ISRAEL & THE MIDDLE EAST

The Rise of Itamar Ben-Gvir

The Kahanist who embodies the fears and drives roiling beneath the shiny surface of the Start-up Nation is now only an election away from real political power. Will it change him?

BY ARMIN ROSEN

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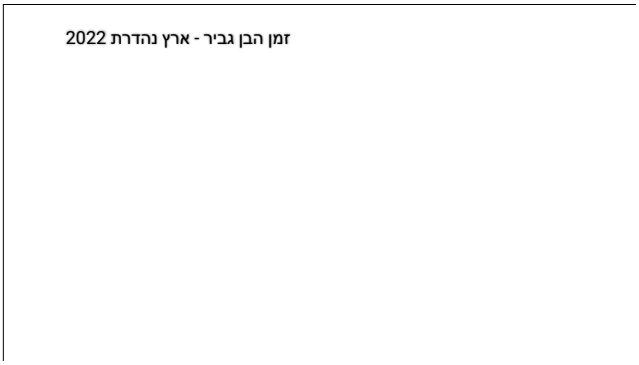
ISRAEL'S POPULAR *ERETZ NEHEDERET* television show depicts the far-right politician Itamar Ben-Gvir with eyes that explode out of his forehead, straining into the demented full hemispheres of a cartoon character or a serial killer. That the leader of the potentially third-largest party in Israel's Knesset is a dangerous lunatic is already obvious to most viewers of the show, the country's *Saturday Night Live*-like outlet for giving comedic form to establishment orthodoxies. The true contribution of the widely viewed Sept. 21 sketch is its suggestion that Ben-Gvir is not just insane, but campy.

Cravenly cheerful, and almost spherical in heft, the show's Ben-Gvir is a racist Israeli Santa Claus who flounces and spins as he prances his way downstage, declaring his yearning for a cabinet position to the tune of "Springtime for Hitler." A group of synchronized-dancing, vaguely homoerotic young Jewish militants soon join him, *peyot* whirling as the black fist of the Meir Kahane-founded Kach party looms behind them. Otzma Yehudit, Ben-Gvir's party, whose name vaguely translates to "Jewish might," will be "*Kahane l'kol hamishpacha*," he sings—Kahanism for the whole family.

The 46-year-old Ben-Gvir was still in his early teens in 1990 when al-Qaida operatives assassinated Kahane, the American-born rabbi and former Knesset member who with chilling directness called for the expulsion of Israel's Arabs, which he believed to be a necessary step toward the restoration of full Jewish sovereignty over the land of Israel, the rebuilding of the Temple, and the final redemption. The teenage Ben-Gvir was a Kach party activist in the mid-'90s, during a time when the group was banned from Israel's parliament. "He wanted to expel all of the Arabs, and I don't think so," Ben-Gvir told me during a rare foreign press interview in late August, when I asked him to compare himself to Meir Kahane. "Maybe there is a great similarity between us, and that similarity is that he acted out of great love."

If current polls hold for Israel's Nov. 1 election, Otzma, by far the most popular of the various legalized, sanitized successors to Kahane's outlawed Kach party to have emerged over the past 25 years, will be able to hand the Knesset to a slim right-wing coalition controlled by Benjamin Netanyahu. In exchange, the party could receive plush ministerial positions—Ben-Gvir is believed to want either Justice or Internal Security—in exchange for an agreement to vote in the new Knesset to give Netanyahu immunity from an ongoing corruption prosecution.

On *Eretz Nehederet* the fake Ben-Gvir is all smiles, beaming when his dancing posse hands him a gas can, which he gazes upon with the exaggerated infinite happiness of a father holding his young child—reference, no doubt, to a 2015 arson attack in the West Bank Palestinian village of Duma that killed three people, one of them an infant. As a lawyer, Ben-Gvir defended two Jewish extremists charged in the attack. The fake Ben-Gvir then whips out a handgun and makes a satirical Benjamin Netanyahu tap dance, which Israeli viewers would of course know as a nod to a 2021 incident in which the gun-loving Ben-Gvir, newly a Knesset member, pulled his weapon on an Arab



Eretz Nehederet's Itamar Ben-Gvir sketch
YOUTUBE

parking garage attendant. The joke proved prophetic: In early October, Ben-Gvir brandished his sidearm when rocks were hurled toward his entourage in the east Jerusalem neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah.

During the song's bridge, a sped-up version of the "don't be stupid, be a smarty / come and join the Nazi Party" bit in the Mel Brooks original, Ben-Gvir's ghosts parade onstage, and he happily greets even the worst of them. First up is the rifle-toting shade of Baruch Goldstein, the American-born doctor who almost single-handedly ended an already fragile peace process by murdering 29 worshippers at the mosque atop Hebron's Cave of the Patriarchs in 1994. Goldstein's portrait hung in Ben-Gvir's house until 2020, and was only removed when his elevation to the Knesset started to look like a real possibility. You will get a Yom Hazikaron, a day of remembrance, Ben-Gvir promises his dead hero. Don't worry, he similarly assures Yigal Amir, Yitzhak Rabin's assassin—whose act was the end-point of an incitement campaign in which the teenaged Ben-Gvir had been an especially notorious participant—you'll be out of prison in a year.

Kahane, Goldstein, Amir, Kach, Duma—like Ben-Gvir, these are all monsters from the national fringe, rising out of the dark abyss lying on the edge of the Start-up Nation. Ben-Gvir inspires both horror—and loyalty—in Israelis because they instinctively recognize him as a geniune product of a dark frontier they all intimately know. Unlike the eternally self-interested Netanyahu, the ever-triangulating Naftali Bennett, the gorgeously robotic Ayelet Shaked, and other staple characters of the Israeli right, the real-life Ben-Gvir is the true version of the thing he appears to be. He is a lifelong activist against a state that Israelis have generally revered for much of the country's history. By the age of 17, he was considered so dangerously subversive that he was disqualified from universal military service.

Yet today, Ben-Gvir's analysis that something is fundamentally broken in the Jewish national project, and that extreme measures are needed to repair it, is now widely accepted among Israelis who have no specific fondness for Meir Kahane, and who would never visit Ben-Gvir's home in the radical hotbed of Kiryat Arba, deep in the West Bank, much less live there. It is indicative of the current national moment, a bubble of tech-driven prosperity that masks heightening contractions and sharpening existential fears, that only a somewhat absurd and obviously sinister social outsider is able to speak to the discomfort that has become a defining feature of Israeli life.

I MET THE REAL BEN-GVIR IN LATE AUGUST, IN AN UPPER-STORY SEAFRONT APARTMENT IN TEL Aviv, the home of Melissa Jane Kronfeld, an American-born supporter of his political party and herself an immigrant to Israel. Otzma uses the apartment as its informal headquarters in the country's largest city and secular liberal stronghold—while waiting for Ben Gvir to wrap up an earlier interview, my interpreter and I shared an outdoor balcony with a long-*peyot'ed* teenage volunteer from the central West Bank settlement of Shiloh who looked like a dead ringer for the dancers in the *Eretz Nehederet* parody.

Ben-Gvir himself is of classic middle-age Israeli build, soft and firm simultaneously. He wore a tucked-in blue button-up shirt that hung baggy around the waist, owlish glasses that looked less comical in person than they do in the media, a white knit kippah that tilted slightly off the center of his prominent head, and a rugged and beaten pair of heavy black shoes, the emblematic footwear of his fellow Jewish settlers of the dusty and rock-strewn Hebron hills. He exclaimed and gesticulated, pounding his chest and slapping his cheeks when he lamented how, in contrast to countries where the attackers of police and soldiers are severely punished, "only in Israel do we wait, and we receive a blow, and another blow, and then another blow." He wedged his forefinger into the table to emphasize even his more minor points. His speech rumbled between parallelisms, dramatic pauses, and well-placed dashes of bombast—during our conversation he ruminated about sending terrorists to the "electric chair," and issued broadsides against the "lamb meat, marmalades, and chocolate" Arab killers of Jews are said to receive in prison. In the interview, as on the campaign train, he performed without seeming to perform.

Removing masses of Arabs is no longer a part of Ben-Gvir's electoral pitch, although he winks to his old allies by affirming his belief in expelling at least some Arabs. "If somebody is a terrorist and throws Molotov cocktails then that person should be in prison, and then after they leave prison they shouldn't be here. They should be sent elsewhere," he told me, a proposition that strikes many Israelis as totally reasonable—or at least as more reasonable than entering into a peace agreement with the Holocaust-denying kleptocratic Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas. The overlooked context for Ben-Gvir's rise is that for the past 30 years, Israel's centrists sold their country on quasi-utopian schemes that to many Israelis now seem far crazier than just about anything Ben-Gvir says he wants. Earlier in the conversation, he claimed to me he would only kick out a "tiny minority" of Arabs, though he would not give a specific percentage. "I don't have an issue or a problem with all the Arabs," he claimed. "*Chas v'chalilah*"—God forbid.

Ben-Gvir is technically only second on a joint list in which Otzma is the leading party, ceding the first spot to his erstwhile rival, Betzael Smotrich, who represents the more religiously doctrinaire Ashkenazi wing of Israeli Kahanism. Smotrich, as one Israeli political watcher told me, "gives off strong rabbi vibes," a liability in a diverse and mostly secular electorate. Ben-Gvir, who comes from a nonreligious middle-class Iraqi family and who grew up in Mevasseret Ziyyon, which is not in the West Bank, comes across like a rambunctious taxi dispatcher, or a gregarious Seder guest.

The Ben-Gvir of Israel's nightmares, and of *Eretz Nehederet*, is accurate for at least one very important reason: To Israeli ears he does not sound like a paranoiac or a religious fanatic, as Kahane himself often did. Ben-Gvir offers a sunnier, more laid-back, and authentically Israeli version of Kahanism, buoyed by a looming sense of national disaster. A significant number of voters now believe Ben-Gvir is telling them things that no one else can or will. This portion of the Jewish electorate, which ranges anywhere from 10%-20%, includes rebellious teenagers, right-wing religious messianists, anti-Arab racists, Haredim seeking a political home beyond the slackening boundaries of Daas Torah, Mizrachim who want someone who will side with them against a distrusted national establishment, and national-religious types turned cynical by former settlement movement leader and ex-Prime Minister Naftali Bennett's decision to form a governing coalition with an Arab Islamist party last year.

It makes intuitive sense that right-wing subversives have become a rising power during such a surreally contradictory moment in Israel, when attached houses in Modiin go for about $1 million and a new condo in the West Bank settlement of Efrat, outside Jerusalem, costs around $700,000. The construction of a second tunnel for the highway running under the West Bank city of Bethlehem, connecting Jerusalem to the settlements of Gush Etzion, is only the most obvious sign of a normalizing existence even in land the rest of the world considers to be disputed. Outside the deep desert every horizon is cluttered with new construction, including in Sderot, the most rocket-bombarded city in southern Israel. The reality on the ground is that Israel has won, at least for the moment, even in places in the West Bank where it recently seemed like it had lost. Maseratis on the streets of Tel Aviv, Arabs in the governing coalition, dozens of nuclear weapons, world-renowned achievements in cuisine and streaming television, and surprise peace deals across the Middle East suggest that local optimists are not wrong to be hopeful about Israel's trajectory.

Ben-Gvir and his voters look at their own lived realities and have decided that the optimists are wrong: Hezbollah has rockets that could destroy any number of $1 million houses in Modiin or nearly anywhere else in Israel; over the summer the Shiite jihadists have been building an ominous string of observation posts along the heavily militarized Israeli-Lebanese border. The 30-year Israeli national project of preventing Iran from getting a nuclear bomb might be very close to ending in failure.

Ben-Gvir and his voters don't care that much about Iran, though. The Arabs under Israeli rule were more threatening than the Islamic Republic, he told me, "because Iran isn't here." Iran's Fordow nuclear facility is far away; the giant Palestinian flag flying over the West Bank city of Tulkarem, conspicuously visible from the national artery of Highway 6, is much closer. A deteriorating Palestinian Authority and a hopeless and angry young generation of West Bankers has produced the deadliest terror wave to hit Israel in nearly 20 years and created the conditions for a fresh Israeli-Palestinian crisis, which Ben Gvir loudly proclaims to have already spread inside Israel's internationally recognized borders. Riots between Arabs

and Jews in the Israeli cities of Lod, Ramle, and even Tel Aviv during the 2021 Gaza escalation, in which synagogues were gutted and policemen attacked, showed that a proportionally small number of troublemakers could psychically and even physically paralyze the country.

Israel's contradictions—between survival in the Middle East and the niceties of Western democracy, millennia of Jewish humiliation and the heady realities of Jewish power, Western normalcy and Judaism itself—were always glaring and obvious. For the past 40 years, the solution on offer has fallen under the catchall of "peace": peace with the Jordanians and Egyptians, peace with the Palestinians, peace with the Arab Gulf, peace with the country's own Arabs, whose daily lives and opinions could safely be ignored by both the left and right as long as their socioeconomic status improved on paper, and as long as it could be claimed that there were still large communities of Jews, the Haredim for instance, who were even more alienated from the national mainstream than they were. Peace meant the secular state's victory over the more messianic currents of religious nationalism, the end to dreams of total domination of the land and the perfection of Klal Yisrael and existence in general believed to result from it. For some—supporters as well as opponents—peace meant living in a country where Judaism itself had been safely quarantined, such that it no longer threatened to infect secular Enlightenment visions of individualism and community.

For many Israelis, the quest for a peaceful post-history at home and beyond resulted in a wealthy yet unaffordable country with a gaudy military that still can't prevent the place from being under constant threat, one where peace always resulted in more violence and where national sovereignty and Jewish commitment were so notional that the Israeli government has denied Jews the right to pray on the Temple Mount, the Jewish people's holiest site. To them, Israel's power and prestige felt strangely meaningless so long as anti-Zionist parties were seated in the Knesset—a body that has banned Jewish holders of correspondingly extreme beliefs—and so long as the territory of the state of Israel, supposedly given by God to the Jewish nation, still feels so unsafe and alien.

Ben-Gvir offers an especially dark and absurdist answer to the core dilemma of what a Jewish state in putative control of the entire territory between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea should look like, an answer based in bluntness and good-natured thuggery—one that certainly doesn't speak to the higher aspirations of frustrated Israeli idealists. His innovation is offering any answer at all, in a language that doesn't seem overly religious or extreme to Israeli voters. It is a great failure of Israel's political system, maybe Israeli society in general, that Ben-Gvir is the most prominent such figure on the ballot, and maybe the only one.

In Ben-Gvir, Kahanism discards its apocalyptic and theocratic overtones and becomes a coherent response to a sense of national drift and slow-rolling danger that a significant number of Israelis can see and feel. Ben Gvir told me he is moved by the plight of "that mother who tells me that her son goes with a kippah to school in Ramle but he takes it off because the other kids beat him up for it, or the child in Nof HaGalil who had to leave school and move to a school in Afula because they kept yelling to him at his school *itbach al Yehud* [slaughter the Jews]." He claims that he wants to stand up for "Jews who are afraid to go to the Kotel." No Israeli government will ever give up the Kotel, and Ramle and Nof HaGalil are safely inside the 1948 cease-fire line, meaning these are three alleged examples of Jewish humiliation taking place within ethnically mixed areas whose territorial status is not up for negotiation in the mind of nearly any Jewish Israeli.

BEN-GVIR ENTERED THE KNESSET THANKS TO A MERGER OF RELIGIOUS FAR-RIGHT PARTIES that ran as a single joint list in March of 2021. One of his first major acts as a Knesset member was a physical altercation with fellow MK Ayman Odeh outside the hospital room of a hunger-striking Hamas operative. That fight, like so much else in Ben-Gvir's 30-year career as a professional rabble-rouser, was caught on tape.

Ben-Gvir hunts for provocation—he must have been delighted that his campaign tent in Sheikh Jarrah, the most combustible of Jerusalem's mixed neighborhoods, was set on fire in late September. Ben-Gvir pulls

the Sheikh Jarrah stunt every election, in the hopes someone outraged at his presence will help demonstrate why he's there in the first place. In the Odeh video, it is difficult to tell who pushed first. But a shoving match with Odeh, the most extreme Palestinian nationalist in Israel's parliament, hardly hurt Ben-Gvir's image with much of the Israeli public.

As a teenager Ben-Gvir boasted about stealing the hood ornament off of Yitzhak Rabin's car just weeks before the prime minister's assassination. That's on tape too, and is much deeper cause for horror in Israel than the Odeh scuffle. If we got this, we can get Rabin, the young Ben-Gvir calmly explained, showing off the Cadillac emblem for news cameras while wearing a look of absolute seriousness that he now knows to disguise beneath a sometimes-clownish exterior. The Rabin footage is proof the Otzma leader was possessed with the dreadful certainty of the young fanatic.

Angered by the Palestinian violence of the First Intifada, Ben-Gvir became active in the youth wings of the Kach and Kahane Chai parties in the mid-1990s, both of which were eventually outlawed due to their advocacy for expelling Israel's Arab population and closeness to violent extremists. Ben-Gvir was a teenage protege of Kach leader and former Kahane confidante Baruch Marzel, whom the Supreme Court disqualified from running for the Knesset in 2019. "Baruch gets money to make trouble, and he pays people to make trouble," one hardline settler explained of their early relationship. ("He's a good kid," Marzel told me of Ben-Gvir last month.) "Trouble" in Ben-Gvir's case meant postering and graffiti campaigns aimed at Jewish enemies of the far-right settlement movement, as well as organizing demonstrations at the sites of terror attacks where protesters—though not Ben-Gvir, usually—would chant promises of death and revenge to the region's Arabs.

In a country with as few people and as many potential flashpoints as Israel, it is possible for nearly any extremist of Ben-Gvir's longevity and persistence to gain national stature. At the same time, he was also especially tireless and effective. "Whenever we would get arrested, no matter what we went and did, he would show up at the court and ask for permission to represent us, even though he wasn't a lawyer," recalled Yaakov Ben Moshe, who was 15 when he first met Ben-Gvir, and who estimated that he had himself been arrested in connection with right-wing activism about 20 times. "The police hated this, because the judge would always let us go."

More than once, Ben Moshe said, Ben-Gvir helped him successfully sue the government for mistreatment, including over an incident in which the Shabak, Israel's clandestine internal security service, arrested him late at night and dumped him on the other side of the country. Ben-Gvir helped Ben Moshe receive 3,000 shekels in compensation—3,150 with interest, when the state initially refused to pay him. In another incident, Ben-Gvir advised a suspected Jewish terrorist to secretly record an entrapment attempt by someone who turned out to be an agent of the Shabak, blowing the government's case.

Eventually, Ben-Gvir really did become a lawyer, joining the Israeli bar in 2011. Young activists told me that he had appeared at nearly every major rally in support of Ahuvia Sandak, a teenager killed in a car accident while fleeing from police after allegedly throwing rocks at Palestinians in the West Bank in December of 2020. In a case that encapsulates the current distrust and hostility between the far right and the state, the settlers claim the police rammed the car carrying Sandak, though an investigation, which the radicals allege is a coverup, cleared officers of any wrongdoing. Ben-Gvir has also been a vocal defender of Amiram Ben Uliel, whom supporters allege was tortured into confessing to the Duma killings.

Ben-Gvir is now in the unfamiliar position of having to reassure a terrified mainstream without alienating his lifelong allies. In a sign that Otzma aspires to mainstream respectability, Zwika Fogel, a retired brigadier general and former head of the IDF's southern command, joined their Knesset list in early September. This balancing act has already cost Ben-Gvir on his far-right flank: In a radio interview in late August, the still-influential Marzel, who had been an Otzma Knesset candidate in a previous election before the government banned him from running, fretted that Ben-Gvir was getting too "flexible" in what he said and believed. Ben-Gvir now hedged on which Arabs he wanted to expel; "death to the terrorists," rather than the usual "death to the Arabs," was now his party's rallying cry.

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WHEN I MET WITH HIM IN TEL AVIV, BEN-GVIR SPOKE LIKE SOMEONE WHO DIDN’T NEED Marzel’s support anymore—he could skillfully mimic a normal politician and then leap into statements that were once too nakedly populist for a major Israel political figure to make. “My dream is to see Israel the way you see it today but just stronger and with more confidence,” Ben-Gvir told me. “Because after 2,000 years we’ve returned to our home. This is our home, and we’re behaving like we’re guests here.” One Otzma campaign poster bearing Ben-Gvir’s face asks, *mi po ba’ale habayit*?—who are the masters of the house here? "*Ba’al*" is both the biblical and liturgical word referring to the head of a household; “*habayit*” could be either any old house or God’s house, The House, as in the Temple on Har HaBayit, a place in the heart of Jerusalem that Israel somehow both does and doesn’t really control.

Unlike every other major Kahanist, Ben-Gvir is attuned to the Israeli understanding of Judaism as a psychic context and a tribal identity rather than a rigid theological system. Ben-Gvir told me that unlike Kahane, he does not yearn for a halachic state. “My father didn’t wear a kippah and I think he was the best person in the world,” Ben Gvir said. “Being a good person has nothing to do with wearing a kippah.”

Ben-Gvir’s view of religion is typical of much of the rest of the country’s. His career can look like a disquieting expression of Israel’s ability to maintain a reasonably free society within a recognizably Jewish scaffolding. The Israeli experiment in creating a vibrant and only moderately coercive Jewish-inflected civic life results in things like Sephardi *selichot* being carried live on television, or Pesach being treated as a national spring break, or the Tanach being taught in public schools. But there is another, less edifying side to this arrangement: civil marriage doesn’t exist, public transit doesn’t run on Shabbat, and the ideological descendants of a rabbi who believed Jews could bring redemption by ejecting the Arabs and imposing Torah law can be politicians whose ideas don’t even sound especially religious these days, at least not to Israeli ears.

Listening to Ben-Gvir is good practice for American Jews in dealing with a type of Israeli leader they are only going to see more of in coming years— namely, ones who don’t care about their opinions very much. I asked Ben-Gvir if he understood why he might make American Jews nervous, given their liberalism and support for the future existence of a Palestinian state. (Two leading pro-Israel Democratic opponents of the Iran nuclear deal, Rep. Brad Sherman and Sen. Robert Menendez, have already made a point of publicly condemning Ben-Gvir and warning Israelis against voting for him.) “No, actually I don’t know why they think [that] because all I want is what’s good for this country,” he replied. “We need to have security and right now there is no security. People are fearful walking in the streets and what is happening is that we’re losing control over this country.”

In turn, Americans, and especially American Jews, seem ill-equipped to understand Ben-Gvir: His background, his ideological system, his seamless mixture of the wild-eyed and the practical, his ability to signal both religiosity and secularity, and his embodiment of the Israeli far right’s paradoxical relationship with a state that is both an obstacle to a messianic Jewish destiny and also the instrument of its possible fulfillment, are all mind-bogglingly distant from the belief systems of NPR listeners on the Upper West Side and Brookline.

Yet what's notable about Ben-Gvir is how distant his life would seem to be from the experiences of Modiin or Tel Aviv, too. He became religious in his teens and lives in Kiryat Arba, at the outer frontier of West Bank settlement. The community of 7,300 is a mile from the walled-off Jewish enclave in downtown Hebron, which is embedded in the center of the largest Palestinian Authority-governed city in the West Bank. With its ideological edginess, close proximity to a hostile Arab population, and heavy military presence, the area around the awesome Herodian rock face of the Cave of the Patriarchs, Judaism's second-holiest site, is atypical of nearly any other Jewish community living under the Israeli flag. Ben-Gvir often prays at a tent synagogue near Kiryat Arba that the army has destroyed several dozen times over the past 15 years.

Baruch Marzel's trailer is on a hill next to Tel Hebron, feet away from a softly ascending lane of exposed ancient cobblestone that ended at the city gates some 3,000 years ago—the entrance to King David's original capital, home to the tombs of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, and Leah. Israel captured Hebron as Jordanian occupation forces fled the West Bank during the Six-Day War in 1967. Stealthy Jewish activists established an unauthorized community in Hebron in the early '80s, moving into buildings in the old city's former Jewish quarter, which Arab rioters and the British mandate authorities had ethnically cleansed during and after the Hebron massacre of 1929. Marzel and his family have lived in the trailer for almost 40 years.

The Hebron settlers only gained official recognition from the Israeli government once they became too populous for the state to remove them without risking a wider backlash. (The first municipal elections in Jewish Hebron's history took place earlier this year.) The government remains unsure of how badly it wants nearly 1,000 Jews living in Hebron, and a new building permit is a once-a-decade event. At the same time, the Marzels' permanent temporary home testifies to the Hebron Jews' ability to push the country toward the policies they want over the course of years and decades. The same could be said of Ben-Gvir's star turn: After 30 years on the extremist fringe, he became a national political force by succeeding where Marzel and his generation failed, by making the Hebron revolt—the mostly grassroots campaign to make the contradictions between Israeli normality and Jewish statehood as stark as possible—palatable even to Israelis who would never dream of living there.

Marzel's trailer overlooks the downtown of an Arab city that Israel bans its citizens from visiting, a place where a beleaguered Palestinian Authority exerts less and less control, just as it exerts less control over Nablus, and no control over Jenin. An autographed copy of Kahane's Knesset portrait hangs on Marzel's dining room wall. Nearby is a photo of the silver-haired rabbi at a rally, smiling radiantly and pointing at something outside the frame—perhaps toward a quasi-messianic future in which the Jews cleanse the land of Arabs in accordance with Kahanist Halacha—while the younger Marzel, who became the rabbi's top Knesset aide and spokesperson, stands behind him in a state of almost mystical bliss.

Today, the white-bearded Marzel exudes strong rock festival rabbi vibes, rounding up his neighbors for the afternoon minyan and distributing cold bottles of water and soda from a rumpled orange plastic bag to soldiers on patrol in the Jewish side of Hebron's partitioned downtown. The allure of the Kahanists and the settlement vanguard comes from the fact that they have always been a counterculture, a force beyond a stagnant and corrupted mainstream that fewer and fewer Israelis trust.

"Ben-Gvir is more practical and ready to compromise, ready to go into the system and influence from the inside," Marzel told me. "Rav Kahane always wanted to influence from the outside." For a fringe romantic like Marzel, who really does want to expel most Arabs from the Land of Israel, this comparison doesn't necessarily reflect well on Ben-Gvir. The grandfatherly old Kahanist did not seem confident that his former protege will stick to any of his old ideas once he reaches a position of actual power. "I hope that he continues with the old views that he has—that he doesn't change. That's my prayer for him." His advice to Ben-Gvir, Marzel told me, is "to stay what he was." Of course, had Ben-Gvir stayed what he was, he wouldn't be the putative leader of potentially the third-largest party in the Knesset.

Ben-Gvir has made the Hebron revolt palatable—but how attractive does Hebron itself really seem, even to the people who live there? How much had the settlers really succeeded? Marzel told me that when he looks out his window at the increasingly cluttered hillsides of inscrutable sandstone high-rises forming the PA-

controlled Hebron downtown a couple hundred meters away, he sees "a lot of Arabs that want to kill me." Jews are a minority even within their enclave, which was placed under a dragnet of concrete barriers and heavy-handed IDF protection after a series of terror attacks following the 1998 Hebron Protocols, which ceded 97% of the city to the PA. On the Israeli side, most Arab businesses have closed and Arabs aren't permitted to drive, or to leave or enter without crossing an IDF checkpoint into the PA-ruled downtown. Inside the enclave the Arabs walk around like living ghosts, as eager not to interact with their Jewish neighbors—and with the IDF—as the Jews are to avoid them.

The warping effects of waking up to what you believe is a mob of homicidal maniacs just outside your door every day for four decades can scarcely be grasped by people with a normative experience of reality. It is not the everyday situation of Israelis, the vast majority of whom live in places where they do not look or feel like inhabitants of a ghetto. The Hebronites, and leaders like Ben-Gvir, believe it's only a matter of time, though, before Israelis feel the same figurative and literal pressures, and with it, the same driving sense of national purpose, that they do. The history of Israel, reckoned Yedidiah, a construction worker I met from the Hebron area, was shaped by small numbers of Jews inhabiting an Arab-filled frontier: "In the end, whoever was more stubborn won."

Neither Yedidiah, whose head was bordered by waterfalls of straight, chestnut-colored *peyot*, nor most of my hilltop activist guides to Ramat Migron wanted me to use their last names. The IDF had destroyed their outpost three times over the previous month, and the hilltop was now strewn with electrical appliances, ground-up cinder blocks, and beads of pulverized glass. Their town now consisted of three plywood shacks that Yedidiah and other hilltop supporters had built in a matter of days, along with trails of electrical wiring, and an *eruv* made of clear plastic string hung between makeshift aluminum posts. "You're witnessing grade-A bootleg construction tactics," said Sadia Hershkop, a Kiryat Arba-based tour guide and hilltop settlement activist, as Yedidiah used the back hook of a hammer to wind a metal wire around a stubborn wooden plank. "Everything here is done in the cheapest possible manner."

The community had no security perimeter the way the recognized West Bank settlements do. The hilltoppers believe fences are a shameful declaration that the land beyond the barrier doesn't belong to Jews. They see themselves as a kind of human guard tower, too unpredictable and potentially violent for the Arabs to ever want to approach. "We are showing people they can leave the fences, leave the gated communities," said Yedidiah, crouching in a rocky sliver of shade under a plywood wall. "We're leading the way for everyone else."

The biggest threat to Ramat Migron's existence is the thing that makes its existence possible in the first place, namely the army of the State of Israel. Yedidiah and my guides expected the soldiers to show up any day now. If Ben-Gvir becomes either the justice minister or the internal security minister, he would be in a position to stall the army's destruction of hilltop outposts and push for their de facto legalization. This would inevitably lead to the creation of more outposts, which would effectively expand the civilian territory in the West Bank the army would have to protect, the first such growth since a wave of quasi-legalized hilltop construction at the end of the 1990s.

Ramat Migron is about a 40-minute drive from Jerusalem. It is one of an increasing number of places where a visitor can survey the landscape of the Israeli-Palestinian problem, crammed into the impossibly small footprint of perhaps a half-dozen square miles. Beneath the mountain are bald desert hills, pillars of burning trash, stubborn clusters of coarse plant life, rock quarries of questionable local and international legality, and an Arab town whose buildings are exactly as white as the hills—crouched across a narrow valley from a proper Israeli settlement's neat amphitheater of barriers and apartment blocks.

For the hilltop zealots of Ramat Migron, the far settlement, with its guarded perimeter and bourgeois comforts, is an ever-looming reminder of everything in the mainstream right and in the modern Israeli state that they are rejecting: ideological drift, the willingness to compromise, the loss of a holy mission. "We could get the Zionists to support this place," one of my American-born guides mused to me sarcastically, addressing the Martian landscape of his shadeless desert battleground. "Think about how many Waldorf-Astorias you could build here."

The younger hilltop radicals, explained Yaakov Ben Moshe, the once-frequently arrested far-right activist who had known Ben-Gvir for much of his life, call the older generation of settlers *sfamunim*, catfish, a nonkosher animal whose whiskers supposedly resemble the mustaches of the movement's former leaders. Mustaches are dandyish, delicate, and implicitly un-Jewish: "We're the beard guys," Ben Moshe said. "We don't believe half in God, half in the state."

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Which side is Ben-Gvir on? "Deep down, I think he cares very much," replied Ben Moshe. "At the moment he's playing a political game … Because of the reality of the way things are, he's *mesubal* [limited] in what he can say. If Itamar says even one thing in the wrong direction he'll be disqualified."

Ben Moshe, born in the United States and raised in the Gush Etzion settlements outside Jerusalem, has a deep desert suntan and the healthy build of someone who grows a lot of his own food. He lives in Esh Kodesh, outside of Shiloh in central Samaria in the West Bank, an outpost that bans Arab laborers but where it is possible to meet residents whose Arabic is far better than their English. He is in his late 30s, and has a large family and a crop of fruit trees fed with wastewater from the outpost's winery, which he helps oversee. He says he studied the Talmudic tracts having to do with *shechita*, or ritual slaughter, in prison.

The town of almost 100 families is what the builders of Ramat Migron hope their settlement will eventually become: a place illegal under Israeli law that is too large and too established for the state to destroy without triggering a national crisis. The roads are unpaved. From Ben Moshe's porch, hung with grapevines and crowded with free-range chickens, I saw a young woman in a lavender religious headwrap whip down a nearby dust track in an all-terrain vehicle. "They were living in a bus, then one of them got engaged and kicked everyone else out of the bus," Ben Moshe said of the settlement's founding some 20 years ago. "The bus is still there. You can go see it."

I needed to be in Tel Aviv that evening, so Ben Moshe offered to take me. Whether you are a hardcore one-stater leftist or believe that hilltop settlements are a necessary first step toward the full Jewish redemption of the land and thus toward *geulah* itself, the drive from Esh Kodesh to the coast is an unbeatable opportunity to convince your listener of the basic impossibility of the status quo. These olive trees are Arab-owned, Ben Moshe explained, pointing to small roadside groves as we left the settlement's unfenced outer reaches. These, on the other hand, are Jewish. These, however, are more complicated: trees the Arabs harvest under IDF protection even though, Ben Moshe claimed, no one can really be sure who actually owns them. Ownership of the middle segment of this vineyard is being decided by the Supreme Court, he explained.

The road abruptly descended toward the desert plane surrounding the Dead Sea, passed by Duma—another phantom in the Israeli conscience, site of the deadly arson attack in 2015—then switchbacked toward a roundabout called Tzomet Tapuach, a junction between two major highways where the IDF permits both Israeli- and Palestinian Authority-licensed vehicles to travel. Israeli and Palestinian drivers merging into the roundabout have to gesture to each other out of car windows and reach an endless series of miniature real-time agreements on the distribution of ever-decreasing units of space. Tzomet Tapuach has been the site of numerous terror attacks, and is believed to be one of the most dangerous single places in the West Bank.

Farther onward, along a thin horizontal ridgeline, were the apartment towers of Ariel, one of the largest West Bank settlements, a place that Ben Moshe said was filled with Russians, pork-eaters, and whores. Along the road, fast-expanding Arab communities on the valley's floor almost touched the highway on which we were driving. The West Bank is becoming a place where Jews can look out their windows and see the freakish results of their government's compromises, all of which are primed to explode. Next came the warehouses of the Barkan industrial park, stacked on the hillsides like an open chest of drawers, a

place the radical settlers despise because of its employment of thousands of Palestinians. Anti-Israel activists hate Barkan for roughly the same reason.

At the checkpoint west of Ariel, the approximate start of Israel's internationally recognized territory, the air is already sweet with humidity and salt water. The Mediterranean blazed orange in the twilight. It had taken us only about 20 minutes to drive the entire width of the Samarian mountain range. If the border police officer noticed the handgun below the dashboard—fully registered and legal, Ben Moshe assured me—he did not ask about it.

The road flattened as we entered the coastal plane. We passed a bizarre skyline of parking-garage-like structures, with archways like black concrete rainbows lacing their facades. "These are burials," Ben Moshe said. "Eretz Yisrael can't be one big cemetery. We don't have a lot of room here."

Earlier in the drive, Ben Moshe had quoted Meir Kahane: "I would rather have a country that is hated but respected than an Auschwitz that is loved." Just an hour after leaving Esh Kodesh we were in the heart of Kahane's Auschwitz, the thriving center of the undisputed territory of the modern Jewish state, punctuated with rising skyscrapers, improbable cities of millions upon millions of Jews, a thickening forest of glassy squiggles and cylinders and zig-zags resembling the urban vista of Dubai or Austin or a thousand other places, none of them the majority-Jewish focal point of a majority-Jewish country. To Ben Moshe, this must have looked like failure, just as Tzomet Tapuach, Ariel, and Barkan looked like failure.

Zionism has always seen the Arab presence in Eretz Yisrael as a moral and metaphysical challenge to the Jewish people, as if the *olim*'s treatment of the Arabs would determine whether the land would spit the Jews out again. To more liberal-minded ideologues, the Arabs were a test of whether we could manifest a humane nationalism that wouldn't be self-corrupting, and that would lead to the improvement of both ourselves and the entire world. To a different set of dreamers, the Arabs are a manifestation of inner Jewish cowardice, a sign of what we are collectively unwilling to do to save ourselves from pogroms and gas chambers, or in order to realize God's greater purpose for us. "The Arabs being in Israel are a symptom of us not fulfilling our mission in the world," Ben Moshe said. "Just like the Arabs are a symptom," he said, "*Moshiach* is also a symptom."

The idea that the Israeli state should unapologetically advance a God-given Jewish mission in the world was once the province of Kahanists and other mad fantasists. It isn't that way anymore: The Israelis who now look out over Israel's power, prosperity, and regional integration not as victory, but as a sign of moral and spiritual sclerosis now have a champion at the highest levels of the political system, however thuggish or clownish or dangerous he is. Even if Ben-Gvir flares out, like so many other political newcomers before him, Israel is a country where the fringe and the center no longer have the option of avoiding one another for very long.

Armin Rosen is a staff writer for Tablet magazine.

#WEST BANK #ISRAELI SETTLEMENTS #MEIR KAHANE #ZIONISM