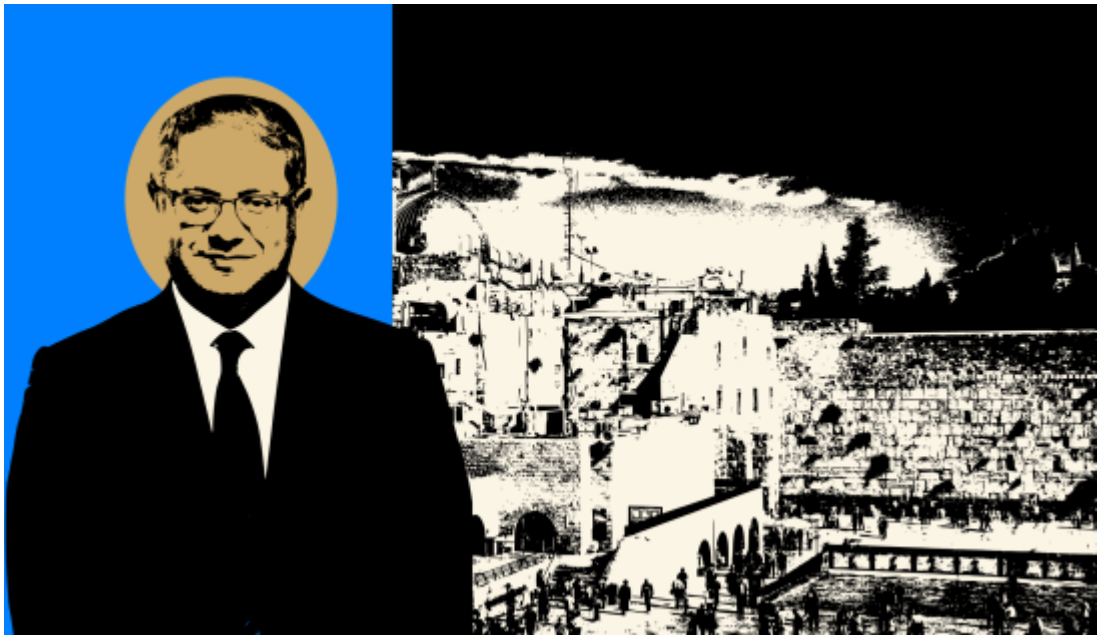
It’s Not About Kahane. Here’s Why Jews Support Ben-Gvir



In “Why Is Meir Kahane Making a Comeback Among Orthodox Jews?”, Zev Eleff and Menachem Butler provide a detailed historical analysis of American Orthodox rabbis’ attitudes toward Rabbi Meir Kahane. While meticulously researched, the essay fails to address its underlying question: Why do so many American and Israeli Jews support Itamar Ben-Gvir, Israel’s Minister of National Security? Instead, the authors focus exclusively on historical American rabbinic responses to Kahane himself.

This focus reveals a wider problem in current American Jewish discourse. Rabbi Meir Kahane was murdered 35 years ago, yet some American Jews see his ghost lurking behind every corner of Israeli politics. Instead of making an honest effort to understand the appeal of right-wing ministers like Ben Gvir and Betzalel Smotrich, they shout “Kahane!” whenever they make headlines.

Too many people are living in the past, forcing an outdated framework of Kahanism onto today’s completely different political reality. Ben Gvir’s appeal has little to do with Kahanism and everything to do with the painful lessons Israelis have learned through decades of failed peace initiatives and security policies.

It’s Not about Kahane

Recent polling confirms what many of us have observed firsthand: Israeli society has shifted decisively rightward. A 2024 Hebrew University survey shows that since October 7, more than 160,000 Israelis have abandoned left-wing affiliations, with over 110,000 joining the political right.

This isn't just a reaction to October 7, but the culmination of decades of bitter experience. As political psychologist Nimrod Nir noted, "October 7 caused a complete collapse of the old Israeli left." The traditional political dividing line of Palestinian statehood has virtually disappeared because most Israelis, regardless of political affiliation, have abandoned the idea. "There isn't even a majority for a Palestinian state among liberal voters anymore," Nir points out. "It's just not on the table."

> Ben Gvir's appeal has little to do with Kahanism and everything to do with the painful lessons Israelis have learned through decades of failed peace initiatives and security policies.

To understand why, consider three catastrophic policy decisions that have shaped Israeli consciousness:

First came the Oslo Accords of 1993, which handed control of much of Judea and Samaria to the Palestinian Authority. Israeli elites celebrated what they saw as a path to peace, but what followed instead was the Second Intifada (2000-2005), a devastating wave of suicide bombings, shootings, and other terrorist attacks that murdered over 1,000 innocent Israelis and wounded thousands more in restaurants, buses, and public spaces.

Next was the 2005 Gaza Disengagement, when Israel uprooted 22 thriving Jewish communities and handed the entirety of Gaza to a population dedicated to Israel's destruction.. Rather than responding forcefully to the terrorist attacks that ensued in the years following the disengagement, Israel chose retreat and appeasement. The consequences have been catastrophic. Since the disengagement, Israel has endured thousands of rocket attacks targeting civilian communities, multiple full-scale wars (in 2008-09, 2012, 2014, and now the current conflict), and the construction of massive terror infrastructure that made the October 7 massacre possible. Every warning issued by opponents of the disengagement has tragically proven correct.

Finally, the 2011 prisoner exchange for Gilad Shalit released over 1,000 terrorists, including Yahya Sinwar, who would later orchestrate the October 7 massacre. This catastrophic deal not only freed hardened murderers who immediately resumed planning Israel's destruction, but it also established a ruinous precedent that hostage-taking pays enormous dividends. Most of Israel's rabbinical leadership warned against the deal, predicting it would lead to more kidnappings and greater bloodshed in the future, but their voices were dismissed. The terrible logic of the Shalit exchange played out exactly as predicted on October 7—Hamas took hostages precisely because they knew Israel's track record of trading hundreds of terrorists for even a single captive.

These policies—now seen by most as disastrous for Israel—are the legacy of both left and right-wing governments, leading to a deep sense of betrayal across Israeli society. The human cost has been staggering: hundreds of soldiers have died fighting in Gaza, a direct consequence of our previous withdrawal. Before the 2005 disengagement, the death of six soldiers in a Gaza terror attack was considered shocking; today, the casualties are orders of magnitude greater.

The painful truth is that Israelis have been subjected to a series of failed "peace experiments" that culminated in the slaughter of October 7. Despite possessing overwhelming military superiority, Israel has been hamstrung by progressive Western values and an unhealthy obsession with international approval. Traditional Israelis are fed up with this cycle of restraint, concession, and inevitable bloodshed.

The painful truth is that Israelis have been subjected to a series of failed "peace experiments" that culminated in the slaughter of October 7.

None of this is connected to Rabbi Kahane.

Every Shabbat, I read six different Religious Zionist Israeli newspapers. It's a great way to practice my Hebrew, and it helps me to understand the inner dynamics of the Religious Zionist community. In four years of regular reading, I can count on one hand the number of times I've seen Kahane's name mentioned. Even when it does appear, it's usually just a passing historical reference. Israel in 2025 is a vibrant, forward-looking society grappling with immediate security challenges, not fixated on an American rabbi assassinated 35 years ago.

My office at Israel365 is located in Beit Shemesh's industrial zone, surrounded by auto repair shops and kitchen supply stores. Our neighbors are predominantly traditional Sephardic Jews—hardworking people who take time each afternoon to learn Mishnah and daven Mincha. Many of these Jews voted for Ben Gvir's Otzma Yehudit party. This is not because they're Kahanists, but because they are sick of the status quo on the Temple Mount, where Jews are still treated as second-class citizens; they are tired of Israel playing defense, responding to terror attacks instead of taking the fight to the enemy; and they have had enough of Israel providing aid and supplies to Hamas as our hostages languish in terror tunnels.

This is the real context for the rise of Ben Gvir and Smotrich. Their supporters—now numbering over one million by current polling—are not "Kahanists." They are ordinary Israelis who have learned through bitter experience that the existing policies have yielded catastrophic results and now want leaders who promise a decisive break from the past's failed paradigm. Their motivation is not ideological extremism but basic survival instinct after decades of watching well-intentioned but devastating policies endanger their families and communities.

Ben Gvir's Otzma Yehudit and Smotrich's Religious Zionist parties have gained support because they prioritize defeating Hamas over endless cycles of hostage deals that inevitably lead to more terrorism. Ben Gvir's policies—such as endorsing Trump's Gaza plan and encouraging immigration from Gaza, toughening conditions in security prisons, expanding civilian gun ownership, and supporting Jewish prayer rights on the Temple Mount—speak to a nation that has been brutalized by Islamic terror in ways American Jews cannot fully grasp.

When these Jews look at Ben Gvir and Smotrich, they don't see Kahane reborn; they see people who understand their fears and frustrations, leaders willing to stand up for their safety and religious rights without apology.

The Transformation of Religious Zionism

The rightward shift in Israeli society is especially evident within the Religious Zionist community, which has undergone a dramatic transformation in recent decades.

Today's Religious Zionist parties bear little resemblance to the centrist Mafdal (National Religious Party) that once dominated its community's politics. Smotrich and Ben Gvir represent a decisive break from that tradition—not because of Kahane's influence, but through the ideological legacy of Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook and his disciples, who reshaped Religious Zionist thinking.

The contemporary Religious Zionist and Otzma Yehudit parties evolved from the National Union — Tekuma slate, formed when principled leaders like Rav Hanan Porat and Zvi Hendel, students of Rav Zvi Yehuda, broke with Mafdal after the 1998 Wye Agreement, which aimed to resume the implementation of the Oslo Accords. Their departure marked a turning point—Religious Zionists would no longer support territorial concessions in the name of pragmatism. Unlike the accommodating approach of the old Mafdal, the National Union took firm positions on the integrity of Eretz Yisrael.

> When these Jews look at Ben Gvir and Smotrich, they don't see Kahane reborn; they see people who understand their fears and frustrations, leaders willing to stand up for their safety and religious rights without apology.

While some Religious Zionists may yearn for the more moderate politics of the past, recent electoral results show they're a small minority. The approach of Rav Aharon Lichtenstein *zt"l*—which tried to balance traditional religious values with liberal political sensibilities—has been largely rejected by Israeli Religious Zionists outside the Yeshivat Har Etzion circle.

This transformation wasn't some abstract ideological shift but a direct response to real-world experience. The more liberal Religious Zionist approach, with its openness to territorial compromise, was tried and proved to be a disaster. When Oslo and the Gaza Disengagement led to the murder of thousands of Jews, Israelis simply changed their minds. When the "moderate" and "reasonable" approach leads to the murder of your friends and neighbors, it's only rational to conclude that the "moderate" approach isn't all that reasonable after all.

Those who criticize this rightward shift from abroad rarely face similar dangers. Most American Jews who express shock at the rise of Smotrich and Ben Gvir have not personally experienced the horrific consequences of the "moderate" policies that Israeli Religious Zionists reject. From the safety of America, it's easy for these critics to maintain ideological positions that Israeli reality has rendered untenable.

The Discomfort with Jewish Power

Much of the criticism of Ben Gvir and Smotrich also stems from a deep discomfort with Jewish power itself. One Orthodox American rabbi recently described "Judaism addicted to power" as morally equivalent to Muslim terrorist movements. This statement exposes a distortion of both history and ethics. After 2,000 years of powerlessness—during which Jews endured exile, persecution, pogroms, genocide, and now jihadist terrorism—the idea that Jews demanding a harsh response to terror are "addicted to power" and somehow equivalent to Hamas is not only wrong but morally backward.

This fear of Jewish power would have bewildered King David. When his family was murdered by the Moabites, David did not worry about proportionality or international opinion. First, he used Jewish power to crush the Moabite army. He then made the surviving Moabite soldiers lie on the ground, measured them with a line, and executed two-thirds of them. He did so not because he was cruel nor because he was "addicted to power" but because this was the only way to ensure they would never again harm the people of Israel.

Did God condemn David's harsh response? Not quite. "God saved David wherever he went" (Shmuel II 8:14). David's harsh use of Jewish power brought peace to Israel and laid the groundwork for his son Shlomo to build the Temple.

The real moral inversion isn't Israelis supporting leaders like Ben Gvir and Smotrich who prioritize security; it's Jews who have become so captured by Western ideologies that they condemn their own people's basic survival instincts. This divide—between those who understand the necessity of power and those who reflexively distrust it—explains much of the disconnect between Israeli and American perspectives on Ben Gvir and Smotrich.

Ben Gvir's Evolution

The claim that Ben Gvir is simply a resurrected Kahane ignores his ideological evolution and his explicit efforts to distinguish his positions from some of the latter's views. During his recent trip to America, Ben Gvir said: "When I was young, I thought we'd have to expel all of the Arabs, and now I think the reality is more complex." While he still expresses respect for Kahane's "great love of Israel," he has developed a distinct political identity that acknowledges the complexities of governance.

The basic principle is straightforward: Those who actively seek Israel's destruction have no place in our society, while loyal non-Jewish citizens—Druze, Arabs, and others who accept Israel as a Jewish state—are righteous gentiles and valued members of our national family. Personally, I believe we can and must hold these two beliefs all at once. We must be uncompromisingly harsh and expel those Arabs who wish to destroy Israel and murder Jews. Sadly, a majority of the Arab population in Gaza, and Judea and Samaria fall into this category. At the same time, we must embrace those Arabs and other minorities who are loyal to the State of Israel.

Perhaps the most telling evidence that Ben Gvir is not a Kahanist purist comes from hardcore Kahanists themselves. Figures like Baruch Marzel—a genuine ideological heir to Rabbi Kahane—see Ben Gvir as having betrayed their cause. In 2022, Marzel and others broke with Ben Gvir, forming their own party and publicly criticizing him as "ideologically flexible" because he no longer advocates for the expulsion of all Arabs.

This basic fact, that Rabbi Kahane's own students consider Ben Gvir a sellout, undermines the narrative that Ben Gvir is Kahanism reborn. He has instead crafted a political identity that draws on multiple influences while adapting to the practical demands of governing in a complex democratic society.

The Double Standard in Political Discourse

Critics often highlight Ben Gvir and Smotrich's confrontational rhetoric while ignoring equally inflammatory language from across the Israeli political spectrum. This selective focus reveals more about their bias than their principles.

All politicians are flawed human beings operating in a combative arena. Ben Gvir and Smotrich have certainly made provocative statements, but the outrage directed exclusively at their rhetoric while ignoring similar or worse comments from left-wing politicians exposes a double standard.

Consider Yair Golan, the current leader of the Democrats party (formed by merging the old Meretz and Labor parties) and a former Member of Knesset, who in 2022 described Jewish settlers in Samaria as "subhuman, despicable people" who 'should be removed by force. (Golan later walked back his comments.) This dehumanizing rhetoric prompted little outcry from the same American Jewish voices so indignant about Ben Gvir. Golan has also called Haredi Jews a "parasitic population" and compared IDF operations to Nazi actions—language that would instantly end any right-wing politician's career.

A few years ago at a meeting in Beit Shemesh, Betzalel Smotrich was questioned by Anglo leaders about his direct and sometimes harsh style. Though they agreed with his policies, they were uncomfortable with his confrontational approach. With characteristic bluntness, Smotrich responded: "*Politica zeh lo Kumzitz b'Bnei Akiva*"—"Politics is not a Bnei Akiva kumzitz!"

Israeli politics is rough and uncompromising. To single out right-wing politicians like Smotrich and Ben Gvir for participating in this political culture, while giving their opponents a pass for equally harsh rhetoric, is simply partisan bias. While we might wish for more civil discourse across the board, honest evaluation requires applying the same standards to everyone.

The greatest threat to Israel isn't Ben Gvir or Smotrich—it's the persistence of the "conceptzia" and the failed policies that have repeatedly endangered Jewish lives. Hundreds of thousands of Israelis are awakening to the reality that survival in a hostile region requires strength and the willingness to do whatever it takes to defend our people. They refuse to be perpetual victims, apologizing for our existence and retreating from our homeland. This isn't Kahanism, even if Rabbi Kahane would have celebrated this awakening. It is a healthy and authentically Jewish response to existential danger.

Rather than condemning this shift through outdated ideological frameworks, Ben Gvir and Smotrich's critics would do well to engage with the lived experiences that have shaped Israeli consciousness. Only through genuine understanding—rather than reflexive condemnation— can the essential bonds between world Jewry be maintained in these challenging times.

Rabbi Elie Mischel is the Director of Education at Israel365.