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# Introduction

## WHY KAHANE?

IN THE EARLY SPRING of 2018 I was attending a bat mitzvah in a Jewish suburb of a major American city. The bat mitzvah was at a large Modern Orthodox synagogue. During the Shabbat-day festive meal I was waiting on line at the buffet when I struck up a conversation with a professional-looking man, probably in his mid-fifties. He seemed educated, friendly, and not particularly ideological. He asked me what I did, and I told him that I was at the Center for Jewish History in New York on a research grant. He asked me what I was working on. When I told him I was writing a cultural biography of Meir Kahane, his eyes opened wide and he responded, “If you want my opinion, I agree with everything Kahane said. Everything he predicted came true. He just should have said it in a nicer way.” What was so striking to me about his response was its matter-of-factness—his willingness to make that statement to someone he barely knew as if it was uncontroversial. I was wearing a kippah, and as far as he knew, I was a member of the Modern Orthodox “club” that gave him license to voice his positive assessment of Kahane. As we moved on to the buffet I was struck by how Kahane seems on the one hand to be a persona non grata in American Jewry, and yet on the other hand a figure whose presence remains ubiquitous, almost like part of the subconscious of a certain slice of American Judaism, especially Modern Orthodoxy.

More than half a century has passed since Meir Kahane founded the controversial Jewish Defense League (JDL) in New York in May 1968. The JDL was established as a response to the 1968 Ocean Hill–Brownsville school strike that crippled the New York City school system. I tell the story of the role of the strike in Kahane’s career in more detail in chapters 1 and 3, but here it suffices to say that anti-Semitic pamphlets were distributed by some African

American PTA members of the school district in part because the president of the United Federation of Teachers, Albert Shanker, was a Jew, and the district had a high percentage of white Jewish teachers among a student population that was over 90 percent black and Hispanic.<sup>1</sup> In addition, liberal mayor John Lindsay, who sided with the teachers' union and Shanker against the parents, was a longtime target for Kahane. Kahane disagreed with Lindsay's liberalism and felt he was not acting in the interest of the Jews of the city.

Through the early 1970s, the JDL flourished and chapters arose in many urban centers in America. The notion of Jewish pride and protecting vulnerable Jews against criminality struck a chord with a new generation of Jews and with older Jews who felt vulnerable in their neighborhoods. JDL activities also included arms smuggling across state lines and illegal transportation of materials to make explosives. They were followed closely by J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI, and by law enforcement. By 1975 the JDL had largely collapsed under local and federal indictments for arms smuggling and possession of explosives. Kahane, for his part, moved to Israel in September 1971 and founded a political party, KACH. After two failed attempts to be elected to the Knesset, he succeeded in 1984. In 1986 KACH was labeled a racist party by the Knesset and Kahane was removed from his parliamentary post. The JDL in America continued without him but never really overcame its legal troubles. And without Kahane as the charismatic leader, it ultimately descended into little more than a street gang.

In Israel, Kahane continued his clandestine activities; by 1972 he had already spent time in Israeli jails. He was arrested over sixty times and found guilty of numerous offenses including incitement to violence. His organization was labeled a terrorist group in Israel, and many of its members spent considerable time in American and Israeli prisons. Nevertheless, even in 2018, a middle-aged Modern Orthodox man at a buffet table might state matter-of-factly to an almost total stranger that "I agree with everything Kahane said. Everything he predicted came true." Many of the ideas Kahane professed continue to resonate today, even in more conventional or mainstream parts of American and Israeli Jewry.

Why write a book about Meir Kahane? Over the past six or seven years, whenever I mention to friends or colleagues that I have been working on such a book, I get one of two reactions. Some scratch their heads and ask, "Why would you want to spend so much time working on such a despicable person, a thug, someone who was an embarrassment to the Jewish people?" But others say, "Oh, that's a great project; I always thought someone should write a

serious study of him.”<sup>2</sup> The fact that the prospect of a scholarly study of Kahane elicits such starkly opposite reactions is precisely why such a work is needed and where this book begins.

I never met Meir Kahane, although for some years I inhabited a world where he was ubiquitous. In the early 1980s, I once shared a rental in Boro Park, Brooklyn, with a JDL member. He was a young idealistic type. He was very proud to be a Jew and wore a kippah, but he was not very religious; I am not even sure he kept Shabbat. On his bookshelf, next to a Pentateuch and a book of Psalms, was a four-volume softcover set of books entitled *How to Kill*. This series offered details of different ways of murdering someone, including some very graphic photos, instructive diagrams, and lists of weapons. Leaning against the wall were a few baseball bats, brass knuckles, and nunchucks (which were by then illegal in New York State). We remained casual acquaintances. I was a *haredi* yeshiva student at the time, and he was a street Jew, one of Kahane’s “chayas” (animals), although he was tall and skinny and not a threatening figure at all. Thinking about him after all these years and after close to a decade of seriously reading Kahane’s work, I doubt he had read much of what Kahane wrote. But he was a proud Jew because of what Kahane *represented*. Kahane represented Jewish pride.

By 1980 the JDL was a skeleton of what it once was in the early 1970s, decimated by arrests, indictments, and emigration to Israel. By that time Kahane occasionally visited or wrote to the organization he founded, but he had moved past it, his eyes now set on a political career in Israel. But the JDL nevertheless lived on, and Kahane’s image continued to inspire young adherents—as it does to this day.

Who was Meir Kahane? Meir Kahane was an American Jew. He was born in New York City on August 1, 1932, and raised in a middle-class neighborhood in Brooklyn. He spent his adolescence among Jews, many of whom had survived the Holocaust, in a community reeling from the devastating effects of the Nazi genocide. The Holocaust was ever present and at the same time, absent. It surrounded everything but was often hushed up publicly. Kahane’s proximate family was not directly affected by the Holocaust; they had emigrated to America or Mandatory Palestine before the Nazi onslaught. After high school, Kahane spent thirteen years attending the Mir Yeshiva in Brooklyn. “The Mir,” as it was called, was transplanted from Russia via Kobe, Japan, where many of its students fled after the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union. Its New York branch opened in 1946 with support from American Jews, one of whom was Kahane’s father Charles.

One of the most respected figures at the Mir and the leader of the New York branch was Rabbi Abraham Kalmanowitz (1887–1964). He had been the head of the Telz Yeshiva in Lithuania (which relocated to Cleveland, Ohio) and was elected head of the Mir Yeshiva in 1926 in Belarus. Kalmanowitz led many of its students to Japan sometime before the Nazi liquidation of the Mir Ghetto on August 13, 1942. Kahane had a very close relationship with Kalmanowitz, who officiated at his wedding and gave him rabbinic ordination. During his years at the Mir, Kahane became well versed in classical Jewish texts as well as the method known as *musar*, which uses Jewish texts to facilitate self-perfection and behavior modification. This will be explored in some detail in chapter 6. Interestingly, while he served as rabbi of a few congregations in Queens and Brooklyn, New York, in the 1950s, his early career and writings do not exhibit his yeshiva training. Among his young JDL constituents he was called “the Reb” (a hip euphemism for “rabbi”), but it isn’t until he settles in Israel in the early 1970s that one sees his religious character come to the fore. In chapter 6 I explore in some detail his magnum opus *The Jewish Idea*, a work of over six hundred pages in Hebrew and a thousand pages in English, where Kahane’s yeshiva training becomes readily apparent. In general, as will be discussed in chapters 5 and 6, Kahane became a religious figure in Israel in ways he was not in America.

Trained as a rabbi and studying in yeshivot, Kahane also graduated from the NYU School of Law with a law degree specializing in international studies but repeatedly failed to pass the bar exam. An avid baseball fan, he worked as a sports writer for a local newspaper in Brooklyn, as a congregational rabbi, and then as a journalist for the *Jewish Press*, a Brooklyn weekly. Until the mid-1960s it seems Kahane was heading for a middling career as another Modern Orthodox rabbi in New York City. But he clearly had aspirations of grandeur. In 1967 he published a book, *The Jewish Stake in Vietnam*, coauthored with his childhood friend and political operative Joseph Churba, and the same year testified to Congress about Soviet Jewry. But it was really the founding of the JDL in May 1968 that made Kahane a public figure, largely due to the organization’s militant activities in New York, Philadelphia, and Boston and its ability to get into the regional and national press.

He rose to national fame through his involvement with Soviet Jewry. While he published a short article called “To Save Soviet Jewry” in 1964, he did not involve himself with them until late 1969; the movement on their behalf was officially established by Yaakov Birnbaum in 1964.<sup>3</sup> By 1970 Kahane became a central figure in the Soviet Jewry movement. He also founded a summer camp,

Camp Jedel, where campers learned martial arts, self-defense, and how to shoot guns.

Kahane emigrated to Israel in September 1971 after he was given a suspended sentence for illegal activities tied to the JDL. In 1975 he returned to America to serve out a sentence for parole violations, spending a year in a federal penitentiary in Allenwood, Pennsylvania, where, among other things, he successfully campaigned for kosher food in the prison. When he returned to Israel, he began a political career, eventually (as noted) founding his own party, and in 1984 he was elected to the Knesset. The controversies surrounding his ideas culminated in 1986 in the “Racism Law” passed to oust him from the Knesset and ban his political party. On November 5, 1990, after a speech at the Marriott Hotel in Manhattan, Kahane was shot in the neck at close range by El Sayyid Nosair, an Egyptian-born Muslim who lived in New Jersey. Nosair was acquitted of the murder. Yet years later, when convicted of charges relating to the first World Trade Center bombing, he admitted to murdering Kahane. Kahane’s funeral in Israel was one of the largest in the history of the country.

Kahane’s life was colorful and controversial. During his heyday in America (1968–1974) his name was widely known among American Jews and the JDL received donations from various sectors of the Jewish community, religious and secular. But despite his ubiquity during an important era for American Jewry, his life and thought have not been fully integrated into the history of American Jews and Judaism. For example, while researching this book, I was looking up a source in the definitive history of Jews in America, Jonathan Sarna’s *American Judaism*—first published in 2004 with a new edition in 2019—and I was struck by the fact that this six-hundred-page study does not contain a single reference to Meir Kahane or the JDL.<sup>4</sup> How could this be, given how influential Kahane was in the United States from the late 1960s through the 1980s? My point here is not to criticize Sarna’s monumental work, nor to suggest that a scholar of his stature might have simply forgotten about Kahane or the JDL. My sense is that this omission was intentional and reflects a broader impulse to expunge him—and the radical militancy he represents—from our narratives about American Jewish culture and history. This book makes the case that this history cannot be told without him.

Most studies on the iconoclastic rabbi Meir Kahane view his life and work in reverse. That is, even when they examine his life in America, they often regard it from the lens of his later career in Israel. For example, Daniel Breslauer’s book *Meir Kahane: Ideologue, Hero, Thinker* focuses a good deal on his life in

America and yet consistently refers to him as a “fanatic.”<sup>5</sup> While I do think “fanatic” captures Kahane’s later life and while his program in Israel could easily be deemed “fanatical,” I don’t think the term quite describes his American career, certainly not in the 1960s and early 1970s. Radicalism, yes; fanaticism, no.<sup>6</sup> Viewing Kahane from back to front may be the reason why Sarna’s otherwise comprehensive *American Judaism* completely ignores him. I do not think any history of Israel from 1948 to the present could ever get away with not mentioning Kahane. His rise and fall in Israeli politics and society was a major event in Israel in the 1980s.

I think part of the explanation is that American Jewry and many of its historians are embarrassed by Kahane and refuse to view him as a noteworthy figure even though until the mid- to late 1970s he was ubiquitous on the national stage. I would venture to say that from 1968 to 1973 Kahane was mentioned more frequently in the *New York Times* than any other American rabbi. He gave a feature interview to *Playboy* in 1972 and was the subject of a major article in *Esquire* that same year. Even given that national exposure, many viewed his radical reactionary views as an aberration in the otherwise liberal or progressive climate of postwar America. It is true that his career in America was quite short; he emerged on the scene as a public figure in the late 1960s and by 1971 had left for Israel. While he subsequently divided his time between Israel and the US, one could argue that by the mid-1970s Kahane was no longer part of American Jewish history. This book maintains that such assumptions are mistaken.

Rather than viewing America as Kahane’s prehistory and his career in Israel as having significant and lasting impact, I view Kahane and his significance the other way around. America was where his impact was really felt and Israel was a kind of a coda where he ultimately did not succeed, in part because his thinking remained mired in an American discourse. True, there is a significant afterlife of Kahanism in Israel until today, but that afterlife is in large part the product of a homegrown Israeli Kahanism, or neo-Kahanism, that is less about him than we imagine. The Kahanism of Meir Kahane was a dismal failure in Israel. As I will try to show throughout this book, Kahanism was—not in its tactics but in its worldview—far more successful in America than we imagine precisely because he was and remained a product of postwar American Judaism.

His story is not only a Jewish story, nor is it only a Jewish-American story. It is a story of religion and ethnic identity in America in the second half of the twentieth century. Kahane’s Jewish radicalism is an untold chapter in the



radicalism of race, ethnicity, and identity politics in the 1960s and 1970s. Kahane should be placed alongside Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael, and the Jewish Defense League should be viewed alongside the Black Panthers and the Young Lords. Can we even imagine a history of black America in the twentieth century without one mention of Malcolm X or the Black Panthers? Even as some historians today may wince at the separatism and militarism of Black Power, they could not justify erasing it from the annals of African American history.

When scholars of American religion today include chapters on Jews and Judaism in their work, these chapters almost never mention Kahane or the JDL. And yet I will argue throughout this book that the shift away from classical liberalism and assimilationism in American Jewry, while it is certainly caused by many factors, also includes the influence of the fairly brief but intense presence of Kahanism as a contestation of cultural and political liberalism. He played a significant role in the emergence of the Jewish counterculture of the baby boomer generation, and he played a part in radical American politics from about 1965 to 1974.

This book is not a biography in any conventional sense. I do not offer a chronological account of Kahane's life nor do I dwell on his background, friendships, or family. For those details one can look at Libby Kahane's very useful, albeit uncritical, two-volume biography *Rabbi Meir Kahane: His Life and Thought*, Robert Friedman's journalistic *False Prophet*, Daniel Breslauer's *Meir Kahane: Ideologue, Hero, and Thinker*, or Yair Kotler's polemical *Heil Kahane*.<sup>7</sup> I am a scholar of Jewish thought and not a social historian. What interests me are the ideas that inform Jewish culture, politics, and religion. This book about Meir Kahane is concerned with the trajectory of his thought in the context of the changing contours of postwar America and later in Israel during the development of right-wing Zionism in the 1970s and 1980s.

As with any public figure, Kahane's life is very much a part of his thought and therefore his life often enters into this study, especially in America. I argue that he is best viewed as a cultural icon who was able to shift the discourse of American Jewry, and later Israeli politics, through sheer will, perseverance, and maniacal certitude. Kahane was a Jewish radical, a militant advocate for Jewish pride, and a destructive force against human decency. But he was also an influential critic of the hypocrisy of 1960s and 1970s American Jewish liberalism and a gadfly to its power.

In Israel, he tapped into the anger and resentment of many who were excluded from the liberally minded Ashkeno-centric circles of power. He was a



political jokester, a huckster, and an attention seeker. He was also a powerful critic of hypocrisy, even as his life is itself a study in hypocrisy. Kahane claimed to love all Jews—he often signed personal letters with “for the love of Israel”—yet he spoke derisively about most Jews who disagreed with him. He claimed his fidelity was to Israel and yet he was a quintessential American, even decades after emigrating to Israel. He may have lived in Israel from 1971 until his assassination in 1990 (while spending about half his time in America), but in many ways he remained an American thinker, which is why I argue that his Israeli career was a failure until it struck more indigenous roots among his Israeli followers.

America was where Kahane made his mark, and he made quite a mark—more so, I suggest, than is usually recognized. His militancy has been largely rejected by the American Jewish establishment. Yet many of his basic precepts have been embraced among present-day American Jewry. This is an audacious claim, but I hope that after reading this book it will seem less provocative even if no less alarming. Kahane spoke of Jewish “survival” in a decade when Jewish liberals were still talking about acculturation. Kahane warned of the dangers of intermarriage (e.g., writing a book on the subject in 1974) long before the “intermarriage crisis” became standard fare in American Jewish circles. He was an “Israel right or wrong” advocate before AIPAC and before Israel became the civil religion of American Jewry. He decried the anti-Semitism on the left when most establishment figures were worried about anti-Semitism on the right. And he argued for a Jewish turn toward conservatism a full decade before the rise of neoconservatism. Today much of mainstream American Jewry has become “survivalist,” even if we now prefer more genteel terms like “continuity.”

More than many others, Kahane understood programmatically the turn in American culture in the era of the New Left. Militarism was a product of the time, and he adopted it toward Jewish ends when most Jews viewed it as something “goyish.” When he founded Camp Jedel (which was coed) in 1971 in Wawarsing, New York, in the Catskills, campers learned to shoot guns “as Jews.” Today many American Jews send their children for a year in Israel where they take part in Gadna, an Israeli military training program for youth where they learn to shoot guns “as Jews.” Militarism has found a comfortable home among many of today’s American Jews—so long as it is aimed at the defense of Israel. Kahane wanted to make that true in the Diaspora as well. “Every Jew a .22” was his brand. This is not to say that the American Jewish community is Kahanist. Kahane wanted Jews to embrace the use of violence wherever the

lives of Jews are threatened or curtailed, including in the Diaspora, and this is where mainstream American Jewish opinion parts company with him—at least for now. However, many of the structural shifts in questions of Jewish identity, including the issue of anti-Semitism, that have taken root in contemporary American soil were espoused by Kahane long before they were popular.

This book takes Kahane's thought seriously, interweaving accounts of his life, activities, and activism with close analysis of his writings. Not wedded to strict chronology, I return to certain seminal events numerous times throughout the book, examining them from different vantage points depending on the context. Chapters 1 and 2 discuss his critique of liberalism and embrace of radicalism and contextualize it in relation to the political landscape of 1960s America. Chapter 3 turns to the charges of racism against him, drawing out his own discourse about Jews and race and its resonance with the Black Nationalism of his time. Then in chapter 4 I examine his involvement in the Soviet Jewry movement and its relationship to his pro-Vietnam War stance and his writings against communism. In chapters 5 and 6 I consider his Zionism through the lens of his major writings while in Israel. In the process, this book seriously investigates Kahane's "survivalism" in all its facets with an eye to his continued influence even today.

The final two chapters focus on Kahane's career in Israel, and they are based more on his writings than his personal activities. The reason is my surmise that when Kahane begins his rise in the Israeli political world in the 1970s, he becomes a public figure who is known as an ideologue and a voice for a disenfranchised and angry segment of the Israeli population. He writes prodigiously, addressing both the Israeli context and American Judaism. In 1975 he published *The Story of the Jewish Defense League*, which is a kind of retrospective of his American career. In addition, he published a book on intermarriage in America (*Why Be Jewish?*) and one on the failure of American Judaism (*Time to Go Home*) after his *aliyah*. That is, even as he became an "Israeli," he never really left his American roots or his self-appointed role as critic of American Jewry. Most of his Israeli followers know little of those writings.

In the 1980s Kahane focused more on his critique of Israeli society and his increasingly apocalyptic vision of redemption. The last two chapters focus on the trajectory of his thought from an American militant Zionist to an apocalyptic prophet of doom, what I call militant post-Zionism. And yet, as I articulate in the conclusion, even toward the end of his life Kahane still thought very much like an American, which is why he was never quite able to navigate the

complex world of Israeli politics; it was only after his death that a homegrown Israeli version of Kahanism that I call neo-Kahanism began to grow. This neo-Kahanism integrates Kookian romantic thinking and the national-religious ideology that emerged among the students of Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook. As I show in chapter 5, Kahane had little interest or use for Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook or his son Zvi Yehuda.

Once he gets his sea legs in Israel in the mid-1970s, and certainly by the early 1980s, his political writings about the future of Israel become his trademark. Personally, he settled into Mattersdorf, a middle-class religious neighborhood in Jerusalem where he lived until his death in 1990, and his domestic life in Israel appears fairly normal. His wife Libby became a librarian and archivist and his children were raised in the religious community in Jerusalem. His son Benjamin was murdered in a terrorist attack in the West Bank in 2000. His short-lived love affair in the mid-1960s with an Italian woman in New York named Gloria Jean D'Argenio aka Estelle Donna Evans, who committed suicide after Kahane broke off the relationship, seems not to have followed him to Israel. There he increasingly adopts a religious persona that serves as the basis of his following.

A note on the organization of the chapters: Since this is not a conventional biography, certain events that happen later are discussed earlier than those that precede them. In fact, the time frame of the entire book is quite short—a mere two decades from Kahane's emergence as a public figure with the founding of the JDL in 1968 to his murder in 1990. In retrospect, it is quite fascinating that what Kahane brought into the world, and what remains thirty years after his death, all occurred in a mere twenty-two years, and the majority of this book, excluding the final two chapters, focuses on little more than a decade, from 1968 until the early 1980s.<sup>8</sup> The chapters are ordered to provide a sense of what is at stake for Kahane and how the key themes impel his activism in both America and Israel. Thus I begin with liberalism and radicalism as these were the issues at play in the late 1960s when Kahane entered the public sphere. Chapter 2 dispels a myth that his reactionary politics were hopelessly at odds with the progressive-left New Jews of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Both were radical critiques of liberalism and expressions of Jewish identity and pride, often using similar methods toward different ends. From there I move to race and violence, which stand at the very center of Kahane's activist project of facing down Jewish assimilation and what he sarcastically called "melting."

The chapter on Vietnam and Soviet Jewry shows that Soviet Jewry was for him merely a piece of a much more complex vision of anticommunism that

informs his support for the Vietnam War when most Jews were against it. It is only after a detailed assessment of his American career that we can understand what transpired once he became a political actor in Israel.<sup>9</sup> The last two chapters trace the trajectory of his Zionist “wokeness” in Israel and, after successes and failures, his turn to a dark apocalyptic politics and, in my view, an abandonment of any kind of conventional Zionism. Thus while the venue and context changed, the same basic issues animated his thinking through his short but intense public career.

As a way of keeping a focus not only on Kahane and his thinking but also his afterlife and impact on American Judaism today, exemplified in my Modern Orthodox interlocutor at the buffet table, many of the chapters conclude with a series of observations, often intentionally provocative, about how Kahane’s intervention plays out in subsequent decades. These codas are meant to dispel the impression that we are engaged in a purely historical project, and to suggest that we are dealing with a presentist project as well. I argue that by marginalizing or ignoring Kahane we have not seen the way he has, in some way, hypnotized us. That is, we have absorbed more of his worldview than we think.

One of the more vexing challenges of writing a book on such a divisive, problematic, and complex figure is how to do justice to the man and his work in all their outrageousness while at the same time offering a coherent presentation of his ideas. In addition, there are specific challenges involved in writing about a middle-brow thinker. Kahane was not an intellectual; his worldview did not emerge from a deep engagement with the Western philosophical canon. He was a voracious reader of the *New York Times* and topical magazines such as *Time*, *Look*, *Newsweek*, and even *Commentary* and had a fairly lucid understanding of Jewish history as told through an Orthodox lens. The occupational hazard of this project is to make him more intellectually astute than he was. And yet what I have found in the years of delving into Kahane’s writings, often outrageous, cynical, comical, and offensive, is that he had an intuitive sense of the how the winds were blowing and had his finger on the pulse of the fears and anxieties of Jews, in America and in Israel. I would not go so far as to say that he was a savant, but he did have an uncanny ability to be in the right place at the right time and express (and also manipulate) the fears of his audience.

The Holocaust stands at the center of Kahane’s thought, and he was particularly astute about the anger and challenges of children of survivors who struggled against their parents’ often quietistic and fearful approach to the world around them. In a way the Holocaust was the very proof of his ideology. In

*Never Again!* he writes that most Jews misunderstand the Holocaust. It should not have been a surprise; quite the opposite, it was in a way the inevitable consequence of a world where gentiles simply hate Jews. The Holocaust was simply the instance when Jew-hatred could be implemented in an unfettered manner. According to Kahane, it was not a unique event in Jewish history but, rather, history's logical outcome.

Many of the young men and women who became his base, as it were, were receptive to the notion that anti-Semitism could never be erased, only managed through Jewish strength. In this sense, Kahane was an unadulterated post-Holocaust thinker.<sup>10</sup> He enabled many young Jews to express their frustration and anger, against their parents but also against their surroundings. He became their ticket to express a sense of pride in Jewish power that resembled what many of them saw emerging among Black Nationalists. "Jewish Panthers" was a badge of honor for many JDLers. He gave them an alternative vision of what it meant to be a Diaspora Jew, and for those who emigrated to Israel, to express their anti-Arab sentiment with no guilt.

Kahane and the JDL beg for a serious gender critique.<sup>11</sup> The movement Kahane initiated, while coed, was dominated by young men, and Kahane's worldview incorporated a strong sense of renewed masculinity to erase the effeminate stereotype of Jews that helped feed anti-Semitic tropes for centuries. His use of power and militancy was an attempt, in part, to rebuild the Jewish male in America.<sup>12</sup> Although he often modeled this reconstruction on the "muscle" Zionism of Max Nordau and later Ze'ev Jabotinsky, in many ways Kahane's renewed masculinity was in fact an adaptation of the Protestant masculinity of American religion more generally. As Sarah Imhoff notes in her *Masculinity and the Making of American Judaism*, masculinity was one of the ways Judaism became an American religion.<sup>13</sup> Kahane and the JDL are part of that story.

Thus what Kahane may have thought was an exercise in difference was in fact an exercise in assimilation. Ridding the Jew of the effeminate brand made the Jew more American and, in another sense, more "Protestant."<sup>14</sup> In one regard, then, we can say that the JDL may have been one of the most *assimilated* groups in American Judaism at the time. A serious gender critique of Kahane would then have to explore his marginalization of the feminine as a "mystique" that had damaged the Jew historically in favor of a "new man," a Jew who was both an avid sports fan and physically able and willing to defend himself. Kahane wanted to bury the Jewish "patsy"; but doing so was itself a kind of assimilatory act. The Jew becomes more of a Jew by becoming more of an American.

It is significant to note that while groups like the Black Panthers, whom Kahane both admired and despised, were also dominated by men, there were some important female figures in the Panther movement, for example, Elaine Brown, who took over its leadership in 1974, and Kathleen Cleaver, who was its communications secretary. The JDL had no such prominent women in leadership roles. A serious gender critique, here in terms of Kahane's reconstruction of the Jewish male, would be an important addition to studies of Kahane and his influence. This book does not take on that task but notes the veneration of male strength and the erasure of passivity in numerous places.

While some may argue that Kahane was an incoherent and self-contradictory thinker, I believe his ideas, even as they were presented in provocative and often ugly ways, do in fact cohere with a perspective of Jewish history, religion, and political life. While they may be chauvinistic, racist, and xenophobic, and they may at times offer simplistic and uninformed presentations of the complexities of the ideas he despised, for example, liberalism, Kahane propounds a vision of Jewishness, and later Judaism, that should not be summarily dismissed as incoherent. And the seeds of Kahane's chauvinistic vision indeed constitute a dark side of Judaism more generally. This book argues that he should be treated seriously and critically and the weaknesses of his worldview exposed.

*Meir Kahane: The Public Life and Political Thought of an American Jewish Radical* is not an apologia of Kahane, even though I sometimes think his critique of the Jewish establishment in America and Israel is quite incisive. Nor is it a diatribe against him.<sup>15</sup> It is an attempt to understand his worldview from his life, activism, and writings as a way to examine his influence, both in his time and today. And it is an attempt to see his influence today, especially in unpredictable places.

This book has two objectives. The first is to critically examine the outlook of one of the most divisive Jewish figures of the second half of the twentieth century. The second is to explore the way some of Kahane's ideas, which were shunned and rejected by much of the Jewish world, inadvertently seeped into the Jewish mainstream, certainly in Israel but also in America. One can see that in the snapshot of my Modern Orthodox friend at the bat mitzvah buffet that began this chapter.

In order to make the second case, I need to offer a coherent rendering of those ideas, both as they emerge from the Jewish tradition but also in the social and political context of postwar America and in an American Judaism that was struggling to both assimilate yet maintain a sense of difference in the

tumultuous countercultural years from about 1960 to 1980. In particular, I suggest that Kahane's ideas resonated with a young population, some of whom had been radicalized by New Left politics and found their way back to Judaism in light of the New Left's critique of Israel after 1967.

My argument is thus counterintuitive in the sense that I maintain that the figure who is one of the most shunned and maligned in recent Jewish history may unwittingly stand at the very center of Jews' continuing struggle to understand their place in history. In this sense, Kahane is to me what Sabbatai Zevi was for Gershom Scholem: the heretic who played a central role behind the scenes in defining a messianically infused normative Judaism, or in Kahane's case, Jewish identity.<sup>16</sup>

By any measure, his life and thought form a fascinating chapter in Jewish history. But there must be more. My contention is that he is not just a curious footnote to that history and should not be marginalized from our narratives about American Jews and Judaism in the twentieth century. Rather, Kahane's ideas remain very much alive, even where we might not expect to see them. We erase Kahane from our imagination and our history at our own peril.

This book is thus an intervention into contemporary Judaism and Jewishness as much as it is a book about Meir Kahane. Kahane makes most Jews uncomfortable, and rightfully so, and yet without that discomfort it is too easy to miss crucial fissures and gaping holes in understanding the Jewish experience today. Kahane is the Jew whom Jews would like to forget, and yet he keeps coming back to haunt us. The reason, I suggest, is that he remains very much inside the Jewish psyche, as the gentleman at the buffet readily acknowledged. The wager in this book is that there is no getting beyond Kahane except through him.

*Meir Kahane: The Public Life and Political Thought of an American Jewish Radical* is thus more than the story of one man. It is the story of a time through the lens of one man who was ubiquitous in that time—loved, hated, followed, rejected, imprisoned, lionized, politicized, and eventually martyred. Few Jewish individuals in the twentieth century evoked such visceral responses. And few have been so misunderstood.



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