

The Religious Challenge of Neo-Hasidic Judaism: Contextualizing the Daniel Ambash Case

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ABSTRACT: The worldview of the Na Nach and other neo-Hasidic movements is often perceived as a collective social threat by other groups in Israel. This paper explores the civil and social issues contributing to the public understanding of the Daniel Ambash case. The primary focus is on the theology that makes possible the miraculous claims of neo-Hasidic movements. I show that charisma is mediated through lineages set through theologies of embodiment and reincarnation. This is a radical challenge to conventional Judaism. The paper also addresses the contemporary situation of polygamy in Israel. Even more than theological disagreements, the practice of polygamy has potential to disrupt Israeli society, for it embroils Jews, Muslims, and secular people. Israel is responding to these issues through the Ambash prosecution.

KEYWORDS: Daniel Ambash, Embodiment, Hasidism / Neo-Hasidism, Incarnation, Rabbi Israel Ber Odesser, Jewish Messianism, Judaism, Kabbalism / Kabbalah, Na Nach, Polygamy, Reincarnation.

Introduction

Judaism is not a monolithic tradition, though many practitioners wish it were so. My goal in this paper is to outline some of the religious context for the Daniel Ambash case, and show how it reflects several issues that are controversial in Israeli society. This article is somewhat a “guide for the perplexed” for readers with no familiarity with esoteric Judaism. Kabbalah scholars will find this compilation quite basic, but I hope to explain some things about Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) Judaism that readers outside Israel generally do not know, yet which figure into how the case has been handled.

The Daniel Ambash family are “Na Nachs,” followers of a twentieth-century Rabbi, Israel Ber Odesser (1888–1994). The “Na Nachim” are one of several modern movements that have emerged from the Breslav tradition. The Breslav themselves are devoted to Rabbi Nachman (1772–1810), a great-grandson of the first Hasidic leader, the Baal Shem Tov (1698–1760: Cohen 2012). The “Na Nachim” regard Rabbi Odesser as *Moshiach*, following the lineage of Rabbi Nachman’s reincarnations.

Israel is a modern, ethnically and culturally diverse democracy with a commitment to religious freedom, and it also was founded as a homeland for Jewish people. The State of Israel is tasked with simultaneously safeguarding Judaism, secularity, and religious pluralism. These goals do not have to conflict, but sometimes they do. It is important to understand how this story connects to ideas in Hasidism that trouble conventional Judaism. In the middle section of this paper, I trace the history of some of the religious concepts behind Rabbi Odesser’s messianic claims. I do this both to interpret his beliefs, and to show how Hasidic Judaism carries a strong theological challenge to “mainstream” Judaism. This accounts for much of the opposition to the Hasidim, who are seen as radical disruptors to religious order.

Let me explain some things that will help readers understand my argument. Many scholars use the term “religious establishment,” but in the case of Israel it has special meaning. The Israeli government lets the mainstream Orthodox branch set the terms for religious laws and customs. This has important practical implications for the certification of marriages and religious conversions, and for determining who is allowed to emigrate to Israel under the Law of Return. In recent years, the religious and civil authorities have come under increasing criticism from non-religious Jews, as well as members of the Conservative and Reform movements, who reject the stringency of Orthodoxy. There is also pressure from the right, as the ultra-Orthodox call for the expansion of religious regulation of public life.

The Ambash case has unfolded in the middle of a struggle over the *doxa* for Judaism. Most of the major branches of Hasidim were founded in the 18th and 19th centuries. In recent years, a number of figures have broken with these historic groups and established devotional communities with distinctive teachings (Garb 2009, 13; Persico 2014). Many of these “new Hasidisms” are in their first generation, with leaders who are still living. Several figures have emerged from

the Breslav lineage alone (Mark 2011). They are a fruitful topic for research on new religions, but what is important here is that the Israeli government and anti-cult activists frame these groups as religious “cults,” and associate them with stereotypes, like the assumed need of charismatic leaders to dominate their followers.

Presenting new Hasidic communities in this way is meant to deflect attention from the collective challenge they present to Israeli society. Hasidic Jews conform to strict codes of religious dress, diet and social behavior, but they advocate a radically different worldview than the mainstream Orthodox, with whom they are sometimes confused. The Hasidic tradition has an openness to mystical presence in the world, in a way critics would describe as being supernaturally oriented. Elaborate theologies of embodiment stand behind Hasidic devotion to Rebbes. Further, many Hasidic and neo-Hasidic groups are incontestably millenarian, declaring we are living in the immediate runup to the appearance of *Moshiach*, and the rupture of human history with a complete transformation of the world.

Promotion of the NaNach movement, combined with a lifestyle that resembled “polygamy” meant the Ambash Family, somewhat inadvertently, triggered multiple flash points in Israeli society. Daniel Ambash is likened by critics to Goel Ratzon, leader of a small religious group who was convicted for domestic violence and sexual abuse (Sagiv 2017). Susan Palmer has outlined the framework for the intimate relations within the Ambash Family, and I agree with her assessment that the intimate acts between the adults were consensual (Palmer, this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*). Daniel Ambash did not initiate the “partnerships” with the women; rather, they proposed, adding friends to the household.

There is no evidence that Daniel Ambash ever sought to install himself as a successor to Rabbi Odesser, but that is subordinate to the biases that drove the investigation, and to its public presentation in the media. There is widespread fear of prophetic charisma in Israeli society.

The Na Nach Movement and Post-Modern Messianism

The Na Nachim exemplify something important to understand about “traditionalist” religions (Magid 2002; Persico 2014). It is a mistake to think of religious fundamentalism as guarding the past. As a social type, fundamentalist

religions are revivals of imagined historic traditions, and a great deal of innovation tends to happen. Micha Odenheimer describes the Na Nach movement as “postmodern” messianism, and as “ultra-Orthodox, anti-rabbinic, trance-dance Messianic universalistic Judaism,” observing that, “the impulse toward magic, largely taboo after the Enlightenment, no longer seems to scare” (Odenheimer 2006).

The Na Nach movement revolves around a wondrous claim made by their founder, Rabbi Odesser, who in 1922 received a miraculous communication while living and studying in a yeshiva in Tiberias (Cejka and Koran 2015, 39). On the fast of Tammuz, Rabbi Odesser’s hunger drove him to eat some bread, breaking his fast. Rabbi Odesser grew despondent after falling victim to his animal human nature in this way. He took to his bed, but later felt motivated to rise and go into the library in search of a book. A letter fluttered out of the volume he pulled, carrying a message Rabbi Odesser believed was intended specifically for him:

It was very hard for me to descend to you, my precious student, to tell you that I benefited greatly from your service. And about you it was that I said: my fire will burn until the coming of the Messiah—be strong and courageous in your service—Na Nach Nachma Nachman Me’Uman.

And with this I shall tell you a secret: Full and heaped up from line to line!

And with the strengthening of your devotions you will understand it. And the sign is: They will say you are not fasting on the 17th of Tammuz (Odenheimer 2006).

The letter ended with a mystical formula based on Rabbi Nachman’s name: “Na Nach Nachma Nachman Me Uman.” The premise of this word play is the Tetragrammaton; the conclusion, “Me Uman,” (“from Uman”), is a reference to the town in Ukraine where Rabbi Nachman was born. The Na Nachs believe this mantra opens the gates of prayer to mystical presence. For them, it represents the tenth song of the Shirot, the “Redemption Song” associated with *Moshiach*. Rabbi Odesser took the “petek” as a divine commission from Rabbi Nachman, to announce the time of *Moshiach* to the world. Rabbi Odesser came to believe his soul was joined with that of the *zaddik* (Rabbi Nachman), and by extension to Rabbi Nachman’s previous incarnations.

Neo-Hasidic religious beliefs raise questions about what is theologically legitimate or “true” in Judaism. These are active, not passive, concerns. When previously non-observant Jews become *Baal Tshuvah* (new observants), abstract

questions about Jewish identity and authenticity are brought directly into family life. Converts to ultra-Orthodoxy often attenuate relations with their families, because their parents are not observant enough for the son or daughter to eat at home or visit for Shabbat. In this light, it is not surprising that one of the accusations against Ambash was that the women were not allowed to see their families. The charge fed into public expectations, in no small part because family division is an experience with which many people are familiar. I spent considerable time with Shiran's father, and with Aderet's parents. All three were emphatic that communication with their adult children had not been blocked.

Incarnation Theology and Hasidic Legitimation

Ideas about human incarnations are controversial in Israeli society. There is a strong tendency in Judaism not to speculate about the afterlife, and teachings about reincarnation go against this protocol. For many subtypes of Judaism, reincarnation is a "heretical" idea. Reincarnation presents a sociological challenge as well. The belief is associated with Asian religions, which have become very popular among liberal Jewish populations, so that Buddhist and Hindu traditions are now seen as a major threat to continuity of Judaism.

Yet reincarnation beliefs run strongly through the Breslav tradition (Gershom 2000, 157). Shaul Magid sees Rabbi Nachman as having had an especially pronounced theory of embodiment (Magid 2014). Rabbi Nachman announced a remarkable lineage, envisioning himself as the fifth incarnation of Moses. Breslav belief holds that Rabbi Nachman's second and third incarnations were as two prominent kabbalists: Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai (?–160 CE), traditionally believed to be the author of the *Zohar*, and Rabbi Isaac Luria (1534–1572). The fourth incarnation was the Baal Shem Tov, founder of the Hasidic movement, and one of Nachman's grandfathers (Mark 2009; Dov-Ber Odes 2018; Goultshin 2018). Rabbi Odesser saw himself directly in Rabbi Nachman's lineage, claiming that his soul and Rabbi Nachman's were unified. Rabbi Odesser frequently said, "I am the mouth and spirit of Rabbi Nachman" (Gershom 2000, 157).

The processes of spiritualizing neo-Hasidic leaders like Rabbi Odesser derive from long traditions in esoteric Judaism. The iconic figure of the *zaddik*, a "righteous," saintly person whose spiritual excellence imparts supernatural powers, is recognized across most traditions of Judaism. In Hasidism, it holds

special meaning, for the status is ascribed to the Rebbes who lead Hasidic communities. Other branches of Judaism see the Hasidic devotion to Rebbes as deification of human beings, and thus a violation of the commandment against idolatry.

Furthermore, while exoteric Judaism rejects incarnation theory almost entirely, esoteric Judaism has a robust vocabulary for spiritual embodiment. Kabbalism supports the belief in *yehudim* (union), *gilgul* (reincarnation) and *ibur* (impregnation) with the idea that there is a fundamental multiplicity to the existence of human souls. The biblical Adam is believed to have encapsulated all the souls of humanity. One should not overlook the social consequences of this idea; the metaphor puts all human beings, throughout history and into today, in a sacred narrative, where their lives and futures are joined in a single body. The belief shapes Kabbalist understandings of the individual physical body too, though. This worldview allows for there to be multiple incarnations of souls, and for there to be continuities of appearances across time.

Jewish ideas about incarnation have several points of origin. There is a debate over whether transmigration (*gilgul*) represents the survival of Gnostic ideas from antiquity, or whether it is a later importation. Gershom Scholem (1897–1982) asserted that *gilgul* has been a strong aspect of Kabbalistic thought since the 13th century (Scholem 1997, 197). Shaul Magid sees Hasidism as the strongest exponent of embodiment/incarnation theories, and he raises the provocative point that Hasidic incarnation theology may draw on Christian ideas (Magid 2014).

Gilgul, or reincarnation, has a long history in Jewish thought (Neusner 2001; Winston 2018). In the ancient world, and into the middle ages, Jewish families sometimes saw newborn babies as the transmigrations of older siblings who had died (Ogren 2009). The most restrictive interpretations of *gilgul* limited it to people who die childless; they were seen as needing to return to complete their task of procreation. Historically, the belief supported Levirate marriage, with the assumption that the son of such a union would be the transmigration of the dead first husband. As retribution, *gilgul* was often regarded as a punishment incurred for major religious violations, such as for the *karet* punishments that “cut one off” from Israel (Scholem 1997, 208–10). A Kabbalist legend credits Rabbi Jacob Abulafia (1240–1291) with restoring to human form people who had been

turned into oxen for trimming their beards in their past lives as human beings, which was a violation of religious law (Ben-Amos 2011, 124–25).

Reincarnation is not promoted in the dominant strains of modern Judaism, and there are many reasons why incarnation beliefs are controversial in Israeli society. There is a strong tendency in Judaism not to speculate about the afterlife, and teachings about reincarnation go against this protocol. Further, reincarnation validates a supernatural worldview, which is rejected in many Jewish sub-cultures. As mentioned earlier, reincarnation presents a sociological challenge as well, as it is associated with Eastern religions that are seen as dangerous competitors of Judaism among young Israelis.

In Kabbalism, an idea that is related to *gilgul* is “*iburim*,” or “impregnation,” whereby the soul of a spiritual person can temporarily inhabit a living person. *Ibur* is understood as occurring so that a soul can accomplish a task. The Kabbalist Rabbi Hayyim Vital (1542–1620) claimed that the daughter of Rabbi Raphael Anav (16th–17th century) was “impregnated” with the soul of Rabbi Jacob Piso (16th century) as a call for repentance (Faienstein 1999, 20–3). Using the metaphor of procreation, *ibur* explains how a soul can divide, multiply, and inhabit several bodies. *Ibur* solves the problem of who at the time of the resurrection will possess a soul that has inhabited several bodies (Scholem 1997, 216).

In some teachings, *ibur* is seen as an occurrence for the righteous, and *gilgul* for atonement, but these ideas are often intertwined (Scholem 1997, 221–22). Kabbalism also proposes the possibility of *yihudim* (“unification”)—the union of a person’s living soul with the soul of a dead sage or *zaddik* (Faienstein 1999, 26). This may be the category of embodiment closest to how Rabbi Odesser understood himself, in relation to Rabbi Nachman’s legacy. Yet Rabbi Odesser never explained how the Rebbe’s arrived in him and became identified with his persona. I asked the Ambash Family for clarification, and even Daniel Ambash stated it was a mystery.

Reincarnation is discussed in many Kabbalistic texts, including the *Zohar* and Lurianic Kabbalah. In the 16th century, Rabbi Hayyim Vital consolidated Jewish teaching on reincarnation in two books: *The Gates of Holiness* (Sha’arei Qedushah), and *The Gate of Reincarnations* (Sha’ar ha-Gilgulim) (Ogren 2009). Rabbi Vital was also one of the strongest exemplars of the Kabbalist pattern of

transmigratory lineages. Rabbi Vital self-identified with a remarkable number of figures, including Cain, David and Saul in the Bible, as well as Rabbi Judah Ha-Nasi (?–217 CE) and the sages Rabbi Hillel (110 BCE–10 CE) and Rabbi Akiva (1st–2nd century CE). The full list of Rabbi Vital’s personae runs about three pages of text (Faienstein 1999, 15, 88, 164–66). Rabbi Vital saw himself enduring several transmigrations for Halakhic transgressions (Faienstein 1999, 25). He also claimed to be the “Messiah of Joseph,” which merits some explanation. According to the view of some Kabbalists, there are potentially two Messiahs: of Joseph and of David. The “Messiah of Joseph” is understood to be a figure who reincarnates in every generation (Faienstein 1999, 14, 292). A version of this idea has been carried forward by the Na Nachim, and the “Messiah of Joseph” was cited to me by the Ambash women in a conversation about the potential for ancient religious figures to reincarnate in the present day.

Reincarnation theology reinforces and legitimates the status of *zaddikim* and other religious leaders. Across the Kabbalist world, one finds figures creating past-life lineages for themselves, and identifying the transmigrations of their associates. Moses was probably the most frequently mentioned past life (Ogren 2009). Rabbi Isaac Luria regarded the North African Kabbalist Rabbi Abraham Barukhin (1035–1094) as the prophet Jeremiah (Weinstein 2016, 88), and Rabbi Isaac Safrin of Komarno (1806–1874) claimed to be a transmigration of Rabbi Isaac Luria (Faienstein 1999). These ideas work together to support the divinization of modern messianic leaders, too. New Hasidisms tend to endow their leaders with sacred genealogies. One example is Eliezer Berland (of whom Ambash was always very critical), leader of the Shuvu Banim Hasidim, who is recognized as an *iburim* by his followers, one of whom told a reporter for *Ha’Aretz* that “God can be incarnated in a human being, in the form of the *tzadik*” (Rabinowitz 2018).

The Tenth Shiro: Prophetic Ultimacy

Jewish messianism has an entirely different foundation from Christian eschatology, but it is possible to see polygenetic similarities in their logical structures. Jewish apocalypticism does not follow the Darbyite system of dispensations, but does have a way of dividing human history into sacred ages. One set of beliefs that is common draws on the Ten Shiro—songs in the Bible

praising God, which popular Jewish eschatology links to eras of human history. Under this logic, it is the “Tenth Song” that is most important, for it is associated with *Moshiach*.

In this way, the Tenth Shirot represents the final era of humanity before the revitalized world of the messiah. Hasidic Judaism does not envision an end-time destruction. Rather, its vision of the transformation of the earth and human life follows the optimistic pattern of “progressive millennialism” described by Catherine Wessinger, in which cosmic transformation happens non-catastrophically (Wessinger 1997). Yet, this distinction should not blur the sharp apocalyptic edge to their worldview.

The text for the “Redemption Song” is frequently seen as chapters 9 and 26 from the book of Isaiah (“Ten Shirot and Ten Sefirot” 2018). In contrast, the followers of Rabbi Odesser see the Na Nach formula itself as the Tenth Song. This symbolic alignment reinforces the millennial worldview of the Na Nachim. It was in the context of a conversation about the Tenth Shirot that I learned that the Ambash women believe that the current living population of Jewish people are reincarnations of the Israelites from Exodus. They referenced a prediction made by the Kabbalist Rabbi Isaac Luria, that the last generation before *Moshiach* would be the reincarnations of people from the time of Exodus.

Polygamy in Israeli Society

In general, Hasidic and neo-Hasidic groups do not promote polygamy, much less practice it. But plural marriage is found in many Israeli subcultures, and it is one of the issues to which the government is responding through the Ambash case.

Polygamy has a long history in Judaism, and it poses questions about how the past will define the future directions of both Israeli society and the Jewish religion (Kalifon 2015). The issue has the potential for tension among all of Israel’s sub-populations. Jewish polygamy dates to the time of the Bible: the Patriarch Jacob, King David and King Solomon all had multiple wives. Some of the Hebrew sages, including Rabbi Akiva, had two wives. Polygamy is not outlawed in the Talmud; rather, the text presents circumstances where it might be favorable, such as for Levirate marriage.

Ashkenazic Jews stopped practicing polygamy about 1000 years ago, when the head of the Diaspora for the Ashkenazim, Rabbi Gershom ben Judah (960-1040), called a rabbinical council that outlawed polygamy in Europe. It is not clear why the rule was made in the first place, but a common interpretation is that it was intended to deflect attention from Jewish communities at a time of anti-Semitic pogroms (Adelman 1994). The ban blocked much of the practice of polygamy in Europe, but it did not end its discussion. Through several centuries, Talmudic scholars debated potential exceptions to the ban, such as a rule that 100 rabbis could certify a second marriage if it could be established that the first wife was mentally impaired and thereby unable to consent to a divorce or support herself as a single woman (Brody 2014; Hoffman 2014). Later, Rabbis argued that the “ban” only applied in France, and that it should have ended in 1240, corresponding to the 5th millennium in the Jewish Calendar. The ban did not apply to Jewish populations in other areas, and polygamy continued to be practiced by Yemenite Jews and other Middle Eastern populations into the twentieth century. The 16th century Sephardic migration reintroduced the practice of polygamy into Italy, which resulted in at least a small number of legal cases (Adelman 1994).

At the time of the formation of the Israeli state, polygamy was debated, mostly as a question of how to accommodate Ashkenazic, Sephardic, and Mizrahi customs (Klorman 2014). Jewish tradition holds that there should be only one set of practices and customs in a locality. Some Ashkenazic scholars believed the Talmudic directive, to abide by the practice of the local community where one moves, implied that Ashkenazic customs should defer to those of the Sephardim.

The current status of polygamy was set in 1977, with the passage of a revision to the penal code (Penal Law 5737–1977, in Elon 2008). In modern Israel, it is a legal violation to formalize a polygamous relationship in any way, and one need not have a marriage contract or civil ceremony to be found guilty of breaking the law. Sharing a cup of wine, for example, can suffice as a ritual consecration, with a penalty of five years in prison.

Many scholars follow the lead of Aharon Gaimani, who in 2006 stated that polygamy does not really exist in modern Israel, but there is reason to question the consensus (Gaimani 2006; Klorman 2014). In the past few years, the Israeli government has learned that rates of polygamy among the Bedouins and Israeli Arabs are higher than previously reported, and in fact are higher than in several

Muslim-majority countries (Harkov 2017; Bob 2018; *Times of Israel* 2018). In 2015, there was an outcry when two Muslim candidates who were polygamous were elected to the Knesset (Kalifon 2015). In the summers of 2017 and 2018, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu promised to work to end the practice.

Although some Sephardim continue to practice polygamy, Israeli law forces them to do so covertly. As a result, some Sephardic ultra-Orthodox rabbis call for its legalization. The most outspoken Sephardic leader on this topic was Chief Rabbi Ovadia Yosef (1920–2013), who died in 2013. Since then, his followers have started an organization, Habayit Hayehudi Hashalem (The Complete Jewish Home), whose goal is to legalize second marriages for Jewish men whose first marriages have not produced children (Mandel 2011; Kalifon 2015). In recent years, Israel has seen small numbers of Jews, in addition to Muslims, endorsing the practice (Smith 2011).

Only a few Orthodox rabbis in Israel publicly call for the legal recognition of polygamy. The supporters do not agree on the details, or even on the reason the practice should be restored. A scholar who writes under a pseudonym has posted many of the justifications on a website, “The Orthodox Jewish Pro Polygamy Page” (L’Yakoov 2018).

In Israel, I interviewed two rabbis who officiate polygamous marriages. They had very different understandings, and in fact disagreed directly with each other on whether a husband needed the permission of his first wife to take another (one individual said this was mandatory, and the other said the husband need not consult his wife at all). Yet both rabbis saw second marriages as a way to solve problems when divorce was unadvised or impossible: if, for example, a first wife was infertile, or if she developed a medical condition, such as dementia, that mandated her continued care. Under such circumstances, they see divorcing the first wife as in fact less compassionate than the husband’s continuing to support her without necessarily co-habiting. Furthermore, both rabbis raised the conflict between European and Middle Eastern customs, and voiced the preference that Israel follow Sephardic practices. For one rabbi, however, polygamy is most important for its potential to help birthrates in Israel. Noting that many modern Israeli women are childless, he attributed this to their inability to find adequate husbands.

Polygamy is popularly associated with “cults,” and it is unfortunate that the Ambash Family’s lifestyle was used to create this caricature. The Ambash women

themselves prefer to describe their relationships with Daniel as intimate “partnerships,” but not marriages. The Ambash Family might more accurately be described as “polyamorous,” though it is understandable why the Ambash women would reject this terminology. It would be a Halakhic violation to participate in such a lifestyle, though polyamory is not illegal under Israeli law. Framing the Ambash Family’s lifestyle as polygamous helped “other” them as a “dangerous cult,” and it also served to render the practice of polygamy as socially deviant, by associating it with the Ambash Family.

Anti-Cult Activism: A Misguided Search for Order

The Ambash case needs to be understood against a backdrop where both the religious and legal authorities in Israel have maintained a campaign against Jewish messianism. The “anti-cult” movements in both Israel and America have religious factions, with the main difference being that in the U.S. the main proponents are conservative Protestants. In Israel, the Israeli Center for Victims of Cults, a group including secular members but believed by some to be aligned with the Orthodox, had an undisputed role in pushing the investigation of Daniel Ambash and his family.

A journalist of *Ha’aretz* claimed the Chabad movement participated in the investigation of their household (Blau 2008), but there is not strong support for this claim. I think the longstanding bitterness between the Breslav and Lubavitch may have engendered suspicions, though it is not hard to imagine a historic rivalry growing even stronger amid present-day messianic competition.

One reason relations with Chabad may have grown especially antagonistic is that each group harbors a messianic contingent (Heilman and Friedman, 2012; Heilman 2017, 210–56). Shortly before he died in 1994, the last Chabad Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902–1994), proclaimed the imminent return of the messiah. In Israel and New York City, Chabad Lubavich launched prominent public relations campaigns, buying extensive advertising on buses and the NYC subway system. Rabbi Schneerson died without a male heir, and today Chabad is distinct among Hasidim by being led by a board of trustees. Many Lubavich Hasidim believe their Rebbe is still spiritually present in the world. This belief has split the Lubavich movement, with the “Meshichist” faction regarding

Rabbi Schneerson as *Moshiach* himself (Mahler 2003). Like the Na Nachim, they anticipate an imminent world renewal.

The growing visibility of the Meshichist faction may have contributed to authorities's growing commitment to root out contemporary messianic Jewish movements. In 2014, legislation was proposed in the Israeli Knesset that would restrict the activities of new and minority religions, by labeling them dangerous "cults." The Bill for the Treatment of Hurtful Cults, 5774–2014, would establish a list or registry of "dangerous groups." It also would change the Guardianship and Capacity Law, 5722–1962, and allow for adult guardianship of individuals who had joined registered groups. Masua Sagiv describes the understanding of a "hurtful cult" in the proposed legislation as "a group of individuals, whether incorporated or unincorporated, who unite around a person or an idea, in a way that sustains use of authority or mental distress of one or more of the members, by using methods of mind and behavior control, and acts in an organized, systemic and ongoing pattern, while committing offenses" (Sagiv 2017). As recently as 2016 the legislation was moving ahead in the Knesset, but it has been slowed for now.

Daniel Ambash did not style himself a guru or religious leader. His actual role was as a promoter of Rabbi Odesser's messianism. That the family's concerts and outreach were favoring the growth of the Na Nach movement appears to have made them a social threat. While in Israel, I interviewed Daniel by phone three times, and in one conversation asked him how he came to take up the mission of spreading news of the *petek*. He explained that Rabbi Odesser had asked him to do so, shortly before he died. When I asked why he, Daniel, was chosen for this duty, Daniel responded that Rabbi Odesser "had told lots of people."

In 2010, the Ambash Family gave a concert outside the Old City in Jerusalem. The performance was filmed, and a complete video can be viewed on YouTube (Ambash Productions 2010). The audience spaces were divided by gender, and there is only minimal footage of the women's section. From the scenes shot of the audience on the men's side, however, it is clear the show was well attended, with hundreds of young men crowded into the dance space. At one point, the Ambash performers throw handfuls of the distinctive NaNach *kippot* into the crowd. Dozens of young men scrambled to grab the white knitted caps with pompoms on top, that bore the NaNach formula in Hebrew writing.

Should one read a switch of allegiance into their replacing their traditional caps with a concert souvenir? Perhaps not; Modern Orthodox young people can be very creative, even playful in the designs they choose. In the Old City, one can find *kippot* with parody logos of popular commercial brands like Coca Cola; caps with a green marijuana leaf in the center are also offered for sale. The concert attendees may not have “converted” to the NaNachim, but their enthusiasm in the moment is captured on tape. The Ambash Family showed me the video with pride, pointing to what they had achieved before the raid upended their lives. The concert was undeniably impressive, but it was not hard for me to envision how a production of its size, with such a positive audience response, would be seen as a social threat by anyone who felt threatened by the NaNach message.

It was this video I thought of when Daniel’s lawyer, Jacob Arditi Landman, told me he was convinced the Ambash investigation had been done to “decapitate” the NaNach movement. Israel has not grappled with the meaning of these aspiring messiahs, and their enthusiastic followers. Mind control is an easy, attractive hypothesis, because it seems to simplify the problems raised by Jewish heterodoxy. Daniel Ambash has been used, literally, as a scapegoat. The authorities seem to believe that his incarceration will remove all traces of the movement he represents from public life. This explains some of the court’s behavior, such as forbidding members of the family from proselytizing the Na Nach message. Yet, silencing Daniel Ambash and his family will not stop the swell of traditionalist Judaism in Israeli society. Will the government attempt to end them all? That would be a radical treatment to the body politic, one likely to destroy the free society the authorities purport to save.

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