Religious press in Israel:
Habad movement papers and the Israeli-Arab peace process

Orly Tsarfaty

The ultra orthodox-Jewish society in Israel is a subculture preserving a traditional Jewish way of life founded on the Bible and on the Jewish Law Books. This is the group that was opposed to the changes, which occurred in the Jewish communities in Europe under the influence of the modernization, enlightenment, and secularization processes during the 18th and 19th centuries. The ascent of the Zionist movement in the second half of the 19th century as a movement seeking a political solution for the Jewish people in the Land of Israel, contributed to it’s crystallization and definition as a separate orthodox community. The Zionist movement’s concept of human redemption was an essential contradiction to the religious belief of miraculous messianic redemption. This controversy on a theological and ideological level between the orthodox and the secular-Zionist Jews lies at the foundation of the orthodox negation of the very existence of the State of Israel and of the secular democratic culture prevailing in Israel (Friedman 1991; Ravitzky 1993).

The ultra orthodox society in Israel consists of four main groups: ‘the orthodox community’, the Latvian and the Hassidim – three groups maintaining the “Ashkenazi” way of life (that of European Jews). The fourth group formed in Israel in the Eighties - the ‘oriental’/”Sefardi”d group (Jews who immigrated from Islamic countries) is mainly identified with the ‘Sha”ss’ movement. Friedman 1991

This is a very divided society, especially the Hassidic group which has dozens of courts of different sizes. Each court with its own religious leader – The Admor (in Hebrew: Our Master, Teacher & Rabbi). The Admor is the highest authority in the Hassidic court. All the Hassidim are fully committed to him. There are struggles about prestige and control among all its factions, as well as about the issue of how to relate to the State of Israel. This society is however united in its struggle against the secular society and its cultural hegemony. The
separation between this group and secular society is both cultural and geographical. The religious ultra orthodox negates the modern way of life and everything it stands for. They negate the use of mass media, in particular, the visual media because of the biblical prohibition. Everything in the media that represents modernism or secularism is rejected by them.

An analysis of the communication patterns in this community shows the preservation of traditional communication patterns resulting from the traditional community structure. The interpersonal communication networks within the various factions are an important communication channel. The use of the newspaper is recognized by all factions of orthodox society as a legitimate medium, both because it is deemed to preserve the relationship with the written word in Judaism (Friedman 1987, Heilman 1983) and for historical reasons (Kouts 1999).

Due to its separatism and the negation of the press. The orthodox society is not part of the secular media establishment. There are often complaints about the negative manner in which they are presented in the media. Starting in the Eighties, following the processes of political, cultural and social change that occurred in Israeli society, the political strength of the orthodox community was enhanced, causing an intensification of the tension and friction with the secular public. At the same time, following modifications in the communications structure in Israel, a religious-ideological and commercial press was developing as an alternative to the national secular press. (Cohen , Levi 1990, Tsarfaty 1998)

The Hassidic Habad movement, with its center in Brooklyn, USA, is one of the several dozen courts of the Hassidic movement. Habad means in Hebrew – Wisdom, Intellect and knowledge. Though it is not the biggest court, it is the most active and the best known to Jews in the world and in Israel. This is the only Hassidic court that operates in order to return secular Jews to their religion. Their Hassidic doctrine grants a central place to teaching the rules of Chassidism to all Jews, based on the belief that such activity will accelerate the messianic revelation. For this purpose, they make use of all the media,
including visual media. This means that Habad’s activities are an exception and are subject to controversy in the Jewish Orthodox world.

In the second half of the Eighties, Habad began to publish her two own weekly papers. The first, “Sichat Hashavoua” (The weekly conversation) – follows the format of the synagogue publications (Cohen, J., 2000) that are distributed among the religious and secular public and appears in 200,000 copies. The paper is distributed to subscribers and in synagogues. On the first page appears an editorial, which mostly makes the connection between actual subjects and religion. The two inner pages deal with religious matters, while the fourth page mostly tells stories of Jews who “found” their Jewish roots. This paper “looking out worlds”, it also addresses the secular public. This is mainly apparent because of the simplicity of its language.

The second, “Kfar Habad” (Habad’s village) – a weekly paper for subscribers among Habad Chassidim in Israel and abroad, is distributed in 40,000 copies. This is a weekly paper, which pays attention to a high level of design. This weekly has between 30 to 50 pages. On the first page always appears the rubric “Editor’s words” and on the second page the rubric “The word of the Realm” – presenting the Admor’s picture and words from his sermon. The number of rubrics and the number of authors change from time to time according to the requirements. Part of the rubrics deal with religious subjects, others with matters of actuality. The paper is intended mainly for Habad Hassidim, a fact that becomes apparent in the level of language and the subject matters.

At the beginning of the Nineties, Habad Chassidim were undergoing a peak of messianic expectation (Ravitzky, 1993, pp.249-276). The papers were extensively broaching the subject and the preparations necessary for the Messiah’s Revelation.

One of the most important commandments of a religious Jew is setting the Land of Israel. Settlement in the Whole Land of Israel is a pre-condition to the coming of the Messiah. Because of their messianic activity Habad took care to define
themselves as an apolitical movement for the rapprochement of all Jews to their religion.

With the beginning of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, which started at the Madrid Conference (1991) and in particular after the signature of the first Oslo Agreement (1993), Habad began a public political struggle, unprecedented for them and for the whole orthodox community in Israel.
The borders of the State of Israel

The Six Days War (1967) was an important turning point in the Israeli public’s attitude on the issue of the State borders. Israel’s military victory acquired a special signification, especially when seen on the background of the existential fear still surviving in the public before the war. As the years passed, the political differences of opinion on the issue of the Territories - between the Left supporting a policy of “territories in exchange for peace” and the Right’s idea of “the Whole Land of Israel” (“Eretz Israel Ha-Shlema”) - deepened.

For Habad as well as for other groups in Israeli society the results of the war were an intentional divine miracle and were given a messianic meaning (Rubinstein, 1997).

In 1967, the Habad’s Admor Menachem Mendel Shneorson, soon started placing advertisement in the Israeli press with statements opposed to the return of the territories conquered during the war, because those were God’s gift to his people before the Redemption.³

At the beginning of the peace process, the Habad papers were widely dealing with the right exegesis of the war results and with the importance of maintaining the extended borders of the Land of Israel as a condition to the messianic revelation soon to come.

The use of the term “liberated territories” and not “occupied territories” expresses an attitude according to which those territories belong to the Jewish people.

From their historical point of view, the peace process is nothing but God testing the Jewish people’s strength against the non-Jews in guarding the Land, and is shown to be a surrender leading to destruction.

The public struggle against the peace process

In 1992, a political change occurred in Israel, putting in place a Government of the Left with Yitzhak Rabin at its head. Immediately after forming his government, Rabin declared his readiness to open peace negotiations with the Palestinians.
Rabin’s government was facing decisions that had been avoided by all governments of the Right and the Left since 1967. It was clear to the political Right supporting the idea of “Eretz Israel Ha-Shlema” that any peace agreement would include territorial compromises. Since the opposition was quite powerless in Parliament, the Right organized extra parliamentary demonstrations against the government. The “Likud” party joined the settlers and the orthodox with the objective of forming a popular opposition to the government and the peace process.

The Habad Movement, which until that time was known as an apolitical Hassidic movement, joined the struggle and even leads its own campaign. The decision to actively join the struggle was taken under the pressure of the young leadership in Israel and was approved by the Admor, who was strongly opposed to a government of the Left.

The Habad papers played an important role in changing Habad’s public agenda – by moving the focus of public activity from the subject of the Messiah that until then had been it’s exclusive issue, to the struggle for the borders of the Land of Israel.

An examination of the manner of the way that this struggle is expressed in the Habad press (especially in “Kfar Habad”) shows that changes were made to the paper’s rubrics. The number of rubrics dealing with messianic subjects was reduced while the number of rubrics dealing with news increased. The religious subjects were replaced by an essentially political discourse.

The arguments appearing in the news rubrics are of two kinds: the first - religious arguments – granting religious legitimacy to the control over the territories. The second - political and security arguments, reacting to events as they occur.

Two stages can be distinguished in the development of Habad’s position in the press regarding the peace process, which express the growing extremism within Habad:
**Stage One: the ideological controversy with the Left**

Starting in 1990 and until June 1992, the Admor increasingly intervened in the political system in Israel, attempting to prevent a government of the Left and by openly supporting the government of the Right.

The central argument on which the ideological controversy was founded was that the Left’s readiness to compromise is what caused terror, bloodshed and attacks against Jews, because it stirs the Arabs’ expectations of surrender of claims.

The papers presented an ideological position opposed to that of the Left, though trying to keep up a framework for the discussion in which the Left is seen as a legitimate camp, even though they are “erring brothers”.

The Gulf War and the open support the Palestinians granted Saddam Hussein were seen as a confirmation of Habad’s just way. At the time of the Madrid Conference, the papers presented the Arab opinion as aiming at the destruction of the State of Israel and the genocide of the Jewish people.

Habad who had given a Messianic interpretation to international events (the end of the USSR, the immigration of a million Jews to Israel from USSR, the international coalition during the Gulf war), does not consider the historical process of the Madrid Conference to be part of the divine plan towards Redemption.

**Stage Two: the active struggle (June 1992 – 1995)**

Immediately following the victory of the Left at the June 1992 elections and the formation of the Rabin government, an evident change appeared in the papers. It can be said that the political upheaval turned the papers’ official line upside down.

From that stage on, the line of a “united Israel” was abandoned and the papers started a hard and virulent struggle which included a deligitimization of the Left and of the Israeli government. The papers served as a stage not only for voicing Habad’s position but also the position of the leadership of the Right. The Left
that opposes settlements in the West bank & Gaza strip was shown as being anti-Zionistic and anti the Jewish peoples interests.
The signature of the first Oslo Agreement (13.9.93) was the turning point in the character of the struggle. From that stage on the ideological controversy was accompanied by the strong need for active protest. 
Habad used all the medias and all advertising means for the purpose of their ideological-religious struggle.
The papers played an important role in creating the feeling of compulsion in the public protest while legitimizing direct political intervention.

**The struggle against the Oslo agreement**

The Oslo negotiations having been held in complete secrecy, took the Israeli public by surprise when they were made public. The ratification of the agreement was a breakthrough in the peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, insofar as it was a psychological breakthrough in the public opinion in Israel. For the first time an Israeli government decided to give territories to the Palestinians and adopted the formula “territories in exchange for peace”. The meaning of this decision was the recognition – though somewhat reserved - of the Palestinians right to auto determination and sovereignty.

In the polarized political reality in Israel, the success of the Left means the political failure of the Right. The decision on the political level was not accompanied by a landslide agreement on the public level. 
From Habad's point of view, those surrenders are presented as a historical mistake. The consciousness of the centrality of the Land of Israel during the period of Diaspora and the aspiration to a return to it form the essence of the relation between the Jewish people and the Land of Israel, and the Israeli government has breached this basic generations old concept. This is a historical mistake and a sin against the Jewish people at all times, actually endangering the security of the Jewish people in Israel.

Starting in August 93, when the Oslo Agreement was made public, the editor of “Kfar Habad” calls his readers to an uncompromising public struggle to stop the
Religious press in Israel

Orly Tsarfaty

Habad adopted the strategy of fanning the flame of public protest. The Habad press widely supported and reported the protest activities and demonstrations organized by the Right.

The “Peace for the people and the Land of Israel” campaign

In August of 93, the Habad leadership decided to establish a special staff for organizing and financing protest activities. The press editors are prominent members of this staff.

When this decision was published, the “Kfar Habad” titles, as expected, supported the move, declaring: “Habad launched the ‘Peace for the people and the Land of Israel’ campaign”. The “Now Happening” rubric extensively reported about the beginning struggle against retreat. In a detailed interview, the movement’s speaker (who is the editor of the paper “Sichat Hashavua”) explains the state of emergency and the Habad Hassidim’s obligation to join the public struggle. From then on the papers are extensively dealing with the organization of the protest, reporting and expressing support for the protest activities of other groups of the Right, as well as negating the legitimacy of the Rabin government. Habad conceive themselves as an elitist religious group on a religious mission and representing true Judaism.

Two years later, the second Oslo Agreement was signed. It was decided that the West Bank cities would be turned over to Palestinian control while the settlers’ evacuation would occur at the time of the final settlement within five years.

The public in Israel was ambivalent in its attitude to the agreement, which was adopted by the Knesset by a small majority (61:59), based also on the Arab Knesset members. The reaction to the agreement in the circles of the Right was very hard. Stormy demonstrations were held in Jerusalem and other places. The excitement
increased so much that sometimes loss of control was feared. The agreement was called “treacherous” and the settlers accused the government of abandoning them. The division and the controversy between the Right and the Left often lead to open discussions about the possible imminence of a civil war in Israel.

The Habad press extensively wrote about the organizational moves of the Council of Judea, Samaria and Gaza (representing the settlers). In fact, the papers offered the whole leadership of the Right a free stage to voice their ideas – even when it was clear that those ideas are against the law or bordering on provocation.

The Council’s campaign “Land of Israel First” was also widely published in the various rubrics of “Kfar Habad”. At this stage, as well as in the earlier ones, the picture of reality as presented by the press to its readers is that the opposition represents the majority opinion, whereas the Left is representative of a small group only.

**Criticism of the Government of the Left**

The negation of the Left by Habad has its origins in the historical opposition to the Zionist Movement and is the expression of the differences between the religious outlook and the secular - Zionist outlook. The Left stands for everything the religious conception negates.

In the political reality in Israel, the Left is considered by the orthodox as a group of people who exchanged Jewish values for universal ones. Moreover, the Left is aiming at achieving a secular democratic way of life and at separating religion from state.

Until the 1992 elections, the criticism of the Left had been mainly concentrating on issues concerning Jewish values. The Admor’s strong support of the government of the Right shows his reservations about the Left’s statements in favor of territorial compromise.

After the elections there were almost no interview or article in the papers’ news rubrics that did not serve as stage for opposing the government. As the peace process progresses, the criticism against the government becomes stronger,
even explicitly accusing of treason, of being dangerous and endangering the Jewish people.

The criticism of government is expressed both by the editors and the interviewees of the Right.

Generally speaking it can be said that the criticism became more extreme in style and contents. There are expressions that do not sound strange to “secular ears”, but which, in the social religious-communication codes of the orthodox public, have a different meaning, such as the use of the term “Evil government”, speaking of Rabin’s actions as acts of “surrender” and of “treason”, or accusing the government of being responsible for the death of Jews in terror attacks.

Habad’s messianic tension and the progress of the peace process brought up for discussion the question of the validity of the laws of the democratic state as opposed to the “Halacha”\(^5\) laws. Democracy is presented as leading to anarchy, whereas a religious government founded on the Bible will lead to order.

Habad negates the legitimate right of a democratic regime to make decisions, especially on subjects with influence on the Jewish people as a whole. “A government leading processes that infringe on basic principles of the Bible (meaning the peace process, O.Ts.) is illegal. In any case democracy is not above higher values - the existence of a Jewish State”\(^6\). And in another article: “If Bible abiding Jews have to chose between the law of the state and the law of the Bible, they will have no doubt – the Bible is above everything else”\(^7\).

The opposition to Rabin’s government started immediately upon its formation.

Articles were published that all had in common the objection to the election results and the presentation of the government as one elected by misleading the public.

The Rabin government was described as pro-Palestinian and dangerous for the Jewish people. The terminology used when speaking of the peace process creates a reality of catastrophe and destruction, with descriptions loaded with pictures from Jewish history and especially from the Holocaust. From every aspect of the political controversy, the acts of government are shown to be anti-Jewish actions resulting from an estrangement from the values of Judaism.
As the peace process progresses, some of the interviewees claim that Rabin and the government will have in future to stand trial for their acts. The meaning of this claim is that the government actions are illegal. The government is considered as acting criminally not only from the judicial point of view. The Jewish Orthodox public gives those claims a meaning according to the "Halacha" that is not understood by the secular reader. For instance: “...The people will have reckonings with whoever helps the government of the Left” and in another article: “If things were as they should be, people like Shimon Peres and Yitzhak Rabin would be brought to trial for their hideous crime...”

The terror attacks against Jews in Israel and abroad, which accompanied the peace process, served a portentous argument against the process in the Habad press. The government is accused of direct responsibility for the murder of Jews. For Habad, the terror attacks prove that the Arabs’ aim is to destroy the Jews.

At first, the criticism against Rabin focuses on the changes, which occurred between the Six Days War, when he was Chief of Staff and the time he was elected Prime Minister. Later, together with the delegitimization process of the government, there is a deligitimization process of Rabin. In an interview with Ariel Sharon, the latter saps from Rabin’s authority in security matters and adds: “this is the cooperation between two people, Peres and Rabin, who in any other country would have been brought to trial”. Sharon reacts to the fear of an attack against Rabin as if it were a provocation from the Left in the Bolshevistic style.

In September 1993 an article was published in “Sichat Hashavoua” under the title “What will be the verdict of thus who help the enemy on ideological grounds?” Afterwards the reader is given an explanation as to who is a traitor and the punishment for traitors is death. Despite the fact that Rabin is not named, the article clearly leads the reader to this conclusion.

Rabin as traitor is the theme of several interviews in which Rabin is compared with Marshall Pétain. This equation leads to a conclusion regarding Rabin’s fate – he will be tried for collaborating with the enemy and will get the death penalty.
On November 4, 1995, after speaking at a rally “for peace and against violence” in Tel Aviv, Yitzhak Rabin was shot to death and died shortly afterwards. The fact that the murderer was a religious Jew oriented the criticism of the secular press and of the secular public against the religious public. Part of the public controversy in the press dealt with the events leading to the murder, such as the demonstration of the Right in Jerusalem, where pictures of Rabin in S.S. uniform were shown and calls of “Rabin traitor” were heard during Netanyahu’s speech.

The article published a week after the murder expresses shock about the fact that a Jew murdered another Jew. The act is singled out as the crime of an individual, underscoring the fact that the Right bears not responsibility for the crime. We can say that the line followed by the paper is to condemn the act while criticizing the Left and the secular press.

Rabin’s murder caused a stop, if only a short-lived one, of the protests and provocations against the government. The reactions to the murder, as expressed in the press do not classify Habad among the extremist groups who openly expressed their joy with regard to his murder. However, the papers do not deal with their own contribution to the extremist tendency. The encompassing message is one that rejects all responsibility.

Conclusions
Habad’s opposition to a peace process that would entail any territorial compromise, as expressed in their papers, opened the public discussion of the issues at the core of the controversy within Israeli society. The struggle for the borders of the State of Israel did not remain in the realm of political discussions, but took on a religious and cultural character. Habad contributed to a strong identification between religious/secular identity and ideology, by equating the “correct” Jewish identity with the opposition to giving up parts of the Land of Israel, or in other words, equating the level of religiousness with the opposition to the peace process. From their point of view the territorial compromise was considered a threat to the opportunity of messianic revelation. Therefore, the
progress made by the peace process sharpened the struggle and exposed the roots of the controversy about the character of government and culture of the Jewish society in the State of Israel. The papers contain a critic of the democratic regime in Israel and the proposal of a religious alternative. This alternative is based essentially on a state ruled by religious law and a messianic regime. A critic of the institutions of government and law, of the state of secular society and its inferior culture, of the secular media and especially of the Jewish Left. The Jewish Left is perceived as being estranged from its Jewish roots, and is therefore prepared to give away parts of the Land of Israel to the enemy. The study has also been looking into the delegitimization process of the Left and of Yitzhak Rabin as an individual and as Prime Minister in the Habad press. The unavoidable inference being that part of the statements border on incitement and most certainly contributed to the use of violence language which in the end led to Rabin’s murder by a religious Jew.

The analysis of all Habad papers during the years 1990 – 1995 shows that the papers played a decisive part in the intensive public preoccupation of Habad members in Israel with the opposition to the peace process. The fact that those papers have the absolute exclusivity among most Chassidim who are not exposed to any other media gives them an influence in setting the public agenda, in structuring their readers’ reality and shaping their opinions. The papers gave the stage exclusively to representatives of the political Right, even to the Israeli extreme Right, thereby contributing to the transformation of Habad into a movement identified with the political Right. The papers played an important part in the politicization process of members of Habad, a process during which their main preoccupation moved from messianic issues to opposition to the peace process. The written press served both for propaganda and for strengthening the solidarity within the community.

The development of an alternative religious press contributed to strengthen the religious orthodox society identity. The religious public and the secular public are now actually moving in separate spheres of thought. The written press serves as arena for the struggle about how to shape the cultural image of Israeli society and the political regime of the State of Israel. Since the meeting points
between the communities are so few, the religious papers serve as a kind of seismograph for testing the change processes and understanding the ways of the orthodox community.
Notes

1 The term Sefardi means Spanish Jew. The source of the name is the Jewish community in Spain before the Jews deportation of the Jews in 1492.

2 The distribution data is according to the Habad spokesman.

3 Habad, who historical opposed the idea of the establishment of the state of Israel, started after the 1967 war to support the policy of “The Whole Land of Israel” for messianic reasons.

4 Kfar Habad No. 586

5 Jewish Low book

6 Sichat Hashavoua No. 364

7 Sichat Hashavoua No. 420

8 Kfar Habad No. 621.

9 Kfar Habad No. 586

10 Kfar Habad No. 587

11 Sichat Hashavoua No. 348

12 French General who was blamed for collaboration with the Germans during World War II.
References


