

# PANTHERS AND LIONS

Yaniv Feller

## ABSTRACT

Shaul Magid's *Meir Kahane: The Public Life and Political Thought of an American Jewish Radical* (2021) stresses the American character of Kahane's thought. This review analyzes this claim in two ways. First, it offers a transnational perspective on Kahane's philosophy. Second, it examines Magid's concept of neo-Kahanism in light of Kahane's legacy in Israel.

KEYWORDS: *Meir Kahane, Zionism, Judaism, Shaul Magid, Israel, Kookism*

It is March 23, 2021, and I am sitting in my parents' living room in Israel. Following a time-honored tradition, we stare at the television and wait. The clock strikes 10:00 p.m., and the news channels are finally allowed to report the results of the election polls for the Israeli parliament (Knesset). After a litany of meaningless commentaries about the seemingly endless political deadlock, images arrive from the headquarters of the rightwing Religious Zionist Party. Bezalel Smotrich and Itamar Ben-Gvir, the head of the party and its number three are carried on the shoulders of their supporters. They celebrate their electoral success with seven seats (out of 120) in the Israeli parliament.

My thoughts travel back to the year 1995 and the heated days of the Oslo Accords. Ben-Gvir, then a young man and head of a movement called Kahane's Youth (declared illegal in 1994), is proudly staring at the camera. Holding a Volvo symbol he and his friends tore from Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's car, he states: "A symbol is a symbol, and it symbolizes that just as we have reached this symbol, we can reach Rabin."<sup>1</sup> This unveiled threat materialized shortly afterward, on November 4, 1995, when Yigal Amir assassinated Rabin.

Almost 40 years after his spiritual mentor Meir Kahane was elected as a member of the Knesset in 1984—only to have his party banned from participating in the 1988 elections due to its racist ideology—Ben-Gvir is now a member of the Israeli parliament. In interviews after his election, Ben-Gvir argued that he had changed, but in his opening speech in the Knesset, Ben-Gvir praised Meir Kahane and insisted that he was a victim of character assassination by the media.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Itamar Ben-Gvir interview, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JQ0sXLYOQeg> (accessed November 14, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Itamar Gvir's first speech as a member of Knesset is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IOJQaKprF7o> (accessed November 14, 2021).

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Shaul Magid's book, *Meir Kahane: The Public Life and Political Thought of an American Jewish Radical* offers a detailed account of Kahane's life and activities in the United States and Israel. It is an intellectual history that is a major contribution to our understanding of Kahane's thought and its cultural context. Yet the book is much more than a biography. It is an intervention in the historiography of the Jewish political tradition and its contemporary relevance. Magid compellingly shows that Kahane is part and parcel of the contemporary Jewish discourse of race, power, and politics—covertly in the United States and more and more overtly in Israel.

### 1. American Panthers

We are taught as children not to judge books by their covers, but I never understood why. After all, we are also taught that an image is worth a thousand words. The cover of Magid's book depicts Kahane with a clenched fist in New York, standing outside the office of the New York Board of Rabbis in 1970. This image illustrates two themes elaborated in the book at great length: Kahane's opposition to the Jewish establishment (whether the American Jewish mainstream or the political structures of the State of Israel) and the parallels between his actions and those of the Black Panthers.

Kahane's clenched fist recalls the Black Panthers' use of the image in the 1960s, as well as the emblem of Kahane's own Jewish Defense League (Magid 2021, 55) and later, his political party in Israel. Magid's keen analysis of the relation between Black Power and Kahane's thought shows the extent to which Kahane was influenced by the American context, which leads to a reassessment of Kahane's thought as well as of American Jewish history more broadly. First, like the Black Panthers, Kahane was a staunch critic of American liberalism, which he believed failed to protect Jews and diluted the meaning of Jewishness. Second, Kahane and his followers turned to radical tactics. Violent street clashes, illegal weapon gathering, and planting bombs were all part of the repertoire. Third, Kahane saw the moniker "Jewish Panthers" as a compliment. As he explained in a 1972 interview to *Playboy* magazine, "a Panther does not mess with a Panther" (Magid 2021, 39). Finally, there is the question of gender. An analysis of gender in Kahane's thought remains a scholarly lacuna, but the Kahanist ideal seems to have been to create a new, muscular American Jew always ready for a fight. I suspect that here too similarities with Black Power would emerge, perhaps even more than Magid concedes (Magid 2021, 13). As Michele Wallace argued long ago (1999, xix–xx), at its core, and for all the participation of Black women in the movement, its gender ethos was reactionary and not radical.

The influence of the Black Panthers did not lead to a trans-racial coalition but rather to sharp opposition that was based on multiple factors. These included a racializing discourse that Kahane fully adopted and utilized, the conflicts between Blacks and Jews in the streets of New York, and Kahane's avowed opposition to Marxism (Magid 2021, 107–24). Finally, Kahane vehemently rejected claims by

Black intellectuals that Jews enjoyed White privilege, engaging thereby in an “Oppression Olympics” (Hancock 2013) or competition of suffering all while claiming that Jews should stop behaving like victims (Magid 2021, 93).

The Kahane that emerges from Magid’s analysis is an American-Jewish activist through and through. Influenced by the prevailing mood of the time, he combined revolutionary tactics with a reactionary ideology that included support for militarism in Israel and the United States, a strong law and order approach, and, as mentioned, a racializing discourse, first against Blacks and in Israel against Arabs. Even after his emigration to Israel in 1971, argues Magid, Kahane “remained an American thinker” (Magid 2021, 9).

## 2. A Transnational Question

For all his Americanism, the content of Kahane’s thought changes in Israel. Magid explains it psychologically, arguing that “like many other new immigrants,” Kahane “‘finds religion’ in his ancestral home and this increasingly takes the form of messianism” (Magid 2021, 157). The operative underlying assumption is in line with the main argument about Kahane’s Americanism. Another way of thinking about Kahane, I suggest, is as a *transnational middlebrow thinker*. By that, I mean someone whose skills are in the popular adaptation and importation of ideas back and forth, at times in an idiosyncratic manner that nonetheless accounts for the thinker’s location.

Magid treats Kahane as a middlebrow thinker whose ways of articulation are hard to take seriously in an academic study (2021, xi). At times, this understanding of “middlebrow” takes the form of a value judgment, for example in the suggestion that Kahane was essentially a “street Jew” who “presumably knew he didn’t have the intellectual firepower to go head-to-head with the likes of [Bayard Rustin and James Baldwin]” (Magid 2021, 82). This rhetoric does injustice to Magid’s argument. On the one hand, dismissing Kahane as a brute might assuage our anxieties about the dark alleys of Jewish thought. But this is clearly not what Magid has in mind, a fact attested for example by the innovative reading of Kahane’s major work *The Jewish Idea*, which Magid reads in light of the musar tradition (2021, 159–90). Kahane is interesting, and Magid’s book is important, precisely because Kahane cannot be dismissed as a street Jew.

It is true that Kahane is neither Franz Rosenzweig nor Emmanuel Levinas. Unlike them, he was read by many, and arguably better understood. In his eulogy to Kahane in the *Jerusalem Post*, Yoram Hazony—founder of the conservative Shalem Center in Jerusalem—wrote that he and other Jewish students in Princeton felt as if Kahane was the only one who provided them practical advice on how to act and live proudly as Jews. Although Hazony (1990) opposed Kahane’s politics—indeed, the title of the eulogy is “Farewell from a ‘non-Kahanist’”—he argued that “there is virtually no young Jewish-American activist” who has not been exposed to Kahane’s writings and speeches. Even if this is an exaggeration, it reflects the wide reach of Kahane’s public

appearances and writing. Kahane, as Hazony's eulogy and Magid's *Meir Kahane* show, was a presence with which Jews had to contend. The Kahanist challenge is still present today.

A transnational approach to Kahane's middlebrow thinking sees his ideas less as a one-way street—as is the emphasis in Magid's work—but as constant movement. It might yield complementary explanations about the development of Kahane's thought. The Six-Day War is a case in point. Magid notes how it contributed to a Black Nationalist solidarity with Palestinians, and respectively to the Black Power leadership's critique of White Jews in the United States. At the same time, the Six-Day War played a crucial role for a young generation of Jews, who renegotiated their Jewish identity as ethnic and unaligned with radical left politics (Magid 2021, 57, 80).

Magid's sparse comments on the subject are not reflected in his otherwise comprehensive analysis of Kahane's thought. In the immediate aftermath of the war, newspapers such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Look* all had cover images of Moshe Dayan, the Israeli Defense Minister celebrated as the architect of the victory. Dayan was often photographed in uniform with his famous eye patch covering his left eye. He represented the quintessential Israeli hero. The Six-Day War's presence in American media provided in this sense military, masculine pride, which coalesced with the ideas of Black Power to provide Kahane with a model of Jewish pride or *hadar*, a concept Kahane adopted from Jabotinsky. In Israel, the context of the Six-Day War was much more messianic and so *hadar* needed to be adapted and given religious overtones. It is not so much that Kahane merely “found religion,” as Magid argues, but that he found a very specific discourse by which to develop his thinking. Kahane, based on his previous yeshiva training and middlebrow penchant to capture the zeitgeist, utilized this newfound tendency.

### 3. Israeli Lions

Kahane's clenched-fist emblem is still a graffito one finds in the streets of major cities in Israel, often with the underlining motto: *Kahane tzadak*, Kahane was right. Magid begins the book with a vignette that echoes this motto. A participant in a Modern Orthodox bat mitzvah in the United States learns that Magid is writing on Kahane and offers the observation that what Kahane said was accurate. He simply “should have said it in a nicer way” (Magid 2021, 1). Magid notes that the Kahane certain Jews venerate is “neither the cultural critic and ideologue for Jewish Power and identity of his earlier phase, nor the critic of liberalism and the American Jewish establishment” but instead the “martyr for the cause of the Torah, the Jewish people, and the land of Israel” (Magid 2021, 197). Are there any Kahanists nowadays? Is Itamar Ben-Gvir, perhaps Kahane's most explicit and public disciple, a true follower of Kahane's ideology of Jewish power?

Magid offers the apt term neo-Kahanism as a way to think about this question. It might be the most important and timely theoretical contribution of this

work. Neo-Kahanism reflects a certain ideological and theological position in Religious Zionism that is broader than merely self-identifying Kahanists. At its core, neo-Kahanism is “an odd amalgam of Kookean romanticism and Kahanist pragmatism” (Magid 2021, 147). The Kahanist and Kookean vision—meaning the thought of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook and his son Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook—are “diametrically opposed” according to Magid when it comes to cardinal issues such as metaphysics, the use of violence, and the relation to the secular state. It is in this sense that it is an “odd amalgam” (Magid 2021, 147).

Kahanist pragmatism does not mean in this context any willingness for compromise, but rather a readiness to engage in politics. It reflects a political theology that celebrates Jewish power unencumbered by complex metaphysics. In Kahane’s theology, Jews in Israel, as God’s vessels, engage in violence against enemies of the Jewish State, thereby fulfilling the divine wrath. Palestinians and Israeli Arabs, he recognized—echoing the more secular vision by Jabotinsky—would reject this claim and likely resist, but that only proves the necessity of violence on both theological and practical grounds (Magid 2021, 151, 162).

By contrast, for Rav Kook, who was steeped in the neo-romanticism of his era, the Land of Israel had metaphysical importance. The 1917 Balfour Declaration and the return of the Jews to their ancient homeland meant that the process of redemption was unfolding. The Jewish presence in the Land allows for fuller spiritual repentance because it is sacred in and of itself and as such is supposedly outside the realm of everyday politics (Mirsky 2019, 149). Seen in the light of an imminent redemption, it was possible to conceive a vision of the land that abhors violence (Magid 2021, 148).

In positioning the Kooks over and against Kahane, Magid at times seems to conflate their theology. The son’s position regarding violence, however, should not be equated with his father’s (Magid 2021, 148).<sup>3</sup> For Zvi Yehuda Kook, in a famous speech he gave in May 1967, the settlement of the land was a positive commandment whose essence is “the statist conquest, the national all-Israeli rule in this holy territory” (1967). To say that Z. Y. Kook rejected violence, therefore, needs to be qualified in two ways. First, it is correct only once we realize that for him and his disciples, the act of settlement is in and of itself not violent. Second, based on this logic, violence is sanctioned when it is statist violence, committed for the sake of the central commandment of settlement in the land. On the other hand, armed opposition to the Jewish state—for example, when the government prevents Jews from building settlements or uproots Jewish settlers—creates a theological problem as it contradicts the state’s inherent sanctity and messianic role.

I insist on the distinction between father and son because the son’s theology contains the potential for violence both in the process of settlement and in the

<sup>3</sup> As Yehudah Mirsky summarizes it, the difference between father and son is that “Rav Kook had essentialized the nation, and Zvi Yehudah essentialized the state” (2019, 229). This is an important distinction that gets lost because many of the writings we have by Rav Kook were edited by Zvi Yehuda in a way that gave the work a more nationalist bent (Mirsky 2019, 181).

process of resisting their evacuation. Maybe the amalgam with Kahane is not that odd after all but in line with the intrinsic iteration of this messianic logic. In fact, one could argue that the principle of settling the land has increasingly superseded that of the sanctification of the state in the later thought of Kook the son. At the same time, the state's redemptive character maintains what Moshe Hellinger and others called a "theological-normative balance" in which specific orders—to evacuate or participate in the evacuation of settlements—might be refused by soldiers, police officers, and citizens without violating the sanctity of the state (Inbari 2012, 32–36; Hellinger, Hershkowitz, and Susser 2016, 849–50). An armed resistance to state orders, however, remains a vexed question. In this delicate balancing act, the scales nowadays might be tipping in the direction of the land against the state.

Even though it is mostly a secular institution, managed mainly by non-observant Jews, the Jewish polity was a central organ of redemption for both Kooks. Whereas both Kooks are dialectical in this regard, Kahane is Manichean and this defines his relation to the state (Magid 2021, 162). In Israel, he opposes a Jewish and Zionist state in the name of Zionism and Judaism (Magid 2021, 157). And it is through this perspective that he left his mark, which is evident in the willingness to actively oppose the state, to engage in violent acts against Israeli Arabs and Palestinians, and to turn this violence also against liberal Jews whom he deemed desecrators of God's name (*hillul ha-shem*) because they exemplify Jewish weakness against foes that is opposed to the divine mission (Magid 2021, 153). Whereas Zvi Yehuda Kook's theology potentially offers a qualified resistance to the state in the name of the land, Kahane goes much further in calling for direct divine violence in the public sphere against perceived dissenters.

Several recent phenomena in Israel could be seen as a litmus test for the concept of neo-Kahanism. The campaign against the Gaza Disengagement Plan of August 2005 included acts of violence against Palestinians and the placing of fake bombs in train and bus stations in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, with the slogan "The Disengagement Plan will blow up in our face." This type of violence, and the associated publicity stunts, recall Kahane's radical tactics. In addition, leading rabbis such as Avraham Shapira—related to the Kooks by marriage—called soldiers to refuse the order to evacuate settlers (Shapira and Lichtenstein 2007). Yet it is noteworthy that the disengagement went with no major violence against the soldiers who came to evacuate the settlers. This suggests either that the theological-normative balance has not been broken or that Kahane's influence might not be as strong.

Second, and partly as a result of the Disengagement Plan, this era saw the rise of the Hilltop Youth, a loose movement of young radical settlers who combine a Kookean neoromantic view of the land with tropes from Kahane's playbook such as a critique of the Israeli secular government and a predilection toward violence against Palestinians and Israeli Arabs. They term this *tag mehir* or retaliation. Meir Ettinger, one of the famous faces of the movement, is Kahane's grandson (Hirsch-Hoefler and Mudde 2020, 82–83). The term neo-Kahanism captures some of the

Hilltop Youth ideology but given the centrality of the romantic ideology of the land it is hard to know where Z. Y. Kook ends and Kahane begins. To track Kahane's legacy, we might need more thinking through different strands of neo-Kahanism. Magid's concept of neo-Kahanism is helpful in this regard and deserves scholarly attention and careful unpacking.

It is also worth noting that there are groups in Israel that can simply be labeled as Kahanist, whether they define themselves as such or not. One such organization is Lehava, a name that literally translates as "a tongue of fire," but also stands as an acronym "For the Prevention of Assimilation in the Holy Land." This organization's explicit mission is to prevent intermixing, to save Jewish women from relationships with non-Jews—specifically Arab Israelis—and to encourage the hiring of only Jewish labor. This was a central part of Kahane's ideology, expressed both in writing and in his political activities. One of Kahane's first interventions in the Israeli public sphere was an attempt to legally prohibit intermarriage and even inter-ethnic dating (Magid 2021, 147). In its mission and pride for military-style activities, Lehava follows Kahane quite closely, including emphasizing the principles of Jewish pride and willingness to fight as Jews.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, as a provocateur and ideologue of Jewish pride (Magid 2021, 45–48), Kahane might have found a very unlikely successor in Yoav Eliasi, better known by his stage name, The Shadow (*ha-Tzell*). Kahane, I suspect, would have abhorred the tattooed rapper's presence as well as the importing of a Black music genre to Israel. Yet he might have appreciated The Shadow's tactics. Starting in the 2014 Gaza War, Eliasi gained notoriety for organizing right-wing demonstrations that were aimed at leftwing demonstrators. In a profile in *Haaretz* from 2018, Eliasi has been called "the great hate instigator of our time" (Reuven 2018), a label that could have been as easily applied to Kahane during his lifetime.

Eliasi himself treads a fine line and has repeatedly denied endorsing violence. In this, he differs from Kahane. But a loose group coalesced around Eliasi's social media accounts, primarily on Telegram where he currently has more than 150,000 followers. On his Facebook page, comments could be seen that include "death to leftists" and "Kahane is alive [*Kahane Chai*]."<sup>5</sup> The latter slogan refers both to Kahane's ideology and to the party that was founded by his son after Kahane was assassinated in 1990. Kahane Chai was prevented, like Kahane's own party, from participating in the election on grounds of racism, and was banned as a terrorist organization in 1994 after Baruch Goldstein—a member of the movement who, like Kahane, emigrated from the United States—murdered 29 and injured more than 100 Muslims who prayed in the Machpelah cave, a site in Hebron that is sacred for Muslims and Jews.

<sup>4</sup> Lehava's website is available at <https://www.leava.co.il/about/> (accessed November 14, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> The Shadow, "Anyone Heard of This? (Hebrew)," Facebook, September 11, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/189064565254/photos/a.10152279651915255/10154305540585255/?type=3>.

The Shadow's followers call themselves "The Shadow's Lions." They endorse a chauvinistic nationalism that is reminiscent of Kahane's activities in the United States before he became more focused on religion. The corollary is a rejection—using violence if need be—of any Jewish critique that is seen as a sign of weakness, what they would call traitorous, or in Kahane's theological parlance *hillul ha-shem*. Panthers have turned to lions. From organizations that can be outlawed, hatred is spread through amorphous social media networks that are harder to contain. Kahane's thought had found convergence with certain strands in settler ideology to form neo-Kahanism. It is also echoed in more straightforward ways in the form of Jewish violence against Palestinians and Arab Israelis, as well as perceived Jewish Israeli dissenters. More than 30 years following his assassination, Kahane's troubling, enduring legacy is still with us. From urban centers to the settlements, from fringe groups to the Knesset, whether we dare say it or not, Kahane is very much alive. After reading Magid's *Meir Kahane*, we are forced to look in the mirror and confront this reality.

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