

The Politics of Political Despair: The Case of Political Theology in Israel

David Ohana

“The Politics of God”

There is no such thing as political theology. There are only political theologies in different national societies. In Zionism, the national movement of the Jewish people in the modern age, there have been four main phases of political theology (Ohana, 2009a). The first phase appeared with the writings, speeches, and confessions of many of the founders and initial supporters of Zionism, who saw it as a secular and universal form of Messianism, similar to romantic national movements in Europe. The second phase arose in Palestine in the 1920s and 1930s, when Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Hacohen Kook (1865–1935), chief rabbi of Palestine, developed a messianic political theology that in a dialectical manner mobilized socialist secularism for the purpose of establishing a renewed Jewish independence. The third phase arose in 1948 with the establishment of the State of Israel, the “Third Temple” which religious thinkers (and David Ben-Gurion) described as “the first flowering of our redemption.” The fourth phase appeared in 1967 after the Six-Day War with the conquest of Greater Israel, with the messianic euphoria that greeted the reunion of the theological with the military, and the avant-garde activities of the Gush Emunim movement that followed.

Jewish intellectuals discussed these developments from the earliest days of Zionism, and Israeli intellectuals discussed them from

the beginnings of Jewish settlement in Palestine at the turn of the twentieth century. They warned of the dangers lurking in the minefield in which the theological and the political came together, or in the words of Jan Assmann explaining the concept of political theology, in the “ever-changing relationships between political community and religious order, in short, between power [or authority: *Herrschaft*] and salvation [*Heil*]” (Assmann 2000,15).

In order to understand the different approaches of the intellectual groups that discussed the political theologies of Zionism and Israelism, I have followed the lead of the educationalist Akiva Ernst Simon (1899–1988) with his distinction between “Catholic” Judaism embracing all areas of life and “Protestant” Judaism which separates sacred and profane. Among the “Catholics” were Jewish thinkers like Gershom Scholem (1897–1982), Martin Buber (1878–1965), and obviously Rabbi Kook, who were strongly attracted to the messianic phenomenon, although they warned of its consequences in the sphere of practical politics. Buber and Scholem were ambivalent about political theology as early as the 1920s, first in Europe and later in Palestine. Among the “Protestants” were Akiva Ernst Simon, the cultural critic Baruch Kurtzweil (1907–1972), and the scientist and philosopher Yeshayahu Leibowitz (1903–1994). These were Orthodox Jewish thinkers who warned against mixing the sacred with the profane. A third group comprised secular thinkers like the historians J. L. Talmon, Yehoshua Arieli, and Uriel Tal and the philosopher Natan Rotenstreich, who made a difference between Pope and Caesar, the kingdom of heaven and everyday politics. They were hostile to an unholy synthesis of religion, the realization of its metaphysical hopes in the present and its manifestations in contemporary politics. But there was also a secular intellectual, such as Israel Eldad (1910–1996), who combined the messianic and the secular. These various

outlooks among secular and religious thinkers prove that there are only variants of political theology.

The concept of political theology is an old one which made its appearance with Marcus Terentius Varro (116–27 BCE), but the modern discourse on the subject only began with the appearance of Carl Schmitt's *Politische Theologie* (Political Theology) (Schmitt 1985, 1996; Balakrishnan 2000) and Walter Benjamin's early articles (Benjamin 1978, 312–13). Eminent thinkers like Leo Strauss, Ernst Cassirer, Ernst Bloch, Karl Löwith, Erich Voeglin, Hans Jonas, Ernst Kantorowicz, Jacob Taubes, Jacques Derrida, and Giorgio Agamben engaged in a fascinating discussion of the subject, and in so doing cast a new light on major political events of the modern age.¹

In 1919–1920, Schmitt participated in a seminar held by Max Weber in Munich, and later contributed to the *Festschrift* of the great sociologist together with the Freiburg philosopher of law Ernst Kantorowicz. The article became the basis of Schmitt's famous book *Politische Theologie*, in which he abandoned neo-Kantian concepts of "supreme law" and "righteousness" in favor of modern Hobbesian formulas. He claimed that a legal theory has to relate to contemporary social and political conditions and that the "concrete situation," as he called it, took precedence over abstract constructions. Schmitt's thesis was that the modern secular constitutional state had lost its theological foundations. The strengthening of the state comes about through a strengthening of theology, and political theology is a challenge to the Enlightenment and an attempt to overcome the crisis of liberalism by finding a substitute for the political order. In Schmitt's opinion, political liberalism failed to take into account exceptional situations

1 Among the important works on political theology, see Strauss 1975; Cassirer 1979; Bloch 1959; Löwith 1958; Voeglin 1952; Jonas 1984, 1996; Kantorowicz 1957; Taubes 1993; Derrida 1995; Agamben 1998.

of danger and war that lie outside the normal legislative framework. Thus, one must ask, in what situations is the existence of the state endangered as a result of political or economic crisis? Who is the ruler in a state of chaos? The ruling power is no longer to be found in norms, in the people, or in legislation but in a person or group capable of achieving a situation of *Entscheidung* and setting up a dictatorship. The danger reflects the crisis of legitimacy of modernity resulting from secularization, as we can see for example from the works of Hans Blumenberg (1987) and Jürgen Habermas (1983). This was also the problem of Zionism when it arose and of the State of Israel when it was established. What would provide a new legitimization after the disappearance of religious authority?

Was the secular Messianism—“that apocalyptic path,” as Scholem (1971, 78-141) called it—a vision of political philosophers or a political theology? Does the statement by the historian Mark Lilla (2007a, 2007b), “we find it incomprehensible that theological ideas still stir up messianic passions, leaving societies in ruins,” stand on solid ground? These shifting interrelationships between the theological and the political had concerned German and French thinkers who were steeped in twentieth-century political-religious thought. In Protestant tradition, the criticism of the split between theology and politics was the result of wrestling with the historical heritage of this division, and especially with that of the “two realms” in Augustine’s teachings and the medieval idea of the “two swords” (first formulated by Pope Gelasius [492–496]).

Humanist scholars of religion like Scholem, Simon, and Martin Buber, were close to the theological-political tradition. They were concerned that modern society in its secularism had lost all sense of the relationship between the sacred and the profane, between morality, religion, and practical life. Uriel Tal (1984) has observed: “Modern man’s sense of moral responsibility is based on the believing man’s

imperatives on the one hand and on the hope of a redemption which will come about in this world, in society, in the state, on the other.” Walter Benjamin, for his part, considered the dialectical affinity between the secular, political hope of liberation and the religious and messianic hope of redemption. Tal (1979) described the challenge posed by theology as follows: “On the one hand it requires one to take up a position with regard to political and social affairs, and on the other hand, because its authority is metaphysical and thus absolute, there is a danger that adopting such a position will sanctify politics. Religion is liable to encroach on politics and politics is liable to encroach on religion.”

David Ben-Gurion, on the one hand and Rabbi Kook on the other are good examples of different varieties of political theology. In some ways, they were on opposite sides of the fence. The former, a political leader, did not hesitate to appropriate the sacred, mobilize hallowed myths, and harness them to the task of building the state; the latter, a religious mentor, did not hesitate to appropriate the profane, mobilize Zionist pioneers, and harness them to mystical speculations concerning the coming of the Messiah. Each had an essentially different starting point from the other, but the common denominator between them was the raising of the profane to the level of the sacred: the plowman became a sacred vessel of Judaism and a central element in the process of redemption. For a short while there was a kind of meeting between these two opposite outlooks, but from that time onward their paths again divided. Rabbi Kook turned toward transcendental Messianism which relied on the Ruler of the Universe, and Ben-Gurion turned toward Promethean Messianism which relied on the sovereignty of man. In both cases, there was a definite fusion between the world of the sacred and the world of the profane, and both men had a clear political theology, but Ben-Gurion was the most extreme expression of secular Messianism and worked for a politicization of the theological, while

Rabbi Kook was the most extreme expression of religious Messianism and worked for a theologization of politics (Ohana 2003, 2008c).

The messianic idea, with its promises and dangers, has nourished social and national movements throughout history, but, as Scholem (1959) has observed: “Despite the many studies that have been made of the Messianic idea, there is still room for a more penetrating analysis of the reasons for the special vitality of this vision in the history of the Jewish religion.”

The Prayer for the Peace of the State, in which the State of Israel is described as “the first flowering of our redemption,” was written by S.Y. Agnon (1888–1970), the Israeli Nobel Laureate in Literature, at the request of the chief rabbi at the time, Rabbi Isaac Herzog. This association of the ancient Jewish yearning with the modern Jewish national movement was not, however, limited to prayers. The political-theological discourse passed beyond the sphere of religious belief and took place concurrently with the secular discourse, and both of them were lively debates on the significance of the new Israeli *mamlachtiyut* (Israeli republicanism) and its affinity to the religious tradition in general and the messianic tradition in particular.

The story-behind-the-scenes of the metamorphoses of the expression *Tsur Israel* (“The Rock of Israel”) in the Scroll of Independence is a fascinating one. Three weeks before the State was declared, Pinhas Rosen, head of the Judicial Council and the first minister of justice, asked the young jurist Mordechai Beham to make a rough draft of the Declaration of Independence. The lawyer, who had no experience of national legislation or of drafting national declarations, went to consult the Conservative rabbi Dr. Shalom Zvi Davidowitz, a translator of Shakespeare and a commentator of Maimonides. Law professor Yoram Shahar (2002), who investigated the genealogy of the declaration, related:

The meeting of the two produced the most religious formulation to be found in any of the drafts. The right of the Jewish people to the land, it proclaimed, derived from the divine promise to the Fathers of the Nation. But after that, the further away Beham went from Davidowitz, the more the declaration took on a secularist coloring. The divine promise was toned down owing to historical, political and moral considerations. . . . The only remaining reference to divine intervention was the expression “Rock of Israel.” (Shahar 2002)

The “Rock of Israel” was the Israeli-Jewish version of the concept “Divine Providence” to be found in the American Declaration of Independence. After many changes and recasting, Ben-Gurion took over the formulation: he and Moshe Sharett (1894–1965), the minister for foreign affairs, Aaron Zisling (1901–1964) of the leftist party Mapam, and Rabbi Judah Leib Hacoheh Fishman Maimon (1875–1962) (Shahar 2002). Zisling asked for the expression to be taken out of the declaration, and Maimon wanted to say, “The Rock of Israel and its Redeemer.” In the end, Ben-Gurion left the expression as it was. For the secularists, it symbolized the historical-cultural continuity of the Jewish people, and for the religious it referred to the Holy One, Blessed be He. From the moment the State was founded, there was an accelerated struggle over the significance of political theology within Israeli republicanism, or *mamlachtiyut*: hence the attempt to impose the political on the theological, and hence the political principle trying to bear-hug the theological.

In founding the state, Ben-Gurion had made the most significant attempt at nationalizing the Jewish messianic concept. Zionism was a historical experiment in nationalizing religious concepts and metamorphosing them into the secular sphere. Ben-Gurion brought

the matter to its ultimate conclusion in his attempt to nationalize the Bible and Messianism. *Mamlachtiyut*, Ben-Gurion's act of nationalization in many spheres of life, was a broad, comprehensive, and multifaceted secular ideology which took hold of religious myths and harnessed them to a project of statehood.

In the middle, between Rabbi Kook and Ben-Gurion, were the religious and secular intellectuals who were repelled by the political theologies of both these giants. The religious intellectuals saw the theo-political detonator which the messianic idea was likely to become. They preceded the secular intellectuals and warned at an early stage against Ben-Gurion's messianic vision because this challenge had been imposed on them even earlier when they were exposed to the explosive interlacing of worlds in the political theology of Rabbi Kook. They had been there before: they felt that Ben-Gurion was playing with fire, and the fact that this did not frighten him did not make it any less dangerous.

At the beginning of the period of *mamlachtiyut*, three essays appeared by Orthodox intellectuals concerning the danger of mixing the theological and the political. The three articles were published in successive years. They were Akiva Ernst Simon's "Are We still Jews?" (1951) (Simon 1953, 357–65); Baruch Kurzweil's "The Nature and Origins of the 'Young Hebrew' ('Canaanite') Movement" (1952) (Kurzweil 1948), and Yeshayahu Leibowitz's "After Kibiyeh" (1953) (Leibowitz 1976, 229–34). In all three articles, religious thinkers warned against the bear hug in which the new Israeli nationalism held the sacred tongue; they warned of the radical effects of the Israeli national secularism which extended even to Canaanism and thus expressed the fear of a rise of a "territorial" or "Canaanite" Messianism.

“Canaanite Messianism”

“Canaanism” and “Messianism” are, on the face of it, opposites. “Canaanism” is a national, geo-cultural ideology in which a certain piece of land defines the collective identity of its inhabitants; “Messianism” is a religious belief that at the end of history “all human contradictions will be resolved.” “Canaanism” is a secular concept based on a nativistic myth; “Messianism” is founded on non-human and ahistorical laws. “Canaanism” embodies the physical basis, the place; “Messianism” represents the metaphysical basis, “the Place” (i.e., God). “Canaanism” promoted Hebraism as a territorial nationalism, while “Messianism” laid emphasis on the universality of the Jewish religion. However, the rise of Gush Emunim after the Yom Kippur War in 1973 introduced a new type of political theology that could be called “Canaanite Messianism” (Ohana 2008b; Feige 2009).²

In Rabbi Kook, Simon saw a mixture of “concrete Messianism,” as he called it, and an original approach to the relationship between the sacred and the profane. Zionism, in Rabbi Kook’s religious philosophy, restored the equilibrium between the sacred and the profane. Simon’s attitude toward a messianic political theology could thus be summarized as follows: give the next world the Messiah and give this world the expectation of a Messiah.

The Kabbalah scholar Rivka Schatz (1990), one of the intellectuals who have supported Gush Emunim, thought that the messianic phenomenon is “greater than can be understood with the tools of scholarship we possess. . . . Rather than a principle that can be described, it is a language through which hidden desires are revealed, it is the ultimate depth, it is the sanctuary of awe and

2 For a new study of Gush Emunim, see: M. Feige (2009).

hope where the dreams are stored which are not revealed in history. . . .” In other words, Messianism is a language that reveals the “ultimate depth” of humanity, and it is something greater than those who create it or those that use it. This concept is a retreat from the Promethean Messianism of Zionism, which depends on the freewill of sovereign human beings, and a return to non-human structures, to transcendental Messianism. Baruch Kurzweil at an early stage criticized this phenomenon of a return to transcendental systems greater than man or than man’s capacity to explain them.

In his expression “the structure of the archetype,” Kurzweil, a product of European culture, was referring to the transcendental school of thought, which interpreted history in terms of deterministic, non-human forms. One of its theorists was Ludwig Klages, who developed an anti-rational approach focused on the conscious creation of myths and the belief that reality itself, and not its representations, consists of “symbols” or “expressions.” The worldview of Oswald Spengler was characterized by this interpretation of reality as a symbol: in his opinion, the significance of morphological forms is that forms rule over life by means of symbols and metaphors; it is they that create the social reality and not human beings with free will. This aesthetic and metaphysical approach to history includes George Sorel’s “myth,” Klages’s “aura,” Spengler’s “morphology,” Ernst Jünger’s “Gestalt,” and mythical non-human concepts of the post-modernist era such as Claude Lévi-Strauss’s “structure” and Michel Foucault’s “episteme” (Ohana 2000).

The messianic myth as a non-human structure was in Kurzweil’s opinion also likely to lead to a negation of human decisions and actions. He disliked the idea that human actions are directed by mythical constructs, that a “system,” a “structure,” an “arché,” an “episteme” should have priority over man and condition his actions in history. The messianic myth that Kurzweil warned against represented

a moral and cultural relativism in which values changed in accordance with historical circumstances. The messianic end justifies the means. Kurzweil was critical of post-modernist relativism whose paradoxical possible result could be an affirmation of fundamentalism. The transcendental messianic language cast aside the Promethean messianic heritage which was based on the sovereignty of man; critical observation was abandoned for a passionate defense of the irrational, the mythical, mystery. Kurzweil's intention, similar to the interpretive enterprise of the Jewish philosophy scholar Yehezkel Kaufman with regard to the Bible, was to eradicate myth. The danger was not an intellectual but a concrete one: playing with concepts of sparks and husks in the realm of politics could lead to a nihilistic theology.

But it was not only the religious intellectuals that warned about a political theology infiltrating the State of Israel and threatening to grow into a "territorial Messianism." The secular historians Yehoshua Arieli, J. L. Talmon, and Uriel Tal also saw the connection between the post-Six-Day War political theology and a Canaanite Messianism (Ohana 2008a).

Yehoshua Arieli warned against the territorial Messianism of the Greater Land of Israel movement, which combined the Revisionist ideology with messianic religiosity of the Rabbi Kook variety. To this school of thought, one principle—the affinity of the people to the land—became an absolute demand requiring full realization. The duty of redeeming the land had replaced the duty of redeeming the people. According to Arieli (2003), an old-new aspect of Judaism was revealed once more as a result of the 1967 war. It seemed as though events had shown the hand of Providence. Judaism appropriated for itself the physical side of Zionism and the biblical promise of settlement and became a "tribal" religion. Nationalism was sanctified by religion and religion was sanctified by nationalism. In this "tribal religion" a new people was created, different from the Jewry outside

Israel, which lived according to the norms of Halakhah and modern life.

Arieli thought that, together with the fetishistic messianic vision, there had developed among the adherents of the Greater Land of Israel movement a Canaanite attitude to the land. Everything connected with the land of Israel—nature, the physical space, the seasons of the year, customs and memories—had been raised to the level of sanctity. The original Zionist approach had been the superimposition of the Jewish people's desire for national independence and the people's distress as a minority scattered among the nations of the world. The new integralist approach sanctified the place as the sole source of legitimacy. Only when the historical attachment to the land of Israel contended with the ideal of a national home was there a need to choose between national territorial independence in part of the land of Israel and an attachment to the whole of the land of Israel. The majority in the Zionist movement continued to prefer national independence to an attachment to the whole Land of Israel, and thus the order of priorities was fixed.

In his analysis of Jewish Messianism, Uriel Tal (1979) discerned two different schools of thought: the political-messianic school of thought that saw present-day historical phenomena as a realization of mystical realities, and the school of thought that held that in social and political matters one should act with caution and self-restraint as God alone is an absolute authority and one should therefore avoid intervening in his name. Both schools of thought accepted Halakhah as normative and as a binding authority. The adherents of the political-messianic school of thought claim that the only difference between the messianic period and other periods is that in the former the Jews are once again free from subjection to foreign rule. In this period, redemption has begun, and it will eventually be realized on a worldwide scale. This claim brings symbols down to the level of

reality: that is to say, a stone or a plot of land is not *a symbol* of something sacred but is in itself sacred.

The peace talks between the Israelis and the Palestinians and the possibility of evacuating the settlements in Judea and Samaria made Israel Harel (1999)—one of the settler leaders and a father to a member of the “Hilltop youth” (the term commonly used for young right-wing settlers in Judea and Samaria) who had some clear notions on the state of Israel—write in his article “Unlike the Crusaders”:

Baath secular circles and other Islamic groups have foretold for some time that our fate will be similar to that of the crusaders. Judging by the strength and fortitude we have demonstrated in recent years, our spirit and behavior, the comparison is unfair to the crusaders. They at least succeeded in persevering in the intolerably difficult conditions of deprivation, isolation and insecurity of the Middle Ages for some two hundred years. (Harel 1999)

Is Harel suggesting that the descent from the settlers’ messianic vision of redemption to the nadir of defeatism is something so disastrous that the Israelis may be compared to the crusaders? Is this what the scientist, philosopher, and the most radical of the Israeli intellectuals, Yeshayahu Leibowitz, meant, when he foretold that the first *yordim* (descenders) from the country would be the settlers in the territories? Harel aims to what I have aimed in this article: the escape from politics through political theology leads at the end of the day to the politics of political despair.

“The Black Brigades”

“The politics of cultural despair,” the expression of the historian Fritz Stern (1961), is aimed at (German) intellectuals who uttered a cultural protest: “as moralists and as the guardians of what they thought was an ancient tradition, they attacked the progress of modernity—the growing power of liberalism and secularism.” They revolted against Western civilization and warned against the loss of faith, of unity, of “values.” This pessimist ideology has many variants but the common denominator is the despair of the universal, objective, and general sphere in politics. There are many faces to the escape from the *political*. Since Aristotle’s and Plato’s *virtue* (or the general good) via Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *general will* to Jurgen Habermas’ *public sphere*, politics always was directed to the whole society—to the universal and not to the particular, to the objective and not to the subjective, to the general and not to the private.

The events of Hebron in 2008 and the disengagement from the Gaza strip in 2005 are stages in the process of the sectoralization of the settlers who wish to break loose from Israel’s secular democracy. The murderous acts of Baruch Goldstein and Yigal Amir after the Oslo agreements in 1993 can be seen as case studies in the politics of political despair.

In November 2008, several hundred youths violently collided with the police and the IDF surrounding the “House of Contention” in Hebron. This violent episode can be seen as another interaction in which the formal agents of the Israeli state confront the settlers in the occupied territories. As before, in past evacuation from Gush Katif in Gaza and northern Samaria in 2005 (“the disengagement”), official representatives, entrusted with the protection of the same people whom they confronted, were referred to as Nazis. In the days following the Hebron episode a confrontation occurred between the

settlers and the local Palestinian population during which their cars and houses were set on fire and many of them were injured.

In an interview, held a few days after the evacuation of the “House of Contention” in Hebron, Gadi, a 16-year-old teenager and a member of the “Hilltop Youth” said:

The state is trying to destroy our existence here. We make it hard for them to breathe, get in the way of their expulsion edicts. What does talking help? It’s just more blah-blah. The more incidents and disturbances we initiate here—against the soldiers and against the Palestinians—the more we can exact from them a high price for the very thought of evacuating this house that connects Kiryat Arba with the Tomb of the Patriarchs, and the better our chances will be of stopping it.

What connection do I have to this country? Why do I have to pray for it or be happy here? Why do I have to respect its symbols? Or its policemen? Or its soldiers? Or its laws? Does it respect me? (Shragai 2008)

“I know that the families who have already been living here for a year and a half don’t like our behavior. They didn’t like us at Neveh Dekalim either,” he continued, referring to the town in Gush Katif, Gaza, evacuated under Israel’s unilateral disengagement plan proposed by the former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon that removed all Israelis from the Gaza Strip in August 2005. “The result” he continued, “was a disaster, destruction. Now no one can sidetrack me and my friends. We have no love for the Arabs. We have no love for the IDF. We have no love for this state. All they understand is force” (Shragai 2008). Gadi is not shocked when Muslim gravestones are vandalized

in the cemetery behind the House of Contention, nor does he care that Palestinian civilians are hurt and army property destroyed.

Last Independence Day Gadi had a serious clash with his father and mother, after they hung the flag from their house and went to the synagogue to recite “Hallel,” the prayer of thanksgiving. He has given up on Israel today: “This country is carrying out a transfer of its people. It is planning to do a transfer here in Hebron and from the entire area of Judea and Samaria. . . . The morals of the state of Israel are the morals of Gentiles in Western culture.” When he was asked about the future elections in Israel he answered: “Nothing will come out of this Knesset” (Shragai 2008).

The same politics of political desperation resonates in the words of Yehuda, an 18-year-old radical activist who lives in Kiryat Arba and also took part in the violent clashes in Hebron:

No one really controls us. Those from the [Yesha settlers] council, who claim they are our leaders, are haunted by fear and, in general, they shouldn't be dealing with struggles. They, as heads of councils, are dependent on the government after all. And after their failure in Gush Katif, why should anyone listen to them?

We are the ones with Jewish morals, with the values of the Torah. The morals of the State of Israel are the morals of Gentiles, of Western culture. They are false and sick morals. They are upset about the suffering of an Arab, but not about the suffering of a Jew or about the humiliation of Jewish honor. You behave here not as the landlords in an independent state, but as if you were still in the Diaspora, small and frightened. (Shragai 2008)

A decade earlier we had witnessed a precedence of the politics of political despair. There was something stupefying about the arrogance of the group surrounding Yigal Amir and about the pilgrims to the grave of Baruch Goldstein. It was a mistake to see the actions of Amir and Goldstein—the murder of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and the murder of 29 Palestinians while they prayed in the Machpelah cave in Hebron—as limited objectives, the attainment of which was their final purpose. These objectives were only the tip of the iceberg of the wider manifestation of revulsion at the political and cultural establishment as such, animosity towards decadent secular culture, contempt for the hedonistic consumer society, and distrust of democratic rules. The total alienation of these people from contemporary Israeli society resembles that of the students and intellectuals of the Baader-Meinhof group in Germany or the Red Brigades in Italy in the early 1970s. By setting fire to department stores, hijacking airplanes, robbing banks, blowing up public institutions, and murdering important figures, they hoped to shake up the affluent German society and to create a provocation that would cause hysteria among the complacent Germans. Behind all this lay a deep despair (Aust and Bell 2009).

The basic assumption of Ulrike Meinhof, the theoretician of violence, that “one has to challenge the fascism in society in order that it should be made visible to all,” led to an affirmation of nihilism, since, in her words, “One cannot change the world by firing a gun; one can only destroy it.” The same applies to Goldstein, Amir, and some of the radical settlers of Hebron—one cannot change the secular and the democratic nature of the state of Israel. Ulrike Meinhof’s distorted interpretation of Marxism resembled Goldstein’s and Amir’s interpretation of Judaism: the common denominator was voiding the content of its original significance, the abrogation of values, the failure to distinguish between means and ends, and seeing the reality of conflict as all that mattered. Thus, their actions are revealed not as

an ideological phenomenon but as a politics of cultural despair: their idealism became nihilism and their politics became terror.³

Political nihilism arises where faith in politics and ideology have been lost. Baruch Marzel, one of the leaders of Hebron settlers, gave a good account of the process of radicalization of his friend Goldstein: “He despaired of politics in the country.” The ideological despair of Goldstein caused him to perform a nihilistic act with a political message, as if to say, “I don’t believe in democratic processes, rational persuasion, or decisions by the majority.” His murderous act was intended to awaken the dormant Israeli consciousness after the Oslo Agreements.

Goldstein, and later, Yigal Amir’s group, conformed to the model of political theology put forward by Carl Schmitt (1989). Schmitt saw politics as a continual confrontation between “enemies” and “friends,” a belligerency that cannot be resolved. Schmitt’s political theology is mutually contradictory. Schmitt thought that sovereignty did not reside in the people or the law, but with the person or group able to take a decision and set up a dictatorship. The modern constitutional state had been stripped of its theological assets. Political theology is thus an attempt to overcome the crisis of liberalism by finding a replacement for the political order. Schmitt wanted to recreate the Gordian knot that held together theology and the state, because he held that the weakening of the central government and the breakdown of authority derived from the crisis of secularism.

Schmitt’s disciple from Kiryat Arba thought that the confrontation between Jews and Arabs was eternal, ahistorical. “The Arabs,” said Goldstein, “are like a plague. They are a sickness that infects us.” In an interview that he gave to the journalist Tom Roberts nine days

3 For a further discussion see Ohana (2009b).

before the massacre, he declared that “the Israeli army sins against the Jewish people in preventing us from taking vengeance on the Arabs. We have to expel them.” In the mythicization of his image that took place on account of the place (the Machpelah Cave) and the time (Purim), the homicidal doctor was seen as a mythical sacrifice that hastened the redemption, a Jew “murdered for the sanctification of God,” as was written on his grave.

The climax of political nihilism in Israel was the three shots of Yigal Amir’s revolver. In his testimony to the Shamgar Commission, which investigated the circumstances that lead to the murder of Rabin, Amir claimed that only after he had despaired of legitimate political activity did he decide to murder Rabin. His political actions in the settlement Efrat and in the weekends organized by the students in the territories had no effect on the inhabitants of Israel, “the people sitting on the fleshpots.” He saw the students as “materialistic people who were only interested in a degree and a career.” This was a personal admission that the murder of Rabin was more than an act of political protest: it was the culmination of cultural and political despair. In this respect, the murder of Rabin was also a dual murder. He was murdered once as the representative of the Oslo Agreements and once as the representative of Israeli secular and democratic culture (Peri 2000).

Amir participated in the demonstrations of “Zu Artzenu,” a group led by Moshe Feiglin that used aggressive and violent tactics in their protest against the Oslo accords. Although Feiglin was a Knesset candidate on behalf of the Likud party, he still believes in taking initiatives in order to construct the third temple and to establish in Israel a messianic political culture. He suggests transfer of the Palestinians if they will not accept Jewish sovereignty. Motti Cappel (2003), the author of the book, *The Faith Revolution: The Fall of Zionism and the Rise of the Faith Alternative* and the ideologue of the “Jewish leadership,”

Feiglin's political faction within the Likud party, predicts that when the crisis of Zionism will reach its climax, Feiglin will be there.

The rightist radical group and the "Hilltop youth" are test cases for the limits of tolerance in Israeli democracy. They seek to prove that individuals or militant minorities have the power to change the course of events through a violent existential act, through shock treatment. They wish to destroy the tolerance, illusory in their opinion, of bourgeois society, which they see as "repressive tolerance."

When it seems that all possible paths of deliverance are blocked, violence raises its head and presumes to awaken the sleeping. All that is required is to pull the trigger of a revolver. Combined with an absolute political imperative, this is a recipe for disaster. As soon as cultural pessimism is combined with political theology, the justification is created for a strategy of violence: terror wishes to impose its own agenda.

In the post-modern era, transcendental Messianism has come back into our lives through the front door. It is active in the world of the post-Enlightenment: that is to say, in the world after the attempt to raise man to the level of God. Fundamentalism has internalized the Promethean initiative in order to increase its strength. In the pre-modern era, men waited with longing for the appearance of God, but they waited patiently and passively; in the modern era, they took their fate into their own hands and obliterated the traces of God; in the post-modern era they have lost their humility and want God to be summoned up immediately. This era has armed fundamentalism with the Promethean self-consciousness and the power of technology and the media. This reversal can take place if the secular is sanctified: only the secular can bring God closer. Fundamentalism has re-connected transcendental Messianism with Promethean Messianism; the theological has once again been joined to the political. Will the Zionist Prometheus return the fire to the gods?

References

- Agamben, Giorgio. 1998. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford University Press
- . 2005. *State of Exception*. Translated by Kevin Atell. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Arieli, Yehoshua. 2003. *History and Metahistory*. Edited by David Ohana. Jerusalem: The Bialik Institute. [Hebrew]
- Assmann, Jan. 2000. *Herrschaft und Heil: Politische Theologie in Altägypten, Israel und Europa*. Munich: Carl Hanser.
- Aust, Stefan, and Anthea Bell. 2009. *Baader-Meinhof: The Inside Story of the R.A.F.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Balakrishnan, Gopal. 2000. *The Enemy: An Intellectual Portrait of Carl Schmitt*. London: Verso.
- Benjamin, Walter. 1978. "Theologico-Political Fragment." In: Walter Benjamin, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, and Autobiographical Writings*. Edited by Peter Demetz. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. New York: Schocken, 312–313.
- Bloch, Ernst. 1969. *Thomas Münzer als Theologe der Revolution*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
- Blumenberg, Hans. 1983. *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*. Translated by Robert M. Wallace. Cambridge, MA: MIT University Press, 1983.
- Carpel, M. 2003. *The Faith Revolution: The Fall of Zionism and the Rise of the Faith Alternative*, Alon Shvut: Milachthila Press. [Hebrew]
- Cassirer, Ernst. 1979. *Symbol, Myth and Culture*. Edited by Donald Phillip Verene. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1995. *The Gift of Death*. Translated by David Wills. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Feige, Michael. 2009. *Settling in the Hearts: Jewish Fundamentalism in the Occupied Territories*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 1987. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, Twelve Lectures*. Translated by F. G. Lawrence. Cambridge, MA: MIT University Press.
- Harel, Israel. 1999. "Unlike the Crusaders." *Haaretz*, Dec. 12. [Hebrew]
- Jonas, Hans. 1996. *Mortality and Morality: A Search for the God after Auschwitz*. Edited by Lawrence Vogel. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- . 1984. *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.
- Kantorowicz, Ernst H. 1957. *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

- Kurzweil, Baruch. 1948. "The 'Innovation' in the Revolt of the 'Young Hebrews'." *Beterem* January 1. [Hebrew]
- Lilla, Mark. 2007a. "The Politics of God," *The New York Times*, August 19.
- . 2007b. *The Stillborn God: Religion Politics and the Modern West*. New York: Knopf.
- Leibowitz, Yehayahu. 1976. "After Kibiyeh." In: Yeshayahu Leibowitz, *Judaism, Jewish People and The State of Israel*. Jerusalem: Schocken. [Hebrew]
- Löwith, Karl. 1958. *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ohana, David. 2000. *The Promethean Passion: The Intellectual Origins of the Twentieth Century from Rousseau to Foucault*. Jerusalem: The Bialik Institute. [Hebrew]
- . 2003. *Messianism and Mamlachtiut: Ben-Gurion and the Intellectuals – Between Political Vision and Political Theology*. Sde Boker: The Ben-Gurion Research Institute. [Hebrew]
- . 2008a. "J. L. Talmon, Gershom Scholem and the Price of Messianism." *History of European Ideas*, 34/ 2: 169–188.
- . 2008b. *Neither Canaanites, Nor Crusaders: The Origins of the Israeli Mythology*. Tel Aviv: The Shalom Hartman Institute, Bar-Ilan University - The Faculty of Law, Keter Publishing House. [Hebrew]
- . 2008c. "Secular Messianism as Political Theology: The Case of David Ben-Gurion." In C. Schmidt and E. Shenfeld, eds. *Jewish Modernity and Political Theology*. Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad and The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, 204–225. [Hebrew]
- . 2009a. *Political Theologies in the Holy Land: Israeli Messianism and its Critics*. London: Routledge.
- . 2009b. *The Dawn of Political Nihilism*. Sussex and Brighton: Sussex Academic Press.
- Peri, Yoram, ed. 2000. *The Assassination of Yitzhak Rabin*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Schatz, Rivka. 1990. "Zionism Is Messianism." *Nekuda* 145: 24–28 [Hebrew]
- Schmitt, Carl. 1985. *Political Theology – Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*. Translated by George Schwab. Cambridge, MA: MIT University Press, 1985.
- . 1996. *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*. Translated by G. L. Ulmen. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Scholem, Gershom. 1959. "Zum Verständniss der messianischen Idee in Judentum." *Eranos Jarbuch* 28: 193–239.

- . 1971. “Redemption through Sin.” Translated by Hillel Halkin. In: Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*. New York: Schocken Press.
- Shahar, Yoram. 2002. “The Early Drafts of the Declaration of Independence.” *Iyunei Mishpat* 26: 523–600. [Hebrew]
- Shragai, N., 2008. “We Are the Ones with Jewish Morals.” *Haaretz*, December 4. [Hebrew]
- Simon, Akiva Ernst. 1953. “Are We Still Jews?” *Commentary* 15/4: 357–365.
- Stern, Fritz R. 1961. *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of the Germanic Ideology*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Strauss, Leo. 1975. *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and Genesis*. Translated by Elsa M. Sinclair. Chicago and London: Chicago University Press.
- Tal, Uriel. 1979. “Hermeneutical Aspects of Social Theology According to Jewish Sources.” *Sidic* 12: 4–15.
- . 1984. “The Foundations of Political Messianism in Israel.” *Ha'aretz*, September 26. [Hebrew]
- Taubes, Jacob. 1993. *Die Politische Theologie des Paulus*. Munich: Wilhelm Fink.
- Voeglin, Erich. 1952. *The New Science of Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.