

## 5. Irving Greenberg vs. Meir Kahane, Public Debate at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale

Irving (Yitz) Greenberg vs. Meir Kahane, Public Debate at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, 1988<sup>1</sup>

**Rabbi Dr. Irving (Yitz) Greenberg** (1933–) served as President of the Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundation and the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership (CLAL).

**Rabbi Meir Kahane** (1932–1990) founded the Jewish Defense League in 1968. In 1971, Rabbi Kahane emigrated to Israel, founded the Kach party, and, in 1984, became a member of Knesset. He was assassinated in Manhattan in 1990.

**K**ahane:  
Halakhah. I'm a man of Halakhah. The Halakhah is clear that the non-Jew does not have a status of a Jew. Democracy is not Judaism. It may be painful to the Modern Orthodox. Of course it's painful. It's too bad. But it's Halakhah. Should I read to you the Rambam? The Halakhah is clear. ...

But more important, long before the Arabs are a majority, what happens when they become a third of the population and they join together in a coalition government with the extreme left? Is that what you want? Is that what you want? Who is a Jew? Decided by one third of an Arab Knesset. And above all there is Halakhah here and if there is one Arab in the country who is not willing to accept the status that was given to him by the Halakhah, that Arab must go too. And we bow our heads to Halakhah, or are we not ordained rabbis? ...

The Palestinians believe that there should be no Israel. That is the problem. We sit and play games and games with them, and worse, with ourselves. The Arabs are not, I repeat for the second time, are not, leaving the Territories. They are coming back in droves. Unemployment now is rife in Kuwait, in Saudi, in Oman, and in Abu Dhabi. They are returning. They never left. They left their families behind and send them checks constantly. There are Arabs from America

<sup>1</sup> "Rabbi Kahane debates Prof. Greenberg," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZefkNmOSins>  
Accessed 2019.

who are not coming back. I saw them when I was on reserve duty for a month. Now, to live in this delusion, "if we give this back and we give that back," that somehow we will realize that time is not on our side. Time is on their side. As long as we have Jews who split the community. As long as we have Jews who condemn the policy of the government of Israel. As long as we have Jews who march with the Palestinians, then time is on their side. I'm not afraid of the Arabs. I'm afraid of such Jews and this one here who with no meaning is a danger to the existence of Israel.

Greenberg:

In short, the overwhelming consensus of responsible rabbis of any halakhic standing, or learning, or *menshlikhkeit*, is that these laws do not apply to Arabs or to Christians or non-Jews who are not idolaters and therefore [Kahane] is using this totally out of context in order to make the Halakhah appear to be cruel, atrocity ridden, antagonistic to gentiles. The truth is, I would say, the opposite, that there should be no limits to Arab rights because in fact democracy gives them a chance to grow and become integrated into society and to commit themselves to that society. Democracy is the best fulfillment of the vision of the Jewish covenant. ...

There is an indigenous Arab population on the West Bank and Gaza. It's 1,342,000 and growing. If we add them to the Israeli Arab population that changes ... the balance from 82/16 to 65/35. The highest birthrates in the Arab world are in the West Bank and Gaza because the women there are in rural situations and are in poverty and their absolute births would make Arab births outnumber the Jews. And for that reason alone because that is the only potential plausible theory of imbalance demographically. But the deeper reason is even deeper than that. Our dream is realized. We came back to the land of Israel, we paid in full for it. But there is a population there; and they are human beings. It's true they are neglected by their own Arabs, other Arabs, it's true they are exploited by the PLO and Israel. But they have roots, attachments, hopes, and lives. They didn't have a Palestinian nationalism twenty-five years ago but now they do. In part because of exposure of Israel and our model of self-respect and dignity and self-rule. If I can make room for them, I should. If I can make room for their dignity, the answer is yes. And the greatest respect and greatest peace chance come when there is self-rule and self-responsibility. Now our commitment to their dignity and their freedom cannot be to commit suicide. It is no *mitzvah*

to destroy ourselves and therefore we will long for peace and if there is a new leadership that is prepared to make peace they are going to change. It's up to them to convince, to convince us the Jewish people.

### COMMENTARY BY SHAUL MAGID

Debates are often entertaining but painful to watch, as they give us a sense of the pulse of opinion and sentiment in particular communities. Sometimes, as in the 1263 disputation between Moses Nahmanides and the apostate Pablo Christiani, they become canonical. More often they remain snapshots frozen in time that can tell us about one particular moment rather than signposts to the future.

1988 was a year that presaged the coming of a storm in Israel and thus a year of anxiety for many American Jews. It was more than ten years since Likud first came to power in 1977, making settlements in the West Bank and Gaza government policy. Peace Now, founded in 1978, was beginning to gain traction in the Israeli left. The shock and surprise of the First Intifada was two years away and yet many felt that Israel's tenuous control over its Palestinian population could not hold. Tensions with the Palestinians were running high and the election of Rabbi Meir Kahane to the Knesset in 1984, after two failed attempts, was a wake-up call for both the establishment right and the pragmatic left. In some way, Kahane's political ascendancy made the political establishment realize something had gone terribly wrong in Israeli society.

In the winter of 1988 Kahane and Rabbi Irving (Yitz) Greenberg, former high school friends, debated at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale in the Bronx. The debate was moderated by Rabbi Avi Weiss, who adeptly framed the debate around four pertinent issues: three dealing with contemporary political realities in Israel, especially regarding the Palestinians, and one about the status of non-Orthodox rabbis and Jews in Israel. Like most debates, the venue and context are significant. The Hebrew Institute of Riverdale was (and is) a Modern Orthodox synagogue in New York City. The audience was likely comprised mostly of Orthodox Jews who, in the late 1980s were strongly supportive of Israel but in many instances wary of Kahane's militarism and yet also nervous about the call for land compromise made by Peace Now.

Weiss was the synagogue's respected rabbi who had made his name as a leading voice in the movement for Soviet Jewry in the 60s and early 70s and was known to be center-right on Israel, and thus in some way closer to Kahane than Greenberg. He was also a strong believer in religious pluralism, and thus closer to Greenberg than Kahane. Weiss's questions were crisp, critical, and probing.

Debates are not usually won on merit; they are usually won on performance and persuasion. In this case, Kahane was much better suited for the task even as Greenberg was much better prepared. Greenberg was professorial and came prepared with statistics and facts, combined with a clear commitment to Israeli security and belief in Jewish pluralism. Each time he approached the podium he did so with seriousness and resolve even as he unfortunately often did little more than read a laundry list of facts with little emotion. The facts, Greenberg believed, would make his case.

Kahane, on the other hand, approached the podium with a swagger, each time glancing at a wrinkled piece of paper he took from his coat pocket, looked at the audience and spoke with passion, conviction, and verve, even if it was openly apparent he was exaggerating beyond the facts.

Greenberg argued that we have to take risks for peace. Kahane claimed there is, and can be, no peace, and that after the Holocaust Jews could not afford to take a risk for anything. Ironically, Greenberg looked like an ideologue while Kahane portrayed himself as a pragmatist.

We can point to three points of contention in the debate. The first is the use of Halakhah as a justification for policy in the State of Israel. A main issue on the table was the proposal Kahane had made in the Knesset for what was known then as "transfer," forcibly transferring the Palestinians in the West Bank to the Jordanian side of the river and then annexing the West Bank as part of Israel. It was a proposal that had been soundly rejected by the Knesset. Kahane argued that Arabs in Israel were the enemy and that coexistence could only happen if they were reconciled to Jewish hegemony. He repeated a comment he often noted that "the Arabs" were as fervently nationalist as Jews and thinking that they would compromise their national aspirations was an illusion. Palestinians, he claimed, would never abandon their national aspirations for indoor plumbing and a washing machine and should not be expected to do so.

Kahane cited Maimonides's description of how the biblical Israelites dealt with the seven nations in the land of Canaan as a mandate for his zero-sum tolerance for non-Jews in Israel. More precisely, he pointed to the *Mishneh Torah* for halakhic support as he stated: to the Arab individual, full civil rights if they bow to Jewish hegemony, to the Arab collectivity, nothing. (This, of course, is eerily similar to the Napoleonic equation for Jewish emancipation in France in the first decade of the nineteenth century.)

Greenberg responded with a list of rabbinic authorities who do not consider gentiles, especially Christians, to be idolaters, thus claiming that Kahane's halakhic justification for transfer was irrelevant. Security, for Greenberg, was only



possible by taking a risk that included cultivating a trustworthy Palestinian leadership and working toward a two-state solution. Kahane, echoing a strong sentiment in Israeli and American Jewish society at the time countered that there is no Palestinian "people" and thus any national aspirations are founded on a myth.

Once Halakhah was evoked as both a rhetorical and substantive device, the debate became a battle for authenticity with Kahane at a significant advantage. In an Orthodox setting, the use of Halakhah was viewed as a legitimate approach to adjudicate these issues. What was missing was that Israel, the subject of the debate, is a secular state where Halakhah's authority in the public sphere is limited to a very narrow set of issues (marriage, divorce, conversion, and burial). Greenberg could have deflected the halakhic conversation by claiming that Kahane's idea of transfer was an attempt to transform the state into a theocracy, which was antithetical to the entire Zionist project. He did not make that argument, and I think he missed an important, even crucial, opportunity.

Indeed, Kahane openly stated that he supported democracy in Israel only for Jews and not for Arabs. Again, Greenberg could have exposed Kahane's revolutionary and subversive agenda by stressing the secular nature of the state and that by definition, democracy for some and not others is not democracy. But Greenberg, himself an Orthodox Jew and a Religious Zionist, chose to make a halakhic argument instead. The problem was that Greenberg did not make a strong enough case for the morality of Halakhah regarding the non-Jew in the Land of Israel. Kahane, armed with his simplistic and out-of-context reading of Maimonides's *Mishneh Torah*, sounded to the Orthodox audience more like a traditional rabbi.

A second issue emerged with Kahane's insistence that Zionism and the State must be focused on Jewish survival over peace, which he relegated to messianic times. As he put it, "In my plan there will be no peace. When Messiah comes there will be peace. Until then, survival, survival, survival." In contrast, Greenberg argued that the state had moral responsibilities and spoke in somewhat lofty terms about morality as a vehicle for redemption, even without the presence of the Messiah. He sounded like a Peace Now advocate using religious language.

The deflection of all messianic references in Kahane's Zionism went uncontested. The irony of his position was that after making a halakhic case for excluding Arabs from Israeli democracy, he was arguing that Israel is a completely secular nation-state with no moral or redemptive responsibilities beyond the survival of the Jewish people. The debate illustrates more broadly how much the Orthodox community in America was naïve in its understanding of Israel's political reality as a secular state with the responsibility of being part of the community of nations.

The third central issue of the debate emerged in the final segment, which addressed the status of non-Orthodox rabbis in the State. This was a perfect opportunity for Greenberg to regain his footing as the audience would likely be receptive to arguments for this type of pluralism in Israel as many may have had non-Orthodox parents, children, or other relatives. Citing Kahane's own words from a recent *Jewish Press* article about the illegitimacy of non-Orthodox rabbis, Greenberg tried to paint Kahane as an enemy to non-Orthodox Jews, by insinuating that once the "Arab problem" was solved Kahane would come after his fellow Jews.

It was a clever tactic, but it failed. Kahane claimed to be "outraged" that his childhood friend should even suggest that he would ever pit Jew against Jew. He noted that as a Knesset member he worked daily with mostly non-observant Jews for the security of Israel. Harkening back again to the Napoleonic compromise of emancipation, he asserted that the individual Jew in Israel is equal no matter what he or she believes or how they choose to live. Non-Orthodox *Judaism*, however, is not acceptable because it is not committed to Halakhah. He asserted that giving Reform (and other non-Orthodox) Judaism legitimacy in Israel would invalidate Halakhah entirely and empower a liberal agenda that would put Israel's security, and thus its existence, at risk. Greenberg did not have a good response to this beyond restating his commitment to pluralism. He continued to insinuate that for Kahane the non-Orthodox Jew was equal to the Arab, while Kahane returned fire by ceding the point only in regards to non-Orthodox *Judaism*. It was difficult for Greenberg to make his case without aligning himself, at least to some extent, with non-Orthodox Judaism, which he did not want to do. Kahane thus turned Greenberg's strongest points against him. The audience was sympathetic to Greenberg here, but in the end, their own anxiety about a liberal solution in Israel turned them largely back to Kahane.

Finally, the date of this debate, winter 1988, is also very significant. Within a matter of months, the Israel Supreme Court would uphold the Knesset's "Racism Law" that would make Kahane's Kach party illegal and remove Kahane from the Knesset. In subsequent writing, Kahane became increasingly negative and desperate about the entire Zionist project, more apocalyptic, and more frightening. This debate was one of the last times Kahane would speak in America as a Knesset member, with the implicit authority of the state behind him. By the spring of 1988, he would be an outcast and increasingly defensive in his public appearances.

Kahane and Greenberg never appeared together again.