

Jewish Fundamentalism

Intellectual Output 2, Unit V



Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

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Introduction

Jewish fundamentalism is a **relatively modern phenomenon**. Until the 18th century, with the emergence of the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment movement, and especially the 19th century, with the entry of European Jews in society and modernity through access to citizenship, Jews as a whole followed a way of life that was quite similar and traditional throughout their communities. But this did not preclude the existence of differences among them. This is illustrated by the opposition that emerged as early as the 18th century between, on the one hand, the *Hassidim* (in Hebrew meaning pious) who were originally from Ukraine and followers of Baal Shem Tov (1698-1760) that prioritised a union with God through joy and dance, and, on the other, the *Mitnagdim* (in Hebrew meaning *opponents*) who were originally from Lithuania and prioritised study above everything else. Those who wanted to **withdraw themselves from society out of fear of assimilation** and the risk of disappearance of their Jewish character **called themselves Orthodox** - with variations ranging from a very closed ultra-orthodoxy to a neo-orthodoxy that was more open towards modern society. Orthodox Jews are **in opposition to the reformed, "conservative" and secular Jews** who, in varying degrees, wish to combine Judaism (religion) or Jewishness (culture) with modernity. With the emergence of the Zionist movement and the creation of the State of Israel, two **new forms of fundamentalism emerged**: one **anti-Zionist**, the other **ultra-nationalist**.

Related digital Modules:

- [Jewish modernity](#)
(esp. Source 1b on Hassidim and Source 2 on Moses Mendelssohn.)



Figure 1. The Hassidim typically express mystical joy through klezmer music ([source](#)).

The Haredim

The term *Haredim*, which in Hebrew means those in awe of God, describes ultra-Orthodox Jews who show themselves to be **very reluctant towards modernity**. They prefer to live in confined areas (in specific neighbourhoods such as in Williamsburg, New York or in Bnei Brak, near Tel Aviv) or in socially closed communities (they are opposed to the viewing of television or controlled access to the Internet, or to the reading of newspapers). In order to perpetuate their way of life from generation to generation, the *Haredim* structure their life around prayer, dedication to study among the men, having large families, educating children within their own community, having no contact with the outside world and learning very little of secular texts. They strongly challenge scientific discoveries when they contradict the text of the Torah, as for example the theories of evolution or those that explore the origins of the universe.

There are differences between the *Haredim* of the Diaspora and the *Haredim* of Israel: in the Diaspora, men work outside their community and are relatively well-integrated into the national social system. In Israel, although the men study and the women work, they both avoid contact with any non-ultra-Orthodox Jews. Families often live very modestly and are dependent on social allowances by the state.

Since in Judaism transmission is essential, the ultra-Orthodox are tolerated by those who practise the religion less strictly, viewed as the guardians of the tradition. Yet there are frequent clashes in Israel between the ultra-Orthodox and those who reject religious coercion as a means to impose their mode of life by law.



Figure 2. In Mea Shearim, an ultra-Orthodox neighbourhood in Jerusalem, internal communication within the community, such as news, death announcements or rabbinical decisions, is posted on the walls ([source](#)).

Significant variations

We **must not confuse ultra-Orthodox and Orthodox Jews**. Even within these two categories, **there are variations**. All men dressed in a black suit, and wearing a beard and hat do not think alike!

Among the ultra-Orthodox, some refuse to speak Hebrew, the holy language of the Torah reserved for worship, and instead express themselves only in Yiddish, also in Israel; others use Hebrew as a vernacular language. Some are very attached to the teachings of a specific rabbi or thinker; others revere a different rabbi and do not mix with other rabbis or thinkers, and can even become quite hostile. Some, originally from the Maghreb, have adopted the teachings, customs and traditions of Lithuanian Jews; others claim they are *Mizrahim* (oriental) and have their heart set on retaining their unique characteristics. But they all share a fundamentalist reading of the holy texts and their entire life is dictated by religious prescriptions.

Among the Orthodox, some avoid to the maximum any contact with the non-Jewish world after having been influenced by ultra-Orthodox Jews; others work in civil society and separate their public and private life. The latter are influenced by the neo-Orthodox doctrine according to which one is to be Jewish at home and a citizen in the outside world. We also note that in a few Orthodox circles, women are starting to claim an equal right to study by creating their own study circles.

Among the ultra-Orthodox communities, the Lubavitch are fairly unique. They are not opposed to contact with the outside world, they are involved in humanitarian action, and they do not reject the media in order to make themselves more visible. But their primary objective is the return of all Jews to regular religious practice in order to accelerate the coming of the Messiah. In a way, the Lubavitch are "internal missionaries" (let's not forget that Judaism is not a proselytising religion seeking to convert or teaching that only Jews have the right to salvation). The Lubavitch have created all over the world welcome centers that offer kosher food for Jewish travellers. They do not hesitate to stop in the street anyone they think is Jewish to ask them to wear *tefillin* (phylacteries).

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- [The main diversity trends in Judaism](#)
- [The main Jewish rites and practices](#)
- [Israel and the Jewish Diasporas](#)



Figure 3. A street in Jerusalem where a Lubavitch man (seen from behind) offers a young Jew to wear a tefillin (phylactery) as a way to persuade him to return to regular religious practice (source).

Fundamentalism and Zionism

The revival of Jewish sovereignty in Israel has led to significant cleavages within the Jewish world, especially among those who are more fundamentalist in their beliefs. Mistrustful of the Zionist ambition to create a sovereign Jewish State, the Orthodox were late to rally behind this movement. According to Jewish traditional thought, the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem (in 70 CE), the Roman victory over the Jewish Revolt (in 135 CE) and the dispersal of the Jews among the nations (the Diaspora) were a divine punishment imposed on the Jewish people. Only God can decide on "bringing together all the exiles" to the land of Israel.

A large majority of Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Jews have accepted the reality of the Jewish State, even if they bemoan that the State of Israel is not Jewish enough in its institutions and in the way of life of the majority of its population. Two groups are particularly opposed but because of radically different views:

The **Neturei Karta** (Guardians of the city in Aramaic) believe that **the existence of Israel is a form of rebellion against God** because it was created against His will by non-practising Jews. They reject the State of Israel whose democratically-voted laws do not meet the requirements of the Halakha (religious law and jurisprudence). Even though they are a minority, they make themselves visible through acts of transgression, such as offering their support to the most outspoken opponents of Israel.



Figure 4. A member of Neturei Karta holding a crossed-out Israeli flag and a sticker with a Palestinian flag displaying the words: "Jew, not Zionist"(source).



Figure 5. "Youngsters of the Hills" facing an Israeli policeman ([source](#)).

In contrast, a **form of religious messianism emerged the day after the Israeli victory in June 1967** (the Six-Day War) after the conquest of the Old City of Jerusalem and the Biblical lands of Judea and Samaria (in the West Bank). Such movements claim, in the name of God, full Jewish sovereignty on all territories between the Mediterranean and the Jordan river. This religious-nationalist group was first represented by the National Religious Party (1956-2008), but it was subsequently disbanded to create the new Jewish Home party.

Extremist splinter groups have become particularly violent. This was the case during the attack at the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron (25 February 1994) against praying Muslim worshippers. The "Hilltop Youth" defy the Israeli authorities by establishing illegal Jewish outposts and settlements. Another extremist movement, *Kach*, formed by Rabbi Meir Kahane, was banned in Israel in 1994 in the name of fighting against terrorism (though it is not banned in the European Union!). These extremist groups attract in their ranks young people who have become religious by way of their strong belief in nationalism.

Related Digital Modules:

- [Jewish fundamentalism in Israel](#)
- [Judaism and the Jews in the 20th and 21st Centuries](#)
(esp. Source 1a and 1b on the creation of the State of Israel)
- [The centrality of Jerusalem](#)