

Next Year in Jerusalem: Anti-Cultism in Israel and the Case of Bnei Baruch

Banquet speech at CESNUR 2016 conference, Daejin University, Korea

Massimo Introvigne

While we are deeply enjoying CESNUR 2016, it is already time to prepare for CESNUR 2017. It will be held in Jerusalem on July 3-5, 2017. Of course, Jerusalem needs no presentation. We had the fortune of having one of our CESNUR conferences hosted, years ago, by the main university of Rome, and with Jerusalem we will complete our tour of the two greatest spiritual centers of the world.

Some may believe that Jerusalem and Israel are only about the traditional religions, and none would deny how important they are for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. But it is also true that Israel has a vibrant scene of new religious movements, from ISKCON to neo-Paganism. And there are two consequences of this. First, Israeli universities have produced a generation of excellent scholars of new religious movements, most of them young. We will meet them at CESNUR 2017 and I am sure we will all enjoy their presentations. Second, Israel has also produced a small but vocal and influential anti-cult movement.

Israeli anti-cultism also deserves to be studied for its somewhat unique features. Israel had its first anti-cult media campaign in 1974, mainly targeting a movement imported from India, the Divine Light Mission.¹ In 1992, Nurit Zaidman-Dvir and Stephen Sharot noticed a unique feature of Israeli anti-cult movement: “In contrast to other western societies, the most active and effective anti-cult activities in Israel have been initiated and carried out by religious interests and organizations and especially by the ultra-Orthodox.”² Zaidman-Dvir and Sharot astutely noted that, in the eye of secular critics, the ultra-orthodox groups themselves may easily be regarded as “cults.” In fact, the report of the Belgian Parliament on cults, dated 1997, denounced with very harsh words and included in its list of cults Satmar, the largest group in Hasidic Judaism.³ This, however, did not deter ultra-orthodox organizations in Israel from participating in the anti-cult movement and denouncing as “cults” groups seeing as luring Jews away from Judaism or being otherwise heretic. In the meantime, a secular anti-cult movement, often explicitly atheistic, also grew in Israel. The coalition between secular anti-cultists and religious counter-cultists worked in a somewhat better way than in other countries.

However, reiterated efforts for a specific legislation against “cults” never succeeded. They were revamped in 2015, after in 2011 and 2014 two “cult” leaders, self-proclaimed ultra-orthodox rabbi Elior Chen and polygamist Goel Ratzon, were sentenced to severe jails penalties for slavery, rape, and child abuse.⁴ After the Ratzon and Chen cases, the Israeli Ministry of Welfare and Social Services formed a committee to investigate “cults.” It produced in 2011 a report expressing the usual anti-cult position.⁵

¹ See Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, *Despair and Deliverance: Private Salvation in Contemporary Israel* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), 44.

² Nurit Zaidman-Dvir - Stephen Sharot, “The Response of Israeli Society to New Religious Movements: ISKCON and Teshuvah,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 31, no. 3 (September 1992): 279-295 (279).

³ Chambre des Représentants de Belgique, *Enquête parlementaire visant à élaborer une politique en vue de lutter contre les pratiques illégales des sectes et les dangers qu’elles représentent pour la société et pour les personnes, particulièrement les mineurs d’âge. Rapport fait au nom de la Commission d’Enquête par MM. Duquesne et Willems*, 2 voll. (Bruxelles: Chambre des Représentants de Belgique, 1997), vol. 1, 358-359. Satmar is spelled “Szatmar.”

⁴ On the Israeli anti-cult movement, see Gabriel Cavaglioni, “The Theoretical Framing of a Social Problem: The Case of Societal Reaction to Cults in Israel,” *Israel Affairs* 14, no. 1 (2008): 84-102.

⁵ See Marianna Ruah-Midbar - Adam Klin-Oron, “‘Tell Me Who Your Enemies Are’: Government Reports About the ‘Cult’ Phenomenon in Israel,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 52, no. 4 (December 2013): 810-826.

The committee even regarded as serious experts deprogrammers and exit counselors Rick Ross and Steve Hassan, apparently ignoring Ross' embarrassing criminal record⁶ and Hassan's controversial positions within the anti-cult community itself⁷ and lack of genuinely scholarly credentials.

Twenty-six Israeli academics wrote to the Minister of Welfare and Social Services criticizing the report.⁸ The report, however, produced a law proposal in 2015, submitted again in 2016.⁹ It is one of the worst such law proposals in the world. It defines a "harmful cult" as "a group of people, incorporated or not, coming together around an idea or person, in a way that exploitation of a relationship of dependence, authority or mental distress takes place of one or more of its members, by the use of methods of control over thought processes and behavioral patterns." This definition, both very vague and based on old theories about thought control and brainwashing, is not really rescued by references to felonies and crimes being committed by the group.

The measures proposed against "harmful cults" are draconian. "The person who heads a harmful cult or a person who manages or organizes the activity in a harmful cult will be sentenced to 10 years in prison." His or her property will be confiscated. Members and those "under the influence of a harmful cult" will be regarded as legally incapacitated and placed under guardianship. In this provision of the law the influence of deprogrammers consulted as experts is obvious, and the proposed Israeli law will become the first law in the world legalizing and even organizing deprogramming.

The draft law started its journey through the Israeli Parliament quite auspiciously, and it looked like it might be passed as a matter of few months. Strong opposition by Israeli and international scholars¹⁰ somewhat slowed down its progress, but the risk that it will be passed remains serious.

In our 2017 conference, we will discuss the progress – or, more hopefully, lack of progress – of the Israeli anti-cult and pro-deprogramming law. We will also have sessions on Israeli movements specifically targeted by the local anti-cult movement. One of the most interesting cases, that I and Gordon Melton are actively studying, is Bnei Baruch. Without anticipating next year's session on this movement, I will say a few words introducing the topic.

⁶ On 10 January 1975, Ross was charged for attempted burglary and pleaded guilty in exchange of an agreement lowering the charge to conspiracy: see Justice Court, Northeast Phoenix Precinct, Maricopa County, Arizona, "State of Arizona vs Ricky Allan Ross and Jeffrey Ward Nuzum: Order Holding Defendant to Answer before the Superior Court," 10 January 1975; and Superior Court of the State of Arizona in and for the County of Maricopa, "Plea Agreement, no. 85433: State of Arizona vs. Ricky A. Ross," 6 March 1975. On July 23, 1975, Ross, with a store clerk as an accomplice, was able to steal 306 pieces of jewelry from a Phoenix shop, pretending he had a bomb in a box ready to detonate: see Rob Kastrow, "Clerk is Held as Suspect in Jewelry Theft," *Arizona Republic*, 25 July 1975. On 2 April 1976, Ross was sentenced to four years in jail for the robbery: see Superior Court of the State of Arizona, Criminal Division, "The State of Arizona vs. Ricky Allen Ross," April 2, 1976. Copies of these documents are in the archives of CESNUR (Center for Studies on New Religions), Torino, Italy.

⁷ See e.g. The Cult Education Institute of New Jersey, "Disclaimer Regarding Steve Hassan," 2013, <http://culteducation.com/group/1289-general-information/8227-disclaimer-regarding-steve-hassan.html>.

⁸ See "A response to the recommendations of the team for 'examining the cult phenomenon in Israel'", June 13, 2011, available at <http://www.cesnur.org/2016/Response%20letter%20to%20cult%20report%20-%20English.pdf>.

⁹ See English translation: <http://www.cesnur.org/2016/Law%20Proposal%20for%20the%20Handling%20of%20Harmful%20Cults%20in%20Israel.pdf>.

¹⁰ See "An Open Letter by International Scholars to the Members of the Knesset," http://www.cesnur.org/2016/letter_knesset.htm.

Bnei Baruch is the largest among a family of some twenty different spiritual movements whose origins lie in the teachings of Rabbi Yehuda Halevy Ashlag (1884-1954), universally recognized as one of the great Kabbalists of the 20th century. He was well-known also for his interest in social problems and his proposal of an “altruistic Communism,” which he came to regard as very different from the Communism realized in the Soviet Union. After his death in 1954, his disciples divided. Some followed one of Ashlag’s closest associates, Yehuda Tzvi Brandwein (1904-1969), who became Ashlag’s brother-in-law through his second marriage and established a separate branch. Brandwein’s branch was further divided at his death in 1969. A small number sought the leadership of his son, Rabbi Abraham Brandwein (1945-2013), who only later in life came to accept this role. Others followed Rabbi Feivel S. Gruberger, later known as Philip Shagra Berg (1927-2013), who had married a niece of the elder Brandwein, although he eventually divorced her in 1971. Berg’s branch, directed after his death in 2013 by his widow Karen and two sons, acquired an international following as the Kabbalah Center. It became famous after the pop singer Madonna and other Hollywood celebrities joined the organization.

Although the Kabbalah Center, mostly because of Madonna, is the most famous Ashlagian group in the West, it is not the largest in Israel and probably not the largest internationally. A significant number of followers of Yehuda Ashlag regarded one of his sons, Baruch Shalom Halevy Ashlag (1907-1991), as the legitimate heir of his father. In turn, Baruch Ashlag’s school divided in various groups after his death. Most of his students had been brought to him by his closest disciple, Michael Laitman, and followed him as the legitimate successor of Baruch. Laitman was born in Vitebsk, in present-day Belarus, on August 31, 1946. He is referred to as Rav or Rabbi by his disciples as an honorific title, as he is not an ordained rabbi and in fact does not act as one by leading religious services. He is also referred to as “Dr. Laitman,” on the basis of a Ph.D. he earned from the Institute of Philosophy of the Russian Academy of Science.

Laitman’s background was in science, and he regarded himself as a deeply secular person. He moved to Israel in 1974 and became interested in Kabbalah, regarding it as a wisdom compatible with modern science rather than as part of the Jewish religion. In 1979, he met Baruch Ashlag, who at that time had only a handful of disciples in the ultra-orthodox Israeli city of Bnei Brak. During the subsequent twelve years, Laitman remained with Baruch, eventually learning how to deal with the ultra-orthodox environment of Bnei Brak.

Bnei Baruch (“Sons of Baruch,” with reference to Baruch Ashlag) started in 1991, after the younger Ashlag’s death, as a modest study group in Laitman’s apartment in Bnei Brak. The breakthrough came in 1997, with the Internet first and live radio broadcasts later. The systematic use of new technologies transformed a local group into an international movement, with study groups present in several countries. Headquarters were moved from Bnei Brak to Petah Tikva, in the area north-east of Tel Aviv. Expansion through the use of technology continued in 2007, with a TV program by Bnei Baruch broadcasted through Israeli television. In 2008, Bnei Baruch acquired its own channel, Channel 66, popularly known as “the Kabbalah channel.” Internet and television remain to this day essential tools for Bnei Baruch’s dissemination of Kabbalistic teachings.

The systematic use of technology notwithstanding, Bnei Baruch still relies primarily on the personal interaction of Laitman with his followers, whom he refers to as “students.” He still teaches daily, except when he travels, in the Petah Tikva international center, from 3 a.m. to 6 a.m. Many students follow the lessons every day, either directly or via the Internet. The unusual schedule has raised eyebrows among critics, who insist on its inconvenience for those to have to work next morning. Bnei Baruch answers that

teaching at night is not unprecedented in Kabbalistic schools, and was practiced by Baruch Ashlag himself, as well as various Kabbalists throughout history. In fact, the practice also exists in monastic traditions of different religions. In these lessons, the separation, traditional in many Kabbalah groups, between men and women is maintained, with women following from a different room or from home via the Web.

Bnei Baruch is a network of students who recognize the authority of Michael Laitman as the legitimate heir and successor of Yehuda and Baruch Ashlag. There are some 100 full-time workers in Petah Tikva, while most of the students have a regular job and follow the daily lessons by attending a center or through the Internet.

An annual convention in Israel gathers in the Tel Aviv Convention Center some 8,000 followers. In addition, there are local study groups in 107 countries, with approximately 50,000 regular participants in Israel and some 150,000 worldwide, participating either physically or through streaming (the figure of two million is often quoted and refers to visitors of the Web site). Local conventions have been organized in such diverse places as Mexico, Turkey, the United States, and Russia. Conventions and courses are organized through a non-profit association known as Bnei Baruch - Kabbalah L'aam (Kabbalah for the People). Israeli media often use the name Kabbalah L'aam as a synonymous for Bnei Baruch. The Bnei Baruch network also includes organizations and groups interested in social work, local politics in Petah Tikva, and the arts.

Laitman insists on the universalistic character of Kabbalah. He teaches it to people of all faiths, not only Jews. He regards Bnei Baruch as a secular rather than a religious organization, although it is by no means atheistic and includes notions on an "upper force," which can also be called the Creator or God.

All this notwithstanding, Bnei Baruch has become a target of the Israeli anti-cult movement. The usual accusations of brainwashing, mind control, disrupting families, promoting a personality cult of Dr Laitman, and soliciting students for inordinate amounts of money, are often repeated. These accusations will be dealt with specifically in articles I and Gordon Melton are currently finalizing, and no doubt discussed in the proposed session at CESNUR 2017. For the time being, it may be sufficient to state that we found them as largely unfounded and coming from a curious attempt to apply to Bnei Baruch traditional stereotypes about "cults" coming from the old cult wars we are all familiar with.

There is, however, more. Bnei Baruch's aim is to disseminate its interpretation of Kabbalah to both Jews and non-Jews. Kabbalah has been subject to many different interpretations. They may be distinguished into four groups: academic, religious, esoteric, and pragmatic. Academic interpretations in the tradition of Gershom Scholem (1897-1982), whose main contemporary representative is Moshe Idel, try to reconstruct the oldest versions of Kabbalah through a study of the texts. They are often critical of pragmatic interpretations. For them, the latter simplify what is an immensely complicated system of texts and traditions, and impose a coherent meaning to disparate and often contradictory sources.

Religious interpretations insist that Kabbalah is intrinsically connected to Jewish precepts and part of a religion, Judaism. In some of these interpretations, although by no means in all, Kabbalah is in fact Judaism's esoteric content. For those advocating the religious interpretation, teaching Kabbalah to those who are not qualified does not make sense, and teaching it to non-Jews is tantamount to sacrilege.

Esoteric interpretations were proposed by occultists such as Madame Helena Blavatsky (1831-1891), the main founder of the Theosophical Society, and the founders of The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. They appropriated Kabbalistic texts and read them through the lenses of their own esoteric systems.

In contrast, pragmatic interpretations such as Bnei Baruch's deny that Kabbalah is part of a religion or of a given esoteric system. Kabbalah for them is the answer to the deepest human spiritual desires. As such, it can be taught to people of all religions and does not require conversion to Judaism or the observance of Judaism's prescriptions. While the leading masters of pragmatic Kabbalah do not ignore the academic literature, they look for coherence, simplicity, and sound spiritual advice where scholars emphasize complexity, contradictions, and theory.

The struggle for Kabbalah between these four interpretations is not purely cognitive. In the process, the very notion of Kabbalah is socially constructed and politically negotiated. Each interpretation serves its own purpose. Conflict is almost unavoidable. Religionists who pretend that they have the sole authority to define Kabbalah as part of Judaism see in the anti-cult climate now prevailing in Israel an opportunity to reinforce their position by labeling as a "cult" non-religious pragmatic Kabbalah, of which Bnei Baruch is the most successful example. Academic historians of Kabbalah and scholars of comparative religion, who have little sympathy for pragmatic systems, may contribute the occasional negative comment. Even specific esoteric groups may have a vested interest in disqualifying pragmatic Kabbalah as a competition to their own brands of Kabbalistic teachings.

It would be naïve to see this controversy as motivated by purely theoretical or philosophical reasons. The attempt to "own" Kabbalah is largely a struggle for power. Religious and, to some extent, academic and esoteric definitions of Kabbalah are promoted by groups that have an interest in affirming their power, by proving that public opinion at large accepts their self-assumed role as the sole custodians of an "authentic" definition of what Kabbalah is. In this sense, controversies about Bnei Baruch are a prism through which we can start studying the complicate religious and cultural climate of present-day Israel and the background of its debate about "cults," which is both old and new, familiar and unique. As Jews say from so many centuries, "next year in Jerusalem."