

MERIA

RABBI OVADIA YOSEF AND HIS "CULTURE WAR" IN ISRAEL

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Rabbi Ovadia Yosef has emerged as one of the most powerful figures on Israel's political and cultural scene. Aside from trying to organize Sephardi Jews politically, he has sought to gain equality or even superiority for Sephardi religious interpretations. In these efforts, he has enjoyed a fair degree of success and has changed Israeli society and the self-perception of much of its population.

"Shas: It's not a platform, it's an identity."

(Shas party election slogan in 1996 Knesset election)

Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, the spiritual leader of *Shas*,⁽¹⁾ the *haredi*⁽²⁾ *Sephardi*⁽³⁾ party, has an agenda much broader than mere politics. His goal is to change Israeli culture and ideology, as well as Jewish religious practices, in a number of ways.

The best-known of Rabbi Yosef's recent public interventions include his frequent attacks on secular Israeli Jews of European origin (*Ashkenazim*) and their way of life. His unflattering remarks about Palestinians and Arabs, as well as statements that those killed in the Holocaust were atoning for sins from previous lives, have also set off public furors.⁽⁴⁾ In February 1999, he declared that the justices of Israel's Supreme Court were *bo`alei nidot*, meaning literally that "they are all [men who] have intercourse with menstruating women,"⁽⁵⁾ and heaped scorn on secular women who "do not practice [ritual] purification" and therefore give birth to "sons born of uncleanness." The secular public was also outraged when Rabbi Yosef, in June 1997, said, "A man must not walk between two women or between two asses or between two camels. Why? Because women aren't concerned with the Torah and whoever walks near them will be like them."⁽⁶⁾

A leading figure of the secular Israeli left also came under fire from Yosef. On March 3, 2000, in a sermon about the *Meretz* leader

and education minister, Yossi Sarid, Ovadia Yosef said "God will uproot him just as he uproots Amalek [a historic enemy particularly repugnant to Jews]; that is how he will uproot him. Haman is cursed? Yossi Sarid is cursed."⁽⁷⁾ This statement was made just before the Jewish holiday of Purim, which highlights the hanging of the Persian minister Haman after he tries to exterminate the Jews.

Rabbi Yosef crusades vigorously not only against the Israeli Ashkenazim secular establishment but also against the Ashkenazic religious establishment. In his battles against Ashkenazic *Halacha* (Jewish holy law) rulings in Israel, Rabbi Yosef fought to forge a united front of the Sephardim to ensure that their religious law has equal status--or prevails--against Ashkenazic interpretations. Thus, Yosef wages a bitter battle against the Ashkenazim on both the religious and secular fronts.

This article explores the roots and implications of Rabbi Yosef's role in Israeli society, especially for our understanding of inter-cultural and inter-ethnic relations in Israel. The central question is how can we explain Rabbi Yosef's behavior and intentions when he attacks the religious and secular Ashkenazim in Israel?

The answer to this question is given us by the Israeli sociologist Baruch Kimmerling.⁽⁸⁾ According to him, the Israeli state is built upon hegemonic ideology, culture, and social order. Kimmerling emphasizes that "this ideology was shaped in order to preserve the

character of the collectivity and the position of the original ruling elite, ethnic and national groups."(10) Founders and beneficiaries of the hegemony were particularly the veteran Ashkenazic parties and elite groups. Losers and casualties were the Sephardi immigrants of the 1950s and 1960s, who had and still have a marginal position in terms of the elite.

Right-wing parties were also excluded from the center of the power until Menachem Begin, himself Ashkenazic, played the "ethnic card" by mobilizing Sephardim against the Ashkenazic establishment. With the support of the Sephardim, Begin was elected prime minister in 1977, an event that began the breakup of the hegemonic culture. Four competing Jewish countercultures appeared on the scene to challenge the original Zionist ideology:

First, there is the Jewish Ashkenazic haredi culture, which strives to change the Israeli state into a religious Jewish state, ruled in keeping with the *Halacha*, according to Ashkenazic customs (*minhagim*). Second, there is a smaller but vocal secular counterculture that supports a civic state for all its Jewish and Arab citizens. The third counterculture is that of the Arab minority using the Arabic language. Finally, there is what is known as traditionalist culture (*masorti*), which encompasses the Jews from Arab and Muslim societies, the so-called Sephardim.

Both social and geographic boundaries between these countercultures are blurred. Some Israelis define themselves as secular, but keep some of the 613 commandments (*mitzvot*). Another group sees itself as religious (*datim* or modern Orthodox Jews), but are nationalist and accept most aspects of "modern" culture. At the present time, all these countercultures are waging a battle among themselves and against the still-dominant culture, in order to establish their own culture as the leading one.(11)

Table 1: The Jewish population of Israel and its religious affiliation

Ultra-orthodox (<i>haredi</i>)	3.9%
Religious (<i>dati</i>)	11.0%
Traditional (<i>masorti</i>)	26.8%
Secular but maintain some traditions (<i>chiloni hamekayem masoret</i>)	23.4%
Secular (<i>chiloni</i>)	30.3 %
Anti-religious	4.4%

Source: Moore and Kimmerling 1995:387

THE MASORTI COUNTERCULTURE OF THE SEPHARDIM

Kimmerling defines the Israeli-Jewish traditionalism of the Sephardim as a "separate belief system, which includes ingredients from the formal religion alongside other popular and folkloric beliefs and practices. Such elements of popular religion, which are considered as 'proper' simply because they are rooted in newly invented history, include cults of saints and holymen, holy sites, superstitions, conservative mores, wearing of 'modest' clothing, and voting for 'traditional parties.'"(12) In addition, this Israeli-Jewish traditionalism is ethnically based since it is overwhelmingly that of Sephardim.

Upon arrival in Israel, the traditional culture of the Sephardim was looked down on because the dominant Israeli ideology put a strong emphasis on the Negation of Exile (*shelilat haGalut*), the Israeli version of the melting pot. Accordingly, the state applied considerable pressure in favor of cultural homogenization via public schools and the universal draft into the army.

The goal was "to create a new autonomous and genuine Israeli culture, which is implicitly counterpoised to the discredited 'exile mentality' putatively characterizing Jewish groups before immigration to Israel."(13) Furthermore, the state viewed the traditional culture of the Sephardim as hindering their integration into the Western-style modern democratic society that was emerging. Ben Gurion, for example, stated that "those [Jews] from Morocco had no education. Their customs are those of Arabs....The culture of Morocco I would not

like to have here....We don't want Israelis to become Arabs. We are duty bound to fight against the spirit of the Levant, which corrupts individuals and societies, and preserve the authentic Jewish values as they are crystallized in the Diaspora."(14)

The cultural gap was supposed to close with the modernization of the Sephardim, meaning their integration into the mainstream Israeli culture. But this effort to absorb the Sephardim through modernization met with only partial success. The failure of the melting-pot policy and the inability of the political left and right, and the cultural and religious Ashkenazic establishment to integrate the Sephardim completely into Israeli society led the Sephardim to develop their own version of the Israeli culture. Furthermore, the Sephardim lost confidence in the secular Ashkenazic-dominated state institutions and turned more and more to the charismatic figure of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef as a new hero on whom to pin their hopes.

RABBI YOSEF AND 'LEHACHZIR 'ATARAH LEYUSHNAH'

According to Kimmerling's analysis, Rabbi Yosef is waging a bitter cultural war in the name of the Sephardim in order to establish an Israeli culture based on the Sephardi minhag. Apparently, the goal of Rabbi Yosef's culture war is to bring the Israeli public, both religious and secular, to recognize Sephardi culture as a new ideology and social order in Israel. In order to "beat the Ashkenazim," Yosef has built a strategy based on two pillars: his astounding knowledge of the Torah and the Halacha on one hand, and the Shas Party on the other.

On the first point, Yosef seeks to take on the Ashkenazim regarding Torah and Halacha. His religious authority comes from his mastery of the Torah and no one in the Jewish world doubts that he is one of the most important halachic sages of our time.(15) He has already revolutionized the Sephardi legal approach within Halacha and revitalized the observance of Halacha within the Sephardi community. Now, he is striving to create a hegemony of the Sephardi minhag as the

basis for Israeli identity. This is exactly what Rabbi Yosef means when he talks of "lehachzir 'atarah leyushnah," meaning, literally, restoring the crown to its rightful place. This sentence, which has become a central motto of the Shas Party, does not refer--contrary to what many secular Israelis think--to bringing the Jews in general back to religion and tradition. Rather, it refers to restoring the primacy that Sephardi Halacha once enjoyed within the Torah world.

To put it in concrete terms, he insists on the restoration of the dominance of the Halacha according to the Sephardi minhag in Israel. In Rabbi Yosef's view, the Ashkenazim deprived the Sephardim of the seniority that is theirs by halachic right. Rabbi Yosef does not want equality with the Ashkenazim; he wants full dominance of the Sephardi minhag. In his book "Yabia Omer," he formulates his goal:

"It is known that the Sephardi chief rabbis before me were subordinated to their colleagues, the Ashkenazic rabbis. And for the sake of peace, they said nothing, but I, who am not subordinate, praise God, will uphold my mission to restore the crown to its rightful place and have ordered that the ruling of Maran [Rabbi Yosef Karo (1488-1575), author of the standard halachic book of the Shulchan Aroch] be adopted."(16)

Most spiritual leaders of the Sephardim in Israel, and Rabbi Yosef and his scholars in particular, claim a direct line of spiritual descent back to some of the greatest sages of Judaism. These include Rabbi Yosef Karo,(17) who stands in the tradition of Moses ben Maimon (Maimonides, 1135-1204)(18), Rabbi Yitzhak Alfasi (1015-1103),(19) the Babylonian *ge'onim* (leaders of academies there)(20) and the authors of the Talmud. Consequently, they are convinced that the Ashkenazic Halacha is no more than a branch that sprang from a deeply rooted tree. But their primary claim to hegemony in Israel, and their dream of a state of Israel based on the Halacha, is anchored in the precepts laid down by Rabbi Yosef Karo. Karo was born in Spain and after expulsion the expulsion of the Jews in 1492 he settled in

Safed(21). When asked about the Ashkenazim who came to live in the Sephardi community, Karo replied, unequivocally: "Because they [the Sephardim] were the first to settle in the city, all those that come to reside there (afterward) are subordinate to them....Even if the Ashkenazim were to outnumber the Sephardim, the Ashkenazim must follow the Sephardi customs, for the first Ashkenazim who arrived were secondary to those Sephardim and had to follow their customs, as I proved. If so, they are all Sephardim."(22)

That indeed was the case for hundreds of years. Ashkenazic rabbis who settled in the Holy Land from the 16th century onward were compelled to join an existing Sephardi community and abide by its precepts and maintain its customs. At the head of the rabbinical establishment in the Land of Israel was the Rishon Lezion (the first of Zion), a Sephardi rabbi, who was chosen by a rabbinical council and whose appointment was then authorized by the Ottoman authorities. However, in the 19th century, Ashkenazic communities were established in Palestine that were able to effect a break with Sephardi halachic dominance with the help of donations from Jews in Europe and the backing of the consuls from their countries, notably czarist Russia, which leaped at every opportunity to intervene in the internal affairs of the Ottoman Empire.

The dominance of Ashkenazic Halacha was sealed in 1911 when Rabbi Ben-Zion Meir Hai Uziel (1880-1953)(23) agreed to serve not as the sole rabbi but to work together with an Ashkenazic rabbi, Avraham Yitzhak Hacohen Kook (1865-1935)(24), who had held the post since 1904. Rabbi Uziel thought he would be able to persuade his colleague to take a unified approach, which would allow rulings to be issued that would be acceptable to both communities. But Rabbi Kook did everything he could to consolidate Ashkenazic customs in Palestine, even over Sephardi customs, while the weaker Rabbi Uziel capitulated and made far-reaching concessions to Ashkenazic Halacha.

Now Rabbi Yosef is seeking to reverse this situation.

The other pillar of Rabbi Yosef's strategy is the Shas Party, which was formed in late 1983 by disappointed Sephardi members of the Ashkenazic haredi party of Agudat Yisrael. Though initially hesitant, Rabbi Yosef soon gave his blessing to the new party, which he saw as a means of redressing discrimination against religious Sephardim. In Shas' political challenge to both Agudat Yisrael and the Zionist, modern Orthodox alternative, the National Religious Party, he saw his chance to gain revenge for previous slights, even within his own party. Originally, it was not Yosef but the Ashkenazic Rabbi Shach,(25) the head of the Ponevezh Yeshivah in Bnei Brak, who ultimately ruled Shas. Some of the party's leading politicians, including Aryeh Deri, had studied in the Shach-affiliated yeshivot and owed their allegiance to him. When Yosef tried to separate Shas from Shach in 1984, it was Deri, Yosef's own closest associate in the party, who frustrated him.

In March 1990, Shas, encouraged by Yosef, toppled the government of national unity by withdrawing its support and planned to join a narrow Labor party-led coalition. Yosef was invited (in effect summoned) by Shach to attend a mass rally in Tel Aviv's Yad Eliyahu stadium. There, before the TV cameras, Yosef heard, for the first time, that Shach was nullifying the Shas-Labor agreement. Still, Yosef was not yet strong - some say courageous - enough to fight back. His moment came just before the June elections in 1992, when Shach made the speech fatal to his political power by insulting his key allies. "The Sephardim are not ready yet to manage affairs of religion and state....They are growing and developing and returning to their roots but they still need more and more to learn."(26) After nine years of playing second fiddle to Rabbi Shach in Shas, Rabbi Yosef sharply and completely ended his relations with him. From this point on, Ovadia Yosef has reigned supreme in the Shas Party.(27)

Shas' 17 years of history as a political party on the Israeli scene can be described as a series of successes. Its growth and parliamentary influence is impressive.(28)

Table 2: The results of the Shas-Party in Israeli elections since 1984

Year of elections	Number of Votes	Percentage	Seats
1984	63,600	3.1%	4
1988	107,000	4.7%	6
1992	130,000	4.9%	6
1996	260,000	8.7%	10
1999	430,676	13%	17

Sources: Peled 1998:703 and the Homepage of the Knesset, <www.knesset.gov.il>.

Shas' success is not only restricted to the political arena; the real success of the Shas Party has been in Israeli society at large. Shas has brought a return to religious faith according to Sephardi practices as a normative option among the Israeli people. With a well-organized network of different sub-organizations, Shas Party is present in the whole country.(29) By far Shas' most influential branch is its El Hama'ayan (To the Wellsprings) organization, a countrywide school system, which utilizes both state funding and party financial resources. According to its incorporation statutes, the goals of El Hama`ayan are "to promote the traditional and Jewish values of religious Jewry in Israel ...to improve religious service, to help improve the quality of religious life, to supply the religious needs of the haredi religious Jewry."(30)

In order to achieve its goals, El Hama`ayan runs after-school clubs for what organizers estimate to be anywhere between 30,000 and 40,000 children in its kindergartens and elementary schools, many of them from secular Sephardi families. For a monthly fee of just \$185, far less than any public school,(31) Shas schools offer a school day three hours longer than that of public schools, hot lunches, transportation, and intensive schooling in the Sephardi tradition. Furthermore, these schools offer tutors for bar

mitzvahs, adult/rabbi lessons, women's support groups, youth activities, immigrant absorption programs, and scholarships for yeshiva students.(32) Shas community organizers function as surrogate social workers, mediating in family disputes, and even finding jobs for the unemployed.(33)

The other key instrument behind the success of Shas is its effort to foster the *tshuva*, or return-to-faith. Through *tshuva*, Shas claims to have inspired innumerable *ba'alai teshuva*, Jews who changed from a secular to religious way of life.

It is common among Israelis to argue that the Sephardi identity Rabbi Yosef is attempting to forge is a separatist one. It is suggested here, however, that Rabbi Yosef is seeking to forge an integrated Jewish identity. The adjective Sephardi in this context has a religious meaning only. Of course, Rabbi Yosef seeks to forge a Sephardi identity against a dominant "other." As one Israeli researcher writes, "That other, however, is not the Ashkenazim, in general, but the Zionist, especially the Labor Zionist establishment that has marginalized Sephardim--in his term, *Mizrahim*--since the beginning of Zionist settlement in Palestine."(34) Rabbi Yosef's wisdom, and simultaneously the secret of his success, lies in his ability to mobilize his supporters, not against the Ashkenazim in general, but rather against the secular and non-Jewish components of their ideology. In other words, Rabbi Yosef seeks to replace the secular elements of Zionism as the official state ideology with a Zionism built only on the Jewish religion according to the Sephardi *minhag*. Under this redefined Zionism there would be a place for all Jews.

At the same time, it should be stressed that while Yosef seeks to unite and lead all "Sephardim," his most active political and social following has been among the Jewish immigrants from Morocco and their descendants. This is no accident as immigrants from Morocco came last in the independence area, mostly during the 1950s and even early 1960s, and were the poorest and least-educated of all the Jewish immigrants to Israel. Yosef, of course, is from

Iraq. But just as Begin was an Ashkenazic Jew who mobilized the Sephardim politically, Yosef is a Sephardic Jew from Iraq who mobilized the Moroccans. This factor is the basis of his success but also limits Shas's appeal among the majority of Sephardim.

CONCLUSION

It appears that the role of Rabbi Yosef in Israeli society can be explained in the framework of an Israeli culture war in which he battles against the Ashkenazic establishment, both religious and secular, to gain hegemony for a Jewish cultural identity based on the Sephardi minhag. In order to "beat the Ashkenazim," Rabbi Yosef has built a strategy based on two pillars: his intimate knowledge of the Torah and Halacha on the one hand and the Shas Party on the other. Based on his unique knowledge of the Halacha and the Torah, he has revitalized the Sephardi tradition (minhag) in accordance with Rabbi Yosef Karo.

Further, Ovadia Yosef has succeeded in gaining an impressive presence in Israeli political and social life through his political party, Shas, and its social sub-organizations. Nevertheless, he will not be content with this partial victory. Rabbi Yosef wants to impose Sephardi cultural identity not only on his flock (the Sephardim) but on all Israeli Jews. According to Rabbi Yosef, this identity should serve as the basic ideology of the state, instead of the Zionist secular belief. In other words, Rabbi Yosef seeks to redefine Zionism in connection with religion, and not with secularism.

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NOTES

1. *Shas* is derived from the Hebrew *Sephardim Shomrei Torah*, meaning literally "Sephardi Torah Guardians." *Shas* is also another name for the Talmud, which is short

for "the six orders of Mishna." The selection of the same name for the party of Sephardi Guardians gives *Shas* more authority among its supporters.

2. *Haredi*, Pl. *haredim* meaning literally god-fearing. I use the Hebrew term in order to avoid the imprecise English 'ultra-orthodox believer', as *haredi* emphasizes "a way of life" rather than a "very extreme theological commitment."

3. *Sephardi*, plural *Sephardim*; one of the most debatable terms in Israeli sociology; meaning literally Jews who came originally from Spain. In the Israeli context nowadays, there is a difference between what *Shas* and its supporters understand under Sephardi and what the rest of the secular public understands. When the leaders of *Shas* speak of Sephardi, they intend to emphasize the importance of the Spanish Jewish customs (*minhag*) as opposed to the Ashkenazic customs as the authentic one for all Jews in Israel. On the other hand, from the point of view of the Ashkenazic Israelis "Sephardim" means Jews who came from Spain and from Arab and Muslim countries. The Jews of Spanish origin called themselves "pure-bred Sephardi" (Sephardi tahor). The "pure Sephardim" considered themselves a distinct people, separate from and above Jews who had arrived in the Holy Land from Arab and Muslim countries. In this paper, I prefer to use Sephardim instead of other terms such as *Mizrahim* or oriental Jews, precisely because it is the term with which *Shas* identifies itself. See Ha'aretz, August 31, 2000 and Daniel J. Elazar, *The other Jews: the Sephardim today*, New York 1989, pp. 15

4. For a general view of the remarks of Rabbi Yosef, see Ma'ariv, March 19, 2000, Yedioth Ahranoth, March 19, 2000, Ha'aretz, March 28, 2000 and Jerusalem Report, <<http://jrep.com/info/Ovadia/>>.

5. Cited in Ma'ariv, March 19, 2000

6. Cited in Jerusalem Report, <<http://jrep.com/info/Ovadia/>>

7. Ma'ariv, March 19, 2000

8. See Baruch Kimmerling, *Between hegemony and dormant kulturkampf in Israel*, *Israel Affairs*, vol. 4/1998, pp. 9-72, p. 48

9. Ibid., p. 51
10. Since the beginning of 1990s Israeli scholars have entered into a debate about an internal Jewish "culture war". For an overview see Moshe Zimmerman, *Wende in Israel: Zwischen Nation und Religion*, Berlin 1997, pp. 115-120, Ezra Kopelowitz, *Jewish Culture Wars: Changing Attitudes Towards Religion and Ethnicity Among American and Israeli Jews*, in <http://www.geocities.com/debbieandezra/rutgerspubliclectureapril2000.html>, Walter Laqueur, *Acute Culture War in Israel: Chasms Between the Intelligentsia and the Netanyahu Government*, <http://www.nzz.ch/english/background/background1998/background9806/bg980620israel.html>, Michael Wolffsohn, *Inner Tensions in Israeli Society: A Jewish-Arab State - an Internal Jewish Culture War*, <http://www.nzz.ch/english/background/background1998/background9805/bg980509israel.html> and Baruch Kimmerling. I stress the work of Kimmerling for this article because Kimmerling is the only Israeli scholar which pick out the theme of the Jewish culture war as a central topic in his work.
11. Baruch Kimmerling, p.62
12. H. Goldberg, *Introduction: Culture and Ethnicity in the Study of Israeli Society*, *ethnic Groups*, 1(3), 1977, pp. 63-186, p.170
13. Cited in Sami Smooha, *Israel, Pluralism and Conflict*, Berkely, University of California Press 1978, p. 68
14. See Moshe Kaveh, *The flip side of Ovadia Yosef*, *Jerusalem Post*, August 23, 2000 and Shahar Ilan, *Second only to Joseph Caro*, *Ha'aretz* October 6, 2000
15. Rabbi Yosef, according to Yair Sheleg, *Rabbi Yosef and his war against the Ashkenazim and Sephardim*, *Ha'aretz*, February 25, 2000, p. b5 (Hebrew)
16. See *Encyclopaedia Judaica (EJ)* , vol. 5, pp. 194-201
17. Ibid., vol. 11, pp. 754-781
18. Ibid., vol. 2, pp. 600-604
19. The geonim were recognized by the Jews as the highest authority of instruction from the end of the sixth century or somewhat later to the middle of the 11th In the 10th and 11th centuries this title was also used by the heads of academies in Erez Israel. See *EJ*, vol. 7, pp. 315-317
20. A town of Upper Galilee. For the religious importance of Safed for the Jews see *EJ*, vol. 14, pp. 626-631
21. Rabbi Yosef Karo, *Yosef Karo: Questions and Answers of avkat rochel*, no date, (Hebrew), no. 212. See also H.J. Zimmels, *Ashkenazim and Sephardim: Their Relations, Differences and Problems as Reflected in the Rabbinical Responsa*, London 1976, p.304.
22. See *EJ*, vol. 12, pp. 1527-1528
23. Ibid, vol.6 , pp.
24. Rabbi Eliezer Menahem Shach is widely considered to be "the last word" on affairs for the Lithuanian communities inside the haredi milieu. Rabbi Shach is also respected among the Sephardim, because many of the religious leaders of the Sephardim were trained in either Shach's Yeshiva or in one associated with him. Shas was also a "product" of a clever political play by rabbi Shach. He knew that there were thousands of Sephardi voters who were either graduates of the Lithuanian educational system or were dependent upon the care provided to their relatives by the Ashkenazic rabbis. For more details about rabbi Shach, see S. Heilman and M. Friedman, *Religious Fundamentalism and Religious Jews: The Case of Hardim*, in *Fundamentalism Observed*, Marty and Appleby (eds.), Westview Press, Boulder 1991, pp. 206-210 and Aaron Willis: *Sephardic Torah Guardians: Ritual and the politics of piety*, unpublished dissertation, Princeton University 1993, pp. 160-161 and 197-221
25. *Ha'aretz* June 14, 1992
26. Aaron Willis, p. 221
27. See Yoav Peled, *Towards a redefinition of Jewish nationalism in Israel? The enigma of Shas*, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 21, pp. 703-727, 1998, p. 703 and the Homepage of the Knesset, www.knesset.gov.il
28. See Aaron Willis, p. 189
29. See Yoav Peled, p. 717
30. For the school year 2000/2001 the fees of the public schools are about 1300 Shekels; see *Ha'aretz*, September 15, 2000

31. See Aaron Willis, p. 195
32. See Y.K. Halevi and N.C. Gross, Religious revival, Jerusalem Report, pp. 14-18, 1996, p. 16
33. See Yoav Peled, p.720