

Introduction

It is impossible to discuss Jewish fundamentalisms in 2002, let alone their gendered characteristics, without first contextualising them in relation both to Jewish past histories and the contemporary history of Zionism and Israel.

It is important to remember that not only Zionism, but Jewish Orthodoxy itself, emerged as responses to the crisis of the 'classical' Jewish existence in Europe¹, when, with the rise of modernity, capitalism and nationalism, the Jewish traditional mode of existence could no longer survive. Hassidism and Jewish Orthodoxy on the one hand, and Reform and Liberal Judaism on the other, were the major religious movements that developed as a result. Secularisation and assimilation, both liberal and socialist, were also popular reactions by Jews to the 'Jewish problem' in the modern world, along with individual and communal immigration to various countries in the 'new world' – settler societies developed by European empires in the colonial world.

The Zionist movement was one of the two Jewish political movements which attempted to solve the 'Jewish question' as a national question. The other was the *Bund*, which was the dominant Jewish national movement in Eastern Europe before World War 2.² In the *Bund's* view, Jews there constituted an autonomous national collectivity with its own language (Yiddish) and cultural tradition. The *Bund* aspired for a multinational state structure in Eastern Europe, in which Jews, like all other national minorities, would have national and cultural autonomy.

Zionism and Jewishness

The Zionist movement, on the other hand, aspired for the 'normalisation' of the Jewish people by establishing a Jewish society and state in an independent territory where, ideally, all Jews would eventually settle. Unlike the *Bund*, the boundaries of the Jewish collectivity as constructed by the Zionist movement encompassed not only East European or even European Jews in general (though it was mostly people originating from there who have controlled the Zionist movement and the Israeli state throughout their history). The Zionist boundaries of the Jewish people encompassed Jews from all over the world (although the question of 'who is a Jew' has nonetheless been a major controversy and source of division in Israel since its inception). Of particular significance to the population composition of the Israeli state has been the incorporation, in this definition, of the Jews from the Arab and Muslim world, some of whose communities had existed for thousands of years, since the creation of the Jewish diaspora during the Persian, Greek and Roman empires. Others, concentrated mainly in big cities, had arrived there (as well as in Western European countries) after the expulsion of the Jews from Spain at the end of the fifteenth century. Accordingly, the 'Jewish language' promoted by the Zionists was not the Yiddish used by the *Bund*,³ but Hebrew, used in the various Jewish communities mostly as a religious language. After long debate, and the proposal of various alternative locations, it was decided that Palestine, which in Jewish tradition was the 'Land of the Fathers' and the 'Promised Land', would be the territorial basis for the state.

Although Zionism generally presented itself as a modern alternative to religious Orthodoxy, the two were never completely separate. The Zionist movement needed the legitimization of Orthodox Judaism for its claim on the country and its settler colonial state project, as well as for its claim to represent the Jewish people as a whole. The Orthodox movements have used the Israeli state, both to gain more resources for their institutions and to impose as many orthodox religious practices on Israeli society as possible. The relationship between religion and the state of Israel was dominated for many years by the agreement reached between David Ben Gurion, the first Prime Minister of Israel, and the religious parties (excluding the small community of *Neturei Karta*, which has continued to be anti-Zionist). According to this agreement, known as 'the *status quo* agreement', the control of Jewish religious law would remain as it had been in the Zionist *yishuv* (as the Jewish settler society in Palestine used to be known before the establishment of the Israeli state in 1948). Thus, for example, there was no public transport on the sabbath in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv but there was in Haifa, the third largest city in Israel; Israeli Jewish so-called secular schools had a heavy content of biblical and other Jewish liturgy in their curriculum, but not the prayers that were part of the curriculum of the national religious schools established by the state. Because the religious parties have always been vital to any Israeli government gaining a large enough majority to establish a ruling coalition, gradually the religious parties have been conceded more and more by consecutive Israeli prime ministers. The *status quo* did not start to be challenged in any serious manner until after the 1967 war and the occupation of the Gaza Strip and especially the West Bank, where most of the traditional Jewish sacred sites are located.

However, before we talk about the post-1967 period, it is important to remember that, central to the relationship between religion and the state in Israel, has always been control of women's position through Israeli personal law.

There are no secular personal laws in Israel. In a continuation of the Ottoman *millet* system, in force before the establishment of the Israeli state (including during the period of the British Mandate), each religious community became the sole legitimate state agent for carrying out marriages and divorces. While in the Jewish case there were parallel religious and secular courts (the latter more equitable in their judgements) which dealt with issues such as child custody and maintenance, for Israeli citizens from the various Muslim and Christian communities, this domain was fully controlled by the religious authorities, at least until recently.

Only two, slightly variant, versions of Orthodox Judaism - Ashkenazi and Sephardi - are recognised by Israeli state laws. Reform and Conservative versions of Judaism, to which millions of Jews outside Israel belong, are not recognised, nor are more ancient forms of Jewish practice, such as those that existed in countries like Ethiopia and India. In order for members of the latter communities to be formally recognised as Jews in Israel, they have to undergo Orthodox conversion. While Reform and Conservative conversions are not recognized in Israel - or at least their ceremonies of marriage and divorce - the members of these communities usually are recognised as Jews, because according to Jewish Orthodox

law, a Jew is either one who has been converted according to Orthodox law, or, as is the most common case, one who is the non-bastard child of a Jewish mother.⁴

This matrilineal genealogical definition of 'who is a Jew'⁵ is quite different from the definition of membership in the Jewish collectivity found in the Israeli Law of Return. This law constructs Israel as the post-Holocaust haven for all Jews, and automatically grants Israeli citizenship to any Jew who comes to Israel and wants to live there. Its definition of who is a Jew mirrors, therefore, that of the Nazis, who considered anyone with even one Jewish grandparent, male or female, to be Jewish.

Part of the growing conflict between secular and Orthodox Jews in Israel is the contestation between these two constructions of Jewishness, which became much more important after the mass migration of Jews from the former Soviet Union to Israel. Given the absence of religious marriage and the growing rate of mixed marriage throughout the history of the Soviet Union, some Orthodox religious leaders have claimed that up to a third of the Soviet Jews who received Israeli citizenship under the Law of Return are not 'genuinely' Jewish and should not therefore have been accepted.

It is important to point out that while the majority of Israeli secular Jews object to the Orthodox definition of who is a Jew, they do not question the underlying exclusionary principle of the Israeli Law of Return - the fact that it does not allow right of settlement and citizenship to non-Jews, including the Palestinian refugees exiled from the country in 1948 and 1967. The other major point of contestation between secular and religious Israeli Jews is the issue of military service. Through full time study in a *yeshiva* (Jewish theological seminary), students can postpone, and after a few years be released from, the national draft.⁶ Secular Jews accuse religious Jews of not fulfilling their patriotic duty.

For Israeli Jewish girls, as part of the *status quo* agreement, all those who declare themselves religious are not recruited to the military. This is a historical compromise, a concession to the leaders of the religious community, who were worried that girls would be exposed to corrupting sexual practices - in other words, that they would lose control over girls. The secular Israeli Jewish women who do serve in the military fulfil their 'patriotic duty'⁷ for as long, at least, as they do not fulfil their other patriotic duty - getting married and becoming pregnant,⁸ in which case they are automatically released.

The rise of the post-1967 Jewish fundamentalist movements

After the 1967 war and the occupation of the Palestinian territories not taken over during and after 1948 - especially the West Bank, including East Jerusalem - the balance of power between the various political agents started to change in Israel. During the late 1970s, the right wing *Likud* party led an Israeli government for the first time ever, since the Zionist *yishuv* in pre-state Palestine had been solidified by the Zionist Labour parties and the state remained under their hegemony. The religious parties gained extra powers in this process, as *Likud* needed their support. This provided an economic and political environment favourable to the growth of the two main kinds of Israeli Jewish fundamentalist movements.

The Messianic settlers of *Gush Emunim* (the Bloc of the Faithful) and the Greater Israel movement saw themselves as the new Zionist pioneers, who had taken over the traditional Labour role at the forefront of the *hagshama* (which in Hebrew means both 'realisation' and 'fulfilment') of the Zionist project by settling in the Occupied Territories, especially in militarily strategic places as well as near the Jewish holy sites. The other type of fundamentalist movement emerged from those whose attitude to the Israeli state was much more instrumentalist, who used it mainly to get resources for their own educational and community institutions (although these as well came to be located more and more in the Occupied Territories). Between the two kinds of movements and their educational institutions (attendance at which replaces, partially for men of the first kind, wholly for men of the second kind, service in the military), Israel in the 1980s had more *yeshiva bochers* (full-time students in theological seminaries) than eighteenth century Poland.

The fundamentalist settlers followed the interpretation of Harav Kook (an orthodox rabbi who was a major religious authority during the *yishuv* period); he saw the original Zionist settlers, secular though they mostly were, as instruments in the hands of God. He considered that building the Israeli state, and gathering the Jews in the Land of Israel, were preconditions for the coming of the Messiah. Like the donkey which the Messiah will ride into Jerusalem when he finally arrives, the Zionist settlers are an important part of God's overall plan. Kook's son was the original leader of *Gush Emunim*; he led the way in settling the West Bank, and continued his father's line of thought.

It is important to emphasize that other brands of Jewish fundamentalism, such as the *Lubavitse Hassids*, who concentrate on 'converting' Jews in the West and the rest of the world to Hassidic Orthodoxy, share this Messianic vision. But in a way it has also provided the basis for the opposition to Zionism of many Orthodox Jewish groups, who regard the establishment of a Jewish state before the coming of the Messiah as a blasphemous act. The anti-Zionist *Neturei Karta* continue to support this position, and have appeared in a variety of forums as supporters of the Palestine Liberation Organisation. In other wings of Orthodox Jewish communities, opposition has faded. With the move of Israeli politics to the right, and especially since the collapse of the Oslo agreement and the rise of Sharon - and before him Binyamin Netanyahu - the boundaries between the ethnic, national and religious elements of Jewish fundamentalisms are being progressively blurred.⁹

Collusion between Jewish and Christian fundamentalists

The incorporation of Israel into the global economic and political market, and its growing dependency on the USA, have strengthened secular ideologies and lifestyles in Israel, but paradoxically have also enhanced the power of Jewish fundamentalists. The most important - and bizarre - characteristic of this has been the deepening political and economic alliance between Jewish and Christian fundamentalists, mainly from the US, which is encouraged by the Israeli lobby in the US because Christian fundamentalists are one of the main pillars of political support for George W. Bush.

A few years ago, the Israeli press reported that many Jewish fundamentalist *yeshivas* in the Occupied Territories were being funded by American Christian Zionists, who believe Jews must congregate in Palestine and establish a Jewish state on all its territory before the 'Second Coming' of Jesus Christ can happen.

However, Christian Zionists also believe that before the Messiah can come again, all Jews must convert to Christianity. Those who do not will perish in a gigantic holocaust in the battle of Armageddon.

As Uri Avnery and others have pointed out, the support of the Christian Zionists relies on a basically anti-semitic doctrine. Many of those from the American South are in any case traditionally anti-semitic. Sending all Jews to Palestine fits their social, as well as their religious, sensibilities - but in the meantime their support enhances Jewish fundamentalism in Israel and strengthens collusion between Bush and Sharon. It also lends weight to the 'clash of civilisations' idea encouraged not only by Samuel Huntington and his followers in the west, but also by some Muslim fundamentalists, according to whom it is the Jews who run the US and the world. The old Tsarist forgery, 'Protocols of the Elders of Zion', which describes how the leaders of Jewish communities meet regularly in secret and devise how to run the world, has been revived. The differences between contemporary anti-Zionism and anti-semitism are becoming blurred, something which the Israeli government encourages, as it interprets any criticism of its policies towards the Palestinians as anti-semitism. In the long term, this is very dangerous to Jews. In the short term, however, this whole construction strengthens fundamentalisms on all sides, and constructions of womanhood are strongly affected.

Jewish fundamentalism and women

There are basic inequalities between men and women in Orthodox Judaism: women are not counted as part of the Jewish 'public'; they are not allowed to lead prayers, to become rabbis or judges or occupy any other public religious leadership position; their evidence is not acceptable in religious courts and they cannot - unlike men - obtain a divorce against their spouse's will, even if their case is conceded to be just. In their prayers every morning, Jewish men say, 'Bless Thee that did not make me a woman'. Women pray, 'Bless Thee that made me according to Thy will'.

Orthodox Jews claim, however, that women's position in Judaism is not inferior to that of men, rather different and equally important, since it focuses on the home and the bringing up of children. As the ideal Jewish man is a religious scholar, sitting and studying in the *yeshiva* all day, Jewish women were asked to become 'superwomen' - wives, mothers, and participants in the waged labour market - probably earlier than other women. In my research on Orthodox Jewish women and *khozrot bitshuva* ('born again' Orthodox women, often converted by various fundamentalist movements), I discovered that many women found the Orthodox life style - which includes arranged marriage and tight communities - a source of security and empowerment (although many others were depressed, overworked and ill after bearing many children). Among the settlers, although women could not become

formal leaders, many of them spoke to the media and made bringing up as many children as possible in the frontline conditions of settlements in the Occupied Territories a fulfilling lifestyle. Indeed, in the privileged position of being protected by Israeli soldiers, some of them spoke callously about their children, saying gun fire had no more effect on them than the sound of fireworks. The children killed in cars going to and from the settlements are often seen as a necessary sacrifice, while the women produce more children to settle the land that God gave to the Jews.

There is a growing gap between secular and religious Jews in Israel, and there is a high degree of overlap between positions on religion and the nation. The gender gap in Israeli politics might not be as strong as in the UK or the US, but nevertheless, secular, anti-fundamentalist women are at the forefront of struggles for a just peace, anti-racism and human rights - all anathema to national, ethnic and religious fundamentalists. These women may not be strong enough to divert hegemonic fundamentalist ideologies and policies, but they will definitely be in the forefront of positive change if and when it comes.

Endnotes

- ¹ Israel Shahak (1981) 'The Jewish religion and its attitude to non-Jews', *Khamsin* 9, London: Ithaca Press, pp. 3-49.
- ² See, for example, A.K. Wildman (1973) *Russian and Jewish Social Democracy*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press; Y. Peled (1989) *Class and Ethnicity in the Pale: The Political Economy of Jewish Workers' Nationalism in Late Imperial Russia*, New York: St. Martin's Press; also N. Yuval-Davis (1987) 'Marxism and Jewish Nationalism', *History Workshop Journal* 24, pp. 82-110.
- ³ Yiddish is based on medieval German, and was used by East European Jews, while Jews originating from Spain speak Ladino, based on medieval Spanish. Other Jewish communities spoke local languages, or adaptations of them.
- ⁴ According to Jewish law, a bastard is not one born to non-married parents (since the sexual act in itself can be seen as a form of marriage), but one born to a mother who is married to a different man from the father of her child. This includes cases in which divorce has taken place according to civil, not Orthodox, law.
- ⁵ Such a matrilineal definition of membership in a collectivity, in an otherwise patriarchal society, suits the history of a persecuted community, where pogroms and rapes might make it difficult to ensure the identity of the biological father, but not that of the mother.
- ⁶ 'National' is the appropriate term here, because although there is supposedly a universal draft law in Israel, only Jewish and Druze men (the Druze are members of a minority Muslim sect traditionally persecuted by other Palestinian communities and therefore historically allies of the Zionist settler movement) are recruited. Bedouin and Christian men are allowed, and sometimes encouraged, to volunteer; no non-Jewish women are ever recruited.
- ⁷ Mostly in very gender specific ways. For more details, see N. Yuval-Davis (2004) 'Women in the Military: The Israeli Case', in W. Giles et al (eds) *Sites of Violence: Gender and Conflict Zones*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- ⁸ On the role of Israeli Jewish women as national reproducers, see N. Yuval-Davis (1989) 'National Reproduction and "the Demographic Race"', in N. Yuval-Davis and F. Anthias (eds) *Woman - Nation - State*, Macmillan, pp. 92-109.
- ⁹ It is important to emphasize, however, that there is also a small but committed religious peace and anti-occupation movement in Israel, which sees its struggle as following the ethical principles of the biblical prophets.