspondence may be viewed unfiltered from such insular communities. The author of this book, Motti Inbari, was informed of the archive shortly after its arrival in Boston, so he is one of the first to access a trove of original information about the most radical Jewish anti-Zionist organization.

The book is not only about Neturei Karta. It also treats a much larger anti-Zionist group in the Satmar Hasidim of New York, and its major purpose is less to chronicle their positions on Zionism that it is to understand their response to modernity in general. In fact, this book is Inbari’s second to treat radical messianic Orthodox Jewish groups. His first book, *Messianic Religious Zionism Confronts Israeli Territorial Compromises* (2012), treats the active, “positive” messianism of Religious Zionism, a form of Orthodox Judaism
and Jewish millenarianism that in its more radical extreme has sanctioned the killing of Palestinians and the expropriation of their lands and properties in the name of rebuilding the Land of Israel as part of God’s messianic plan. This book is about the passive form of Jewish millenarianism, which he terms “negative” messianism as expressed by ultra-Orthodox Jewish groups that vilify the very existence of Religious Zionism as a travesty working against God’s messianic plan.

Inbari defines these latter groups as “radical ultra-Orthodoxy,” the third of three types of Orthodox Judaism that emerged out of the heterogeneous mass of Jewish customs and practice of the pre-modern period. With the coming of European modernity it suddenly became possible for Jews to become integrated into the modern world beginning in the eighteenth century. By the nineteenth century many Jews were assimilating and losing their distinctive identity altogether. Others formed modernizing movements (or “branches,” “sects”) of Judaism such as the Reform and Conservative movements. Still others chose to open up to those aspects of modernity that would not impact the strict behavioral and ritual requirements of Jewish tradition, thus forming Orthodox Judaism. Many traditional Jews became alarmed and opposed to the changes; they decided that their only alternative to the powerful enticements of modernity was to isolate themselves entirely from the modern world, both geographically and socially. That included divorcing themselves from the world of modernizing Jews who were taking on any level of the contemporary lifestyles. Those Jews who intended to wall themselves off entirely are today called “ultra-Orthodox” or “Haredi,” and they comprise a variety of communities organized either around styles of traditional Jewish learning or rabbinic dynasties from the mystical stream of pre-modern Judaism.

But the ultra-Orthodox communities found that they were unable to isolate themselves entirely. They were legally required by the European nation-states in which they lived to teach their children the local languages and certain universal subjects in their schools, and some decided that they needed to be involved in one way or another in local affairs for their own benefit and protection. And in Palestine where the Zionist movement had gained control over the Jewish community in the early twentieth century, most of the ultra-Orthodox slowly began to cooperate even with modernizing Jews who were most threatening to their sense of identity. That motivated a few small groups to remove themselves even from the ultra-Orthodox community and form entirely separate enclaves of radical ultra-Orthodoxy. Most of these groups were wiped out in the Holocaust, but remnants survived and were reorganized after the War in New York and Palestine, soon to become the State of Israel.

Motti Inbari treats these communities in detail, not only chronicling their genesis and history, but most importantly, the history of their interactions
and conflicts with other Jewish communities with which they were forced by circumstance to interact. There is nothing in this book that is not extremely interesting. It begins with an introduction to the trends summarized above and then swiftly moves into the history and politics of the founding of the Neturei Karta. A key early incident in this history is the fascinating affair of Jacob Israel de Haan, a homosexual, multi-lingual Dutch free-thinker, novelist and journalist turned ultra-Orthodox Jew, who became a lobbyist for the branch of Palestinian ultra-Orthodoxy that would become the Neturei Karta. Although a Zionist himself for a time, he quit the Zionist community and worked to support the Haredi community’s determination to avoid being subject to the authority of the Zionist leadership. Eventually he was assassinated by Zionists for promoting the so-called “Arab option” after negotiating with members of the Hashemite tribe in Arabia that would eventually be granted the lands of Transjordan by the British.

Chapters 2 and 3 treat the life and perspective of Rabbi Amram Blau in Jerusalem, including his ongoing campaigns against modernizing tendencies not only within his small ultra-Orthodox community but also within the neighboring ultra-Orthodox camp and even in the large and growing secular Zionist Jewish community. Blau was an organizer and institution-maker rather than a Torah scholar, and Inbari suggests some interesting and new motivations for his uncompromising zealotry based on the new material available in the Blau archives. He also examines the messianic ideologies that influenced Blau and suggests, with considerable acumen, that Blau’s predecessor Rabbi Chaim Elazar Shapira believed that the messianic redeemer would be announced in his own lifetime. In fact, says Inbari, he believed that he himself may have been a candidate. The discussion of the active messianism among some ultra-Orthodox Hasidic communities, including the well-known Habad Hasidim (Lubovitch) and their last rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneersohn, informs current discussions about the impact of active messianism among ultra-Orthodox communities to this day.

Chapters 4 and 5 move back to Europe and back in time to pre- and inter-war Hungary and particularly to the county of Maramaros (Maramureș in Romanian) where ultra-Orthodoxy first took root. For this community there is no accessible archive with original papers, so Inbari is confronted with the problem of working with highly hagiographic sources. Luckily, there are a significant number of studies of ultra-Orthodoxy since the pioneering work of Jacob Katz, but most are written in Hebrew and are therefore inaccessible to non-Hebrew speaking scholars. One of Inbari’s important contributions in his books is his making much of this scholarship accessible to the non-Hebrew speaking public.
As Professor Inbari points out, a great irony of this history is that the most powerful contemporary opponent of Zionism, Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum, was rescued from the Holocaust through Zionist intervention. New to me is the evidence of Teitelbaum’s obsessive compulsion disorder that hindered his ability to work in his younger years in Hungary and most likely influenced his extreme views on a common Jewish problem of purity and pollution. It also may have influenced his views on Jerusalem and the ultimate decision to re-establish the Satmar community after WWII not in the holy city of Jerusalem or elsewhere in the Holy Land, but in New York. Inbari compares and contrasts the particular positions taken on social and political issues by the Satmar under Teitelbaum and the Neturei Karta under Blau.

In chapter 6, the book moves from the particular to the general by treating the eschatologies and worldviews of the radical ultra-Orthodox communities. This includes, among other issues, the powerful binary perspective of these communities that pits the forces of good (their own communities, of course) against all the many forces of evil, including other Jewish religious and political camps and even those camps of Orthodox Jews that they considered accommodating to modernity. This perspective began in Hungary with the schism in the mid-nineteenth century between the various modernist schools and ultra-conservative groups. In the ultra-Orthodox view, the degenerate nature of the modern era was considered so threatening that it seemed to represent the rise of horrific satanic powers that, according to some Jewish sources, will erupt prior to the advent of an expected apocalyptic divine redemption.

Given the history of Jewish persecution and the resultant tradition of Jewish solidarity in the face of oppression, it was shocking to these hyper-conservative Jews to observe the majority of the Jewish world succumbing to the satanic temptations of modernity. Some explained the overwhelming Jewish abandonment of their religious tradition through the myth of the *erev rav*, the “mixed multitude” that accompanied the Israelites when they were redeemed from Egyptian bondage (Exodus 12:37–38). According to a few traditional Jewish sources, this *erev rav* was not pure Israelite, and they were therefore responsible for the various internal problems that confronted the Israelite community during the generation of desert wandering. Some Kabbalistic works suggest that the souls of the *erev rav* in that ancient generation are perpetually reincarnated and continue to wreak havoc within the Jewish community, thus explaining the modernists’ rejection of Jewish tradition and providing a pretext for abandoning other Jews as they closed themselves off from even the Jewish world. This essentializing, racist position conflicts with the normative view in the Talmud (Sanhedrin 44a and elsewhere) that despite sin and even radical transgression, all Jews remain part of the covenanted community.
The final chapter treats Jewish zealotry past and present by comparing the zealous positions and behaviors of messianic Religious Zionism (the theme of Inbari’s first book) and radical ultra-Orthodoxy (the theme of the present book) with the famous radical and violent Jewish zealotry of the Second Temple Period. He notes, in conclusion, that while the rhetoric of contemporary Jewish zealotry among both messianic Religious Zionism and radical ultra-Orthodoxy can be extremely violent, their actions are not. “The zealotry they seek to apply is one of protest and reproach, insularity and demonstration” (202). I would suggest, however, that the repeated use of violent language, even limited to the rhetorical sense, can and often does lead to violent behaviors upon community fractionalization and the growth of new leaderships. In an epilogue, Inbari then tracks some of the most important current social, political and educational trends within the ultra-Orthodox and radical ultra-Orthodox communities.

This book is significant for a number of reasons in addition to those mentioned above. It seeks to place current expressions of Jewish fundamentalism within the rubric of religious fundamentalism studied by such researchers as Martin Marty and Scott Appleby, and it raises a number of important issues about the processes and nature of contemporary Jewish religious radicalism. While the level of physical violence within contemporary Jewish religious radicalism comes nowhere near the level in, say, contemporary Islamic religious radicalism, the seed has been sown in the violent rhetoric and apocalyptic worldviews among ultra-Orthodox Jewish messianists. It is already producing a significant rise in physical violence among Jews that reflects a changing view regarding the use of violence in the name of religion.

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