

Guarding the Gates of Zion: Hasidic arguments against Zionism

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Guarding the Gates of Zion: Hasidic Arguments against Zionism

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Abstract

Today, it is common in the popular media to draw attention to the connection between Jewish religious fervour and Israeli nationalism, and justifiably so. Groups such as Gush Emunim exhibit the powerful convergence of Torah and nationalism. Because of this, it is easy to envision a directly proportionate relationship between the level of a Jew's religious observance and his or her support for Zionism and the State of Israel. However, this is not and has never been an accurate view of the picture. Zionism's roots were in the secular Jewish world, and from the start, it met strong opposition from the religious community. All Orthodox Jews, and notably the Hasidim, strongly opposed the Zionist movement from its inception, and while some Orthodox groups later embraced the Zionist cause, many groups remain resistant. In fact, some oppose the state even as they reside within it. This paper charts the history of Hasidic opposition to Zionism, examining the theological, political and social arguments. The opinions and policies of prominent Hasidic anti-Zionist rabbis and groups is discussed and briefly contrasted to those of Hasidic Zionists. Finally, the question of whether there is something inherently Hasidic in the opposition to Zionism is addressed.

The Talmud relates the following story:

Two scholars, sent by Rabbi Judah the Prince to supervise a community, asked to see the city guards. Upon meeting them, they told the armed guards, 'You are not the city's guardians but its destroyers. The scholars who study the Torah are the true guardians of the city [neturei karta]'.¹

Today, it is common in the popular media to draw attention to the connection between Jewish

religious fervour and Israeli nationalism², and justifiably so. Groups such as Gush Emunim exhibit the powerful convergence of Torah and nationalism. Because of this, it is easy to envision a directly proportionate relationship between the level of a Jew's religious observance and his or her support for Zionism and the State of Israel. However, this is not and has never been an accurate view of the picture. Although now much less prominent than their religious Zionist counterparts, the Orthodox anti-Zionists were once the ideological majority of religious Jews.

From the time of Zionism's beginnings in the late nineteenth century, its reception by Jews of all levels of religious adherence has been mixed.³ However, Zionism's roots were in the secular Jewish world, and from the start, it met strong opposition from the religious community. Contrary to the perception that Jewish religious extremism and nationalist sentiment go hand in hand, history presents a picture of vehement Orthodox opposition to Zionism. All Orthodox Jews, and notably the Hasidim, strongly opposed the Zionist movement from its inception, and while some Orthodox groups later embrace the Zionist cause, many groups remain resistant. In fact, some oppose the state even as they reside within it.

This essay will chart the history of Hasidic opposition to Zionism. It will examine the Hasidic position based on their theological, political and social arguments. The opinions and policies of prominent Hasidic anti-Zionist rabbis and groups will be discussed. These views will be briefly contrasted to those of some Hasidic Zionist supporters. Finally, the question of whether there is something inherently Hasidic in the opposition to Zionism will be addressed.

¹ *Chag* 1:7, quoted in Samuel C. Heilman and Menachem Friedman, "Religious Fundamentalism and Religious Jews: The Case of the Haredim," in *Fundamentalisms Observed*, ed. Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 226.

² On Gush Emunim and Jewish fundamentalism, see for example David Hirst, "Pursuing the Millennium," *The Nation* (online version), February 2, 2004.

³ For a broader and more in-depth discussion of the Jewish reception and criticism of early Zionism see Walter Laqueur, *A History of Zionism* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), ch. 8, or Ehud Luz, *Parallels Meet: Religion and Nationalism in the Early Zionist Movement (1882-1904)*, tr. from the Hebrew by Lenn J. Schramm (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1988).

Zionism's Beginnings: From Europe to Palestine

The Zionist movement originated in the south of Russia, where a Jewish nationalist movement called *Hibbat Tzion* had been founded in response to the pogroms there in 1881-2.⁴ From the outset, Zionism was a movement led by relatively secular Jews, and found strong opposition from the Hasidim throughout the Pale of Settlement. *Hibbat Tzion* was interpreted by the Hasidic rebbes who led their communities as having a secular orientation that would undermine the religious integrity of their communities as well as challenge their own political authority⁵. Besides the concern that Zionism would lead Jews away from religion, a large factor in Hasidic opposition to the Zionist movement was the Hasidim's general conservatism. Goldstein in fact links their opposition to Zionism (in the late nineteenth century) to their prior opposition to the Enlightenment⁶. At the same time, as Goldstein notes, many secular Jews from the middle-class, urban intelligentsia also opposed Zionism for the opposite reason: they thought it would foster more of a religious and ethnic divide between (relatively assimilated) Jews and the rest of society⁷.

As Zionism gained ground, the Hasidim fought to keep it back. In 1897, Hasidic leaders began a counter-Zionist campaign, through sermons, posters and other methods. Goldstein notes that the rebbes of Kock, Radzyn, and Gur were the spearheads of this campaign, which then spread to the heads of Hasidic courts in other towns⁸. "The Hasidic rebbes and their followers, who comprised the majority of Polish Jewry, were totally opposed to the Zionist movement and employed every possible device in order to harm it and sabotage its activities."⁹ This included excommunicating the Zionists as well as informing on them to the state authorities.¹⁰

According to J. Jasinowski, a prominent Zionist leader of the time, the Hasidim were not above using violence to achieve their aims. In his words, the rebbe in Siedlce "preached from the pulpit that pursuing Zionism to its destruction is a religious

obligation ... things have reached the state that our activists are being beaten up ..."¹¹

Despite the efforts of the Hasidim, however, the Zionist movement established itself and grew across central and Eastern Europe. At the same time, Zionist leaders were faced with the fact that the strength of their movement would be severely limited without the support of the Hasidim, who made up the majority of Polish Jewry¹² and a large part of eastern European Jewry on the whole. They continued their efforts to win over the Hasidim.

In 1912, European Orthodox leaders formed the group Agudath Israel, in order to unite Orthodox Jews in the battle against modernization and reform efforts in Judaism. The group was comprised of a variety of Orthodox Jews from both Hasidic and Mitnagdic camps.¹³ According to Walter Laqueur, the Agudah "bitterly denounced Zionism. In east European communal politics it cooperated even with the assimilationists, for Zionism was the more dangerous enemy."¹⁴ Agudath Israel became a political party, even serving in the Polish parliament¹⁵. Such activities marked them as assimilationists and compromisers in the minds of more zealous Orthodox groups, including the majority of Hasidim.

Indeed, Agudath Israel proceeded towards an increasingly moderate view. Facing increasing pressure to stand in solidarity with the Zionists in Palestine in the face of mounting anti-Jewish violence there, and in light of the tragedies that had taken place in Europe, the Agudah developed a more sympathetic stance toward statehood. In 1946, they pronounced support for the Jewish claim to the Land of Israel on religious grounds. In the coming of the State of Israel, "they saw the finger of God," not the redemption itself, but certainly its beginning.¹⁶ By attributing the impending statehood to the actions of God, the Agudah avoided attributing this achievement to the efforts of the Zionists¹⁷ or identifying with their largely secular approach. After the war, Agudath representatives signed the Israeli Declaration of Independence¹⁸ and Agudath Israel became an Israeli political party.¹⁹

⁴ Joseph Goldstein, "The Beginnings of the Zionist Movement in Congress Poland: The Victory of the *Hasidim* Over the Zionists?" *Polin*, vol. 5 (1990), 114-5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 115-16

⁸ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 119.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 124.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 24.

¹³ Heilman and Friedman, 225

¹⁴ Walter Laqueur, *A History of Zionism* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), 409.

¹⁵ Heilman and Friedman, 225.

¹⁶ Laqueur, 413.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Heilman and Friedman, 227.

¹⁹ Laqueur, 413.

Later Stages: Post-War, Post-Independence

From this point on, the majority of Orthodox Jewry accepted the idea of statehood. However, scholars are quick to attribute this change of heart to the fear provoked by global anti-Semitism rather than to any changes in the Orthodox Jews' apolitical doctrine.²⁰ At any rate, the Hasidim by and large remained anti-Zionist and anti-State. They were members of both the Eda Haredit and the Neturei Karta, who by 1945 had become "twin forces leading the most aggressive contra-acculturation forces and the battles for traditional Orthodoxy" in Palestine.²¹

Major Hasidic Anti-Zionist Figures

The Munkaczer Rebbe

Among Zionism's most vocal early critics was the Hasidic Rabbi of Munkacz, Hungary, Hayyim Elazar Shapira (1872-1937). According to Allan L. Nadler, Shapira was not only the most militant rabbinic opponent to Zionism in his day, but was obsessive in his devotion to the cause.²² His conservatism and that of ultra-orthodox Judaism in general is exemplified by the motto of R. Moses Sofer of Pressburg, in which Shapira was a firm believer: "*hadash asur min ha-Torah*" (all that is new is biblically prohibited).²³ In line with Goldstein's appraisal of Hasidic anti-Zionism, Nadler situates the Munkaczer Rebbe's rejection of Zionism within the larger rejection by the Hasidic leadership of all things modern, beginning from the time of the *Haskala* (Jewish Enlightenment) onward.²⁴

In Shapira's view, the religious-Zionist movement was an even greater threat to tradition than secular Jewish nationalism²⁵ because it was in fact a form of false Messianism, and "a repudiation of one of the thirteen principles of the Jewish faith."²⁶ This Maimonidean principle called for the Jews to passively await the redemption rather than seeking to bring it on through their own initiative.²⁷

²⁰ See Laqueur, 412-13, also Israel Rubin, *Satmar: Two Generations of An Urban Island*, 2nd Edition (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1997), 35.

²¹ Heilman and Friedman, 226.

²² Allan L. Nadler, "The War on Modernity of R. Hayyim Elazar Shapira of Munkacz," *Modern Judaism*, vol. 14, Issue 3 (Oct 1994), 233.

²³ *Ibid.*, 233-34.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 235,

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 237.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 238.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 242.

Furthermore, religious Zionists were even worse than secular Zionists to R. Shapira, because in his view they were heretics masquerading as pious individuals, whose influence could lead others astray.²⁸ R. Shapira's anti-Zionist passion erupted in such outpourings as the labeling of Zionism as a "demonic force."²⁹

Shapira's opposition to Jewish political organizations of any kind brought him into conflict even with other anti-Zionist Hasidic leaders such as the Gerer Rebbe, Abraham Mordechai Alter, who was the most influential Hasidic rebbe of the day³⁰ and the founder of Agudath Israel. To Shapira, Agudath Israel was a group of "crypto-Zionist heretics parading as Torah-faithful Jews."³¹

However, R. Shapira was not against Jews living in Israel; his Munkaczer Hasidim had a yeshiva (religious school) in Jerusalem.³²

The Satmarer Rebbe

R. Yoel Teitelbaum (1887-1979) and his Satmar Hasidim were early, vocal and consistent opponents to Zionism. Satmarers continue to be so in the present day, now under the leadership of R. Yoel's nephew, R. Moshe Teitelbaum. Yoel Teitelbaum and his original followers hailed from Hungary, a bastion of Hasidic ultra-conservatism and anti-Zionism. After the annihilation of Jewish life in Hungary in 1944 and the Holocaust, Teitelbaum and his surviving followers settled in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, New York. Today, Satmarers are also found in Israel and many other places around the Western world.³³

Satmarers are key organizers of demonstrations against Israel. Sometimes they target specific religious affronts, such as Israeli violations of religious customs, and sometimes they demonstrate against the existence of the State in general.³⁴ They also maintain a bond with the Neturei Karta in Jerusalem and provide financial assistance to various cultural and educational establishments in Israel that refuse government funding.³⁵

R. Yoel devoted an enormous amount of energy and resources to combating Zionism. American Satmarers "picketed embassies, organized boycotts,

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 293.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 240.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 293.

³² *Ibid.*, 242.

³³ Rubin, 48.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 204.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

and argued their case in leaflets and in the press. ... In Manhattan mystified onlookers saw thousands of Satmar Hasidim in mass demonstrations against the presence of Israeli officials.”³⁶ In the 1970s and ‘80s, the Satmarers bought full-page advertisements in the *New York Times* to denounce the Jewish State.³⁷

R. Yoel also distinguished himself from other Hasidim in his practice of blaming Zionism for all modern Jewish misfortune, including the tragedy of the Holocaust.³⁸ This belief is of course very controversial and, although it may be shared by other Hasidic groups, it is certainly not universally held in the Hasidic world. In the words of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, “the tragedy of the Holocaust is an unanswerable question. There is no human rationale whatsoever that can explain such indescribable suffering.”³⁹

This particular difference in opinion may be a key to understanding the fact that the Lubavitch Hasidim have come to accept Zionism and the State of Israel while the Satmarers have not. Whereas, prior to the Second World War, the Lubavitchers shared the Satmarers’ demonization of all things nationalistic and Zionist, after the Holocaust the Lubavitch view changed dramatically to endorsement of the Zionist movement. This must certainly be reflective of their Rebbe’s above-mentioned position. The Satmarers, in their belief that the Zionists had brought on the Holocaust through their heretical movement to establish a Jewish state, naturally became even more vociferously anti-Zionist post-war, and all the more determined to flush out any tinges of modernity and secularity from their midst. The Lubavitch, on the other hand, have become relatively open to the outside world, wearing more contemporary styles of clothing, for instance⁴⁰ and fostering interactions with non-Orthodox and secular Jews. In Israel, the Lubavitchers became “a vital link between the government of Israel and the Orthodox community” and have furthermore become champions of the Zionist right wing in taking a stand against proposals to surrender land for peace.⁴¹

Meanwhile, the Satmarers find themselves on the same side of political demonstrations as Palestinian nationalists. They continue to blame the Holocaust on the Zionists, voicing opinions that border on

conspiracy theory. Take, for example, the following statements made by a spokesperson for the Monsey, New York branch of the Neturei Karta, in a recent interview:

...the Zionists wanted to get Jews to Palestine to build their state, so they needed people, they needed cannon fodder. And to do that they even made deals with the Nazis. There are 51 documents in a book by Rabbi Weisman that show how they collaborated with the Germans. The Germans were not going to kill the Jews of Hungary, but for the Zionists... spiritually we believe that they caused God’s punishment of the Jews by trying to fight the exile.⁴²

An ironic side note is that the Satmarer Rebbe in fact owed his life to his despised enemies, the Zionists. In December 1944, Zionist leaders bribed some German officials into transporting a trainload of Jews out of Bergen-Belsen concentration camp and into Switzerland at a price of \$1000 per head. R. Yoel Teitelbaum was among the 1,368 Jews saved.⁴³

Anti-Zionists in Israel: The Eda Haredit and the Neturei Karta

The Eda Haredit was formed in Israel around 1917. Its mandate was to combat the forces of Zionism and secularism. Its members were largely yeshiva students who “eschewed the passivity of the Old Yishuv and espoused an activist and aggressive struggle against Zionism and all it represented.”⁴⁴ However, the Eda Haredit were only a marginal force in Israel, being few in number and lacking in political skill. Moreover, they were fighting a losing battle as mainstream Orthodox sentiment veered increasingly towards the settlement and building of *Eretz Yisrael*. Members of Agudath Israel continued in increasing numbers to move to Palestine. While they remained affiliated with the Eda Haredit until the 1940s, the latter held them in low esteem since many Agudists willingly made concessions to the British rulers, such as allowing English to be taught in their schools.⁴⁵

In 1939, a group of Orthodox anti-Zionists in Jerusalem who believed that “only religious activity

³⁶ Jerome R. Mintz, *Hasidic People: A Place in the New World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 39.

³⁷ Heilman and Friedman, 234.

³⁸ Mintz, 37.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁴² R. Yisroel Dovid Weiss, quoted in Brian Lipson, “Interview – Rabbi Yisroel Dovid Weiss,” *T/F* Issue No. 1 (Montreal: Bluebomber Recordings/ Press, Fall 2003), 7.

⁴³ Mintz, 27.

⁴⁴ Heilman and Friedman, 224.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 225.

could truly protect Judaism”⁴⁶ established themselves under a new name, the Neturei Karta, or “guardians of the city.” They remain active to this day. The group was originally made up of the descendents of pre-Zionist residents of Israel. The Neturei Karta had the support of the followers of the rabbis of Brisk (Poland) and Satmar (Hungary), who were living in America and other Western countries, and the blessing of several talmudic sages such as Hazon Ish.⁴⁷ According to the Neturei Karta, anyone who accepted the state of Israel was an apostate, because the purpose of the state was “to lead the Jews away from religion.”⁴⁸ They drew no distinction between the Agudah, which had originally been an anti-Zionist group, and the Mizrachi, a religious Zionist group, since the Agudah was now compromising with the Zionists.⁴⁹ The Neturei Karta took a radical and uncompromising stand against the state:

[The Neturei Karta] refused to take part in the war of independence of 1948, and demanded the internationalization of Jerusalem under the supervision of the United Nations. They refused to accept Israeli identity cards, for they believed that any concession to secularism and modern life, however small, would sooner or later spell doom for traditional Judaism as they understood it.

The Eda Haredit went to such extremes as petitioning the ruling British government and the League of Nations to save them from perceived Zionist oppression, and enlisting the help of Arab leaders in the fight against Zionist domination.⁵⁰

The Neturei Karta and Satmarers in Israel today continue to refuse all affiliation with the state, protesting against its existence through such measures as refusing army service and eschewing the right to vote, as well as organizing and staging protest rallies.⁵¹

While the Neturei Karta claim the Satmarer Rebbe as their spiritual leader⁵², in certain respects they are too extreme even for the Satmarers. For instance, the Neturei Karta have “solidly allied” themselves with the P.L.O. and its leader, Yasser Arafat, who has commended them for their refusal to recognize the State of Israel and for “considering

themselves as Palestinians.”⁵³ The Satmar Rebbe, by contrast, chose not to meet with Arafat during a visit to Israel in 1994, viewing the P.L.O. as “an organization that has killed, and anyone who associates with it is a killer.”⁵⁴

The Theological Arguments Against Zionism

The Hasidim justify their opposition to Zionism with the declaration that it is inimical to traditional Judaism, both doctrinally and in practice. Their arguments on this front have remained the same from Zionism’s inception to the present day.

The fundamental Hasidic anti-Zionist argument is that the return to Israel and the establishment of a Jewish kingdom or state can only be accomplished by a Messiah who is sent by God, and not by human beings⁵⁵ of the Messiah. The Zionist movement constitutes a denial of God’s supreme authority over the fate of humans.⁵⁶

However strongly evinced, the anti-Zionist argument contains some elements of contradiction when held up to biblical law. The conviction that the Jews’ return to Israel must only come about through the messianic redemption conflicts with a biblical commandment to settle the Land of Israel (*Mitzvat Yishuv Eretz Israel*).⁵⁷ Early Orthodox anti-Zionist leaders discussed this problem, as Laqueur notes.⁵⁸ One explanation they gave was that this commandment was merely one of 248 *mitzvot*, and that it could potentially clash with any of the others.⁵⁹ However, this argument was not deemed to be convincing. Another argument was that Jews are exempt from fulfilling the commandment of settling the Land of Israel if it presents physical danger, economic obstacles, or the impossibility of studying the Torah, among other reasons.⁶⁰ Further still, others argued that this *mitzvah* did not apply at this time, since God had put the Jews in *golus* (exile) as punishment for their sins, and it was not up to them to determine when their sentence would end.⁶¹ Agudah Israel countered this argument with the

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Laqueur, 412.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 409.

⁵¹ Mintz, 38.

⁵² Rubin, 48.

⁵³ Clyde Haberman, “Hailed in Zion, Anti-Zionist ‘King’ From the U.S.” *The New York Times* (1857-Current file); June 8, 1994, A1. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times, A4.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Laqueur, 408.

⁵⁶ Nadler, 237.

⁵⁷ Laqueur, 407.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 408

⁵⁹ Laqueur, 407.

⁶⁰ Laqueur, 408.

⁶¹ Ibid.

proclamation that Israeli statehood was being brought about by God.⁶²

Political and Social Reasons

A major reason for opposing Zionism was the belief that it constituted a serious deviation from traditional Judaism in many respects, one of which was an ideal of apoliticism. According to proponents of this argument, the Jews had never and should not take part in politics of any kind, or form any kind of political associations, even if they were Orthodox in nature. R. Shapira was horrified by the Jews' participation in such organizations as the League of Nations.⁶³

Shapira advocated maintaining the *shtadlanut* system, under which the European Jewish community had been operating for centuries, in which the Jews were treated as a religious minority and were at the mercy of local authorities, to whom they pleaded for favour.⁶⁴ The Zionist movement, however, operated on the principle that the Jews were a nation in the political sense and that they should be accorded the political rights and powers of sovereign nations.

To anti-Zionists such as Shapira, Zionists were simply a new version of *Maskilim* (the assimilationists of the Enlightenment era), and nationalism was a foreign concept the Zionists had borrowed from Western Europe.⁶⁵ Indeed, the Satmarers maintain that democracy is valid only for non-Jewish political communities. Therefore, the Zionist vision of the State is invalid, as the Messianic State will be a complete theocracy. In such a State, only the laws of the Torah apply, "as interpreted by its authorized expositors."⁶⁶ However, critics argue that this unrealistically inflates the tradition of Jewish quietism.⁶⁷

Another argument against Zionism deals with its secular nature. The Satmarers hold that only pious people can bring on the redemption. In this way, they reject Rabbi Avraham Kook's often quoted view that "the irreligious, by virtue of their zeal and sacrifice for national goals, are unconscious agents of the divine redemption."⁶⁸

Finally, Hasidic anti-Zionists argue that Zionism destroys the very heart of Jewish identity by replacing religion with secular nationalism. As Ehud Luz explains, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Shalom Dov Baer, believed that "Zionism cannot remain neutral toward religion and tradition—as Herzl, for example, believed. Zionism is compelled to reject religion in order to cultivate the national spirit."⁶⁹ In a letter of 1903, the Rebbe argued that:

...one who subscribes to the Zionist covenant no longer thinks himself at all obligated to observe the Torah and mitzvot, nor can we hope that he will someday return to them...because by his lights he is a proper Jew by virtue of being a loyal nationalist.⁷⁰

The Other Side: Hasidic Supporters of Zionism

It must be pointed out that while the Hasidim universally opposed early Zionism, within Orthodox Judaism as a whole the response to Zionism varied. For example, the early religious-Zionist Mizrachi movement was formed by rabbinic leaders who supported Zionism and wanted to give it Orthodox representation to ensure that it pursued a religious agenda.⁷¹ In more recent times, groups such as the prominent Israeli activist organization of religious Zionists, Gush Emunim, show that Hasidim today display a range of sentiments towards Zionism and nationalism.⁷²

The Lubavitchers are also Zionist supporters, as mentioned earlier. As proposed earlier in this essay, there appears to be some compatibility between their theological view of the Holocaust and their sympathy for Zionism, which may in part explain the reversal in their stance on Zionism from the pre-war days of the Previous Rebbe to the post-war time of R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson. However, such a line of inquiry is beyond the scope of this essay.

⁶² Laqueur, 413.

⁶³ Nadler, 243.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Laqueur, 408.

⁶⁶ Norman Lamm, "The Ideology of the Neturei Karta, According to the Satmar Version," *Tradition*, vol. 12 (Fall 1971), 46.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 52.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 46.

⁶⁹ Ehud Luz, *Parallels Meet: Religion and Nationalism in the Early Zionist Movement (1882-1904)*, tr. from the Hebrew by Lenn J. Schramm (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1988), 215.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Nadler, 233.

⁷² On Gush Emunim and religious Zionism in general, see R. Scott Appleby's, *Spokesmen for the Despised: Fundamentalist Leaders of the Middle East*, and Israel Shahak and Norton Mezvinsky's *Jewish Fundamentalism in Israel*.

Conclusion: Is Anti-Zionism Hasidic in Character?

To what extent do the philosophies of these anti-Zionists represent the original spirit of Hasidism?⁷³ In Nadler's view, the vision of R. Shapira constitutes an outright reversal of traditional Hasidic values. For one thing, the Hasidism of the Besht was an optimistic movement that espoused belief in the transformative powers of redemption, and that all Jews, no matter how sinful or low, could redeem themselves through repentance and sincere heartfelt prayer to God. Shapira on the other hand believed that Jews who sinned were no longer Jews and were not to be associated with.⁷⁴ Zionists were infidels and heretics who should be persecuted and never brought back to the fold.⁷⁵

Secondly, Shapira rejected the Besht's focus on joyful service of God and distancing from asceticism.⁷⁶ In Shapira's view, the Besht's council was no longer applicable to the current generation, whose sinfulness was too extreme, and had to be mediated through strict self-denial and penitence.⁷⁷

Third, Shapira rejected the social pluralism implied by the Besht's tolerance and outreach to Jews who had strayed from Orthodoxy, celebrated by such modern writers as Martin Buber.⁷⁸ In Nadler's view, the philosophy of R. Shapira shows a transformation of the spirit of Hasidism from a "populist, optimistic spiritual revolution into the most pessimistic, elitist and reactionary religious movement in Jewish life."⁷⁹

However, such an argument implies that R. Shapira is representative of all of Hasidism of his time. This is a questionable proposition at best, since other Hasidic leaders of that era, such as the Gerer Rebbe, endorsed settlement in Israel. As noted earlier in this essay, many Hasidic leaders at this time were members of Agudath Israel. While this group was anti-Zionist initially, it eventually adopted a more moderate political stance that was quite distant from the militancy and reactionism of R. Shapira and his followers. Furthermore, while groups such as the Satmarers have maintained their original

vociferously anti-Zionist stance to the present day, other Hasidic groups such as the Lubavitch have changed their perspectives over time. Furthermore, contrary to Nadler's assessment of the Hasidim post-R. Shapira as pessimistic and elitist, Lubavitchers continue optimistically to reach out to Jews the world over, regardless of their background, religious affiliation or level of observance, encouraging them back into the fold.

What compels Hasidim such as the Satmarers to maintain their uncompromising anti-Zionist position while other Hasidic and Orthodox groups have changed over time? Since some Hasidim have become Zionists, we cannot propose that there is something inherently incompatible between Zionism and Hasidism. It is difficult to say whether there is a Hasidic character to religious anti-Zionism, since its proponents come from both Hasidic and non-Hasidic Orthodox communities. Furthermore, Hasidim are not a homogenous group, and hold a variety of attitudes towards Zionism. At the same time, it is possible to draw several conclusions about the nature of the relationship between Hasidism and Zionism, and to propose several ways in which Beshtian Hasidism may inform the anti-Zionist stance.

As noted earlier, those who oppose Zionism tend to be the most strongly conservative of Hasidim, whose objection to Zionism stems in a large part from their rejection of modernity in general, with Zionism as just one of its many evils. The Lubavitch, with their policy of relative openness to the outside world (compared to other Hasidic groups) are also more open to Zionism.

Does Zionism contravene Hasidic beliefs and values? Would the Besht (the original Hasidic leader) have endorsed Zionism or condemned it? We can only speculate. It is argued that the Besht advocated personal, spiritual transformation, and preferred theurgic activity to political activism, as Murray J. Rosman argues.⁸⁰

Modern commentators on Beshtian Hasidism, such as Martin Buber, emphasize the humanistic elements of the Besht's teachings.⁸¹ Buber has written extensively on reconciliation and coexistence between Jews and Palestinians.⁸² A similar concern for human rights can be seen in recent writings of the Neturei Karta, one of whose American representatives, R. Yisroel Dovid Weiss, recently

⁷³ That is, if we can agree that such a thing exists. For the purpose of this essay and its speculative conclusion, I will assume that the spirit of Hasidism reflects what we know of the teachings and life of the Besht.

⁷⁴ Nadler, 252.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 254.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 255.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 256.

⁸⁰ Murray J. Rosman, *Founder of Hasidism: A Quest for the Historical Ba'al Shem Tov* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 110-112.

⁸¹ See Buber's *Hasidism and Modern Man*.

⁸² See *The Martin Buber Reader*, ed. Asher D. Biemann, Part VII.

attended the memorial service of Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, the spiritual leader of Hamas who was assassinated by the Israeli army in March, 2004. R. Weiss offered condolence to his Palestinian “cousins” and professed hope for the day in which Arabs and Jews will “live side by side under Palestinian rule over the entire Holy Land.”⁸³

However, it cannot be argued that either Buber or the Neturei Karta (or the teachings of the Besht, for that matter) represent Hasidism as a whole. Satmarer anti-Zionism may be less of a departure from historical European Orthodox Jewish communal ways than is Lubavitcher Zionism, or Neturei Karta’s outreach to the Palestinian community, for that matter. However, the Satmarers’ anti-State activism could also be said to contravene the quietism of the Hasidic tradition in Europe.

Rather than leading to the formulation of any conclusive distinctions between Hasidic and non-Hasidic religious anti-Zionism, the study of the Orthodox Jewish response to Zionism reveals the diversity of modern Hasidic belief and practice. While these days, ultra-Orthodoxy and religious zealotry are not necessarily the first thing that come to mind when anti-Israel activism is mentioned, this is nonetheless a valid connection to make in the case of many Hasidim today. As unlikely partners as they may be, Hasidic Jews currently share ideological space with Palestinian rights groups and other affiliated “left wing” groups, while approaching the issue of Zionism from a decidedly unique religious perspective.

⁸³ This speech is entirely reproduced on the Neturei Karta website under the title “Orthodox Jews Responding to the Assassination of Sheikh Yassin.” See <http://www.nkusa.org>.