

vision, but the Jewish writer is also guided by a higher vision of God's central role in the process of all creative endeavors.

In discussing the difficulty inherent in writing about holiness without being vague or resorting to clichés, Ruchama points out the necessity for requesting God's partnership in the writing process:

"If I were to devise a prayer before writing, it would be for some divine assistance to capture the *tzaddik* and *tzaddeikes*, to capture the holy moment," she says. "I see these people and these moments in captivity. We must find the words to release them."

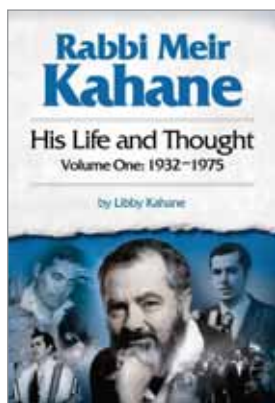
Everyone's Got a Story is more than a showcase for developing Jewish writers. It affirms the importance of creative writing to the Jewish world.

Rabbi Meir Kahane: His Life and Thought (Volume One: 1932-1975)

By Libby Kahane

The Institute for the Publication
of the Writings of Meir Kahane
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Reviewed by Aaron Rakeffet-Rothkoff



Ours was a generation that grew up in the shadow of the crematoria and the glow of the Israeli flag. While I was American born, there were numerous survivors among my

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fellow students. This was true of both my elementary school, Yeshiva Rabbi Israel Salanter of the Bronx, and my high school, Marsha Stern Talmudical Academy in Manhattan. Yet we did not dwell on the past, as we were engaged by the saga of the emerging State of Israel. We sought guidance and direction as we matured: How do we balance out the pain and tears of yesterday with the joy and pride of today?

Many of us were attracted to Bnei Akiva, the major Religious Zionist organization on the North American scene. There, I met and adored one of the most charismatic individuals I would ever encounter. His name was Meir Kahane.

Libby Kahane, the "wife of his youth," has published a meticulously researched biography entitled *Rabbi Meir Kahane: His Life and Thought*. The book is envisioned as volume one and covers the years 1932 through 1975. Libby, possessing a master's degree in library science, penned more than 180 pages of footnotes in addition to 566 pages of text. It is not a critical biography and there is no attempt to analyze the more controversial aspects of Meir's teachings and actions in broader context. I would describe the volume as a scholarly memoir written by a devoted spouse. Reading the volume is to relive the period in which Meir was active.

The young Meir was strongly influenced by the tragic murder of a few of his relatives on the road to Tzfat in 1938, when they were returning from a family wedding in Tel Aviv and were ambushed at close range by Arabs. Another influence on Meir was his father, Rabbi Charles Kahane, who supported the Zionist Revisionist movement. Both Zev Jabotinsky and Peter Bergson were visitors at the Kahane Flatbush residence. Meir's formal education included elementary school at the Yeshivah of Flatbush in Brooklyn, and high school at the Brooklyn Talmudical Academy. He continued his studies at the Mirrer Yeshiva by day and at Brooklyn College by night, earning his rabbinical ordination and his bachelor's degree. He later attained both a law degree from New York Law School and a master's degree in political science from New York University.

During this period Meir was active in Betar and afterwards in Bnei Akiva. In 1954, he became the *mazkin* (director) of Greater New York's sixteen Bnei Akiva chapters. I was active in a chapter in the East Bronx, New York, and Meir was a frequent guest at our activities. In a letter to Libby, Naomi Klass Mauer, an editor at the *Jewish Press*, wrote that Meir had made a deep impression on her in Bnei Akiva:

There was a fire in his eyes, and there was a magnetism about him. He had a beautiful voice....Many of the songs he taught us...were about Israel, and I still sing some of them today. When he spoke...about Israel, there was magic. He was captivating. You could hear a pin drop during his stories. And I always felt that if it wasn't Shabbat, and he told us to follow him to Israel at the conclusion of a story, we'd get up and go (p. 28).

We were excited when Meir became the rabbi of the Howard Beach Jewish Center in 1958. Located in Queens, New York, the synagogue was traditional rather than strictly Orthodox. I followed his new responsibilities with great interest as I too prepared for the active rabbinate. At the Jewish Center, Meir influenced many of the synagogue's youngsters to adopt a more observant lifestyle. But when he attempted to install a *mechitzah*, many of the key synagogue members turned against him. His contract was not renewed and he soon published an article entitled "End of the Miracle of Howard Beach." This was Meir's first article in the *Jewish Press*, where he continued to write until his murder in 1990.

To supplement his modest income from the *Jewish Press*, Meir purchased a newspaper delivery franchise. Libby described his route in detail and was quite positive about such employment for him. "Finished by 7 AM, he was free to go to the [Mirrer] yeshiva," she writes. But many of those who knew Meir were distressed by this turn in his life. The spiritual leader of a congregation was now a newspaper delivery boy; he had to wake up at 4 AM to distribute the dailies on time. In retrospect, I came to feel that his rejection at Howard Beach influenced the subsequent quests in Meir's life. He

was never a team player again and constantly insisted that only his way was correct. He became even less flexible and more convinced that his vision was the only path to follow. This rigidity was later reflected in a crucial moment in his life when he rejected attempts to co-opt him to the leadership of Herut, a forerunner of the contemporary Likud political party in Israel. (It would be advisable for laymen and synagogue officers to consider the possible consequences of their actions in their relationship with young, capable and aspiring spiritual leaders.) I often fantasize about what Meir could have achieved if not for the Howard Beach debacle.

A prolific writer, Meir wrote several best-selling books, including *Never Again!*, *Why Be Jewish?* and *The Story of the Jewish Defense League*. Meir wrote for the *Jewish Press* under various pseudonyms, among them "David Borac." He also wrote sports columns under the pseudonym of "Martin Keene." These appeared in the *Daily*, which the owners of the *Jewish Press* published when the city's dailies were struck for almost four months at the end of 1962 and the beginning of 1963.

Following the 1967 Six-Day War, Meir became more strident and innovative in his public posture. He was to inspire the formation of many different organizations to actualize his vision. The most lasting of these was the Jewish Defense League (JDL), which was created in 1968. With the JDL as his base of operation, Meir fought the causes of Soviet, American and Israeli Jewry.

At the outset, the JDL was warmly embraced by many elements of the Jewish community. African-Americans rioted in more than 150 locations across the United States in 1967 and 1968. While many of their grievances were justified, there was an element of anti-Semitism in their public posture. Slum-housing, unemployment and inferior education were at times attributed to Jewish interests. In response, the JDL published persuasive articles and used demonstrations and non-violent civil disobedience. These actions were legitimized and supported by many elements in the Jewish community, including members of Manhat-

tan's Reform Temple Emanuel. But when JDL members began to appear with baseball bats and lead pipes, vocal criticism was expressed against these tactics. The Anti-Defamation League accused the JDL of "imitating the mindless tactics of racial hoodlums" (p. 111). Bert Zweibon, co-founder of the JDL, declared:

We are not vigilantes. We don't go out to apprehend anyone. We protect Jewish life and property. When someone attacks you, you fight back. That's the law. When someone comes to kill you, you have the right to defend yourself (p. 111).

This debate over the JDL and its tactics would only intensify with the passage of time. Rallying cries would later abound. Some were in the spirit of "Kahane Zadak" ("Kahane was correct"), others reflected that he was the "The False Prophet."



Naphtali Belyatsky, a refusenik from Leningrad, with a picture of Rabbi Meir Kahane in his pocket, ca. 1989. Photo: Rabbi Aaron Rakeffet-Rothkoff

Meir was among the earliest voices to publicly detail the plight of the Jews behind the Iron Curtain. Often, he did so by reminding his audiences of their failures during World War II. Before a Brooklyn College audience, Meir "reminded the audience that an earlier generation of Jews had failed to meet its responsibility."

"We had it in our hands to save over one million Jews at Auschwitz, but...the United States...could not bomb the rail lines...because of technical difficulties...It was Jewish reaction which was

wrong. Nowhere was there raised the voice of non-violent civil disobedience... So what if they had gotten arrested. You can survive an arrest, believe me!" Laughter resounded through the hall at this remark (p. 236).

Meir's leadership inspired many youngsters to take up the cudgels for Russian Jews. But it also led to violent acts, and even death. On January 26, 1972, incendiary bombs exploded in the offices of Sol Hurok, an impresario who specialized in arranging the visits of Soviet performers. Minutes before the fires started, news agencies received calls that the fires were to protest the "deaths and imprisonments of Soviet Jews." The calls ended with the JDL slogan "Never Again!" (p. 258). Twenty-seven-year-old Iris Kones, an employee in Hurok's office, died of smoke inhalation. Libby outlines all the details of this incident, but a critical study is necessary to analyze the horrendous episode in light of halachic sources, the philosophy of Torah deportment and the responsibility of leadership. Libby thus concludes her discussion of this tragedy:

Meir was aghast at the loss of life in the Hurok bombing. Alan Rocoff speculated, "After the death of Hurok's employee, Meir was subconsciously closing down American JDL." Journalist Walter Ruby believed that JDL "fell off rapidly after the Hurok bombing due in part to...the depletion of JDL's funds and the arrest of many of its leaders" (p. 282).

As the history of the redemption of Soviet Jewry was reconstructed by contemporary scholars, Meir was essentially dismissed as an anti-establishment maverick. He is barely mentioned in Professor Henry Feingold's major study *Silent No More: Saving the Jews of Russia, the American Jewish Effort, 1967-1989*. But my wife and I visited Russia a number of times as emissaries of Nativ, then a branch of the Israeli intelligence community. Only after those trips did we fully appreciate the profound respect for Meir felt by many within the refusenik community. On one trip, Naphtali Belyatsky, a refusenik from Leningrad, met us with a picture of Meir sticking out of his shirt pocket. Belyatsky and many others attributed the miraculous liberation of Soviet Jewry to the chain of events

sparked by Meir's pioneering efforts a generation earlier.

In his efforts on behalf of Soviet Jewry, Meir learned to focus on one individual rather than stress the total numbers. In my own activities and lectures I too have found this approach to be the most effective. Regarding Meir's efforts to aid Silva Zalmanson, one of the Leningrad Eleven (Soviet citizens, nine of them Jews, who were convicted of plotting to hijack a Soviet airliner in 1970), Libby wrote:

Pointing up the plight of one individual was an effective way to dramatize the oppression of these million faceless Jews, said Meir, as he detailed plans for the mass rally on her behalf. Meir recalled the trail of the Leningrad Eleven: "We will behold, again, the train in Leningrad with Silva and her husband, Edward Kuznetsov, and all the rest, and weep as she is sentenced to ten years of murderous imprisonment in the Potma labor camp. We will hear the death sentences pronounced on Kuznetsov and Mark Dymshits and hear Silva Zalmanson cry out: 'I am a Zionist!'" (p. 235).

The JDL was also active on the American scene in areas of local concern. Its members led protests against anti-Semitic teachers in the public school system, provided escorts for elderly Jews in changing neighborhoods and educated Jewish youth in the art of self-defense. I only realized how much JDL meant to many seniors when I returned to the United States in 1977, my first visit to America since my 1969 *aliyah*. I stayed with my parents in the Pelham Parkway section of the Bronx, New York, a neighborhood that was already starting to change. Standing in line at the local bank, I overheard a conversation between two elderly women, who were bemoaning the Kahanes' 1971 *aliyah* and the subsequent decline of the JDL. One exclaimed to the other: "Why did Rabbi Kahane leave us? We need him so badly in New York City!"

In retrospect, Meir's evaluation of the precarious state of United States Jewry was incorrect. Many times he declared that a Holocaust was imminent on the American scene. In a 1972 article in the *Jewish Press* Meir wrote:

America is today a troubled land. Torn by racial passions and hatreds, we

find white pitted against black in anger of the busing of children to achieve integration, violence over changing neighborhoods and housing patterns, competition for blue-collar and low-level white-collar jobs, and tensions and fighting between races in schools and the armed forces....

The frustration of the average American as he watched social, moral and ethical values that he has long cherished, mocked and changed is evident to all.... He seeks to lash out and erase those whom he believes have been responsible for the social revolution—the Jew (p. 253).

Almost four decades after Meir

"There was a fire in Meir's eyes, and there was a magnetism about him."

wrote these words, the Jew has continued his unprecedented success on the American scene. Even the Torah Jew has become totally integrated into contemporary society: A prominent senator who observes Shabbat was a candidate for the vice presidency of the United States. The *New York Times*, once a bastion of Reform Judaism, constantly publishes fascinating articles on the Torah world in the greater New York area. There is widespread sensitivity among non-Jews for the Jewish obligation to observe Shabbat and *kashrut*. Indeed, this is the reason behind the widespread admiration for American *olim* in Israel. They have returned to the Jewish homeland because of the "love of Mordechai" and not as a result of the "hatred of Haman."

Following his *aliyah*, Meir attempted to function both in Israel and in the United States. Gradually his activities shifted almost entirely to the Israeli scene. While Meir headed the JDL office in Jerusalem, his lengthy absences in the States weakened the JDL there. He defined the role of the JDL in Israel in a 1971 *Jewish Press* article.

People ask: "What purpose is there for JDL in Israel? Are there troubled neighborhoods? Is there anti-

Semitism?"

The Galut, the Diaspora...has bred in the Jew inferiority complexes, physical fear and mental abnormalities....It is totally possible to be a Sabra, a genuinely free soul, and nevertheless be beset with all the complexes and problems of a Galut Jew.

What must concern us is the Sabra who ideologically proclaims himself an Israeli first and a Jew second....When the son of the mayor of Jerusalem writes a book and candidly states his Israelism over his Jewishness as he sits next to his non-Jewish wife, we are faced with a serious problem (p. 227).

The Israeli branch of JDL evolved into a political party, which Meir named "Kach," the Hebrew word for "thus." The name is derived from the modern Hebrew idiom "*rak kach*, only this," which was the motto of the Irgun Tzvai Leumi in the pre-independence era. The implication is that its ideology was the only way to go. Meir would later head the Kach list as a candidate for the Knesset. (He ultimately served as a member of the Israeli Knesset from 1984 to 1988.)

Meir's predictions for future developments and trends in Israeli society were notably more correct than his American visions. In the election campaign of 1973 Meir declared in a speech in Tel Aviv:

The State of Israel came into being not because the Jew deserved it, but because the Gentile did. It came into being not because the Jew was worthy of it, but because the name of G-d had reached its fill of humiliation and desecration....Israel came into being because Israel is the essence and apex of Kid-dush Hashem (p. 365).

In a speech in Rechovot he stated:

A Jewish state does not eliminate assimilation when the same non-Jewish concepts, ideals and goals remain embedded in the Jew.... And from the assimilation of [Western] ideas and concepts and the jettisoning of Jewish values and practices, must come intermarriage and apathy to any concept of a particular Jewish identity (p. 366).

In 1976, the Jewish Agency attempted to ban Meir from speaking at the convention of the Association of Americans and Canadians for Aliyah. Meir analyzed the "frantic efforts to

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ban me from speaking” by Jewish Agency personnel:

[They are] desperately frightened of hearing Jewish truths that will shake the very foundation of their philosophies and existence and that will make them question the essence of their reason for being...[They] fear that my ideas and words may open the eyes of the Jewish masses and persuade them that their present leaders guide the nation to disaster (p. 558).

“If ever a human being felt the pain and anguish of his brothers, it was Meir Kahane.”

In a press release protesting compromises in Sinai, Meir wrote:

The JDL has, from its inception, represented the idea that the Jewish people all over the world constitute a single and indivisible entity...The Land of Israel...is the property of the entire Jewish people, those who reside in it and those who have not yet returned home. No power on earth...has the legal or moral right to give up any part of the Land of Israel....

We call upon the government of Israel to recognize its position as trustee and not owner of the land. It is because of this that we gather here to protest the liquidation of the government of Israel of the Jewish settlement of Shalhevet [near Abu Rodeis in the Sinai]....This is a betrayal of Zionism and a betrayal of the Jewish people (p. 379).

Who could have imagined then that this same confrontation would continue until today? But now, Jerusalem is at the center of this debate.

Perhaps the most insightful description of Meir was penned by Irene Klass, the wife of the publisher of the *Jewish Press*. In an editorial titled “I Remember Meir,” she wrote:

I remember the first time he came to us twelve years ago. He was slim even in those days and handsome. But it was not just the physical beauty of his face that caught your eye and held it! There was a certain brooding quality about his eyes as though he carried the weight of the world on his shoulders. If ever a human being felt the pain and anguish of his brothers, it was Meir Kahane. This feeling, which one Jew is supposed to have for another, was to lead him into avenues even he could not have foreseen (p. 399).

Libby's biography is permeated by Libby and Meir's devotion to each other, and their dedication to their children. I experienced this bond at close range. Not only did I know Libby and Meir, but I interacted with all their children. This book is a must for all who knew him. It will also be illuminating for those who wish to understand him and the times in which he lived. Yet it will be read and studied through a veil of sorrow; we all know what awaits us in the forthcoming volume. We will be haunted by the thought of what was and what could have been. ■

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