

“Cults” and Enslavement *via* Brainwashing in Israeli Justice: The Case of Daniel Ambash

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ABSTRACT: Daniel Ambash (1955–) is a Franco-Israeli citizen and follower of Rabbi Yisrael’s revitalization movement within the “Na Nach” Breslover Hasidim. Since his arrest in 2011, he has been serving a 26-year prison sentence. He is portrayed in the Israeli media and in the judgments of the District and Supreme Courts as a sadistic cult leader who enslaved his six wives and his children through the mental manipulation techniques of brainwashing, thereby compelling them to participate in deviant sexual practices and heinous acts. This study explores the anti-cult narrative that shaped the police investigation and the legal process, and how Israel’s new anti-slavery legislation was combined with brainwashing theory in order to convict Daniel Ambash. The role of Israel’s anti-cult group, the media, the police and Social Welfare are analyzed within the theoretical frameworks of Stuart Wright’s model (1995) of counter-movement mobilization and Stanley Cohen’s concept (1972) of “moral panic.”

KEYWORDS: Religion in Israel, New Religious Movements, Anti-Cult Movements, Polygamy, Enslavement, Brainwashing.

Introduction

Daniel Ambash, born in Paris in 1955, was a successful ballet dancer in his youth and toured with the dance company of Maurice Béjart (1927–2007). At age thirty, he began to explore his Jewish roots. He went on *Teshuva*, studied the Torah and left his famous choreographer lover, Maguy Marin, to marry a Jewish woman. The couple moved to Israel to follow the path of Hasidic spirituality. There, he joined the Breslover Hasidim and became a disciple of Rabbi Yisrael Ber Odesser (1888–1994), believed by his followers to be the same person (via reincarnation) as Rabbi Nachman of Breslov (1772–1810).

Today, Ambash is serving a 26-year sentence in a prison near Tel Aviv, branded in the media as a “sadistic cult leader” (Radl 2018)). But technically, from a religious studies or social scientific perspective, Daniel Ambash does not meet the criteria of a “cult leader.” He never claimed to be a prophet or messiah, nor was he ever credited with supernatural powers (Weber 1904; Melton 2000). He never aspired to be a magical healer, nor did he predict the future. He was not a creative theologian with divinely-inspired revelations. He never founded or led a new religion or “cult” (Weber 1924; Ellwood 1973). Daniel Ambash might more accurately be described as a follower; a devotee of Rabbi Nachman/Rabbi Yisrael. Ambash worked with a group of Na Nach Breslovers from his synagogue who spread their spiritual master’s message of redemption by distributing his holy books.

The Na Nachs believe Rabbi Nachman of Breslov promised to reveal the “song of redemption” for all humanity. In 1922, Rabbi Yisrael Dov Odesser announced he had received a holy letter from heaven (*petek*) containing the song: *Na Nach Nachma Nachman Me’uman*. The *petek* proclaimed, “And upon you I said My fire will burn until the Messiah will come.” For the disciples of Rabbi Yisrael, this meant that Rabbi Nachman had returned in the person of Rabbi Yisrael to bring the song of redemption to humanity (*Letter from Heaven* 1991).

Rabbi Yisrael Dov Odesser lived to the age of 106 and was often a guest in the house of Daniel Ambash and his wife, Ilana. He entrusted Daniel with the mission of distributing the *petek* to every household. To this end, Daniel sold his house to support his rabbi’s mission. He danced and sang in the city squares and hosted large Sabbath suppers with his family, and annual *hilulots* to commemorate the death of Rabbi Yisrael.

Daniel Ambash had grown up in the *avant-garde* art scene of Paris and Brussels, raised by secular Jewish parents. Well-versed in music, mime and *commedia dell’arte*, Ambash found creative strategies to promote his spiritual master’s message of salvation. His large family of six wives, fifteen children and friends formed a traveling circus, dramatizing the parables of Rabbi Nachman on the street. His sons built a recording studio and formed a rock band to sing the ecstatic tenth song from the *petek*. He wrote over fifty original songs of praise, sold in CDs on the street.

By 2008, the Israeli Center for Victims of Cults (ICVC) had identified Ambash

as a “cult leader” and informed the police, social welfare and media of his deviant social status. As a practicing polygamist, he stood out. Ambash was never formally charged with the crime of polygamy, illegal in Israel since 1977. Nevertheless, according to the Ministry of Social Services and Welfare, polygamy is an “identifying signal” of a “cult leader” (Lidman 2011). In October 2013, the judges wrote in their ruling against Daniel Ambash, “A civilized society cannot tolerate a way of life like that created by the defendant, with multiple wives” (“Daniel Ambash” 2018).

In this study, we will explore the roles of Israel’s main anti-cult group (ICVC), the media, the police and the Social Welfare Office in Ambash’s arrest and indictment. They will be analyzed within the framework of Stanley Cohen’s model (1972) of “moral panic”; and within Stuart Wright’s model (1995) of countermovement mobilization by networks of interest groups responding to the “cult threat.”

Methodology

As a sociologist of religion who studies new religious movements, I received a grant in 2017 from Canada’s federal Social Science and the Humanities Research Council for my research project, “Children in Sectarian Religions and State Control.” The Ambash case seemed relevant to my research, so I traveled to Israel, where I spent a week interviewing the four loyal Ambash wives. I visited Daniel Ambash in prison on September 3, 2018, met one of his lawyers, and consulted with Israeli anthropologists and with NRM scholars at the Van Leer Institute. I also met with French documentary filmmaker, Jessica Vaturi-Dembo, and with two members of the France-based International Support Committee for the Artist Daniel Ambash.

Initially, I found this case to be utterly baffling. I could see why scholars and human rights groups tended to avoid it. The researcher is confronted with a miasma of bizarre and sadistic sex crimes, listed in the indictment and the Supreme Court’s charge sheet. As an outsider who speaks no Hebrew, with no access to the estranged children or to the prosecution’s witnesses, I lacked the tools to investigate the allegations or revisit the decisions made in the District Court and the Supreme Court. Access to the records of the police interrogations of the “abusers” and the “victims” (who sometimes switch roles) were the key.

These records, unfortunately, are sealed under a judge's gag order. Even so, a study of the case based on the available data reveals serious flaws in the Ambash trial.

Israel's Concern with "Cults"

In order to understand the "why" of the Daniel Ambash case, it is useful to step back and survey Israel's "anti-cult" movement that was gathering force between 2008 and 2016. It began in the mid-1970s and led to the founding of the Israeli Center for Victims of Cults (ICVC) in 2006.

In his 4 September 2018 report, Willy Fautré, human rights activist and director of the NGO *Human Rights Without Frontiers*, states that, until recently, the ICVC received 97% of its income from an ultra-orthodox millionaire, Rami Feller: "a fact that is played down and concealed by the ICVC to this day" (Fautré 2018). According to Fautré, controlling the ICVC from behind the scenes is *Yad L'Achim* [A Hand to the Brothers], described as "a religious, extremist orthodox movement." Formed in 1950, one of *Yad L'Achim's* stated goals is, "to bring back more Jews from other Jewish groups to orthodoxy." Rami Feller, a *Yad L'Achim* operations officer, was one of the original founders of the ICVC in 2006 and donated over two million shekels to his center during its first two years (Fautré 2018). Thus, although the ICVC appears on its website to be a secular "cult awareness" group (Barker 2007), it appears to have a hidden religious "counter-cult" agenda (Introvigne 1999). Even journalists question the ICVC's agenda. Marianne Azizi (2016b) asks, "the cult breaking group in Israel have also declared Yoga to be cult, so how reliable is their criteria?"

The case of Goel Ratzon, a Mizrahi Jew from India who claimed to be the *mashiach* and was known as a spiritual healer and polygamist, had a strong impact on Israel's anti-cult movement and influenced public perceptions of polygamous "cult leaders." Ratzon was arrested in January 2010 and charged with abuse of his 17 wives and 39 children. Unlike Ambash, Ratzon does conform to standard definitions of the charismatic prophet or "cult leader" since he claimed to be a messiah (*mashiach* in Hebrew) and to possess supernatural healing powers. A year and a half after the Ratzon affair, on 4 July 2011, Daniel Ambash was arrested. The Jerusalem police referred to him in a press conference as "Goel Ratzon Number Two" (Lidman 2011).

The infamous Goel Ratzon child abuse case prompted the Ministry of Welfare and Social Services to create a special branch of the Ministry, with an appointed “cult supervisor” and twenty social workers who would undergo training to recognize and deal with “cults” in Israel (Eglash 2011). This initiative was based on the assumption that children in cults were routinely abused (Eglash 2011; see also Knesset 2013).

In 2011, the Ministry of Welfare and Social Services Team published their report, *An Examination of the Phenomenon of Cults in Israel* (Itzkovitz 2011). Anthropologists Ruah-Midbar Shapiro and Warshawski (2018, 6) note,

This report uses fierce anti-cult language, whilst relying upon the brainwashing thesis, and recommends significant legislative amendments that would limit ‘cult’ activity.

In 2015, a new bill proposing a new law designed to control “harmful cults” was introduced in the Knesset. It was voted down in February 2016. Israel’s spiritual landscape is dotted with charismatic rabbis, both Orthodox and Hassidic—many of them behave very much like “cult leaders” and the proposed law held the potential to undermine the freedom of these charismatic yet orthodox rabbis. But Jewish spiritual masters who claimed to be the *mashiach* and/or lived in polygamy—especially if they happened to belong to small fringe groups like the Na Nach Breslovers or the Mizrahim (like Ratzon)—might be singled out from the rest of the rabbis and identified as deviant “cult leaders.”

A third important factor in the Ambash story was the new Anti-slavery/human trafficking law that had been passed in 2006. According to the explanatory notes by the Ministry of Justice,

the proposed law is intended in principle to serve several purposes: first, to provide tools to improve the struggle against human trafficking and to protect its victims, even when dealing with trafficking for purposes other than prostitution (Office of the National Anti-Trafficking Coordinator 2018).

This law prohibited “[holding] a person in conditions of slavery, including sexual slavery” and prescribed up to 16 years in prison for sex trafficking or for slavery.

Daniel Ambash became the second polygamous “cult leader” to be charged with enslavement. The first had been Goel Ratzon. The latter had been under investigation since July 2009, when the Welfare Services had received complaints of alleged “sexual offenses within the family.” In January 2010, the

police mobilized dozens of police detectives, 150 social services employees, and central district state prosecutors to launch a raid on the Ratzon apartments. The authorities involved in Ratzon's case chose to interpret "slavery" as meaning "psychological slavery." Social Service workers from the Welfare Ministry announced that they were enabled by the new anti-slavery legislation to finally move against Ratzon, since the evidence allegedly showed that Ratzon's women had "no choice" but to comply with his demands.

Ratzon was found guilty in September 2014 of rape, sodomy, sex with a minor, indecent assault and fraud. He was, however, acquitted of the slavery charge (of holding one of his wives in sexual slavery against her will). He was sentenced by the Tel Aviv District Court in October 2014 to 30 years in prison (Bob 2014).

The Ambash case became the second time the charge of slavery was applied to a private family and to a putative "cult leader." Azizi (2016b) notes,

The case followed hot on the heels of a true cult leader, Goel Ratzon, who abused 30 women, making what could be a witch hunt so much easier.

While Daniel Ambash clearly had not shackled nor locked up his wives, the notion of "psychological slavery" had already been introduced to the court in the Ratzon trial. And we find the term, "mental slavery" recurring several times in the Supreme Court's verdict on Daniel Ambash.

The French psychoanalyst, Georges-Elia Sarfati, comments on this, as follows:

Daniel Ambash was convicted of "enslavement." The case appears to be the first of its kind in the world, where a state takes the United Nations conventions against slavery and forced labour—intended to address physical conditions of captivity—and extends their interpretation to include mental slavery, i. e. slaves who are free to come and go as they please but are dominated by some telepathic power of "mind control" (Sarfati 2016a).

It is important to note that "brainwashing" is a controversial theory in academic circles (Barker 1985; Melton 2000; Anthony 2001). In 1983, the task force of the American Psychological Association found the theory lacked "scientific rigour." In California the brainwashing theory was thrown out of court in the *Fishman* case in 1990 (Introvigne 2005, 77).

The Issue of Polygamy

Anthropologists and historians have found various patterns of polygamy across cultures and in ancient civilizations (Boserup 1997), but Ambash’s peculiar marital situation was interpreted by his opponents within the narrow ideological framework of anti-cultism. What is interesting about Ambash is that he is atypical among “cult leaders” who practice polygamy.

Based on my previous study of polygamy in new religious movements, I was expecting in my interviews with the Ambash wives to hear their religious rationale for plural marriage. After all, in early Mormonism, “Living in the Principle” (as polygamy was called) was imbued with a profound eschatological significance—and it still is in contemporary fundamentalist Mormon communities. Polygamy and polyamory have served an important millenarian function in many spiritual communes, such as the Love Israel Family, the Children of God, and the Oneida Community—but not for the Ambash family. A retinue of wives and concubines have bolstered the charismatic persona of a prophet, as in the case of David Koresh (1959–1993) of the Branch Davidians, Ben Ammi (1939–2014) of the African Hebrew Israelite Nation of Jerusalem or Dr. Malachi York of the United Nuwaubian Nation—but Daniel Ambash never claimed nor exhibited charismatic powers. Rather, in our interviews, the Ambash wives offered practical and emotional reasons for their unusual life choice. According to Aderet, the fourth wife:

The Ambash family is not “polygamous.” The state does not allow formal marriage, so we are not officially married... We, the women, initiated and established this special structure of family from the friendship between us and... for the work we did in book distribution together. The decision was ours and Daniel agreed, not the opposite. And since [we believe] it is permitted according to Jewish law (“Halacha”), we maintained it. For the first ten years, Daniel and Ilana did not live like this, they were a couple alone with seven children when [the second wife] Esther asked for their help. And after her, each one of us asked Daniel and Ilana if we could join them in the marriage. The judges decided that it was not possible for a woman to want to live like this. They call it a “soft paternalism.” But why, if a woman wants to be a lesbian, is it allowed, yet to share the same man it is forbidden? (Interview with Aderet in Jerusalem, September 3, 2018).

The journalist Azizi (2016a) points out how an “anti-cult” interpretation of polygamy led to Ambash’s downfall:

The district attorney of Jerusalem presented to the Court a novel theory, which states that women in a polygamous relationship lack the legal capacity to consent to such a relationship

and therefore all sexual intercourses in this framework are deemed *a posteriori* as non-consensual, and hence Mr. Ambash was accused of multiple rapes over the years.

The Legal Process

On July 4, 2011, the police launched a raid on the Ambash household, where 3 men and 6 women were arrested and 15 children taken into custody. The charge sheet included the alleged crimes of slavery, abuse of minors, false imprisonment, sexual assault, and severe violence. The wives were placed in shelters for battered women that were barricaded so as to imprison them.

On August 3, 2011 in the Jerusalem District Court, three men were indicted: Daniel Ambash, Asa Mirash (described as his “close right arm”), and a friend of the older sons, “NK,” who appears in charges 15 and 18. From October 13 to 18, 2014, Ambash and the other two men were on trial in the District Court of Jerusalem. The judge issued a scathing verdict in which Ambash was convicted on 18 of the 20 charges against him and sentenced to 26 years in jail. These included sexual offenses, abuse of minors, incest, rape, incarceration and sadistic violence (Azizi 2016a). On May 27, 2016 the Ambash wives lost their appeal in the Supreme Court, and Judge Uri Shoham denied the four wives’ request for conjugal visits (Azizi 2016a).

Comments on the Verdict

The public understanding of the Ambash verdict is summed up by a journalist, as follows:

Daniel Ambash was convicted for sending women and children to beg in the street, living as a parasite from their profits and using mind control to punish them for impure thoughts via violence, rape and humiliation (Azizi2016b).

The 18 charges for which Ambash was convicted describe an extraordinary range of rare and bizarre sexual, sadistic and masochistic acts. But many of these heinous actions are on record as being perpetrated, not by Daniel Ambash, but by a wife or teenage son/stepson. When many of these acts occurred he was not physically present. And some of these heinous acts were products of the *literary imagination* rather than real-life events. The bewildering array of sex crimes in the charge sheet might be organized into three sets.

Set One. The first set might be described as problematic sexual behavior perpetrated by certain members of the Ambash family (which had become a blended family after the second wife moved in with her four children). Some of the older boys made sexual overtures towards their younger stepsisters. A second problem emerged when one of the older Ambash sons formed a sort of secret sex club with his younger brothers. They would lock themselves in the bedroom to watch pornographic websites while pretending to do homework. When their father became aware of these problematic situations, his solution was to separate the boys from the girls and from each other by placing them in different households. Later, after the 2011 arrests, the older son was accused in the interrogation room of raping his younger brothers (an accusation he consistently denied). The third man in the arrests, “NK,” was indicted for his sexual torture of “J,” Ambash’s 14-year old stepson. According to the testimonies of witnesses who called the police, he was identified as the one who actually committed the crimes described in charges 15 and 18 while Daniel was absent. “NK” was convicted in a separate trial and had to pay indemnities to “J” whom he had injured with a broomstick, as mentioned in charge 18. However, “NK” and “H” were not tried for the crimes attributed to them in charge 18, instead, Daniel Ambash was blamed.

The fifth wife, Simcha, is on record for having abused minors. Believing that Ambash’s 14-year old stepson by his second wife had molested her six year-old daughter, she had flown into a rage. Enlisting the help of two other youths who held him down, she inflicted pain on his genitals. She also inflicted pain on three teenagers’ private parts, accusing them of covering up the molestation of her daughter (Interview with Aderet and Shiran in Jerusalem, September 1, 2018).

Simcha was arrested in the police raid of July 4, 2011. She was kept in prison for a week of relentless interrogations, until July 11. Her interrogation process is shown on Youtube, where a police interrogator is repeatedly accusing her of raping a girl (see “Daniel Ambash’s Kangaroo Trial,” in Ambash 2018).

After spending a week in prison, Simcha became a state witness for the prosecution (*kemo’ ed medina*) against her husband, Daniel. In Israel, the status of *ed medina*, modeled upon systems to protect mafia and terrorist informants, gives those witnesses who agree to collaborate with the prosecution impunity and protection, plus advantages with financial recompense in exchange for testimony.

Ambash's lawyer, Avigdor Feldman (2016), discusses Simcha's motives:

Simcha... incriminated Daniel for self-serving, ulterior motives because during the police investigation she was promised immunity from prosecution for serious acts she had committed and because of an invalid police interrogation where they threatened her that her daughter would be taken from her [if she did not agree to testify against her husband]. It goes without saying that these claims are listed in the notice of appeal as a result of the evidence, cross-examinations and argument of the undersigned at the trial court.

Six months later, on May 21, 2012, Simcha returned to the police station to complain about more abuse—this time involving a horse. She claimed that Daniel had ordered her to have sex with a stallion, so she had stripped naked and crouched under the horse for half an hour. She didn't recall the exact date, but according to her testimony it had happened within the past two years. Neither did she recall the name of the horse she had "dated." Nor had she relied on assistants for this difficult and potentially dangerous feat. Amazingly, this event is listed on the judge's crime sheet as one of the heinous acts that resulted from the ineluctable power of Ambash's mind control ("psychological enslavement"). Zvi Zer, one of Ambash's attorneys, offers a critique of the verdict, as follows:

The first error of the court was that slavery and forced labour cannot be induced by mental forces. The wild allegations of sex with animals and pagan scenarios of rape never really happened. In order to say that a victim was influenced by cosmic and telepathic powers, the court would have needed psychiatric evaluations, and there were none. It is astonishing how a plethora of horrendous stories was deemed credible without any solid evidence, forensic or psychiatric. Witnesses were coerced to fabricate fantasies (quoted in Sarfati 2016a).

Set Two. The second set of "crimes" materialized from the pages of a personal diary, seized by the police in the July 2011 raid on the Ambash home. This diary contained the fourth wife, Aderet's, sexual fantasies, centering on her ex-husband, a homosexual who had avoided the act of procreation throughout their four and a half years of marriage (Lidman and Paraszczuk 2011).

Written in a vivid literary style, as part religious confession and part psychological quest, the diary features intense erotic scenes, ardent pursuit, and experimental love-making. The author reprimands herself for her futile obsession with this man, her ex-husband, who clearly never loved nor desired her. Speaking metaphorically, using earthy language, she asks herself: "Why should I run after him and drink his piss and eat his poopoo?" (Interview with Aderet in Jerusalem, September 3, 2018).

Once this diary fell into the hands of the prosecution, Aderet’s fantasies were treated as descriptions of real-life events. On December 16, 2012, Aderet was summoned to court as a witness for the prosecution and Daniel Ambash was accused of masterminding the imaginary erotic dramas penned in her diary, where Aderet describes being repeatedly chased and ardently seduced by her gay ex-husband (“I wish!” she commented ironically in our interview).

Deeply mortified to have her diary read out in court in front of her former and current husbands, and the children who had been her pupils in the Ambash home school, Aderet protested to the court that these were her own, private fantasies. The judge chose to reject her claim. She explained the judge’s rationale, as follows:

The law says you must accept the author’s explanation of [her] diary. It says the weight of the diary will be judged according to what the witness says about what is written inside and according to the logic of the items inside the diary, and if it is connected to other evidence presented in court... But the judge said, “because Aderet writes sexual words she proves these actions really happened.” So, because I wrote words connected to sex, they decided sexual abuse must have happened. I used the word “insemination” and I wrote “to be wet.” So, the judge says, ‘because she knows the [sexual] words, this means these things really happened, although she denies it’ (Interview with Aderet in Jerusalem, September 3, 2018).

Aderet described how the diary was used to influence the witnesses:

In addition, the police interrogators broke the law when they showed my diary to those interrogated in the interrogation rooms (to the state’s witness, Simcha, and to a 14-year-old boy, to my ex, and to a 15-year-old girl). They tried to influence them to change their testimony according to my fantasies in the diary. And the District Court judges wrote in their verdict and in the protocol that I am an intelligent and wise woman, but that I was under mind control. And they decided this without any expert opinion, psychological examination or jury! (Interview with Aderet in Jerusalem, September 3, 2018).

Aderet claims that her husband Daniel was completely unaware of her diary. She wrote it as a confession to G-d (the spelling for “God” commonly used by Jews), and addresses Him directly:

I wrote a letter to G-d, saying, “I want to speak about my adultery” (meaning about how I still desired my ex, even after being in a couple with Daniel). I wrote a confession to G-d, but [the court] decided this meant I must confess everything to Daniel! “*But I was not talking to Daniel, I was praying to G-d!*” I told them (Interview with Aderet in Jerusalem, September 3, 2018).

Since the court had already decided that Daniel Ambash, as a cult leader, was worshipped as divine by his wives, Aderet's protests were swept aside. In the end, Ambash was convicted for masterminding the sexual acts described in the diary through his mysterious powers of mind control.

Set Three. The third cluster of crimes were acts of sexual sadism, bestiality, degradation or humiliation and incest, allegedly perpetrated by Daniel Ambash himself and inflicted on his wives and the children. While I do not have access to enough data to assess the individual charges, it is clear that we encounter the problem of the reliability of the witnesses.

The members of the family who became witnesses for the prosecution had been subjected to heavy-handed, repetitive police interrogations. The "Daniel Ambash" website features videos of the draconian police interrogations of the fifth wife, and of three teenagers. The police interrogator is shouting, threatening long prison sentences, and repeating the same accusations over and over again. As Sarfati notes:

The crimes of the police in beating innocent women into admitting crimes they deny, holding [the wives] in prison for a year prior to a trial which ultimately concluded in their full acquittal, forcing young children to testify against their parents literally days after being removed from their family (later retracted but not supplied as evidence)—these are the questions being raised in the Supreme Court on 28 March (Sarfati 2016a).

What was most disturbing was that there were players on the side of the prosecution who held that the use of violence and blackmail on the part of the police and the social services was justified in order to obtain confessions and witnesses for the prosecution (Sarfati 2016c).

Four of the witnesses for the prosecution later recanted their testimonies, claiming they had been threatened with losing their children or with long prison terms unless they testified against the defendant. Three of the Ambash children (ages 19, 16, and 14) and Simcha, the fifth wife (31), all claimed they had been pressured to lie and commit perjury against Ambash. They made videos and/or wrote letters to the Supreme Court to this effect ("Daniel Ambash" 2018). Azizi (2016b) writes,

[Daniel Ambash] was charged with running a cult; mind control and alleged child abuse. All the evidence was circumstantial. Was he innocent or guilty? This article is not to determine this. All the evidence shows his guilt, but to achieve this in Israel, police and the judiciary violated every possible right.

At the end of 2011, while Daniel’s two oldest sons, Nachman and Naftali Ambash, were still in jail, Daniel’s stepchildren with Esther, his second wife, made a secret plan to disappear for a year in order to avoid testifying in court against their father. Following the advice of their lawyer, the teens rented a large house with a walled garden in Yavne’el, in the northern district of Israel. They stocked their hideout with food, wine, cigarettes and exercise equipment, Internet access and films. Around ten teenagers, the children of Ilana and Esther, were hiding in this house, prepared to sit out the trial of Daniel Ambash. The plan was foiled, however, when Benjamin (14) had an argument with his older brother, Moshe, about smoking too many cigarettes. He left the house abruptly and called the police, who then raided the house on January 2, 2012. All the children subsequently appeared in court as witnesses for the prosecution (Interview with Shiran and Aderet in Jerusalem, September 3, 2018).

The most glaring flaw in the Ambash trial was the lack of hard evidence. There was no forensic evidence in the trial; no DNA reports and no psychiatric tests, either on the defendant or on his alleged victims. Why was this so? Because most of the alleged crimes in the indictment were not committed by Daniel Ambash, but by other people. Since the court determined that the perpetrators were “victims,” acting under the ineluctable influence of Ambash’s “mind control,” there was no need to bother with forensic evidence or psychological examinations.

The assumption that polygamy is a form of slavery and a by-product or symptom of the deviant pathological process of brainwashing was behind the court’s decision. The journalist Azizi (2016a) observed,

Judge Yaacov Tzaban wrote that although the Ambash wives appear to be intelligent and independent, their willingness to share one man must be a product of mental captivity. No psychiatrists testified in that case to explain when and how the phenomenon of losing the autonomy due to mind control manipulation actually can happen.

Sarfati (2016a) comments as follows:

The Jerusalem District Court found Mr. Ambash guilty of 18 counts of enslavement, rape and other counts of sexual molestation. In almost all of these counts, Daniel is not charged with actually committing the crimes, but for ordering others to do it, by the power of some kind of telepathic persuasion and mental conquest. The victims are the same women who appeared as defense witnesses and claimed that they were no victims and no rape ever took place. Bizarrely, they were held victims contrary to their own statements.

A Coalition of Interest Groups and Cultural Opponents

So far we have addressed the question of *why* Daniel Ambash was framed as a “cult leader.” Now, we will address the question, “Who were his opponents?” Stuart Wright, in *Armageddon at Waco* (1995), presents a model of “counter-movement mobilization” by networks of interest groups responding to the “cult threat.” He notes a pattern of forging coalitions among various oppositional “anti-cult” activists or groups, and the creation of alliances with state agents.

One finds in the Daniel Ambash story this classic pattern of the formation of a coalition among interest groups, ranging from hostile ex-members to concerned parents, from secular anti-cult activists allied to “cult awareness” groups, to the religiously-motivated Jewish heresiologists, from journalists to policemen, to social workers.

Wright (1995) has constructed a model of the trajectory of a cult conflict, where first a network of interest groups will form with the common goal of dealing with a “cult” problem. Through collecting and sharing complaints and rumors, they will pool their expertise to construct a stereotypical portrait of a deviant “cult leader.” Next, pressure will be applied on politicians and police chiefs to “do something.” In the pursuit of a “cult leader,” the presumption of innocence is often swept aside, resulting in scapegoating and injustice.

A timeline of events leading up to the arrest of Daniel Ambash shows how the media, the ICVC, the police and social workers collaborated in pooling their information and misinformation. Together they crafted a pop-psychological portrait of Daniel Ambash as the quintessential abusive and manipulative “cult leader.”

In 2005, the police opened a case file on the father of Simcha, Ambash’s fifth wife. Simcha went to the police on November 27 to complain that her father had attacked her in the market, then appeared the same night with her brother outside the Ambash house to throw stones, breaking the windows and threatening to burn down the house. After Simcha went to the police, filed a complaint and demanded a restraining order, her father and brother apologized for their behavior, but then turned to the Israel Centre for Victims of Cults. Simcha’s mother then spoke with the journalist Uri Blau from *Haaretz*, who had written previously exposes of other “cults” (Introvigne 2017, 30), and was preparing an article, “Daniel Ambash’s Little Beggars.” It appeared in *Haaretz* in Hebrew on June 11 and in English on

June 19, 2008 (Blau 2008). This article offered some background information on the Na Nachs, but portrayed the Ambash children as unschooled and forced to beg on the street.

Social workers from the Ministry of Welfare and Social Services began to express their concern about the Ambash children. After Uri Blau’s article was published (in Hebrew) on 11 June 2008 in *Haaretz*, Yamina Gretzkin from the Welfare Services department called the police and faxed the *Haaretz* article to them. She also alerted the police to a tip from the neighbor of the Ambash family, who had informed her that Daniel and his two wives had returned to the house in Lifta. According to the Ambash wives, Daniel was unaware that the police was looking for him.

On July 12, 2009, Ruth Matot from the Welfare Services contacted the police and gave them two addresses of the Ambash apartments to assist them in their search. On August 3, 2009, Shuli Gerson, also from the Welfare Services, wrote to the police that they were concerned about Daniel Ambash’s children and hoped that the police was trying to arrest him.

Daniel Ambash was first arrested in January 2010, but he was released after four days of house arrest in Tiberias. While he was under house arrest, a judge decided that wiretaps would be placed on the family members’ cellular phones and home telephones.

On August 14, 2008 the police opened an investigation on Daniel Ambash, including surveillance, bugging, the deployment of investigators and undercover activity. On April 28, 2009, the police requested an arrest warrant for Daniel Ambash, on suspicion of child abuse, neglect and sending children out to beg. (Aderet notes, “After months of detective work, the journalist Uri Blau did not even have one picture of an Ambash ‘beggar boy!’”).

The involvement of a Chabad “counter-cultist” (Introvigne 1999) is mentioned in Blau’s article. In February 2008, a certain “Rabbi S.” of the Jerusalem Chabad community, was approached by Ayelet Kedem, the director of the Israeli Center for the Victims of Cults, who asked him for help in investigating the “Ambash cult.” The rabbi decided to infiltrate the Ambash gatherings, and told the journalist from *Haaretz*:

One day I dressed up like a Bretslover, with a big skullcap. I saw the children, ages 12 to 14, collecting money at the crossroads at the entrance to Jerusalem, and I came to them as if I wanted to join their band (Blau 2008).

Aderet challenged Uri Blau's account, as follows,

This rabbi deliberately lies... The real story was... one day he called me and said he saw our band and would like to meet Daniel and the kids and maybe join the band. I arranged a meeting with the boys... He never saw children begging because our children did not beg. There are people in Chabad who persecute and slander us, because we are publishing what Rabbi Yisrael ordered us to publish—that the Rebbe of Chabad is not a Messiah, that is a lie! (E-mail communication with Aderet, October 2018).

On April 17, 2009, Emanuel Rosen hosted a television show called *Ulpan Shishi* based on Uri Blau's article in *Haaretz*, in which he compared the Ambash family to David Koresh's "cult."

In January 2010, Goel Ratzon was arrested (see above). Ratzon, born in 1950, was a spiritual healer and self-proclaimed Jewish messiah. He lived in a Tel Aviv commune with 39 children and 17 plural wives who bore a tattoo of his face on their arms. He was held on suspicion of enslavement, rape, and extortion and indicted with nine counts of physical and sexual abuse. Significantly, the charge of "enslavement" was eventually dropped in his case. In 2014, Ratzon was sentenced to 30 years in prison.

In May 2010, Shai Abramof, 40, a man suspected of being the "cult leader" of a group called Ithaka, was accused of encouraging a teacher to starve and beat her young son. He committed suicide by hanging himself in his prison cell at the Hadarim Jail (Lappin 2010). It is interesting to note that this "cult leader," like Daniel Ambash, did not personally perpetrate the crime of which he was accused.

In March 2011, a special report on the Ambash family was aired on the TV show *360°* on channel TV2. It had been filmed in the Ambash home in Romema (Jerusalem) by journalists Rino Tsor and Dina Avramson, who had befriended the wives, saying their report would attract many people to their upcoming *Hilulot* concert. The film footage was edited to portray the Ambash family as a sinister cult, with background horror film music. The commentator compared Ambash to the notorious Goel Ratzon, whose criminal trial was currently in the news.

Two "cult experts" were invited as guests on the show, Sharona Ben Moshe of the ICVC and one of Goel Ratzon's former wives. Scenes of the happy Ambash family at their feasts were aired, with commentary ("Everything looks almost *too*

good”; “There are rumors of terrible neglect and abuse of minors.”) The ICVC lawyer ventured his opinion, that the Ambash wives were unwitting victims of “psychological slavery.” Goel Ratzon’s former wife noted, “They live under spiritual threats,” and gave examples of the spiritual threats she personally experienced, concluding, “Daniel Ambash is Goel Ratzon’s double!” The reporters also interviewed an ultra-Orthodox *yeshiva* boy from the Romema neighborhood where the Ambash family lived, blurring his face to hide his identity. When asked, “Are they a sect of crazy people?” the boy responded, “Yes, a sect of lunatics!”

In May 2011, an 18-year old woman named Hodaya (who had been a regular guest at the Sabbaths and religious holidays of 2009 held at the Ambash family home) saw the program and emailed the ICVC, asking that her identity be kept secret. “I lived in a Jerusalem collective,” she told the ICVC director, Rachel Lichtenstein. “I’m not certain, but I think it’s a cult” (Rotem 2011).

Lichtenstein then filed a complaint about Ambash to the police on behalf of Hodaya and arranged a meeting between Hodaya, the ICVC staff and the police in a hotel in Tel Aviv. This meeting was kept unofficial and, contrary to the law, was not recorded (Interview with Aderet in Jerusalem, August 31, 2018).

Hodaya alleged that Daniel Ambash was the leader of a “cult” who had been abusing his wives and children. Later, when she appeared in court, she modified her statement:

I just want to emphasize that I did not see much of these situations, I did not even see them at all, but it was something we kept hearing at home.

Hodaya became the key prosecution witness in the trial. The media dubbed her, “the seventh wife.”

According to Shiran, the sixth wife,

Hodaya had fallen in love with Daniel and proposed to him, but he felt she was too young, and we [the wives] did not accept her. She was not special (Interview with Shiran in Jerusalem, September 1, 2018).

Hodaya later told the District Court judge, “I never loved anyone as I loved Daniel.” But, she also testified that she had “escaped” from the Ambash family because she had witnessed a “violent rape.” She was quoted by a journalist as saying:

The defendant adopted the persona of someone chosen as a great spiritual and religious leader... and claimed to have supernatural and mystical healing powers... [and] spoke about his “special gifts” and demonstrated his powers and his charisma until the woman agreed to live with him and the other women, and adopt his way of life (Rotem 2011).

When Hodaya testified in court, the lawyer for the defense failed to show up for the cross examination. He had gone to appear in court in Haifa, unexpectedly, delegating the task to his assistant who refused, saying he “didn’t know enough.” Paradoxically, a month later, the Ambash wives watched a media interview with Hodaya, filmed by Dina Avramson for the program *360°*, in which the interviewer had asked her how she felt about the Ambash family. She smiled and said, “I did not want to leave them, they are a very special, good family.” The Ambash wives claim she had made a deal with the police, in which a shoplifting charge would be dropped in return for testifying against Daniel Ambash.

On July 4, 2011, the Jerusalem Police, with the Jerusalem Welfare Department and with the guidance of the ICVC, arrested the Ambash family and imposed a seizure on their property. This included two housing units in the Romema neighborhood, a house in Givat Shaul, two caravans, a house in Tiberias, a yeshiva house and GMC cars.

The arrest was prompted by the discovery of police wiretapping, according to Aderet, the fourth wife:

Daniel’s fourteen year old stepson, called the police because, “Dad isn’t home and a friend of my older brother is hitting me...” When the police called back and understood everything was okay, they didn’t even bother to come. But a month and a half later, one of the boys saw a strange wooden box behind the closet and ripped it out [not knowing it was a police wire]. When he opened the box to see what it was, five undercover cops swarmed the house yelling that everyone is under arrest. Chief Prosecutor Lilach Ranan admitted in the District Court hearing that the arrest was not planned, but they had to arrest us since the listening devices which were supposed to help gather evidence were exposed... Three years of close surveillance had yielded nothing (Interview with Aderet in Jerusalem, August 31, 2018).

The Anti-Cult Narrative

As Holly Folk points out in her open letter to the Supreme Court,

A preconceived narrative has driven the investigation. The court documents are replete with language intended to frame the group as a religious ‘cult’ with Daniel Ambash as the mastermind (Folk et al. 2018).

The “cult” word, however, was used selectively in the Ambash case. In 2011, the State Attorney’s Office had told the court that there was no claim that the Ambash family was a “cult” or a “sect.” During the Supreme Court hearing in 2016, the judge had said that this was not a case of a “cult leader.” Nevertheless, the Ministry of Welfare and Social Services consistently referred to the Ambash family as a “cult” in the family court where the fate of the children was being decided, and also in their interviews with journalists. Also, Judge Noam Sohlberg’s speech in the August 4, 2011, press conference displays a strong “anti-cult” bias:

Publishing details of the charges against the three cult members may be a vital service to those families... trapped in cults like this one, encouraging them not to give up, but to exhaust every possible effort to escape from the sect... At least part of the horrific descriptions in the charge sheet should be brought to public notice... because it seems that this is not an isolated event... There are other people whose relatives were caught in similar sects, and who had given up hope of rescuing their near ones from the cult; or who had perhaps not done everything possible in this regard because they did not know how horrific [the cults] are (Lidman and Paraszczuk 2011).

Twenty-five days after Daniel’s arrest, the police chiefs and the social workers attended a press conference in Jerusalem. There, they assured the fifty journalists present that the Ambash Family was indeed “a sadistic cult” (Lidman 2011).

Throughout the legal process, one might discern a relentless effort to force Daniel Ambash to conform to the stereotype of the “cult leader” who abuses and brainwashes. Standard characteristics of a “cult” found in anti-cult literature—as characteristics of other NRMs, such as the “Moonies” in the 1980s (Freed 1980)—were imposed on the Ambash family in an incongruous fashion. One such example is the claim that Ambash intentionally separated his wives from their families. In fact, this was not accurate, as the Ambash home videos show, for Ambash’s in-laws were often present at their family gatherings.

Another example is the claim that Ambash imposed a regimen of ritual confession, judgment, punishment, and “sweet time” on his women and children. Aderet notes,

The children were puzzled by the way the social workers and police kept saying, “tell us about confession and sweet time”—when in fact there was no such thing in their experience (Interview with Aderet in Jerusalem, August 31, 2018).

It seems the ICVC had noted this pattern in other groups (like Goel Ratzon’s commune) and assumed it must therefore apply to the Ambash family, following the “seen one cult, seen ‘em all” principle.

This dominant anti-cult narrative led to strange anomalies in the indictment. Many of the so-called “crimes” (later itemized in the judgment) qualify as mere deviant behavior rather than as actual “crimes” (e. g. disconnecting from one’s parents, eating human excrements, or testing a woman’s “wetness” with one’s finger).

Folk points out that several “details in the indictment are [legally] irrelevant,” and argues, “it seems they were included to flesh out the portrait of the group as a [pseudo-religious] ‘cult’” (Folk et al. 2018). Because Ambash was supposedly a “cult leader” who mentally “enslaved” people, the private, intimate actions of others—undoubtedly repulsive but not actually illegal—were added to the list of “crimes” attributed to Ambash in order to concoct a stereotypical portrait of deviant leadership.

Holly Folk raises this point in her 26 July 2018 Open Letter:

Many facts included in the indictment are actually not at all crimes, and should not appear there. It is the “mind control” theory that makes them allegedly relevant to the court’s inquiry. This allows for one’s personal life to be open to state investigation. By depriving some witnesses of the right to privacy, and framing their consensual interactions as “mind control,” the court comes to define private behavior as illegal...

Daniel Ambash had an alibi for many of the crimes. He was able to provide proof that he had been somewhere else when many of these heinous actions occurred (i.e. he was at the dentist, or distributing books in another city). But the alibi of a “cult leader” was deemed irrelevant by the court, the assumption being that brainwashing, like magic, can overcome time and space (Sarfati 2016b). As Folk notes,

the precedent-setting finding that atrocities could happen by proxy has ominous repercussions for religious freedom and personal civil liberties, as well as for criminal liability (Folk et al. 2018).

The Ambash Affair—A Case of “Moral Panic”?

The Ambash affair might be analyzed in sociological perspective as an example of what sociologist Stanley Cohen (1942–2013) called “moral panic” (Cohen

1972). The concept of “moral panic” has become almost a cliché, at least within the field of new religious studies, but it might be argued that our findings in the Ambash case help reiterate its relevance.

A *moral panic* is a widespread fear, often irrational, of a person or phenomenon that is perceived to pose a threat to the social values and the interests of a community. Typically, a moral panic is instigated and perpetuated by the news media, fueled by politicians, and might result in new laws or policies that target the source of the panic.

The Ambash case gives us a vivid example of how injustice may result when an unconventional individual is seen through the lens of an anti-cult group with a consultative role with secular authorities—law enforcement, social services and media. Stanley Cohen uses the term “folk devil” to describe the person who unwittingly incites the moral panic and becomes the victim of “scapegoating.” I would argue that Daniel Ambash was chosen by the media and the ICVC to become one of Israel’s “folk devils.”

A study of the 2015 bill proposing the creation of a new law designed to control “harmful cults” might contribute to our understanding of the thought processes behind Daniel Ambash’s arrest in 2011.

Ruah-Midbar Shapiro and Warshawski (2018, 68–69) refer to the State of Israel’s proposed “unique legislation, unparalleled throughout the world,” the 2015 “Bill for the Treatment of Harmful Cults,” submitted to the Knesset on July 20, 2015. They also note that, “the bill is a direct consequence of the 2011 Ministry of Welfare report” (Ruah-Midbar Shapiro and Warshawski 2018, 69).

The draft bill defined a “harmful cult” as follows:

A group of people, incorporated or not, who congregate around a person or an idea, in a manner that enables exploitative relationships of dependency, authority, or mental distress with one or more members.

The first problem with this definition is it is too vague and inclusive. What group does *not* entail the occasional experience of exploitation or mental distress by one or more of its members? This is part of the human condition, and occurs in “extra-cultic” contexts, in hockey teams, church choirs, cooking school, even in bands of chimpanzees, according to anthropologist Jane Goodall (2010).

The definition continues:

... by the use of methods of control over thought processes and behavioral patterns, acting in an organized, systematic and ongoing fashion while committing felonies which are defined by the laws of the State of Israel as felonies, or sex offences, or egregious violence, in accordance with the 2001 Rights of Victims of Crimes Act.

The second problem here is the unsupported assumption of how this exploitation or distress comes about—by brainwashing. By ignoring the academic debate over brainwashing theory, the bill implies that brainwashing is a respectable scientific theory that can be tested and proven to be in operation, and that it can be distinguished from the more mundane processes of persuasion, social pressure, etc. (see Klin-Oron 2016)

A third problem might be discerned. When felonies are committed by members who so just happen to be affiliated with a new or unconventional religious community, the assumption is they were brainwashed, forced to commit crimes. Thus, it will be the spiritual leader, not the perpetrator, who will be blamed and sent to prison.

The bill refers to “sexual offenses or severe violence as stated by the Law of the Rights of Victims of Felony—2001.” Within this anti-cult framework, Ambash was charged with multiple counts of rape and sexual aggression. His six wives were perceived as victims of brainwashing. Thus, every private act sexual of intimacy was perceived by the court as coercive. The consensus was that, because these women were living in a plural marriage, they must have been brainwashed by a “cult leader.”

The bill continues:

This law proposal comes to order the legislation surrounding this undefined area of harmful cults, which often causes difficulty in proving the connection between the heads and leaders of organizations of this kind and the commitment of offenses. While doing so, this law proposal defines what is a harmful cult while balancing and distinguishing between legitimate cults with religious characteristics and cults characterized by relationships of control and authority that operate while committing legal felonies.

This proposal solves the problem discussed above, of how to protect charismatic rabbis while singling out “cult leaders.” It achieves this by robbing cults of their “religiousness” and focusing on the issue of “control,” deemed as illegitimate because, as is regarded as typical of fake religions, their leaders’ control depends on brainwashing.

One finds in the statement that “bad” cults are “characterized by relationships of control and authority and operate while committing legal felonies,” the problematic assumption that *felonies will result inevitably; and that every single cult is pointed unswervingly towards a career of crime.*

The bill acknowledges the difficulty in proving that brainwashing actually happened and offers an easy solution:

Due to the difficulty to prove the connection between the heads of the cult and the felonies committed in the framework of the cult, *it is proposed that holding significant posts in the cult will, in itself, be defined as a criminal offense* punishable with 10 years in prison.

Thus, rather than assigning lawyers the knotty problem of tracing the history of communications between cult leader and perpetrators (both verbal and psychic), in order to prove to the court that the latter was mentally coerced to break the law, a far easier solution is, “When in doubt, lock’em up!”

But this bill stretches even further when it states,

it is proposed that holding significant posts in the cult will, in itself, be defined as a criminal offense punishable with 10 years in prison.

This seems to imply that: once a man or woman has been *labeled* as a cult leader, and even if no felony has been committed (yet), he or she should be sent directly to prison, simply for *being thought of* (by someone) as a “cult leader.” (The obvious questions regarding the academic credentials or the personal motives of the parties behind the labeling are ignored.)

I would argue that Daniel Ambash’s fate is the consequence of the same woolly thinking and “folkways” we find in the “Harmful Cults” draft bill. The Israeli courts—both the District (Criminal) Court and the Supreme Court—functioned as if a “Harmful Cults” law had already been passed, as if its dystopian impact on Israel’s legal system was already in progress.

Today, Daniel Ambash, a 65 year-old Franco-Israeli citizen, is serving 26 years for simply *being thought of* as a “cult leader.” If this dystopian law had been passed in the Knesset, we might have seen other cases similar to his in the news. And perhaps we might still, because of the peculiar manner in which the Anti-Slavery Law was applied, so as to include the notion of “cult brainwashing” in the Ambash trial. This provides a powerful precedent for those who wish to persecute Israel’s future “cult leaders.”

The Ambash “Family” Today

The Ambash family can be watched on their pre-2011 posted videos. Daniel, his six wives and fifteen children are enjoying their holidays; feasting, swimming, acting in skits, singing and dancing in public. After 2011, the family was torn apart. The two wives who left the family are still seeking and/or receiving monetary compensation in their role as “victims.” The four loyal wives live together and celebrate the Jewish festivals and respond to Daniel’s daily phone calls. In October 2018 they filed another appeal before the Supreme Court.

The Ambash children were placed in foster homes, boarding schools or psychiatric hospitals, and forbidden to contact their parents. Odel (2003–2018), the fifteen year-old daughter of Ilana (Daniel’s first wife), was placed in a boarding school and had written letters to the judge begging to return home. After escaping several times, she was found unconscious on the street. She was badly beaten, there were signs of rape and cigarette burn marks on her body. She had ten surgical operations, but died in hospital after persistent attempts by social workers to keep her mother ignorant of her daughter’s situation and to prevent her from visiting her daughter’s bedside. Oddly, there was no police investigation of the crime or inquiry into the circumstances at the boarding school that prompted her to run away (Interview with Ilana Ambash in Jerusalem, August 30, 2018). One of the Ambash sons, Israel, was accused of rape and threatened with prison in the police interrogations, prescribed psychiatric medication and persuaded to witness against his father for the prosecution. After he wrote to the State Prosecutor’s Office retracting his testimony, he was confined to a psychiatric hospital. Daniel Ambash’s parents and sister fell ill and died while he was in prison and he was unable to visit them or attend their funerals.

In a rare display of journalistic compassion, Marianne Azizi (2016b) muses on Israel’s treatment of the Ambash family:

The innocence or guilt of Daniel Ambash is not for the reader, nor it seems is it for a judge. The real trial could be of the [Israeli] system itself, which conspired to destroy an entire family unit, based on just a few bribes, words and hearsay... The Ambash family bore the brunt of all the institutions combined: false claims, social workers seizing children and abusing them, police brutality, false imprisonment, and a judge’s gag order that interfered with their right to tell their side of the story.

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