

Jewish Theopolitics: Considering the Rising Right in Israel and Beyond

Prof. Dr. Jonathan Schorsch

School of Jewish Theology

Ringvorlesung / Lecture Series

Monday, 16.15-18.45 CET. BA. (Basismodul Geschichte und Kultur)

Beginning April 1



Today's crises in Israel – the push for judicial reform, undermining Israeli democracy, using the current war as a cover for worsening conditions for Palestinians and for curtailing freedom of thought and expression – bring into stark view questions regarding the understanding of politics held by Judaism traditionally and by modern leaders and thinkers across the denominations. As is true in the West in general, right-wing political and religious forces have spawned to dangerous effect in Israel and throughout the Jewish world, though the features differ somewhat. In this course we will seek to understand this phenomenon from historical, religious, and sociological perspectives.

Do Jews have a particular obligation to combat political parties and movements that push authoritarian, anti-democratic, ethno-supremacist values, methods and policies? (Part of our course will be devoted to defining right-wing politics.) Does Germany / do Germans have a particular obligation to warn Israel/Israelis of the cost of right-wing politics? In what ways is the right-wing understanding of Judaism, with its Jewish supremacism, selective, distorted, and mendacious? What resources do Judaism and Jewish history offer those of us struggling against right-wing Jewish/Israeli politics?

What are effective arguments and strategies against right-wing ideology? What are Jews in and outside of Israel to do about Israeli authoritarianism? What is the connection, if there is one, between neoliberalism and the rise of right-wing nationalism? Are current failures of democracy also a cause of the rise of the right? Why is it important to acknowledge the anxieties many Jews have regarding antisemitism and/or Arab/Muslim threats to Israel or Jews in general? Why do we need to admit that Jewish supremacism and anti-democratic authoritarianism in Israel is hardly new, but actually comprised much of political Zionism and Israeli policy toward Palestinians? Is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict the root cause of Jewish/Israeli authoritarianism? Is antisemitism a cause or effect of Jewish/Israeli authoritarianism (or both)?

The struggle against antidemocratic and authoritarian movements is not merely a political one. The political unconscious must be addressed, which is inescapably

intertwined with theology, psychology, notions of tradition, culture, and community, and the like. It is imperative not to fall into facile binarisms, to demonize the other, or to exempt ourselves from critical scrutiny. Ultimately, it may be the basic skills of emotional intelligence, listening with empathy, respectful communication, and self-awareness that help us move forward politically.

This Ringvorlesung (lecture series) will feature multiple guest lecturers from Europe, Israel, and the United States.

Open to the general public with [registration](#) as an auditor or visiting student.

For more information: michael.lesley@uni-potsdam.de

Requirements for Credit Points

A final project that will take the form of a research paper, short film or video, graphic work (comic), PowerPoint presentation, etc. (7.000 characters minimum), on a topic chosen by the student in coordination with the instructor. Regardless of format, the presentation must have both a descriptive and analytical component.

Schedule

April 8

Introduction and Overview
Prof. Dr. Jonathan Schorsch

Umberto Eco, "Ur-Fascism," *The New York Review of Books*, 22 June 1995. PDF.

Masha Gessen, "How to Maintain Hope in an Age of Catastrophe," Interview with Robert Jay Lifton, *The New Yorker*, 12 November 2023. PDF.

April 15

Moshe Behar
The Israeli Right, *Longue durée*: Before and After 1977

Behar, "Past and Present Perfect of Israel's One-State Solution," in *Israel and Palestine: Alternative Perspectives on Statehood*, John Ehrenberg & Yoav Peled, eds. (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2016), 243-270.

Behar, "Unparallel Universes: Iran and Israel's One-state Solution," *Global Society* (2011)

April 22

No class. Passover.

April 29

Prof. Dr. Shaul Magid
on Meir Kahane and his continuing influence

May 6

Rachel Z. Feldman
Assistant Professor of Religion
Dartmouth College

The Third Temple Movement: Jewish Theocracy in Israel Today

Professor Feldman will share some of her anthropological research on a theocratic biblical revival movement that has mainstreamed in Israel in recent years gaining unprecedented support from both religious and secular politicians in the Knesset. Over the past decade, Feldman conducted intensive ethnographic research with theocratic activists in Jerusalem; Jewish men and women who view the rebuilding of a temple on the Temple Mount/Haram ash-Sharif, the renewal of animal sacrifices (discontinued for thousands of years in Judaism), and the restoration of a Jewish monarchy, as the prophesized conclusion to Zionism. Feldman's previous publications on the topic examined why and how the Third Temple Movement, which first began as a marginal and violent initiative in the 1980s, managed to gain access to state resources, funding, and police protection since 2012. Theocratic activists, Feldman argues, have been successful precisely because they act as proxy-state actors and a supportive appendage to the liberal state.

13 May

Tovah Sheleg

One of the Jerusalem protest leaders against the legal reform, leads the weekly demonstrations in the city.

We will conduct an in-depth acquaintance with the protest against the legal reform in Israel. We will discuss the goals of the protest, its challenges and achievements. We will analyze the place of the protest in the tension between the democratic identity and the Jewish identity of the State of Israel. In addition, we will discuss the motivations of the key people promoting the reform — in the government and the Knesset — and try to understand the social and political background that brought religious fundamentalists to positions of influence. Finally, we will discuss the question of how Israel can get out of the crisis

May 20

No class. Pentecost Monday.

May 27

Elli Stern
Yale University

Prof. Stern will speak about the relationship between Orthodoxy and the New Right. Specifically, he will focus on the ways in which Agudath Israel was transformed from a “social justice” organization to a family values organization over the course of the 1980s. This development was a function of domestic politics and the changing nature of religious identity in American life.

June 3

Dr. Avraham Shilon
Columbia University
From Jabotinsky to Netanyahu Days: Changes and Continuities in the Zionist Right-Wing

June 10

Judaism and Democracy: A Roundtable Discussion with Youth Organization Representatives
Organized by Dr. Alejandro Cozachcow

June 17

David Gushee
Mercer University

On the Christian right, Christian Zionism

June 24

Prof. Dr. Menachem Lorberbaum
Tel Aviv University

The Kingdom of God.

At least two different thematic strands grow out of this enticing vision. One that I shall term theocratic, which touches upon the legitimacy of human politics – may human beings rule one another? The other is hierocratic: it envisions a kingdom of priests that view both sanctuary and sanctity as the axis of human societal existence. The first strand is theologically-politically inclined and calls into question worldly governance and policy and can be anarchistic in tenor. The second is focused on a regimen of sanctification. In the modern nation-state the two combine into a toxic religious politics. Most especially when a third theme is enlisted: divine history as an eschatological vision of human salvation working itself out through human political history.

July 1

Prof. Atalia Omer
Professor of Religion, Conflict, and Peace Studies
Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies/Sociology
Keough School of Global Affairs
The University of Notre Dame

Grappling with Idolatry: American Jews and the B'tselem Apartheid Report: from the Zionization of Jewishness to decolonial disruptions.

I scrutinize the public reactions to the release of the Jewish Israeli human rights organization B'tselem report naming the geopolitical space of historical Palestine apartheid. I will trace responses of American Jewish establishment voices and institutions and their discrediting techniques of an organization that offers (as many

Palestinian individuals and organizations did prior) evidence-based accounts of the human rights violations and the operation of the crime of apartheid and what B'tselem terms a "Jewish-supremacist regime." How and why, for example, when public arguments against Israel's own language to describe its policies of "Judaizing the Galilee or the Negev" are rendered antisemitic and whether "Judaizing" through depopulation is indeed "Jewish"? What makes it "Jewish"? I will trace the kind of internal debates revolving around such issues and representations of B'Tselem's analysis in the US. The Hasbara (or Israel Zionist public diplomacy) spin shows that Israeli public diplomacy relies on weaponization to antisemitism and mythology about Jewish insecurity rather than evidence that points to Israeli domination and belligerence. This reveals the zionization of American (white) Jewish identity. I will trace the rhetorical techniques and the political theology they convey as deployed by a host of American Jewish spokespersons in the US to explain away the inconsistency of Israel with the rhetoric about it (e.g., "the only democracy in the Middle East"). The public diplomacy replicates and reinforces a myopic Jewish-Israeli Zionist liberalism and redemptive narratives articulated on a "secular" or religious register. The presentation will ask how the assimilation of American Jews into whiteness and civilizational Islamophobic discourses explains Jewish complicity with and support of (and active participation in) white Christian nationalist (which is also necessarily antisemitic) trends. Finally, I will also identify points of departure of American Jews from their socialization into Israelism (the worship of Israel or the reduction of Jewishness to the unquestioning sacralization of a nation-state) and their recognition in the level of grassroots of the intersections of their safety with their commitment to anti-racism and broader social justice issues propelled by marginalized communities and genders.

July 8

Adam Stern

Assistant Professor of Jewish Studies and German, Nordic, & Slavic+
University of Wisconsin-Madison

History/War/Zionism

In his 1921 book, *The Star of Redemption*, Franz Rosenzweig makes the idiosyncratic claim that Jews are a people "outside of history" and, for that same reason, a people that "does not know war." In his 1976 lectures, "*Society Must Be Defended*," Michel

Foucault makes a parallel claim about French and British history: “War is waged throughout history, and through the history that tells the history of war.” My contribution to this year’s discussion of “Jewish Theopolitics” takes these two texts as the comparative starting point for a more wide-ranging philosophical and political inquiry into the continuity between Jewish war and Jewish history. I ask: Is there some truth to Rosenzweig’s suggestion that Jews were (once) a “people without history”? And if so, has the Zionist “return to history” always and inevitably been a Jewish return to war? Through these questions and others, I identify the centrality of concepts like “invasion,” “struggle,” and “conquest” in modern Jewish historiography. I will close by assessing the significance of this theological-political tradition for any understanding of the Jewish settler colony in Palestine.

July 15

Closing Session

Prof. Dr. Jonathan Schorsch