Why Is Meir Kahane Making a Comeback Among Orthodox Jews?



The American specter of Rabbi Meir Kahane reappeared last week when Israeli Minister of National Security Itamar Ben-Gvir traveled to the United States to meet with diplomats and Jewish leaders.

In Israel, Ben-Gvir wears the mantle of Kahane. He graduated from Kahane's East Jerusalem yeshiva, displays Kahane's books in his home, and once hung a picture in his living room of Baruch Goldstein, the Kahane devotee who murdered 29 Arabs in Hebron. In his youth, Ben-Gvir was exempted from the mandatory IDF draft because his views were too radical, meaning he was too much of a loose cannon for the military. Today, he is the longtime leader of the ultranationalist Otzma Yehudit party, whose platform conforms to most of Kahane's militant Zionist ideas but refrains from calling for the total expulsion of Arabs from Israel.

But Ben-Gvir isn't a carbon copy of Meir Kahane. Kahane was charismatic and had a knack for English wordplay. This isn't Ben-Gvir. He lacks Kahane's charisma, and for English-language meetings, he speaks through a translator.

Most high-level American politicians refused to meet with Ben-Gvir. The majority of American Jews also declined. The exception was the Orthodox Jewish community. This is the 10% of the American Jewish enclave that is most religiously traditional and politically conservative (particularly after the Hamas terrorist attacks on Oct. 7, 2023).

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Ben-Gvir's visit began in Florida, where he met with Efrem Goldberg, the senior rabbi of Boca Raton Synagogue, and other prominent Orthodox leaders. At Yale University, an independent Jewish society welcomed him, while he was met outside with protesters hurling water bottles. Ben-Gvir's reception in New York was mixed. His rally at Chabad headquarters in Brooklyn Crown Heights led to protests and counterprotests, and an injury to a NYPD uniformed officer. His subsequent Shabbat plans on Long Island led to uproar in protest and celebration

Congregation Beth Shalom extended a speaking invitation to him "with full awareness that Ben-Gvir is a highly controversial figure, both in Israel and abroad," the synagogue leadership explained to its members in a letter. They noted that it "is no secret that his far-right platform and statements have drawn significant attention and criticism, and many of you might be surprised at his presence in our shul."

The leadership ultimately decided it was reasonable to host Ben-Gvir, not as a political endorsement, but because a "sitting member of the democratically elected Knesset on an official government visit was presented to us, and as lovers of the State of Israel." Debate, the letter concluded, "has always been a hallmark of the Jewish people." Similar arrangements to host Ben-Gvir and explanations for extending the invitation (likely, shared talking points) were made and offered by other Orthodox Long Island synagogues, such as Irving Place Minyan and Congregation Bais Tefilah.

Nearby, the Young Israel of Woodmere invited Ben-Gvir to speak on Shabbat but suddenly "cancelled" last minute. Congregants applied significant external pressure on social media, but the synagogue provided no further explanation. Under previous rabbinic leadership, the influential congregation refused to permit Kahane to speak from its pulpit.

What, then, explains the reception extended by the Orthodox to Itamar Ben-Gvir? Likely, it has much to do with the present polarized political climate in the U.S., Israel, and elsewhere. This explains how Ben-Gvir reached the inner circle of the Knesset while Kahane was a marginal political figure, and then an excommunicated one. But there's something very historical about Ben-Gvir's short trip to the U.S. It reflects something about Meir Kahane that American Orthodox Jews could never let go.

Becoming Kahane

Meir Kahane was born in Brooklyn in 1932 and ordained in 1957 at the Mirrer Yeshiva in New York. He had a variegated early career. Kahane was an editor and columnist for the Brooklyn-based *Jewish Press*, had a brief stint as a sports reporter, and served as rabbi at two synagogues in Queens. In 1965, Kahane—under the nom de plume Michael King—established a short-lived consulting firm in Washington, D.C., with a friend.

In June 1960, he left his pulpit at the Howard Beach Jewish Center, after a falling-out with the congregation's board. In June 1968, at a meeting held at his cousin's midtown Manhattan synagogue on West 34th Street, he founded the Jewish Defense League, or "JDL."

"We are talking of Jewish survival," Kahane declared at that meeting. "To turn the other cheek is not a Jewish concept. Do not listen to the soothing anesthesia of the establishment. They walk in the paths of those whose timidity helped bury our brothers and sisters less than 30 years ago."

The next day, Kahane traveled to Washington to testify before the House Committee on Un-American Activities. He proudly introduced himself as a founder of "a group called the Jewish Defense League, which is currently being organized to defend Jewish people against anti-Semitism and to defend this country against various extremist groups such as the communists and the black nationalists, functioning at the present time."

One memoirist recalled the early years of the JDL as follows: "Kahane organized groups of Jewish men to patrol the Williamsburg and Crown Heights areas of Brooklyn, as well as other predominantly Jewish neighborhoods in New York. The men escorted Jews to synagogues and protected Jews and Jewish-owned businesses against attack. This subgroup of the JDL became known as the Chaya squad. The *chaya*, a Hebrew word meaning 'animal,' was the fighter in the organization and was responsible for protests, demonstrations, and street patrols. A training camp was established in the Catskills, where members could learn combat techniques and weapons use."

Often, JDL's members resorted to violence to protect their coreligionists against indigenous antisemitism and protest the Soviet Union's intolerable treatment of Russian Jews. (Kahane cultivated alliances with Joseph Colombo's Italian-American Civil Rights League and modeled the JDL based on the Black Panthers.) Kahane was average height and build—he stood at 5"8, at best—but his passion enlarged his profile and fierceness.

His justification for violence was biblical, even theological. “He did not believe that antisemitism was ‘circumstantial’ but rather embedded in non-Jewish society, a secular iteration of ‘Esau hates Jacob,’” wrote Shaul Magid, a Kahane biographer. “Thus for him antisemitism can never be eradicated. It can only be controlled, and violence was a deterrent to control antisemitic behavior through fear.”

Kahane’s Orthodox Enablers

Kahane was enabled by influential Orthodox Jews, albeit beneath the radar. Rabbi Emanuel Rackman of the well-heeled Fifth Avenue Synagogue supported the JDL’s efforts. The friendship was a fundraising boon for Kahane that yielded, adjusting for inflation, tens of millions of dollars. Rackman introduced Kahane to the synagogue’s “finest families,” including the Orthodox philanthropist, Joseph Gruss.

These families encouraged Kahane’s self-defense activities, applauding the JDL’s activism when picketing against antisemitism and, in one instance, guarding Montefiore Cemetery from Halloween vandalism on Jewish graves. When it came to Kahane’s violence, however, most of the Orthodox leaders remained silent.

In May 1970, when 50 of Kahane’s men stormed into Manhattan’s Park East Synagogue—another East Side Orthodox congregation, a half-mile from Rackman’s—and occupied it for three days in protest of a Soviet Mission across the street, the response was silence. “They invaded the building like thugs,” said Arthur Schneier, the synagogue’s rabbi, but none of his rabbinical colleagues stood up for him and their Orthodox coreligionists.

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Rackman and Gruss stood behind Kahane while he and the JDL demanded that the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies of New York cease funding non-Jewish operations, increase support to Jewish schools, and equip yeshivas with armed guards. The JDL picketed the Federation’s headquarters until its staff took out a restraining order against Kahane. According to Kahane’s uncle and longtime Jewish communal worker, Rabbi Isaac Trainin, Federation lay leaders publicly rejected him but readily “gave him money under the table.”

Few people dared to stand up to him. One such person was Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, who once summoned Kahane to his Lower East Side apartment after learning from the U.S. State Department that Kahane's tactics were hurting Soviet Jews, not helping them.

"You are jeopardizing Jewish lives," pleaded Rabbi Feinstein. In December 1970, Rav Moshe told a Hebrew newspaper: "Not one Jew has been saved or helped because of these demonstrations. On the contrary, they are harming very much. Hundreds and thousands in the Soviet Union have been jailed or exiled as a result of such activities."

Rabbi Feinstein concluded: "The actions of the Jewish Defense League directed against governments and states are contrary to the Torah which prohibits us from such deeds of violence."

In 1971, Kahane moved with his family to Israel and broadened his political scope to include the Arab-Israeli conflict. "We'll miss him," a young member of the JDL remarked at that time. "But for us, emigration to Israel is the final solution." Kahane established his ultranationalist Kach party in Israel that year, but frequently returned to the U.S.

Kahane left many admirers in the United States. In December 1971, the Orthodox writer and community organizer Marvin Schick assessed that Kahane was "one of the most influential Jews in New York City."

"Rabbi Kahane continues to be an important force in Jewish and public affairs," wrote Schick. "This is less a matter of JDL power, than it is the result of his talent and brilliance. Rabbi Kahane remains the only American Jewish leader to have grasped fully the implications and potential of confrontation politics for the Jewish community and also the means of exploiting the new mood among our people."

Things changed after Jan. 27, 1972.

Breaking from Kahane

That night, a small band of JDL members bombed Sol Hurok's Midtown Manhattan talent agency because of its work with Soviet musicians. The terror attack claimed the life of twenty-seven-year-old Iris Kones and injured thirteen other people. Kahane himself called the attack "insane" but public opinion had it that he must have been involved.

Rackman and many others finally broke away after that. Rackman now said Kahane's methods were more "destructive rather than helpful." Kahane retaliated against Rackman in his weekly newspaper columns.

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> — Rabbi Moshe Feinstein

Still, Orthodox rabbis, pastors at their core, cared for Kahane's well-being. Take, for instance, Rabbi Shlomo Riskin of Lincoln Square Synagogue. In 1975, a federal judge ordered Kahane to serve a one-year sentence for a gun-related parole violation. Kahane was a prisoner in the Bryant Hotel on 54th and Broadway and was permitted to leave to pray at Riskin's shul. He ate Friday night meals at Riskin's home.

Rabbi Haskel Lookstein of Kehilath Jeshurun on the Upper East Side of Manhattan had a similar interaction:

> It was Friday night, June 6, 1975. Meir Kahane just showed up in shul for Friday night davening, and sat in the back. At the time, he was sentenced to a half-way house in Manhattan. One of the most hospitable people in our shul, a Dr. Blumenthal, came over to me in the front row and said: 'that's Meir Kahane sitting in the back'. I turned around, and sure enough, it was. Dr. Blumenthal said to me: "I am going to go and invite him for Friday night to our home." I said, "no, that's not right. I am the rabbi of the shul and I think that I should extend that invitation to him."
>
> How is it that I remember clearly the date of the dinner? Well, June 6 was my parents' wedding anniversary, and Audrey and I were planning a quiet Friday night dinner in our home. Just with my parents and our four children. No guests. It would be an anniversary Shabbos dinner for them. I sent one of my children ahead to let Audrey know to add another plate to the table. When I arrived home, I knocked, and Audrey opened the door, let Meir Kahane in, and then not-so-gently said to me: "how could you spoil this dinner, just for your parents on their anniversary?" and I said: "Meir Kahane showed up in shul, so I had to bring him home."

Rabbi Rackman also continued to care for Kahane during his imprisonment, despite the JDL's attacks against him in the press. According to one longtime member of Fifth Avenue Synagogue, Kahane sometimes took naps on the synagogue couches following the kiddush luncheon. Other times, he napped at Rackman's apartment across the street.

The rabbinic thinking was that Kahane could be rehabilitated. Riskin abhorred Kahane's violence and told Kahane so at public debates held at Lincoln Square. During these programs, Riskin was more concerned with his interlocutor than the audience and hoped his words might abate the rage of Kahane's followers.

Kahane liked to debate. This type of evenhanded forum made it easier for Kahane to receive public invitations once most JCCs and Hillels decided to boycott him after the Kones murder. "It was a decision of all the major Jewish organizations," one ranking Jewish executive told the *Washington Post* about the boycott.

In the United States and Israel, Kahane was desperate for sparring partners. In 1978, Kahane started the Institute for the Jewish Idea, his personal speaker's bureau. Sol Stern of the *Village Voice* warned that Kahane was a "practiced speaker," able to "brilliantly play every instrument in the orchestra, the high notes and the low." Stern observed Kahane on one of his American tours, taming hostile reporters and endearing himself as an "injured, misunderstood political analyst." Stern's message was that Kahane was a "time bomb" and that his opponents better beware.

Jewish public intellectuals such as Jacob Neusner refused to debate him. "No, Rabbi Kahane, I will not debate with you," wrote Neusner in a Boston newspaper. "My mind is closed to racism, which is the real issue you represent."

One significant exception to the Kahane boycott was Yeshiva University (YU). Kahane managed to maintain access to YU students while he bullied President Samuel Belkin and the rest of the "spineless" administration, as he described them. One of Kahane's first talks at YU took place in November 1970, when he addressed 200 students at the university's Washington Heights campus.

A year later, 700 YU undergraduates listened to Kahane's message about Jewish self-defense and the Free Soviet Jewry Movement. So-called "fringe" YU students sympathetic with his message continued to provide a forum for Kahane, even as his messages further militated. They liked it when Kahane referred to their teachers as "Orthodox atheists" who were, according to Kahane, "too diluted with Americanized blasphemies" to see things his way. Aware that many wanted him banned, Kahane routinely and shrewdly closed his YU speeches with thanks for the university's "fairness in allowing him to speak on campus."

Kahane's appearance at YU, like everywhere else, became more controversial in the 1980s. He spoke a lot about expelling most Arabs from Israel. He wrote about it in his aptly-titled *They Must Go*, a manifesto he prepared in 1980 in Cell 23 in Wing Nine of Ramla Prison. Kahane was incarcerated without trial—called an "administrative arrest"—for planning to blow up the Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount.

Upon his release years later, Kahane pushed Arab expulsion as his principal platform in his campaign forKnesset. His Kach party garnered just enough votes (25,907 in all) in July 1984 to earn a single seat in Israel's parliament. "I expect to be prime minister," he boasted to media outlets. "Doesn't every Jewish boy want to be prime minister of Israel?" Kahane served a single term from 1984-1988, before Israel's Supreme Court banned him from serving in Knesset on the grounds that his politics threatened to negate the democratic character of the State.

Orthodox Jews didn't know how to handle the ultranationalist Kahane. The activist Rabbi Avi Weiss of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, for example, criticized Kahane as a vigilante. but also provided a forum for him. Weiss remained friendly with the charismatic Kahane, perhaps hoping that their relationship might soften Kahane's undaunted militance.

On November 11, 1984, Weiss provided a forum for Kahane, then a member of the Knesset. Weiss believed Kahane could still be saved. A thousand women and men crowded into the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale to witness a three-hour debate between Meir Kahane and Harvard Law professor Alan Dershowitz. Weiss's large synagogue did not have enough seats so many had to stand in the back.

The next day, Kahane spoke at YU. There, he addressed a "capacity crowd." A group of student demonstrators stood in the lobby of Rubin Hall, carrying signs and "singing songs of peace." "Our goal, explained the protesters, "was to show that there is strong opposition to [Kahane's] views among committed and concerned religious Jews."

The picketing infuriated Kahane. At one point, the speaker pointed to a sign that reproduced a verse from Proverbs 3:17, "Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace." Kahane countered with his own take on biblical political science, arguing that the Torah directs its adherents to expel gentiles—an expansive take on the Torah's discussion of the "seven nations"—from Israel's borders. The whole lecture amounted to a dissertation on Jewish law aimed at justifying Kahane's anti-Arab position.

The controversy continued in the newspapers. A student in YU's high school announced to the Brooklyn *Jewish Press* that "Meir Kahane is right." The young man elaborated that an "Arab-free Israel" would be a "tremendous boost in aliyah and tourism which would follow, as many foreigners are afraid to visit the land because of the daily news reports of Jews being slaughtered in the streets."

Another student agreed, charging that "Rabbi Kahane is hated precisely because he forces Jews to choose between classical Jewish teachings and Western, gentile concepts."

In contrast, Nati Helfgot, a YU student, penned a lengthy response in Yeshiva's rabbinical school student magazine, indicating where Kahane had allegedly misrepresented rabbinical sources and presented misleading minority positions to prove his point. Several months later, Kahane responded in his weekly column to a portion of Helfgot's critique.

Meanwhile, Orthodox rabbis remained conspicuously silent. YU refused to comment on the affair. It therefore became the job of others like former Jimmy Carter aide Leon Charney to disavow Kahane. "I don't think he represents the ideal that I was taught at Yeshiva University," he said. Another faculty member noted this and suggested that students only showed up for Kahane's annual visits to YU's campus so that no one else felt emboldened to weigh in on the matter.

The prevailing agnosticism explains why a Kahane supporter in August 1984 tried to fool one of Israel's top leaders into thinking that Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, the most esteemed rabbi at YU, secretly supported Kahane. The forged letter didn't influence newly elected Israel President Chaim Herzog, but the plot betokens the vagueness that surrounded the Orthodox rabbinate's odd reticence when it came to Kahane. (There is no public record of Rabbi Soloveitchik's disapproval of Kahane, although his students claim he was abundantly clear about his negative feelings.)

Some YU rabbis made their opinions better known and were frankly far more positive about Kahane's actions. Rabbi Moshe Tendler, for example, offered tentative support to Kahane's politics and delivered a eulogy at his funeral.

Understanding the Orthodox Ambivalence

Why didn't the Orthodox rabbinate respond to Kahane?

First, and in line with the religious current of that time, Orthodoxy had absorbed more than a modicum of radicalism. In 1989, one insider who had understated Kahane's influence at YU at the outset of the decade reflected on how "Meir Kahane [has] remained one of the most popular and sought-after campus speakers." He surmised that the same rightward forces pushed on religious and political fronts.

Second, the 80s were a period marked by Orthodox triumphalism. Unlike other Jewish groups, the Orthodox were attracting "returnees" to their unique brand of American counterculture. Orthodox Jews felt self-confident, building new yeshivas and other communal institutions. Despite possible misgivings over Kahane's politics, Orthodox leaders recognized that he preached Jewish pride and, not unlike the Gush Emunim Israeli settler movement, was somewhat in step with a broader post-1967 Religious Zionists sentiment that was absorbed into the American Orthodox spirit.

Third, Kahane and his followers intimidated others. In February 1988, Rabbi Avi Weiss's Hebrew Institute of Riverdale held another showdown. In this iteration, Kahane challenged Rabbi Yitz Greenberg. The two were high school debate teammates. Whereas Kahane was a "rightist" and a fiery orator, Greenberg was a typically controlled and reasonable-spoken liberal Orthodox thinker. Kahane's supporters heckled Greenberg throughout his remarks, interrupting him with sarcasm and taunts. The "abuse," as one reporter described it, "left Greenberg uncharacteristically off-stride and visibly worn." After the debate, Greenberg "pledged never to appear with [Kahane] again. The friendship was broken."

Avi Weiss and Shlomo Riskin were the only other Orthodox leaders willing to joust with Kahane. They still believed Kahane could be saved.

Riskin and Weiss were slated to appear with Kahane in November 1990. By that time, Riskin had left Lincoln Square to settle in the Israeli community of Efrat, where he served as chief rabbi. He was traveling in the United States and learned that the leaders of his synagogue had turned down Kahane's request to speak. Riskin's relationship with Kahane was still complicated. The pair had worked together to reintegrate Jewish women formerly married to Palestinians into Israeli life. However, Riskin still very much opposed violence and was the principal target in Kahane's very last vituperative op-eds. An adamant believer in dialogue, Riskin was upset that others still tried to silence Kahane and arranged a debate with Kahane in a public library near Lincoln Square Synagogue.

Just before that, Weiss and Kahane scheduled another bout for November 6, 1990. Weiss prepared for the showdown, hopeful to get the better of his opponent. For his part, Kahane instructed his followers to plaster signs reading "Avi Weiss is a wimp" throughout Weiss's tony Bronx neighborhood.

But the night before the debate, Kahane was assassinated by the Egyptian-born El Sayyid Nosair at the Marriott Hotel on Manhattan's East Side. Weiss learned that Kahane's last words were, "Tomorrow night I'm in Riverdale to debate Avi, and I'm going to whip him bad."

In death, Kahane was not so frightening. For example, Orthodox leaders did not hesitate to respond to a *New York Times* obituary that incorrectly reported that Kahane was ordained at YU. At the urgent behest of university officials, the newspaper issued a correction, explaining that Kahane had graduated from YU's high school but not its more advanced institutions. Once he had handled the matter, YU public relations head Sam Hartstein dashed off a memo to President Norman Lamm with the subject, "Rabbi Meir Kahane and YU." Hartstein recalled that "Kahane gave YU many heartburns over the years" and listed several incidents that had plagued the school.

The Orthodox finally felt at ease talking about and rejecting Kahane.

In 1994, after Baruch Goldstein murdered 29 Palestinians while they were praying in a Hebron mosque, rabbis were quick to distance themselves from the card-carrying Kahanist. Rabbi Louis Bernstein, a longtime Orthodox organization man, admitted that “we are guilty, we have tolerated this phenomenon of Kahanism in Jewish life.”

A headline in a New York Jewish newspaper carried the admission that Orthodox leaders regretted their earlier silence, that their community had “been too soft on Kahane and fanaticism.”

The Orthodox started to repent for the 80s. Then the polarizing Itamar Ben-Gvir—a man who thrives in a polarized political world—convinced them there was nothing to apologize for.

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