

Can Judaism Survive a Messianic Dictatorship in Israel?

What will happen to Judaism if Israeli democracy is destroyed by supremacist zealots



Aerial view of Hawara village, following the February rampage there of Jews who were avenging an earlier terror attack. Credit: Ilya Yefimovich/DPA



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Jews around the world will shortly commemorate Tisha B'Av, the fast day marking the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians and of the Second Temple by the Romans. Can Judaism survive the destruction of the Third Temple – the prosperous Israeli democracy – this time by the Jews themselves? And what would such destruction look like?

Two weeks ago I went to Beit Shemesh, a predominantly religious city, to take part in a [pro-democracy rally](#). Hundreds of people participated: religious and secular, women and men, straight people and LGBTQ people, Ashkenazi and Mizrahi, and everyone in between. Opposite us, there was a counter-rally of government supporters. There were only a handful of people, but they were armed with huge loudspeakers that amplified live speeches intermingled with recorded songs. “That’s how it is every week,” explained the old hands. “The other side cannot bring many people, so they fill their ranks with loudspeakers.” To prove their point, they played me recordings of some of the speeches and songs played over pro-government loudspeakers on previous occasions.

One of the songs in particular caught my attention. In the following days, I found myself inadvertently humming it. It had a catchy tune. But the words were utterly shocking. The song was written about [events in the West Bank town of Hawara](#) this past February. After a Palestinian shot and killed two Israelis who were driving through Hawara, gangs of right-wing activists entered the town, set fire to houses, cars and other property, and wounded dozens of Palestinians, without the Israeli security forces doing much to protect the locals. Many described it as a pogrom, but the leader of the Religious Zionism party, Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, supported the attack and publicly [called for Hawara to be “wiped out.”](#) In a similar spirit, the pro-government loudspeakers in Beit Shemesh sounded out the following gleeful song:

*Who is going up in flames now? – Hawara! Houses and cars! –
Hawara!
They are evacuating old ladies, women and young girls, it is
burning all night! – Hawara!
Burn their trucks! – Hawara!
Burn the roads and cars! – Hawara!*

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I later looked for the song on YouTube, and found that it's had thousands of views. One Israeli YouTube channel accompanied with it a request of viewers to share, "with all your might, to show everyone that just as Hawara is burning, so is our faith." I hummed the tune, and thought about the meaning of "destruction."



"The Destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.," engraving by Louis Haghe after a painting by David Roberts. Credit: Stapleton Collection / Corbis

What is destruction, and can Judaism survive a Third Destruction? One scenario is easy to imagine, because we all know it well from the destruction of the Second Temple. The Second Temple was destroyed by religious fanaticism. During the Great Jewish Revolt (66–73 C.E.), messianic Zealots took over the Jewish community in the Holy Land, killed or silenced all moderate voices, and out of burning faith in their own infallibility, led the Jewish people to political and economic destruction.

If the Third Destruction looks like the second, then no matter how terrible it is, we can hope that Judaism will survive, because this kind of destruction is Judaism's formative event, and Jews are well-drilled in it. The Judaism of the Mishna and Talmud sprouted out of the smoldering ruins that the Zealots left in their wake. For the next 2,000 years, Judaism withstood repeated acts of political and economic destruction, such as the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, the Khmelnytsky massacres in Ukraine, and the Holocaust. It seemed that there is a fixed Jewish script, according to which the Jews build a political and economic center somewhere – in the Holy Land, Spain or Eastern and Central Europe – but just when they reach an apogee of prosperity, a terrible calamity befalls them, and they later have to pick up the pieces and start all over again.

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But what if the Third Destruction is different? What if this time the Zealots succeeded in creating a messianic state that would destroy Israeli democracy and would persecute Arabs, secular people, women and LGBTQ people? What if that state were to embrace a racist ideology of Jewish supremacy – but thanks to its nuclear weapons and cyber industries, it managed to avoid for some time economic and political destruction? If this were to happen, then Judaism would have to deal with an unprecedented kind of destruction – a spiritual destruction.

Imagine a world in which Jews can no longer excuse incidents like Hawara as the handiwork of an extremist minority, because the gangs that burned Hawara turned out to be the pillar of fire guiding the entire Jewish nation? Imagine a world where Judaism discards the spiritual and moral legacy it has accumulated over generations, burns down “love your neighbor as yourself” and sets fire to “you shall not covet your neighbor’s house.” Imagine a world in which “Judaism” becomes a synonym for religious fanaticism, racism and brutal oppression. Could Judaism survive such a spiritual destruction?

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What could religious Zionists tell themselves

Out of the different streams of Judaism, religious Zionists will probably find it most difficult to cope with such a spiritual destruction, because they will be the main party responsible for bringing it on. For generations, religious Zionism produced leaders, thinkers, scholars, scientists, military officers and thousands of other dedicated and selfless people who made important contributions to the State of Israel and even to the whole world. But religious Zionism also pushed itself into a difficult historical corner, by taking upon itself the leadership role first in the settlement project and now also in the antidemocratic power-grab shaking Israel to its foundations.

The problem started when many of the leaders and thinkers of religious Zionism argued that their way was superior to that of any other Jewish stream. On the one hand, they claimed that religious Zionism was superior to secular Zionism, because secular Jews had abandoned the Torah and halakha (religious law), and had adopted a materialistic and immoral worldview. On the other hand, they claimed that religious Zionism was superior to the Haredi stream, because though ultra-Orthodox Jews study the Torah and observe halakha scrupulously, they have made no attempt to improve the world (tikkun olam) outside their own yeshivas and neighborhoods. Religious Zionists have claimed that they have found the ideal middle path. They study Torah and observe Jewish law like the Haredim, while also being active in the world like secular Jews.





Credit: Alex Levac

But in order to prove its superiority, religious Zionism needed to accomplish some big historical project. Secular Zionism proved itself through such a project – the establishment of the State of Israel. True, religious Zionism also played an important role in establishing Israel, but in that case it was only playing second fiddle. Where could religious Zionists find their big historical project, which they themselves could lead? After 1967, religious Zionism chose the settlement project to be its flagship enterprise, which would fulfill its destiny and prove its moral superiority. Was this choice a historical accident, or an inevitable tragedy? It is hard to say. But it was this choice that put religious Zionism on the path that led to Meir Kahane, Baruch Goldstein and Yigal Amir; to the success of politicians like Bezalel Smotrich, Itamar Ben-Gvir, and Simcha Rothman; to Hawara and to the antidemocratic power-grab of the Netanyahu coalition. It was this choice that brought religious Zionism to embrace an ideology of Jewish supremacy.

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Many religious Zionists objected to this choice in the years after 1967, and still object to it today. Even among those who have supported the settlement project, many are committed to democracy and pluralism, are shocked by events in Hawara, and are terrified by the danger the government's antidemocratic power-grab poses to Jewish unity. Unfortunately, most of those who think like that do not dare speak up loudly enough. I saw many Orthodox Jews at the pro-democracy rally in Beit Shemesh, and thousands more have participated in pro-democracy rallies in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and even in some settlements.

But thousands are not enough. We should be seeing a titanic struggle within religious Zionism. We should be seeing latter-day Jeremiahs coming from within religious Zionism to warn against

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demonstrating and crying in the streets of Jerusalem. This isn't happening. Which political or social movement in present-day religious Zionism has dared to publicly challenge the Religious Zionism party in the coalition government, and its ideology of Jewish supremacy? One might argue that Naftali Bennett tried to turn religious Zionism in a more moderate direction, but he was consequently abandoned and vilified by many of his supporters. Where is Bennett today, and where are Ben-Gvir and Smotrich?

If Judaism suffers a spiritual destruction, will religious Zionists have any way back from the abyss? If in the near or distant future more of them understand what they have wrought, they will confront a terrible crisis of faith. What might religious Zionists tell themselves when they come to reckon with their historical role in the Third Destruction? How will they explain that the Jewish

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stream that thought of itself as the most moral, forgot at the moment of truth the most important values of Judaism, and repeatedly made immoral choices? Every day that religious Zionist rabbis and politicians are leading Israel toward spiritual destruction, without encountering serious in-house resistance, will just make their future spiritual crisis more intractable.

Ben-Gvir and Smotrich. Credit: Ohad Zwigenberg

Haredi Jews: Jumping into a sinking ship

While religious Zionists would find it difficult to deal with spiritual destruction, Haredi Jews could see it as proof that they were right all along. Since the 19th century, the ultra-Orthodox have objected to the Zionist project, arguing that even if it gains material success, it will lead to spiritual failure. Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum, the late leader of the Satmar Hasidim, for example, said that after the destruction of the Second Temple, God had forbidden the Jews to “resist the gentiles” or to “scale the wall” – meaning to try and reestablish a Jewish state by their own efforts. He implied that Zionism was a rebellion against God, and utterly rejected it.

In recent years, however, many Haredim have warmed up to the Zionist project, and they increasingly follow the path blazed by religious Zionists. The Haredi younger generation is, according to many studies, the most nationalist segment of Israeli society, and even the old rabbis are reluctantly following suit. Many of the voters of the Religious Zionism party are in fact Haredim, and the Shas and Torah Judaism parties both fear that if they don’t adopt a more nationalistic stance they will lose their electoral base. Simultaneously, as religious Zionism turns against the values of democracy and equality, it becomes easier for the Haredim to ally themselves with it. The creation of a liberal democracy in Israel undermined the Haredi worldview, but the idea of a messianic dictatorship dovetails better with Haredi society. As a result, Shas and United Torah Judaism have in recent years become leading members of the settlement project and of the antidemocratic power-grab.

Of course, as among religious Zionists, so too among the Haredim, many are shocked by recent events in Israel, and decry the growing rift within the Jewish people. But they keep such thoughts largely to themselves. If the Netanyahu government brings material destruction to Israel in the next few years, the ultra-Orthodox

It is important that we realize that what is happening right now in Israel is not a

could perhaps wash their hands of the disaster, and blame it on others. But if a messianic dictatorship succeeds in establishing itself in Israel, will the Haredim have the moral backbone to resist its temptations?

Secular Jews: On the verge of extinction

In a world where Israel has become a messianic dictatorship, the secular Jewish stream might cease to exist, at least in Israel. Within the country's borders, a system of religious coercion, censorship and brainwashing will not tolerate the continued existence of secular communities committed to tolerance, equality and freedom. As in the days when Jews were expelled from Catholic Spain, those who wish to leave, and have the means to do so, will flee the country, while those who remain will have to convert.

One of the most shocking things happening today in Israel is that the country is becoming antisemitic, in the deep sense of that word. Antisemitism isn't anti-Judaism. The reason that Jews were persecuted for centuries in Europe wasn't hostility toward Jewish practices like observance of the Sabbath or of the dietary laws of kashrut. Jews were persecuted because they were a small minority that refused to follow the majority's lead. They allegedly belonged to the Semitic race, in countries dominated by other races. Jews were accordingly vilified as foreign agents, cosmopolitan, unconnected to the land, and as traitors who served various types of liberal and global conspiracies. Exactly the same allegations are made today by the government of Israel against liberal citizens of the country. If you take the propaganda of the Netanyahu government against "left-wingers," and simply replace the word "left-wingers" with "Jews," you will be looking at the exact same texts that generations of antisemites have propagated against Jews. No wonder that the Netanyahu government finds it easy to cooperate with antisemitic movements in countries like Hungary.

Jews have a lot of experience dealing with antisemitism, but what happens when the antisemitism is propagated by Jews? If secular Jews escape antisemitic persecution in Israel by emigrating to more liberal countries, would they still want to retain any connection to Judaism? Many of the Jews who escaped antisemitic Spain after 1492 continued to speak Ladino. Would secular Jews who escape an antisemitic Israel continue to speak Hebrew? Or would they turn their back on anything related to Judaism?

fleeting political struggle, but a decisive event that will shape Jewish history.

Salvation in the Diaspora?

And what about Jews – secular Jews, religious Zionists, Reform Jews or Conservative Jews – who were born and raised in countries like the United States, and didn't experience the expulsion from Israel? In a world where a messianic dictatorship in Israel turns Judaism into a synonym for fanaticism, racism and oppression, would Jewish communities in New York or Kyiv insist that "Hawara Judaism" is just a monstrous mutation in our national DNA, which fails to represent the true spirit of Judaism? Some Jews may try to maintain in the Diaspora a liberal and sane Jewish alternative. If so, Judaism will have split into two rival religions, separated by an unbridgeable chasm, that will regard each other as sworn enemies.

When Zionism arose, it wasn't only the ultra-Orthodox who objected to it. Many liberal Jews thought Zionism was making a double mistake. First, they said Zionism wrongfully adopted the antisemitic critique of Diaspora Jews, as if Jews were really disconnected from the land, and as if there was something wrong in supporting universal liberal ideas. Second, they said Zionism was wrong in trying to solve the Jewish problem by way of emigration to Palestine, where they would establish a Jewish nation-state on the model of Poland or Hungary. Far better, said, for example, Jews who supported the Bund party, that the Jews stay where they are – in Poland, Hungary or Ukraine – and serve their homelands as loyal minorities by fighting for justice, freedom and equality for all citizens of those countries. In the historical memory of the Jewish people, it is common to claim that the Shoah proved that the Bundists were wrong while the Zionists were right. But if Israel turns into a messianic, antisemitic dictatorship, we may have to revisit Bundist ideas.

After all, the most inspiring Jewish leader of our generation isn't Benjamin Netanyahu, but [Volodymyr Zelenskyy](#). He is a scion of a Jewish family that repeatedly preferred the Bundist solution over the Zionist one. Even after the fall of communism, when many Soviet Jews emigrated to Israel, the Zelenskyy family chose to stay in Ukraine. It is a historical irony that just when in Hawara, Jews are behaving like Cossacks, in Ukraine the descendants of Khmelnytsky's Cossacks have chosen the Jewish Zelenskyy to lead them at their moment of ultimate crisis.

Zelenskyy is living proof of the Bundist claim that a Jew can be a Ukrainian patriot, and that Ukrainian patriots can see a Jew not merely as one of their own – but as their leader. As president of Ukraine, Zelenskyy is fighting at one and the same time for the national independence of the country, for its democracy, and for its right to join the EU. Zelenskyy's Ukraine proves to the world that patriotism and liberalism are two sides of the same coin, and that patriotism, democracy, Judaism and commitment to universal values get along fine together.

But will the Judaism of Zelenskyy remain strong enough to withstand the Judaism of Netanyahu and Hawara? If a messianic dictatorship strikes roots in Israel, it will become increasingly difficult to dismiss it as a momentary historical aberration. After all, the State of Israel wasn't the pet project of a single Jewish denomination. It was established and supported by generations of Jews throughout the world. Secular Jews, Reform Jews, Conservative Jews, religious Zionists and Haredim all came to see it as the realization of the Jewish vision. If the tree eventually produces a vile fruit, what does that imply about the seed from which it grew?

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As we approach Tisha B'Av, I hope that all the questions I have posed here will remain purely theoretical. I hope that the government of Israel stops its antidemocratic power-grab, heals the national wounds, puts down the flames of Hawara, and prevents a Third Destruction, whether material or spiritual. And if the government of Israel carries on with its dangerous policies, then it is the duty of all Jews, wherever they live, to resist this government in every nonviolent way we know. To do so, it is important that we realize that what is happening right now in Israel is not a fleeting political struggle, but a decisive historical event that will shape Jewish history for generations to come.

Big historical disasters are sometimes caused by small personal ambitions. Most members of the Netanyahu coalition are so busy dishing out jobs and budgets to themselves, that they may not understand where the Zealots are leading the Jewish people. But though many in the Netanyahu coalition are blind, history sees everything, and history will remember what each person did in the decisive days of this month of Av. History has its eyes on us.

Prof. Yuval Noah Harari is a historian, author of “Sapiens,” “Homo Deus” and “Unstoppable Us,” and cofounder of the social-impact company Sapienship.

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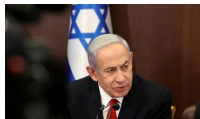
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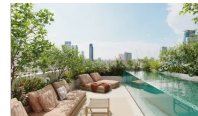
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