

GALINA ZELENINA

Torah against the Virus, Rabbis against the Government: The Ultra-Orthodox and the Pandemic

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22394/2311-3448-2021-8-2-34-51>

Translated by Anna Amramina

Galina Zelenina — Russian State University for the Humanities; Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration (Moscow, Russia). galinazelenina@gmail.com

The paper discusses several of the most remarkable responses to the Covid-19 pandemic and its social distancing measures coming from several, mostly ultra-Orthodox, Jewish communities in Israel, the United States, and Russia. It examines major elements of the crisis discourse, i.e., the hermeneutics of the causes and meanings of the pandemic; the affirmation of group borders and hierarchies as a result of the search for culprits; the relations between the religious community and the state; as well as the possible transformations of social behavior and ritual practices resulting from the crisis.

Keywords: Judaism, Ultra-Orthodox Judaism, Hasidism, Modern Orthodox Judaism, apotropaic practices, messianism, COVID-19 pandemic.

IF one imagines Judaism as a physical body threatened by COVID-19 and forced to comply with its related measures, this body would display an impressive array of reactions representing various types and trends. Some rabbis blame and condemn outsiders (e.g., China, Italy, and the LGBT community), while others disparage their own groups. In some communities, cantors record holiday liturgies for parishioners to watch at home, while in others parishioners gather in prayer at parking lots. Some Orthodox leaders criticized the state (Jewish or otherwise) and its social distancing requirements and restrictions on large gatherings for discriminating against them as ethnic or practicing Jews, while others shut down

their synagogues before the state mandated it. Some figures of authority on the Halakhic religious law permitted practitioners to join in prayer from a balcony, while others discussed whether it was acceptable to adjust the nose wire on a mask on the Sabbath or whether a food blessing should be read if one has lost the sense of taste and smell.

This paper considers the responses of several, mostly ultra-Orthodox, Jewish communities and rabbis in Israel, the United States, and Russia to the COVID-19 pandemic, and on a second level, the reactions to those responses from other rabbis, who either rebuke or justify the immediate reactions of their fellow believers. I do not, however, claim to create a comprehensive picture of Judaism's response to the coronavirus. Furthermore, this study is bound by two unavoidable limitations: methodologically, quarantine made fieldwork impossible, and thus this research is based solely on open online sources, and chronologically, it only considers the first wave of the pandemic in the spring of 2020. The available sources prescribe a broad focus, preventing the paper from exploring the undercurrents of the private everyday life of communities during these months but enabling it to collect the most significant public opinions, behavioral strategies, and ritual practices that attracted media attention. Open sources also provide an opportunity to look for patterns, to discern both what is new and what corroborates existing observations in regard to ultra-Orthodox behaviors "in the face of death" (itself long considered an important anthropological test case that can "shed new light on worldview systems and values accepted by society" (Gurevich 1992, 1), which in this case is further enriched by state regulations and the interpretation of them.

Responses of religious groups to the pandemic can be grouped into three categories: the hermeneutics of the causes and meanings of the pandemic, the search for deliverance (alternatives to the secular scientific approaches of lockdowns and vaccines), and, lastly, the regulation of change, or the assertion that religious practices remain unaltered. The crisis presents an opportunity to reaffirm existing hierarchies, boundaries, authority, and phobias. Pronouncements and actions of Jewish religious figures shed light on "semiotic technologies" (see Keane 2003, 419-20; Panchenko and Khonineva 2019) typical of their communities — perspectives on which signs are natural and which are not, and on the intentions of the agents behind unnatural signs; on hermeneutic strategies — ways of interpreting those signs; on the reactions of the authorities, which since the Enlightenment, the

Jewish community has described as a “state within a state”¹ ; and on the structure of a religiosity that resists the replacement of social/comunal practices with individual ones.

The “Coronavirus pandemic” equals “lack of modesty”: the hermeneutics of causes and meanings

Rabbis of several denominations provided a list of causes for the pandemic that have nothing to do with the conventional viewpoint. The semiotic ideology common to a variety of religious mindsets implies that all significant events explained as coincidental or as links in cause-and-effect chains are, indeed, not random and do not conform to the laws of nature, but are initiated by a supernal, or nonhuman, agent in response to humans’ actions in order to communicate to them, i.e., they function as rewards, retributions, or lessons.

The statements of various religious leaders on the causes of the coronavirus answer one question: Why did God send the coronavirus? Matityahu Glazerson, the Israeli Rabbi and prolific scholar of Torah codes — textual patterns that make the scripture the source of numerous predictions for modernity — declared that breaches of the Kashrut laws were the cause of the pandemic, first and foremost in China, where all manner of unclean animals are consumed (*The Jerusalem Post* 2020).

The influential Sephardic Rabbi Meir Mazuz, the dean of the Kisse Rahamim yeshiva in Bnei Brak, an Israeli city with a predominantly ultra-Orthodox population, saw pride parades as the cause of the virus, calling the pandemic revenge from the One who created nature for acts in violation of it. In support of this insight he erroneously argued that the disease was not spreading in Arab countries where all open displays of gay life are prohibited (*The Times of Israel* 2020a; Joffre 2020).

Wall posters and pamphlets with mostly critical, protest content, the so-called pasquils, or *pashkavilim*² in Hebrew, were displayed abundantly in the streets of ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods in Jerusalem and other cities, acting as an important information channel in communities that shun modern public and social media. The pasquils

1. The expression used to describe the Huguenots after the Edict of Nantes was widely used in the eighteenth century in debates on the assimilation of Jews in order to not grant them civil rights. See Kats 2007.
2. On this subcultural phenomenon, see the documentary by L. and S. Chaplin *Yoel, Israel, and Pashkavils* (2006).

condemned lack of modesty among Orthodox women, who purchased wigs made with non-Jewish hair and/or excessively attractive ones, proclaiming it the cause of the pandemic. For example, in the Mea Shearim neighborhood of Jerusalem the equality of numerical values (*gematrias*) of the expressions “coronavirus pandemic” and “lack of modesty” were used as evidence of this theory. Another cause vividly demonstrated on the same walls was revilement, a grave offence in Orthodox Judaism that is strongly reprehended in the Talmud (Babylonian Talmud, Pesachim 113b, 118a; Sotah 42a; Shabbat 33a-b): “*Lo medabrim [lashon hara] lo nidbakim*” (“no revilement, no sickness”) (Sokol 2020a; Sokol 2020b). This conclusion was based on Biblical precedent, drawing on the occasion when God’s wrath at Mariam, who rebuked Moses, took the form of striking her with leprosy (Bemidbar, or Numbers, 12). The doyen of the Litvaks and an influential figure in the Israeli ultra-Orthodox community, Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky, shares this position (Greenberg 2020).

Other Israeli and North American ultra-Orthodox rabbis offered several more interpretations of the pandemic as divine retribution. They linked it to Internet usage and the instigation of conflict in the online space (understood as the baseless hatred that destroyed the Second Temple); moral relativism and postmodernism; and noted that it targeted certain nations, China for atheism, Iran for antisemitism, Italy, the embodiment of Catholicism, for its centuries-long hostility toward Jews, and Western civilization in general (Rav Wachtfogel 2020; Slifkin 2020a; Lamber Adler 2020; Muchnik 2020). Naturally, the suggested causes reflect the traditional agenda; they establish boundaries between the inner circle and outsiders, demonize the ostracized, and point the finger at things that ultra-Orthodox groups have long seen as threats — female beauty, fashion, sexual liberty, the West, technological innovations, and secular media. The crisis inspired no new thinking; it only revealed existing ethical imperatives and phobias.

Such interpretations gave rise to criticism from liberals. Speaking from the position of Jewish religious rationalism and citing its creator, the highly influential medieval scholar Moses Maimonides, representatives of Modern Orthodox Judaism tried to blend the concept of divine retribution, quintessential to religious hermeneutics of tragic events, and an analytical cause. In their opinion, the explanation lies in punishable sin but not in unrelated ones, such as immodesty or revilement. Rather, sins directly related to the disaster cause it. Maimonides blamed the destruction of the Second Temple on Judea’s military

unpreparedness; in this sense, high COVID-19 mortality rates should be attributed to society's medical unpreparedness, which is considered a sin rather than a consequence of economic conditions. This can be framed in the same way as building a fence on a balcony — in this case, the fence around people's health was not constructed properly (Slifkin 2020b).

Another hermeneutic line of thought was a search for meaning in the pandemic, i.e. what was God's goal for inflicting it on humanity in general and Jews specifically, and what lessons were people expected to learn from it? As paradoxical as it may sound, this approach searches for a positive meaning of the tragedy.

The abstracted meanings correspond to the ethos and the agenda of the denomination, to which the rabbis who declare them belong, and range in content and scale from moderate practical innovation to messianism. On the one hand, the modern liberal American Orthodox community revels in the transition to the online space where parishioners' activity is much higher (Salkin 2020). On the other hand, conservative rabbis welcome the deliverance from the inner Egypt — the dissolution of familiar life with its secular temptations and routines, which is essentially everything outside of family and religious practices (EveryJew 2020). Rabbi Shlomo Aviner, the dean of the At-eret Yerushalayim yeshiva, expressed satisfaction with the paralysis of the entire goy (i.e., secular) culture: the academe, the Ministry of Education, the entertainment industry, and international travel. The popular neo-Kabbalist, Michael Laitman, also called the virus a "good deed," more than that, "a greater good, mercy," which allows people to slow down and stop "running, running, running," and enables the entire world to stand still, preventing it from sliding into a world war and environmental disaster. In his words: "I am absolutely sure [...] if it were not for the virus [...] we would start a war in the near future" (Laitman 2020).

Many ultra-Orthodox rabbis resort to the traditional hermeneutic strategy of perceiving signs of an upcoming messianic deliverance in any substantial crisis (the so-called birthing pains of the Messiah) and claim that "the pandemic, like wars and even the Holocaust, 'was getting us closer to the redemption'" (Halbfinger 2020; Winner 2020). They perceive the mechanism that brings about the messianic age differently. Some envision it as depriving people of pastimes and vacations (the Bratislava Rabbi Lazer Brody) or bringing the collapse of world economies (the Tzfat Rabbi Alon Anava), both of which rid society of its material dependences; others, the purging of two states

which are responsible for theft and the violation of human rights and which contribute to global instability (rabbi Mendel Kessin); others, the awakening of diaspora Jews who previously had no intention of returning to the promised land until they discovered that Israel's gates were closed to them due to the lockdown (Nahman Kahana, Rabbi in Jerusalem's Old City); and still others, the actualization of the categories of purity and impurity during two-week quarantines of the infected and the contagious (rabbi Yaakov Mizrahi). These categories of purity and impurity are vital during temple services, and through their actualization, the pandemic prepares Jews for the construction of the Third Temple, an indispensable attribute of the messianic era (Mizrahi 2020). Some rabbis and kabbalists interpret the pandemic in the messianic sense, defining it as an all-pervading crisis when the Almighty alters the world order, and humans are to demonstrate repentance and faith (*tshuva* and *emuna*) and thus embark on the path to salvation and messianic deliverance (Lambert Adler 2020).

Another hermeneutic mechanism of reconciling with the pandemic, or taming it in a way, corresponds to the tradition of seeing reflections of past events in contemporary ones. Mostly, this consists of searching for precedents or parallels in events of sanctified biblical history (see Yerushalmi 2004, 35-58). Matityahu Glazerson claims that his coding method reveals that the pandemic was predicted in the Torah (*The Jerusalem Post* 2020). Predictions of the pandemic were also found in medieval commentaries to *Sefer Yetzirah* (Book of Creation) and other sources (Schnytzer 2020). Precedents were uncovered — primarily, in Miriam's and Job's leprosy — from which a moral lesson is derived: people should pray for healing, as Moses did for Miriam (Numbers 12:13) (Kipnes 2020) and should not ask why it happened, but rather what can be done. Lessons were also derived from historical precedents, such as the 1830s cholera epidemic that struck Eastern European Jews, whose rabbis prescribed obeying the authorities, praying, and burning incense. In such situations, strength is required in place of fear. Of utmost importance is confidence in the Almighty and the coming of the messiah, and faith that society is in the messianic age (Winner 2020). The same semiotic ideology allows for other ways of rooting the new event in Jewish history, ones that are not pragmatic and free of moral lessons and messianic signs. Thus, the transfer of religious practices to the online space is compared to the radical changes of the Yavneh period (70-132 CE). When the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the Second Temple, the surviving institutions moved from Jerusalem to Yavneh, and Temple Judaism turned into a synagogal

faith, in which the Torah scroll assumed the role of the sacred object, and the synagogue became the place of worship (Salkin 2020).

Helicopters, amulets, and other apotropaic practices

Rabbis of various denominations agree, understandably, that during the pandemic religion should not give way to medicine in saving lives. On the contrary, many pronouncements and actions stem from the conviction that lockdowns alone cannot defeat the virus. The most conventional religious strategy in this case is praying for the health of all the diseased, of all Jews who contracted the virus, and of specific individuals, especially sick rabbis.³ As expected, online forums of communities and synagogues are replete with prayer requests, video recordings of prayers, and schedules of online prayer groups that produce considerable effect. Thus, the Chief Chabad-Lubavitch Hasidic Rabbi of Russia, Berel Lazar, who the Federation of Jewish Communities elected, and for whom the concept of miracle is paramount (i.e. God's presence in people's lives reveals itself through a variety of positive events that are not necessarily extraordinary but are conceptualized as miracles),⁴ notes that joint prayer brought "great miracles" and that many people recovered (Moskovskii evreiskii obshchinyi tsentr 2020).

Some circles and communities resorted to rather extraordinary but hardly novel rescue strategies fraught with accusations of doing magic. These included circling Israeli territory in a helicopter while citing kabbalistic apotropaic formulations and performing wedding ceremonies for socially disadvantaged couples, usually orphans, at a cemetery (*shvartse khasene*, or "black wedding"), a tradition that dates back to the cholera years of the nineteenth century, in which those beyond the grave are called upon to intercede with the Almighty on behalf of the congregation (Gorskie.ru 2020; Kafri 2020). Customary apotropaic objects, such as amulets with images of revered religious leaders, also circulated. Promising protection from the virus, representatives of the ultra-Orthodox Shas (*Shomrei Torah Sepharadim*, "Sephardi Torah guardians") party distributed amulets with a portrait of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, the creator and long-time leader of the party

3. See the newsfeed at Matzav.com where prayer requests for rabbis' health previously appeared once every two months but beginning in March 2020 have been posted every few days.
4. On faith in miracles, see Biale, et al. 2020, 280, 69-70; Idel 1995; Miller 2014, 1011-3; Dein 2011, 41-4.

and a highly influential figure for Sephardic and Eastern (*Mizrahi*) Israeli Jews (*The Times of Israel* 2020b).

Another traditionally approved method of protection from disaster is charity, which rabbinical texts claim deters God's wrath: "Three things cancel the decree, and they are prayer, charity, and repentance" (Bereshit Rabbah, 44:12). Calls for donations and requests to extend generosity went out in many communities. The most resonant was the story of a promise made by Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky, "the prince of Torah" (Sar ha-Torah) a *posek*, an influential Halakha scholar with the authority to issue Halakhic decrees, and the leader of the Lithuanian, or Litvak, non-Hasidic ultra-Orthodox community in Israel. According to Kanievsky, a sizable donation (three thousand shekels, i.e., approximately nine hundred dollars) to the town fund (*kupat ha'ir*) would guarantee immunity (Magid, J. 2020; Slifkin 2020c; *The Yeshiva World* 2020a). Non-Orthodox forum audiences met Kanievsky's suggestion with disbelief. Moreover, they ridiculed and rebuked the call, interpreting it as profit hoarding and comparing it to the Catholic Church selling indulgences. The Kanievsky family promptly responded to the critique. Rabbi Chaim's son, Rabbi Yitzhak Shaul Kanievsky, called his father's doubters heretics and maskils ("enlighteners," apostates to ultra-Orthodox Judaism) and offered an elaborate providential explanation for COVID-19 cases in Bnei Brak. If God wills someone to contract the disease, the same providence would stop him or her from donating. The person would either never learn of it or would forget to contribute. Despite Rabbi Chaim's guaranty, a donor could also fall ill because of sins punishable by the disease. The bonus from donating consists in administering two punishments — the disease itself and the loss of blessing for the donation — at the same time, thus paying for multiple sins that deserve two separate penances (*Kikar HaShabbat* 2020). Obviously, these convoluted accountancy calculations provoked another wave of sarcasm in response (Slifkin 2020c).

Learning cannot cease: Haredi defiance and its motivations

Differences between the generic, or secular, and religious narratives of the pandemic, which include interpretations of its causes and strategies for protection, culminated in controversies when ultra-Orthodox communities defied lockdowns and social distancing regulations by refusing to close schools and synagogues or cancel large gatherings for weddings and funerals.

This disobedience is a logical extension of the above-mentioned strategies of conceptualizing the situation. If the causes and meanings of the pandemic and deliverance from it lie outside those approved by modern medicine and secular society, then widely accepted methods of curbing it are irrelevant for ultra-Orthodox groups. Moreover, an ongoing conflict of authority exists between “the laws of the kingdom,” (the law of the extraneous anti-Jewish state, which Israel is to ultra-Orthodox Jews), whose prescriptions are nonetheless mandatory, and the laws of the Torah pronounced by religious leaders. This conflict reveals beliefs about the adaptive capability of religious practices. The currently relevant question is whether the epidemiological situation qualifies as “saving a life” (*pikuach nefesh*), which would render any negative Torah rule inapplicable, arises against a backdrop of reticence among religious denominations to modify norms for following rules in response to the non-catastrophic needs of the time. Some groups adapt in the hope of maintaining a following for Judaism, while others toughen the rules to preserve Judaism for the congregation.

In this case not only very adaptive Reformist and Conservative Jews but a variety of Orthodox and even ultra-Orthodox groups — American “Modern Orthodox,” Israeli Sephardi, Chabad-Lubavitch Hasidim — closed synagogues (Goldman 2020), transferred religious festivities online (for example, they conducted *Megillat Esther* readings over the phone and Passover Seder on Zoom) (Sharon 2020), and cancelled optional rituals not required by Halakha, for example, kissing the *mezuzah*, the Torah scroll, and prayer books (Boroda 2020). In public addresses about the pandemic, the leaders of the Russian Chabad-Lubavitch Hasidism added to practical Halakhic recommendation representative details on the country or the community. For example, they mentioned that the Moscow Jewish Community Center is the largest in Europe and that the epidemiological status of Russia was better than in other countries (Boroda 2020; Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia 2020). They also underscored that contrary to some rebellious Israeli and American ultra-Orthodox groups, the Russian rabbinate shut down the synagogues early (Masis 2020). Thus, the Russian Chabad obeyed the state authorities (following the established Talmudic principle “the law of the land is the law”) (Babylonian Talmud, Nedarim 28a; Gittin 10b; Bava Kamma 113a; Bava Batra 54b and 55a,) and expressly supported the state by sharing its narrative of superiority over other countries and Jewish communities. The same cannot be said of Litvak Jews. The Israeli Lithuanian ultra-Orthodox community represented by Rabbi Kanievsky defied a decree is-

sued by the Ministry of Health. In mid-March of 2020, in response to his grandson's question Kanievsky said: "God forbid [the shutdown of cheders and yeshivas]." In his opinion, stopping Torah studies would bring more danger to Jews than the virus as the Torah protects them (Katz 2020a; Katz 2020b; Sokol 2020a).⁵ Interestingly, while male educational and liturgical practices continued without change, females could follow Ministry of Health recommendations. This decision demonstrates the secondary role assigned to women in ultra-Orthodox communities — they do not participate in the economy of salvation through studying the Torah and prayer. They are not expected to perform either of these crucial religious practices; they are to attend to men's practicing rather than to be plenipotential followers of Judaism. Other influential statements during the pandemic also reflect this view of men as practitioners of Halakhic law and religion and of women as a subsidiary element and a potential threat to the virtue of practitioners and even the entire community (demonstrated by women's lack of modesty being named as a cause of the pandemic).

Only after two weeks of ill-advised delay when cheders and yeshivas continued to function and caseloads in Bnei Brak rose to second place in the country behind Jerusalem (Rabinowitz 2020a), a much larger city with a considerable ultra-Orthodox population,⁶ did Kanievsky shut down schools and synagogues, issuing a preventive reprimand to violators (Rabinowitz 2020b). However, the story of ultra-Orthodox defiance did not end there. Large gatherings continued in Bnei Brak, for example, at funerals (Peleg, et al. 2020). Similar occurrences were registered in other Haredi neighborhoods, including in the US. In April 2020, in ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods in Brooklyn police broke up numerous crowded funerals, prompting a stern appeal from the mayor to the Jewish community that was immediately criticized as antisemitic (Berger and Chapman 2020; *The Yeshiva World* 2020b; Hanau 2020). In his words "the time for warnings has passed" (de Blasio 2020).

5. Kanievsky's civil disobedience and Haredi defiance gave rise to numerous discussions in the press. See: Zaken 2020; Sokol 2020c; Halbfinger 2020.
6. Jerusalem and Bnei Brak are at the top of the list of Israeli cities with high percentages of ultra-Orthodox population. This analysis is based on the numbers of voters for the Yahadut Ha Torah (United Torah Judaism) party. According to the statistical report on the ultra-Orthodox community in Israel (Israel Democracy Institute, 2019), votes for Yahadut Ha Torah are an indicator of the numbers of Haredi in the country and their distribution among cities. Jerusalem and Bnei Brak respectively bring 24% and 19% of votes to the party, leading by far (four ultra-Orthodox cities of Beit Shemesh, Modiin Illit, Beitar Illit, and Elad combined yield 20%). See Malach and Cahaner 2019.

Reactions from the secular and non-Orthodox public ranged from sarcasm to rage. Some assumed mockingly that Rabbi Kanievsky failed to understand his grandson's question because he, like most members of the ultra-Orthodox community, did not own a smartphone or television, was not exposed to news media, and had access only to community newspapers and had thus not heard anything about the pandemic. Concerns over the irresponsible behavior of Haredi communities endangering the rest of the population (for example, having depleted the resources of Bnei Brak hospitals, Haredi occupied hospital beds in neighboring towns) led to passionate disapproval of ultra-Orthodox Jews' persistence (e.g. "insane fanaticism," "utter irresponsibility,") and calls for police or military intervention to enforce lockdowns in Haredi neighborhoods (Pfeffer 2020).

Non-ultra-Orthodox Jewish groups and authors also responded apologetically. They refused to lay blame exclusively on the Haredi, calling it biased and pointing out that most Orthodox Jews were innocent or, at least, that responsibility should be shared between them and secular Israeli citizens, many of whom — beachgoers and promenade joggers — also violated lockdown regulations (Iton TV 2020). To explain high rates of infection among the Haredi, other advocates looked to their unchangeable way of life, which includes large families and small residences, attributed violations of lockdown rules exclusively to a small number of marginals, radicals, and zealots, and claimed that mainstream ultra-Orthodox groups promptly discouraged large gatherings (citing, for example, Rabbi Gershon Edelstein, the dean of the Ponevezh yeshiva and the second-in-command in the Litvak community after Rabbi Kanievsky) (Shafran 2020).

Academic authors have called for an end to the social stigmatization of ultra-Orthodox groups and have shifted the conversation from criticizing ultra-Orthodox rigorism to exposing the inconsistency of liberal observant Jews and secular traditionalist groups (Myers 2020). The scholar of Hasidism and commentator, Shaul Magid, deflects accusations of ignorance. In his words: "They are certainly aware of avoiding danger. The question is more about authority — who gets to determine danger and who gets to dictate what activities need to cease in light of it" (Magid, Sh. 2020). Moreover, Magid perceives the behavior of the ultra-Orthodox as an expression of an authentic Jewish approach, according to which the yeshiva and the study of the Torah protect from disaster. The Haredi truly believe in this and in divine presence in general while Modern Orthodox Jews cite the prayers but place their faith not in what they cite but in science. In addition, they

are inconsistent because they rely on the scientific worldview in important matters while resorting to apotropaic practices and amulets in “just in case” and “it cannot hurt” situations (for example, checking the *mezuzah*, placing notes in the Wailing Wall, treasuring dollar bills from the Lubavitch Rebbe and water bottles from Rabbi Kaduri, etc.) Magid uses Bruce Lincoln’s opposition between religious maximalism and minimalism as discourses present in all religions (Lincoln 2009). He condones Haredi religious maximalism as being consistent, redirects the discussion toward secularization and liberal denominations, and exposes religious maximalism among secular and Modern Orthodox Jewry as hypocritical (Magid, Sh. 2020).

This same discussion of the justification and consistency of ultra-Orthodox versus Modern Orthodox positions on the pandemic takes place among liberal rabbis. The Modern Orthodox rabbi, Yitz Greenberg, criticizes the behavior of the Haredi from the point of view of the Jewish tradition rather than medicine or common sense. In his words “tradition includes the idea of a growing minimization of the miraculous and divine intervention over the course of history”; thus, it would be a mistake to expect this intervention and refuse to take precaution. Greenberg considers the position of the Modern Orthodox, who have as much faith as the Haredi but are forced to solve new dilemmas and adapt to new ages instead of ignoring them as ultra-Orthodox communities do, to be more appropriate, challenging, and dignified in this situation (Blau 2020).

Several publications criticize ultra-Orthodox behavior from the viewpoint of religious rationalism with references to its Jewish founder, Maimonides. The message “Torah protects,” to which the Haredi appealed, is interpreted realistically rather than literally. The Torah grants wisdom to scholars who exert a positive influence on society, thus giving them protection (Slifkin 2020b). Maimonides taught to follow the commandments because the Torah prescribes it, not to initiate divine intervention (Slifkin 2020d), for the latter becomes an attempt to manipulate God’s will and perform divine magic. Consequently, ultra-Orthodox leaders are accused of “false theology” — using magical thinking rebuked in the Bible — and of making erroneous decisions comparable to the fatal choice made by those who resented Zionism in the wake of the Holocaust and thus decided not to relocate to Palestine, which led to the obliteration of entire communities (Greenberg 2020).

Interestingly, opposition toward ultra-Orthodox authorities, most of all Kanievsky, ranging from marginal nonconformity to full-fledged

opposition, came from the ultra-Orthodox medium itself, demonstrating the diversity of opinions (if not open controversy) in its midst. Members of the Bnei Brak Lithuanian Jewish community announced in the media that they were sensible people, not the “idiots” depicted in the Israeli press. They asserted that not everyone blindly follows leaders, who are currently behaving like murderers, and that many parents refuse to send their children to cheders. Less influential rabbis in the community also spoke against unquestioning obedience to the gedolim (“the great,” or “leaders of the generation”). One in particular, “published an article in Kikar-Shabbat on a false prophet, whom he did not name, but everyone knows who was implied [Kanievsky]” (Heil’brun 2020) Thus, leaders’ declarations of power in opposition to the state often undermine their authority within the community, or their zealous position exposes underlying controversies, dissatisfaction with the leadership’s policies, or, most likely, the leaders’ authoritarianism, the autocratic system of power in the community.

Ultra-Orthodox groups’ quarantine violations take on several contexts other than faith in being saved by the Torah and a perception of the current events, their causes, meanings, and ways of negotiating them that differ from the mainstream. One of these contexts is power: the competition between community and religion as sources of authority and knowledge and the state and medicine as secular sources. When Kanievsky sanctioned the continued functioning of educational institutions, his grandson was actually saying to him that the state wanted to close them. Of course, Kanievsky reacted with “halila,” “God forbid.” The state is seen as an enemy, and it is no coincidence that the Haredi speakers use the word “gezerah” (“evil decree,” “persecution decree,” or simply “persecution”). In some cases, historical associations evoked in connection to this are explicitly articulated. A representative of the radical Lithuanian ultra-Orthodox organization “Hapeleg HaYerushalmi” (The Jerusalem Faction) stated: “They will not close our synagogues — this is how Jewish persecution in Russia began!” (Rabinowitz 2020c)

Kanievsky literally claims the priority of the Torah over state law and, respectively, his own authority over state rulings: “Toran told us to protect ourselves long before they [the government] made up their laws” (Sharon 2020). Opposing the government manifested itself through actions as well. Stones were thrown at representatives of the state who came to inform residents about the virus and quarantine measures. Haredi behavior that was unacceptable during a lock-

down was an act of defiance against state power, a recent move in a long history of opposing or ignoring it.

Another context is social. Kanievsky exclusively issued statements about ignoring lockdown measures, yet a wide range of Haredi communities — Lithuanian and Hasidic Jews in Israel and in the US — refused to self-isolate and social distance, including those who do not follow Rabbi Kanievsky's decisions. Why? The explanation rests in the ultra-Orthodox way of life, which at its core is socialization within the community. The Haredi are above all a social category even if they are often perceived as a religious one, and it is difficult to determine the common dogmatic and ritual specifics among all Haredi Jews. Practices of socialization — minyans, Shabbat and feast meals at a rabbi's house, and other practices — distinguish them.

Established religion plays a crucial role for ultra-Orthodox Jews. The pinnacle of Haredi identity is belonging to the community, loyalty to leaders, and resentment toward the outside world. The main framework of their life comprises collective religious practices and uniformity in everything from attire to voting. The cornerstones of the ultra-Orthodox society are such institutions as the synagogue, the yeshiva, and the *kollel*, and in Hasidism these include the *shtibl* (informal prayer space and gathering separate from the synagogue) and the *tisch* (Pfeffer 2020). This explains why the Haredi were unprepared to discontinue group ceremonies. Their cancellation posed a threat to the very existence of the ultra-Orthodox community. For other denominations, including the Modern Orthodox, faith centers around individual rather than collective observance and shutting down spaces for prayer and learning did not pose as large of a threat. As far as I can see, several weeks of a lockdown that was loosely followed (in addition to large gatherings, the Haredi, for example, the Kanievsky family, continued to pray together in home minyans) failed to introduce any noticeable adjustment toward individual observance. Nor was there a transition to online practices by the end of spring 2020, contrary to what was unfolding in other communities. Furthermore, the relaxation of lockdown rules facilitated the reinstatement of the basic components of social religious routine.

* * *

It can be concluded that the pandemic and related patterns of social behavior became challenging for Jewish religious communities, spurring intellectual and political responses but failing to foster (by the

beginning of summer 2020) any notable and stable new routines or to transform religious practice in general. Temporary closure of synagogues and schools and the compulsory transfer of prayer and feast liturgies online do not count. Different reactions to the pandemic demonstrated semiotic ideologies and hermeneutic mechanisms customary in Judaism; gender and intra- and interfaith (Orthodox and non-Orthodox, Jewish and non-Jewish) hierarchies and boundaries intrinsic to a *high-group high-grid*⁷ community; and power relations within the community and between the community and the state.

References

- Berger, P., and B. Chapman. 2020. "New York's Ultra-Orthodox Jewish Community Warned about Large Funeral Crowds." *The Wall Street Journal*, April 6. <https://tinyurl.com/y4qxwtav>.
- Biale, D., et al. 2020. *Hasidism: A New History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Blau, Y. 2020. "COVID-19 and Modern Orthodoxy: Is Acceptance of Science a Religious Failing?" *Tradition*, May 20. <https://tinyurl.com/yyna5vhd>.
- Boroda, A. 2020. "Prezident FEOR, ravvin Aleksandr Boroda zaiavil o neobkhdimosti sobliudeniia mer po protivodeistviiu rasprostraneniia koronavirusa" ["FJCR President Rabbi Alexander Boroda declared a necessity to follow anti-coronavirus measures"]. feor.ru, March 16. <https://tinyurl.com/y4urrxjp>.
- De Blasio, B. 2020. Twitter Post. April 29. <https://tinyurl.com/ya47djt>.
- Dein, S. 2011. *Lubavitcher Messianism: What Really Happens When Prophecy Fails?* London: Continuum.
- Douglas, M. 1970. *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*. London: Barrie & Rockliff/The Cresset Press.
- EveryJew*. 2020. "Poslanie nadezhdy. Koronavirus — blagoslovenie ili chto-to strashnoe?" ["A message of hope. Coronavirus — a blessing or something terrifying?"]. YouTube Video, March 23. <https://tinyurl.com/yyfgpf5n>.
- Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia. 2020. "Rabbi Lazar Closes Synagogue in Maryina Roscha." feor.ru, March 18. <https://tinyurl.com/y4tpetdz>.
- Goldman, D. 2020. "Two Orthodox Jewish Approaches to the Coronavirus." *The Washington Times*, March 28. <https://tinyurl.com/y22wgswk>.
- Gorskie.ru*, 2020. "Religiia protiv bolezni: kabbalisty Izrailia nachali molitvennuiu kampa-niiu protiv koronavirusa" ["Religion against disease: Israeli kabbalists launched a prayer campaign against the coronavirus"]. *Gorskie.ru*, March 3. <https://tinyurl.com/s7zpgn9>.
- Greenberg, Y. 2020. "Coronavirus Is a Wake Up Call for Ultra-Orthodox Jews." *Jewish Journal*, April 20. <https://tinyurl.com/y56yjrgq>.
- Gurevich, A. 1992. "Filipp Ar'ès: smert' kak problema istoricheskoi antropologii" ["Philip Ar'ies: Death as a problem of historical anthropology], in Filipp Ar'ès [Philip Ar'ies], *Chelovek pered litsom smerti* [*The Human being in front of death*]. Moscow: Progress.
7. The anthropologist Mary Douglas introduced the theory of intersecting categories "grid" and "group" that determine types of communities (Douglas 1970).

- Halbfinger, D. 2020. "Virus Soars Among Ultra-Orthodox Jews as Many Flout Israel's Rules." *The New York Times*, March 30. <https://tinyurl.com/rlubser>.
- Hanau, Sh. 2020. "New York City Police Break Up Another Ultra-Orthodox Funeral as Crowds Gather." *The Times of Israel*, May 1. <https://tinyurl.com/y472such>.
- Heil'brun, A. 2020. "Criminals Amongst Us. We Are Angrier with Them than the Secular Folk Are (in Hebrew)." *Ynet.co.il*, March 29. <https://tinyurl.com/y5mshtp6>.
- Idel, M. 1995. *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Ierushalmi, I. 2004. *Zakhor. Evreiskaia istoriia i evreiskaia pamiat' [Zahor. Jewish history and Jewish Memory]*. Moscow: Mosty kul'tury; Jerusalem: Geshtarim.
- Iton TV. 2020. "Jewish Secrets of Coronavirus. A discussion between Zvi Zilber and David Shekhter." Video. <https://tinyurl.com/y6pfkxjf>.
- Joffe, Tz. 2020. "Rabbi Mazuz Blames Pride Parades for Coronavirus Outbreak." *The Jerusalem Post*, March 10. <https://tinyurl.com/y2uk84dn>.
- Kafrissen, R. 2020. "Plague Weddings." *Tablet*, March 13. <https://tinyurl.com/y3304pw9>.
- Kats, Ia. 2007. *Iskhod iz getto. Sotsial'nyi kontekst emansipatsii evreev, 1770-1870 [Exodus from the Ghetto. The Social Context of Jewish Emancipation, 1770-1870]*. Moscow: Mosty kul'tury; Jerusalem: Geshtarim.
- Katz, Y. 2020. "Our Teacher, Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky: 'Close the Cheders? God Forbid, It's Dangerous!'" *Kikar HaShabbat*, 13 March. <https://tinyurl.com/y2wqk63b>.
- Katz, Y. 2020a. "The Great Men of Torah: Stopping Religious School Learning Is More Dangerous than Coronavirus (in Hebrew)." *Kikar HaShabbat*, March 12. <https://tinyurl.com/y2te608h>.
- Keane, W. 2003. "Semiotics and the Social Analysis of Material Things." *Language & Communication* 23: 409-425.
- Kikar HaShabbat*. 2020. "Difficult Questions about the Promise of "No Sickness in His House'," (in Hebrew). *Kikar HaShabbat*, April 2. <https://tinyurl.com/yxb5ecj7>.
- Kipnes, P. 2020. "We've Been Here Before: Spiritual Wisdom for Enduring Coronavirus." *ReformJudaism.org*, March 15. <https://tinyurl.com/y45ntfss>.
- Laitman, Mikhael. 2020. "Ne boites' koronavirusa. Vzgliad kabbalista" ["Do not fear the coronavirus. A kabbalist's view"]. YouTube Video, March 21. <https://tinyurl.com/y55wft0d>.
- Lambert Adler, R. 2020. "What Is Hashem Teaching Us with the Coronavirus?" *JewishPress.com*, March 19. <https://tinyurl.com/y6keoxnd>.
- Lincoln, B. 2009. *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11*. University of Chicago Press.
- Magid, J. 2020. "Charity Tied to Top Rabbi Raises Cash with Promise of Immunity from Coronavirus." *The Times of Israel*, April 18. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/charity-tied-to-top-rabbi-raises-cash-with-promise-of-immunity-from-coronavirus>.
- Magid, Sh. 2020. "COVID-19, "Haredi Judaism, and 'Magical Thinking'." *Tablet*, April 30. <https://tinyurl.com/y9aqabzc>.
- Malach, G., and L. Cahaner. 2019. "2019 Statistical Report on Ultra-Orthodox Society in Israel: Highlights." *The Israel Democracy Institute*, December 24. <https://en.idi.org.il/articles/29348>.
- Masis, J. 2020. "A 'Miracle?' Rabbi Explains Why Russia's Jews Have Low COVID-19 Death Rate." *The Times of Israel*, May 7. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/a-miracle-rabbi-explains-why-russias-jews-have-low-covid-19-death-rate/>.
- Miller, Ch. 2014. *Turning Judaism Outward: A Biography of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson the Seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe*. New York: Kol Menachem.

- Mizrahi, Y. 2020. "Is the Corona Virus Preparing Us for Mashiah?" *TorahAnytime*, March 11. <https://tinyurl.com/y6yw2m5x>.
- Moskovskii evreiskii obshchinniy tsentr. 2020. "Molitva-onlain s glavnym ravvinom Rossii" ["Online prayer with the chief rabbi of Russia"]. YouTube Video, March 30. <https://youtu.be/VaNxxCYh3vo>.
- Muchnik, M. 2020. "Kakoi smysl v tom, chto na mir obrushilsya koronavirus?" ["What is the meaning of coronavirus descending on the world?"]. *Toldot.ru*. <https://tinyurl.com/y67hz4mq>.
- Myers, D. 2020. "Coronavirus Is No Excuse to Demonize Haredim." *Forward*, March 23. <https://tinyurl.com/y4wq8cf3>.
- Panchenko, A. and E. Khonineva. 2019. "Semioteskie ideologii", medial'nost' i sovremennaiia antropologiya religii" ["Semiotic ideologies," mediation and contemporary anthropology of religion"]. *Gosudarstvo, religiya, tserkov' v Rossii i za rubezhom*. 37(4): 7–18.
- Peleg, B., et al. 2020. "Mass Ultra-Orthodox Funeral Held in Israel Despite Coronavirus Pandemic." *Haaretz*, March 29. <https://tinyurl.com/tvf6fm8>.
- Pfeffer, Y. 2020. "Coronavirus: The Charedi Response." *TzarichIyun*, April. <https://tinyurl.com/y2htet63>.
- Rabinowitz, A. 2020a. "This Haredi City Has the Fastest Coronavirus Infection Rate in Israel. Here's Why." *Haaretz*, March 31. <https://tinyurl.com/y44hswql>.
- Rabinowitz, A. 2020b. "Israel's Prominent Rabbi Orders Praying Alone to Stem Coronavirus Spread in Haredi Community." *Haaretz*, March 30. <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-prominent-rabbi-orders-to-pray-alone-to-stem-coronavirus-spread-in-haredi-community-1.8722409>.
- Rabinowitz, A. 2020c. "A Member of Modiin Illit Council Says: 'They Will Not Close Our Synagogues — This Is How Jewish Persecution in Russia Began'" (in Hebrew). *Haaretz*, March 29. <https://tinyurl.com/y56qmp79>.
- Rav Wachtfogel. 2020. "Listen: Rav Elya Ber Wachtfogel: The Coronavirus Mageifah and the Internet." *Matzav.com*, April 4. <https://tinyurl.com/yxlg28wl>.
- Rettig Gur, H. 2020. "More Basic than a Crisis of Faith: Will the Virus Upend Ultra-Orthodox Society?" *The Times of Israel*, April 20. <https://tinyurl.com/y6pzuwqr>.
- Salkin, J.K. 2020. "The Coronavirus Is Transforming Judaism." *Forward*, March 17. <https://tinyurl.com/y27mtv36>.
- Schnytzer, J. 2020. "Coronavirus & Kabbalah." *The Times of Israel*, March 18. <https://tinyurl.com/y583xm2s>.
- Shafran, A. 2020. "The Media's Obsession with Haredi Wrongdoing Exposes Its Bigotry." *Forward*, April 6. <https://tinyurl.com/y35rekm9>.
- Sharon, J. 2020. "Senior Orthodox Rabbis Allow Zoom for Passover Seder Due to Coronavirus." *The Jerusalem Post*, March 25. <https://tinyurl.com/tvsvmxh>.
- Slifkin, N. 2020a. "Why Did God Send the Coronavirus?" *Rationalist Judaism*, April 7. <https://tinyurl.com/y4hom64n>.
- Slifkin, N. 2020b. "A Maimonidean View of Why Coronavirus Happened." *Rationalist Judaism*, April 11. <https://tinyurl.com/y6r63avh>.
- Slifkin, N. 2020c. "Daas Torah on How to Avoid Getting Coronavirus." *Rationalist Judaism*, April 13. <https://tinyurl.com/y33x8w7f>.
- Slifkin, N. 2020d. "Does Judaism Mandate Magical Thinking?" *Rationalist Judaism*, May 4. <https://tinyurl.com/yxdnalq7l>.
- Sokol, S. 2020a. "'We're Not Scared': Some Haredi Orthodox Jews in Israel Are Ignoring Coronavirus Social Distancing Rules." *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, March 18. <https://tinyurl.com/r2qb5da>.

- Sokol, S. 2020b. "Slammed by COVID-19, Ultra-Orthodox Jews Try to Understand What God Hath Wrought." *The Times of Israel*, May 13. <https://tinyurl.com/yxb87fm5>.
- The Jerusalem Post*. 2020. "Could the Bible Have Predicted Today's Worldwide Coronavirus Outbreak?" *The Jerusalem Post*, March 16. <https://tinyurl.com/y3xl58r4>.
- The Times of Israel*. 2020a. "Israeli Rabbi: Coronavirus Outbreak Is Divine punishment for gay pride parades." *The Times of Israel*, March 8. <https://tinyurl.com/uayvvg7>.
- The Times of Israel*. 2020b. "Shas party slapped with fine for anti-virus charms." *The Times of Israel*, March 2 <https://tinyurl.com/y2ab79fe>.
- The Yeshiva World*. 2020a. "Worried About the Coronavirus? This Is Rav Chaim Kanievsky's Advice." *The Yeshiva World*, March 6. <https://tinyurl.com/y45u2oy2>.
- The Yeshiva World*. 2020b. "AGAIN: Levaya in Boro Park Turns Chaotic with NYPD Response." *The Yeshiva World*, April 20. <https://tinyurl.com/y2gen8mf>.
- Winner, Z. 2020. "Jewish and Chassidic Perspectives on the Coronavirus." *Chabad.org*. <https://tinyurl.com/vkj7q4j>.
- Zaken, D. 2020. "Ultra-Orthodox Leaders Ignore Coronavirus Threat, Endanger Israelis." *Al-Monitor*, March 18. <https://tinyurl.com/y3wgazba>.