



SEÇÃO TEMÁTICA

Messianic movements and the sacralization of the territory

Movimentos messiânicos e a sacralização do território

Vincenzo Pace*

Abstract: This article focuses on contemporary Messianic Judaism. The author deals particularly with the Chabad and Gush Emunim movements, which have established many settlements in the West Bank, Sinai Peninsula, Gaza Strip and Golan Heights. These settlements not only satisfy a vital need for living space, but are also the expression of a strong Messianic tension. This tension produces a *mundus imaginalis* (Corbin), the boundaries of which come between heaven and earth, between the biblical contours of the Promised Land and the harsh reality of a territory marked by war. The object of analysis is the toponymic politics developed by these Messianic movements in order to sacralize the territory in view of the coming of the Messiah.

Keywords: Messianism. Contemporary Judaism. Sacralization of the territory. Chabad. Gush Emunim.

Resumo: Este artigo tem como foco o judaísmo messiânico contemporâneo. O autor trabalha particularmente com os movimentos Chabad e Gush Emunim que estabeleceram muitos assentamentos na Cisjordânia, Península do Sinai, Faixa de Gaza e nos Montes Golá. Esses assentamentos não só satisfazem uma necessidade fundamental de espaço vital, como também são a expressão de uma tensão messiânica forte. Essa tensão produz um *mundus imaginalis* (Corbin), cujas fronteiras se encontram entre o céu e a terra, entre os contornos bíblicos da Terra Prometida e a dura realidade de um território marcado pela guerra. O objeto de análise é a política toponímica desenvolvida por esses movimentos Messiânicos para sacralizar o território com vistas à vinda do messias.

Palavras-chave: Messianismo. Judaísmo contemporâneo. Sacralização do território. Chabad. Gush Emunim.

Introduction

Looking at the map of Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories, the colonies seem to have spread at random. They form discrete points all over the territory, scattered like leopard spots with no apparent logical continuity. The latest villages (particularly those built since 1967, after the Six-Day war) do not generally correspond to any urban development plan explicitly proposed by the various (right- or left-wing) governments succeeding one another in the State of Israel (Levine and Mossberg, 2014).

The settlements represent the successful efforts of numerous social enterprises. They were designed and built by various collective movements that often took action before any government decided to support them. In many cases, these movements

* Doctor in Law and Philosophy (University of Padua). Professor of Sociology of Religion at the University of Padua. ORCID: 0000-0002-6861-3415 – contact: vincenzo.pace@unipd.it.

circumvented national laws and contravened international treaties¹ forbidding any confiscation of territories destined for the future State of Palestine. In short, the land was often occupied illegally. Studying the geography of these settlements can shed light on the collective movements that established them, their political projects, and the type of imaginal social world they express, and help us to understand whether this imaginal realm has been nourished by a religious narrative in some cases.

The object of my study is precisely the link between the value-oriented action (to borrow from Weber's language) and the sacralization of Palestinian territory by some Jewish collective movements settling in this area.

It is important to recall the main features of these settlements. They are inhabited by Israeli citizens, almost all Jews, largely on land within the Palestinian territories occupied by Israel ever since they won the Six-Day war in 1967. These settlements are to be found in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Golan Heights (in Syrian territory)². There used to be others in the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip too. The former were evacuated in 1979 as a consequence of the Camp David peace agreement between Egypt and Israel signed by Menachem Begin and Anwar al-Sadat, thanks to the mediation of the US President Jimmy Carter. Then, in 2005, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon decided to disengage from the Gaza Strip and dismantle the Jewish villages in the region.

It was soon after the Six-Day war ended that the building of the settlements intensified, tolerated by the left-wing government of the time, and encouraged by the right-wing one that supplanted it. The expansion of the settlements gained momentum particularly under the rule of the Likud party, whose leader (Begin) declared in 1977 that all the land that had historically been part of Israel was the inalienable heritage of the Jewish people. Ariel Sharon, the Minister for Agriculture, announced a plan to settle two million Jews in the West Bank by 2000.

Not all the settlements are the same. Their features depend largely on the type of collective movement that occupied them. We can generally distinguish between three types of settlement based on the occupants' different ideological background, two with an explicitly religious orientation, which may be either *mystical-messianic* or *pragmatic-messianic*, and one inspired by a secular vision (Piterberg, 2008).

Among the groups of secular settlers, there are those adhering to non-religious Zionism who obtained permission to build colonies in places that the government considered strategically important to the State of Israel's security. For those unfamiliar with the Israeli situation, it is important to emphasize that security is a huge issue. In the name of security, the army can take action virtually unhindered to expropriate and requisition land and houses if this serves to ensure their control over the territory. Numerous such settlements were established from 1967 to 1977 as military outposts,

1 In particular, the Fourth Geneva Convention, as reiterated in December 2016 with United Nations Security Council resolution 2334, which states that Israel's settlement activity is a "flagrant violation" of international law, and has "no legal validity".

2 Israel occupied the western two-thirds of the Golan Heights during the Six-Day War in 1967. Israel's Knesset (Parliament) decided to administer the territory as a part of Israel in 1981, despite the UN resolution 497 condemning this decision as an annexation. This area was involved in the Syrian civil war in 2011.

and subsequently turned into real settler villages. Out of 750,000 settlers, only 120,000 belong to religious communities, many of them part of the so-called Haredi movements³.

An important language issue fuels political and religious controversies in Israeli society. The geography of the settlements is a territorial reflection of the many divisions existing between the different souls of the Israeli people, between right and left, religious and secular, reformist and fundamentalist, those in favor of the “land for peace” formula and those who reject any concessions to the Palestinians.

In Hebrew, the term for settlement is called *hitnakhlut* (plural: *hitnakhlyot*), which evokes the biblical commandment to guard the heritage of the Promised Land. Some settlers call their villages *yishuvim* (Newman, 2005). The term *yishuv* refers to Jews settling in Palestine before the birth of the State of Israel, who included both the Jews arriving from Europe with the first Zionist *aliyah* (immigration) in 1882 (the so-called “new y”) and those already there (the “old y”). It therefore stresses the continuity of the process to re-establish the biblical borders of Israel’s people⁴. While all settlers are driven by the idea of reconquering the Land of Israel, for the religious groups this action is seen as a sign of the Messianic promise.

The present study focuses on this particular type of collective movement in Israel, starting from the hypothesis that - unlike the Zionist movements inspired by a nationalist ideology - these religious groups express a powerful Messianic tension. In the first part of the article, I recall the concept of Messianism (which is not easy to define), taking into account the divergent theories elaborated by Jewish and other scholars, in an effort to clarify the kind of imaginal social world that Messianism can stimulate in collective movements, and the type of action it generates. In the light of this initial review of the conceptual frameworks behind the collective movements’ social action, the second part of the article is dedicated to analyzing the politics of sacralization of the territory adopted by two different movements: Gush Emunim and Chabad.

I intend to demonstrate that for the more mystical Chabad, these politics of sacralization of the territory revolve around the figure of a charismatic leader who makes himself known as the Messiah. On the other hand, the more pragmatic Gush Emunim implements these politics by acting as an extra-parliamentary group, while also seeking a political compromise with the forces in the political field.

Data and methods

According to the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, there were 223 settlements in 2015, with a total population of 764,250 citizens, including 389,250 in the West

3 As a rule, they belong to the Haredi (plural: Haredim: *those who tremble*) communities, often described by the media and scholars on contemporary Judaism as strictly Orthodox, or ultra-Orthodox. Haredim members consider the latter term pejorative. They regard themselves as the most authentic believers, who fully respect the precepts of the Torah (Malach, Cahaner, Choshen, 2016; Weinreb, Blass, 2018).

4 It is worth mentioning that in Arabic, the word used is *mustawtanāt* (the verbal root is *watana*: to reside or sojourn in a place, i.e. it means those who choose a place to live or settle in). Palestinians prefer the word *mustamarāt*, that refers more precisely to the notion of colony.

Bank, and 375,000 in East Jerusalem. Only 121 settlements are officially recognized by the government. The proportion of settlers out of the total Israeli population is now 4.6%. From 2015 to 2018, the Netanyahu government promoted an intensive urbanization of East Jerusalem. In July 2018, the Higher Planning Committee decided to build more than 1,000 new housing units for settlers in occupied East Jerusalem. Since Donald Trump took office as US President, Israel has submitted and approved over 14,454 units in the occupied West Bank⁵.

To define the object of my analysis, I used as my primary source the list of settlements that the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics⁶ publishes, periodically updating the figures and locations. These data only concern populations of settlements recognized by the State of Israel, and do not cover any settlements considered as military outposts. I compared these official data with the list produced by a non-governmental movement, PeaceNow⁷, which also includes colonies not officially recognized by the government. This enabled me to compile a reliable final list containing the following basic information for each settlement:

- name (in English and Hebrew)⁸;
- population;
- date of foundation; and
- administrative structure for clusters of settlements⁹.

There are other Messianic movements in the Jewish world today, as well as Chabad and Gush Emunim, but I disregarded them because they are not systematically involved in building colonies or mapping the biblical sites of the Promised Land. There are also some missionary movements of spiritual awakening uninterested in sacralizing the Land of Israel: they are more concerned with promoting the resacralization of distant places that once belonged to lost Jewish communities all over the world, where small groups of people have been trying to trace their Jewish roots¹⁰. Of the 223 colonies considered, 22 belong to the Gush Emunim, with a total population of around 70,000 people, and are administered by the Gush Etzion regional council. The Chabad has mainly built villages (*kfar*) outside the occupied territories, one of the most important of which is

5 Haaretz (The Land), the influential left-wing newspaper founded in 1918 and associated with the New York Times, wrote on June 12, 2017 ran a headline: “Fund headed by Trump’s Israel ambassador pumped tens of millions of dollars into West Bank settlement, Beit El”, destined particularly for the new settlements in East Jerusalem.

6 See: <https://www.cbs.gov.il>

7 An Israeli movement advocating peace with the Palestinians and the recognition of the Palestinian State, founded in 1978, just after Egypt’s President Anwar al-Sadat visited Israel, paving the way to the historic peace treaty with Israel’s President Menachem Begin in 1979. See: <https://peacenow.org.il/en>

8 The names of the settlements are a useful general indication of the religious-messianic inspiration behind a group of settlers (S.B. Cohen, Kliot, 1992). For instance, Efrat (established in 1980 with a population of 9,116) means “fruitful” and refers to the story of Rachel dying when giving birth to Benjamin.

9 Clusters of settlements refer to various regional councils that provide municipal services for a limited group of settlers in a given area. For instance, the Shomron run 35 Israeli settlements in the Samaria hills with a population of about 23,600. Har Hebron is another regional council that administers a group of 18 colonies.

10 This is the case of Shavei Israel (literally, the returners of Israel), a non-profit organization founded by Michael Freud in 2002 that encourages people of Jewish descent to strengthen their connection with Israel and the Jewish people. The movement supported the Aliyah (immigration to Israel) of small groups of Bnei Menashe people from India in 2005.

Kfar Chabad near Tel Aviv. This is where the movement has its headquarters, with an exact replica of the Chabad headquarters at 770 Eastern Parkway, Crown Heights, in Brooklyn, New York¹¹. The movement has centers and synagogues in many other places too, however, including several settlements in occupied territories¹². The choice of these two movements takes their different settlement strategies into account. While Gush Emunim has continued to invest a lot of energy in the occupied territories, Chabad has always tended to prefer building its villages outside the West Bank.

I have therefore chosen these two movements for their Messianic tension, although they diverge in the way they modulate their theological and socially-oriented action. The crucial research question driving the analysis concerns the relationship between the expectation of an imminent arrival of the Messiah and the sacralization of a territory, imagined as a possible restoration of the sacred boundaries of the Promised Land (*Eretz Israel*), after a long history of trials and tribulations. My specific interest lies in exploring these two Messianic movements' *mundus imaginis*, a notion that comes from Henri Corbin (1954), and that I find more meaningful than Anderson's imagined communities (Anderson, 1983). Corbin came up with this concept while analyzing the Shiite eschatology. My feeling is that there are two reasons why it is also applicable to the Messianic movements we are talking about. First, an imaginal realm is not a utopia in this setting, but a place where the spirit materializes in bodies, and bodies spiritualize. Second, the mystical habitus takes shape, becoming a daily lifestyle, a holistic discipline for the mind-body-spirit. The places where mystical groups live bear the marks of the union between heaven and earth, or better, between "spiritual bodies and celestial earth" (Corbin, 1071: 11). For these groups, the Earth is imagined not only as being full of God or His signs, but also as the elective place for a transformative performance of those who *see beyond* the material boundaries of human existence. In the case of mystical Messianic Jewish movements, expecting the Messiah is a way to see *beyond political constraints*. It enables members of the movements to imagine that the earth under our feet really is the Promised Land, *Eretz Israel*, in spite of the real-life conflict between the Israeli State and Palestinians' drive for independence.

I would like to clarify the notion of Messianism according to the Jewish tradition, before analyzing the different social and political actions of Chabad and Gush Emunim.

Messianism

Messianism is a type of socio-religious action within the context of modern Judaism. As a concept, it often takes the form of a collective movement based on religious language. From the sociological standpoint, Messianism should be considered an empirical

11 The first nucleus of this settlement dates back to 1949, when the Sixth Rebbe of the movement, Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson (1880-1950) decided to offer shelter to recent immigrants from the Soviet Union, survivors of WWII and Stalin's pogroms. He refused any help from religious and political organizations.

12 According to official data provided by Chabad, the movement runs more than 250 centers in Israel, 12 of which are in the West Bank, sharing the urban space with other religious and non-religious groups. In addition to Kfar Chabad, there are 14 other Kfar with biblical names located on the coast or in Northern Israel.

manifestation of the Weberian ideal-type of charismatic action, since it presupposes the appearance of a virtuoso of social redemption, i.e. an individual who can interpret the wait for a new world. Messianism is therefore an organized social system of belief that creates a new social bond, an alternative to the established social order. As an organized system of belief, Messianism provides a set of communication media, which are gradually changing within a socio-religious movement into a fully-fledged collective narrative. For instance, whether the Messiah has already come or his arrival is imminent, a movement that believes in this proposition tends to transfigure the particular into the universal, going beyond the distinction between the life of the individual and that of society, including everyday life, to create a new, united moral and religious unity (Pace, 2011). Thus, even when it advances a belief in the world to come, Messianism helps to reformulate social bonds in the here and now. In short, it creates society. My research question concerns what type of social order the Messianic groups intend to establish, their model of authority, the social relations that they establish, their interactive rituals, and the social outcome generated by the organizational pattern they adopt.

It is worth recalling the seminal works by Gershom Scholem¹³ on Messianism (Scholem, 1941) in relation to the major trends of Jewish mysticism. There are two main Messianic currents: one believes the Messiah will arrive when all Jews strictly comply with the precepts of the Torah; the other that the Messiah will come at the end time. According to the former, in a millenarianism variant, the Messiah's arrival coincides with the advent of the Kingdom of God on Earth. For the latter, in an apocalyptic variant, the end time coincides with the Last Judgement.

These two conceptions differ as to the nature of Messianic redemption, an issue still hotly debated by rabbis of various schools of thought. Their opinions range from the idea of the coming of the Messiah being associated with merit to the conviction that not everything depends on the moral perfection of humankind, and external intervention is required to help human beings overcome their weaknesses.

Beyond the theological cleavage, I can sum up the differences in terms of the social effects of these eschatological views. The first conception sees the Messianic era as an event that human action can either hasten or delay. The second regards the coming of the Messiah as a sudden, gratuitous event that bursts in on history from the outside, and changes everything.

Messianism has close links with Jewish mysticism, and particularly with the Kabbalah, developed in Europe in the 12th century. The affinity between Messianism and mysticism stems from a particular spiritual revival movement that arose in Eastern Europe (spreading from Ukraine to Belarus, Lithuania, Poland and Russia) during the 18th century. The founding father was Israel Ben Eliezer (or Ba'al Shem Tov), and the movement took the name of Hasidism (*hasidut*: piety). Its worldview spanned from Kabbalah traditions according to the hermeneutical version of Isaac Luria (Sefed, 1534 - Jerusalem, 1572) to the idea of God's immanence in the universe. From the search for

13 Born in 1887 in Berlin, he died in Jerusalem in 1982. Professor of Jewish Mysticism at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, he was the founder of modern studies on the Kabbalah focusing on Sabbatianism, a Messianic movement of the 17th century developed by Isaac Luria.

the mystical individual and communitarian experience to the devotional and emotional rituality, and the spiritual dimension of corporeality and mundane actions. Organized as independent communities called *courts* or *dynasties* (because of the patrilineal succession of the charismatic leadership), Hasidism emphasized the charismatic dimension of the spiritual guide, the *zaddiq*, the holy man who bridges heaven and earth. Within Hasidism, the Haredi¹⁴ groups – forming a more conservative branch of strict Orthodox Judaism – arose in Europe (particularly in the Ashkenazy milieu) during the second part of the 19th century. One of the fundamental reasons why this current of strict observance developed relates to the process of Jewish emancipation begun in the 19th century. The Haredi perceived this process as a dangerous form of secularization that threatened Jewish identity. This explains their continuing firm opposition to Zionism – ever since 1880. Some groups later changed their stance a little in reaction to the so-called religious Zionism that developed after the Six-Day war (Chowers, 2012). From the theological point of view, according to the Haredi, the Jews are forbidden from re-establishing a Jewish state in *Eretz Israel* before the arrival of the Messiah.

Other Hasidic courts shared the same attitude to the hypothesis of a State of Israel, though it was based on different theological assumptions. The following table summarizes the differences between the various positions adopted by groups within the Hasidic movement.

Table 1: Hasidic and non-Hasidic movements and their attitudes to the State of Israel today

| Against Zionism and the State of Israel | Against Zionism but not against the State of Israel | Against Zionism and the State of Israel, but... | Destroying Zionism, Secular Tribunals and the Israeli Government |
|---|--|--|--|
| They do not vote, refusing any State funds. They establish only self-sufficient communities | They vote, working to change Israeli policy from within through the action of their political parties in the Knesset, but they refuse to do military service | They see Zionism as a heresy, and the only way to contrast it is to support the religious political parties | Zionism is the absolute enemy of the People of Israel, and they are actively fighting against it |
| Satmar, Shomer Emunim, and Naturai Karta | Agudath Israel (founded in 1921) represented today by United Torah and Deged HaTorah | Lithuanian stream: non-Haredi groups coming from Lithuania, plus many Sephardic communities and some Chabad groups | Hillpot Youth Movement born in 1988, develops new illegal outposts in areas densely populated by Palestinians. Influenced by the ideas of religious Zionism and by one Chabad Rabbi, Ytzchak Ginsburg. |

¹⁴ Literally, those who tremble with the word of God (according to Isaias 66:2), the same etymology as the Quakers (now the Society of Friends).

The table provides a glimpse of the complexity of the Orthodox and strict Orthodox groups in Israel, in all their various facets. There are many interactions between one group and another and the boundaries between the four ideal-types are fluid.

Moshe Idel (1988; 2004)¹⁵ developed a hypothesis that seems to me more useful for clarifying the sociological implications of Messianic imagery. The core concept of his theory is that mysticism, or rather what he calls “an intense mystical life” (Idel, 2004, p. 20), does not exclude redemptive and even Messianic activity. Unlike Scholem and Taubes¹⁶, who were inclined to see a close connection between the emergence of Messianic mysticism and the impossibility of the world’s redemption, Idel maintains that the mystical experience is capable of withstanding any disappointment, helping an individual to endure the wait for the redemptive event of the world. In other words, only an intense (individual and communitarian) mystical experience makes it psychologically possible to hold on to the expectation of a redemption that never comes, or is continually deferred¹⁷. In the tension between the waiting time and the end time, mystical Messianism seems to Idel to be the best answer and, from a sociological perspective, there are two reasons for this. First, it demands an internal cohesion and solidarity, an organizational effort on the part of those who mystically await the Messiah. Second, it implies an organizational effort to be together, and a continuous and scrupulous collective discipline, a sort of purification process to make ready for the extraordinary event of the Messiah’s arrival. All these behaviors involve cognitive and emotional attitudes adopted in everyday life, and they give rise to micro-societies (Desroche 1969). The sociology of eschatological waiting (Séguy 1983) helps us to understand how a new social order arises, only imagined at first, and then implemented.

Levinas (1961) says that the Messianic age coincides with the hopes of humankind to see the historical triumph of good over evil, the end of violence, and the establishment of a society founded on justice. Actually, what interested the French philosopher was the intersubjective dimension – the other or one’s neighbor – that the notion of Messianism encompasses. ‘The age of the Messiah’, according to Levinas, distinguishes itself from ‘the future world’, because it needs the ‘fecundity of time’. It is not the equivalent of the liberation from time, yet it takes place in time (Levinas 1974: 121). In the Messianic movement, the charismatic figure is thus able to promote an ethical-social revolution: he tends to establish a social order that prefigures the wait for salvation.

Because the Messiah’s coming was no longer deemed imminent, at the end of the 18th century both interpretations were superseded by the notion of being at the service of God in exile, or diaspora. After the Shoah, the distinction between the two

15 He is a prominent scholar on Jewish mysticism, and Emeritus Max Cooper Professor in Jewish Thought at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He migrated from Romania to Israel in 1963, and enrolled at the Hebrew University. His supervisor for his PhD thesis was Gershom Scholem, who occupied the chair of Jewish Thought before him.

16 Jakob Taubes (2009) was briefly a scholar of Scholem, and taught sociology of religion at the Hebrew University on Scholem’s behalf. He considers Messianism not only an eschatological hope, but also an inner tension that seeks to change the here and now.

17 This is an analysis that comes very close to the well-known theory advanced by Leon Festinger (1957) on cognitive dissonance, applied by sociologists of religion to explain the resilience of modern millenarian groups coping with the fact that the predicted imminent second coming of Christ proved wrong.

orientations was restored. Some Hasidic and Haredi groups regard the coming of the Messiah as an extraordinary but unpredictable event, while other groups interpret the sign of the times as announcing His imminent coming. In the first instance, it is important to keep up a personal religious zeal for God while waiting for His arrival. In the second, the Messiah is already in our midst, and He may show himself.

Mystical Messianism in the Chabad movement

What distinguishes the Chabad movement from Levinas's interpretation is not so much the ethical-social dimension that the movement has expressed over the last thirty years. It is more about the emergence of a figure who has gradually managed to gain credence not only as a charismatic leader (which is nothing particularly new in the Hasidic tradition), but also as the Messiah. Perhaps this has gone beyond the intentions of the last spiritual head of the movement, the rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson, who died in 1994. The charismatic structure of the leader's power reinforces the mystical experience that members of the community tend to have during the ritual: their experience comes through the manifestation of the rebbe's extraordinary powers (Heilman, Friedman, 2010, p. 1-28).

The Hebrew term *moshiach* (from which the Greek word *messias* derives) really means "anointed", and it occurs in the Bible as an attribute of most of the kings of Israel or Judea. Anointment was historically the equivalent of enthronement (as in the anointment of David, recounted in 1 Sam 16, 3-12). Later, *moshiach* was also used in referring to priests, patriarchs and prophets, as anointment came to indicate consecration. It is only in post-exile times, and then in late Judaism, that the term *moshiach* took in an eschatological meaning, used to indicate someone invested with a divine mission, summoned to fulfil a promise of liberation or salvation.

Chabad is an acronym derived from the Hebrew words *Hochmah* (wisdom), *Binah* (understanding), and *Da'at* (knowledge). The movement began in Lubavitch, a small town in Belarus, around the figure of the first rebbe Schneur Zalman from Liadi (1745-1813). The movement forms part of a larger network of Hasidic communities (or courts), comprising a number of different families. Originally, these families traced their common descent back to a charismatic leader who transmitted his extraordinary powers through the blood. The leader of a Hasidic court is considered a mediator between the celestial court and the earthly one. Thanks to his exceptional powers of sanctity, this leader can place the human community in communication with the world of the divine, guiding people towards a mystical experience. At the same time, he has often been seen as a spiritual master and healer, the community's political leader, endowed with a special gift that enables him to perform miracles, and ward off misfortune. Given this concentration of extraordinary powers, the Hasidic communities chose to call their leaders rebbe, rather than use the traditional name of rabbi.

The last rebbe of the Chabad movement was Menachem Mendel Schneerson. His views form part of the Jewish Messianic school of thought, which sees redemption as a public event that will occur in the course of history, within the community of

the pious who await the Messiah. In other words, the community is a sort of living laboratory from which the face of the Messiah will emerge. The Messiah in question is Ben David, often described by Schneerson as an eschatological but also real figure, who will reveal all the new ideas of the end time. This concept helps to strengthen the authority of the charismatic leader, who is easily identifiable with the Messiah to come because of his holiness and exemplary nature. It is also a strong cohesive factor for the group, exalting the special virtues embodied by the leader, the vanguard of the core event in the messianic belief. This explains the charismatic leader's particular impact on organizational performances, as regards both the missionary zeal guiding the movement's collective action, and the authority structure of the relationship between master and followers. If you are convinced that the Messiah is *in our midst*, then an intensive activity of proselytism (not traditionally widespread in Judaism) can be justified. The process of beatification or sanctification on Earth of the figure of the charismatic leader, conducted by the community and supported by the leader, reinforces the solidarity within the group.

When Schneerson was appointed in 1951 as the legitimate successor to the sixth rebbe (Yosef Yitzhak Schneerson), he said in his inaugural speech that: "this generation will announce the Age of the Messiah, bringing to an end the teshuvah, the repentance which pre-announces the coming of the Messiah"¹⁸.

At the time of the Six-Day War in 1967, he sent spiritual assistants to the soldiers at the Front. This action was prompted by a specific eschatological conviction: by so doing, he rehabilitated in the eyes of many ultra-orthodox Jews abroad the theological legitimacy of the State of Israel, hitherto seen by many movements as an unholy, artificial creation. The argument he used to persuade his followers was that winning the war would re-establish the holy borders of the Promised Land (*Eretz Israel*) in their entirety, and such an event would confirm the imminent coming of the Messiah. Therefore, the wait for His arrival was linked to a series of practical, not imaginary events.

From then on, the movement was urged by Rebbe Schneerson to engage in an intensive campaign of re-Judaization, first in the neighborhoods of Brooklyn (where the Chabad has its headquarters), and later in Israel. He launched the idea of what came to be called *mitzvah tanks* ("tanks of the commandments"), groups of proselytizing missionaries in minibuses working the streets of the metropolis (Fishkoff, 2003).

In 1989, he assured his followers that the Age of the Messiah was imminent: "the obscurity of golus (exile) is about to be transformed into Light"¹⁹. This prediction, based on a Kabbalistic interpretation, enabled him to explain both the re-establishment of *Eretz Israel* and the collapse of the Berlin Wall. The announcement was interpreted by his followers as an explicit reference to the role of the rebbe as a visible link between the earthly court and the celestial one, between the community of the pious on Earth and the Messiah above. Despite numerous conflicts with other

18 See the official webpage of the organization: <https://www.chabad.org/>

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Hasidic courts (the Satmar court, for example), which accused Chabad of being a personality cult, the Messianic function of Schneerson's leadership was boosted by some dramatic events affecting Israeli society. During the 1991 Gulf War, for example, the Rebbe prophesied that nothing would happen to the Children of Israel. With the defeat of Iraq and the relatively little war damage to Israel, his reputation as a credible prophet increased, and not only among his own followers. Many Hasidim reportedly left other courts for Chabad. Interest in Schneerson's sanctity and extraordinary powers steadily grew.

On his death in 1994, the mourning process proved long and complex for his followers. This was partly because many believed (and still believe) that he was the Messiah, and this made it difficult to explain his disappearance from the Earth, and partly because it was hard to find a successor with as much charisma. If Menachem Schneerson was the Messiah, nobody can succeed him. But then who will take on the role of community leader? It is no accident that the place in New York where Rebbe Schneerson is buried²⁰ is called *ohel* (literally "the tent", a sign of the deceased's prominence), and visited by a constant stream of pilgrims. The force of his Messianic and charismatic power is allegedly still active, in spite of the movement having no new leader (Abramovitch, Galvin, 2002; Ehrlich, 2000; Feldman, 2003; Greilsammer, 1991; Gutwirth, 2004; Guolo, 2000; Mintz, 2002; Ravitzky, 1996).

The Messiah in our midst

In many ways, the Messianic tension of Chabad recalls Ernst Bloch's well-known theory on the revolutionary theology of Thomas Münzer (Bloch, 1921). In one extraordinarily effective passage, Bloch compares Anabaptist millenarianism with the Jewish Kabbalistic Messianic movement awaiting the end of impiety on Earth and the coming of a new kingdom resplendent with the power of the Lord (in Löwy, 1988: 58). Applying Bloch's theory, we could say that Chabad is a variant of revolutionary Messianism in that:

1. it keeps alive the memory of the exodus – the uprooting and diaspora of the Jews – that fuels the desire to return to the Promised Land;
2. the Promised Land still has to be redeemed because the State of Israel is an unsound political creation, with no basis in the Torah; it is suspended in indefinite time, awaiting the Messiah, who will finally materialize in the form of a rebbe;
3. meanwhile, social and religious action must enable people to really imagine what it means to live as if the Messiah had already come, prefiguring opportunities to change the social structure and power relations in the here and now.

Chabad communities are of a Messianic nature, so they believe in the practice of equality and fraternity - in contrast with a social and political structure that they see as impious and unjust. The ideological device does not prompt a withdrawal from the

²⁰ In Montefiore Cemetery in Cambria Heights, Queens, New York. The rebbe's father-in-law, Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson, is buried in the same place.

world, however. On the contrary, it mobilizes human, material and organizational resources to transcend reality and prefigure a time when the world will no longer be as alien to the vanguard of pure believers as it appears today. This is how the followers of Chabad see themselves, unlike their religious Jewish brethren who, in their view, have become secularized.

In 1949, Yosef Yitzhak Schneerson (then head of the Chabad community) established a small self-sufficient village in Israel called Kfar Chabad (which grew from a population of 1,540 in 1969 to approximately 3,500 by 2003). This prompted a considerable shift of opinion: the State of Israel and Zionism had previously been considered unholy. After the Yom Kippur War in 1973, Menachem Schneerson said that Israel had the full (divine) right to annex the occupied territories, according to the principle of *pikuach nefesh*. Literally, this means “respect for life”, but in the present context, it is the rabbinical expression applied to the essential duty to save the life of a Jew when it is under threat, even if it means breaking Judaic law.

Tension in the community was kept high by the fact that the Chabad movement came to believe that the seventh rebbe was the Messiah. This conviction also charged the wait for an imminent change in the social order, especially in Israel (the last frontier of the Messiah’s manifestation), while waiting for the building of a celestial Jerusalem stimulated zealous forms of proselytism. Early in 1990, Chabad launched a campaign in the major American newspapers to announce the coming of the Messiah. At the same time, the movement organized the mass distribution of leaflets and stickers bearing the slogan: “We want the Messiah now, we don’t want to wait”. On 19 June 1991, the New York Times carried a Lubavitch advertisement that ran: “The mass return of Jews to the land of Israel from the former Soviet Union, and the defeat of Iraq after the first Gulf War are unequivocal signs of the coming of the Messiah”.

In this climate, the followers of Chabad consolidated their conviction that the seventh rebbe was in fact the long-awaited Messiah. In truth, Schneerson never proclaimed himself to be the Messiah, though he also did little to counter this belief. In April 1992, a group of Lubavitch rabbis made an authoritative statement listing the messianic traits of Rebbe Schneerson (Ravitzky, 1996: p. 205) that prompted criticism from more cautious rabbis within the movement who had misgivings about identifying the figure of the Messiah with the head of the movement. When their leader died at the venerable age of 92 in the summer of 1994, many of the faithful continued to believe he was the Messiah, and that he was not dead, but would soon become visible again after his imminent resurrection. Some rabbis fond of the Kabbalah took delight in indicating other signs of Schneerson’s Messianic profile using numerology. One of them, Butman, pointed out that the number 770 indicated the house of the Messiah in the Kabbalah, and that Rebbe lived at 770 Eastern Parkway, Crown Heights in Brooklyn, and in the Kfar Chabad settlement in Israel!

This belief in Rebbe Schneerson’s resurrection prompted other Hasidic communities (always critical of Chabad) to accuse the movement of being not very *kosher* because its unorthodox beliefs bordered on Christian eschatology at times. Twenty-five years after the rebbe’s death, the belief that he was the Messiah is still very much alive, and the missionary zeal of his followers provides ample proof of this. The movement has

grown by 30% in the last twenty years and can boast about 3,000 missionaries in 107 countries around the world²¹.

The Chabad's mystical Messianism thus represents a sort of symbolic capital that has accumulated thanks to the charismatic force of a leader who became, in his lifetime, a cultural resource for the organization. This has helped to make the Chabad movement active and competitive in the contemporary Jewish religious market, particularly in Israel.

The Pragmatic Messianism of Gush Emunim

While Chabad is quite a homogeneous movement, Gush Emunim is a network of different groups belonging to the same spiritual family, the strictly orthodox Haredi. The militants of these groups share the idea that Israel is the Lord's Land, so it is not up to the Jews to give up even the tiniest part of it. Gush Emunim (literally the Bloc of Faith) was created in 1974, some months after the end of the Yom Kippur War, in Kfar Etzion, a religious kibbutz in Judea, between Jerusalem and Hebron in the southern West Bank²².

It was led first by the rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935) and, after his death, by his son Zvi Yehuda Kook (1891-1982). The former was appointed Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem 1919, and became the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Palestine soon afterwards, in 1921. In 1924, he founded a yeshiva, Merkaz Ha-Rav Kook (the Rav Kook Center). His son, Zvi Yehuda Kook, took up his father's position as rabbi in 1951. The basic ideology of the movement focuses on the idea of the sacred integrity of the Land of Israel. The movement refers to the ideas of the two Kook rabbis, father and son, and particularly on the latter's preaching. In May 1967, a few weeks before the Six-Day War, Zvi Yehuda held a lecture at the headquarters of the Merkaz Ha-Rav in Jerusalem that has come to be considered by all strictly orthodox Jewish groups as a fundamental theological-political reference. The speech revolved around the following points: the young State of Israel is a challenge to the all nations; it will bring together all the Jews of the Diaspora and mark the starting point for the Kingdom of God on Earth, and the beginning of the time of redemption. The plan will be come to fruition only when Judea and Samaria return under the sovereignty of the State of Israel²³.

According to many scholars (O'Dea, 1976; Newman, 1981; Weissbrod, 1982; Liebman & Don-Yehia, 1983; Aran, 1981 and 1993; Sprinzak, 1991; Greilsammer 1991; Ram 1995; Guolo 1997; Neidle 2013), the Gush Emunim movement gravitates towards the galaxy of the religious Zionist groups – a formula used to identify all those

21 The rebirth of Venice's ghetto is due to the active presence of Chabad since 1999-2000 (Pace, 2013, p. 131-138; Pace, 2016, p. 4)

22 There was a massacre in Kfar Etzion on 14 May 1948, when 157 Jewish inhabitants of the village were murdered by Arab Legion and irregular forces. In memory of this tragedy, Benny Katzover (one of the settlers) suggested the name Gush Emunim. He was a student at the Markaz Ha-Rav under the spiritual guidance of Rabbi Yehuda Kook.

23 This means the entire West Bank territories. Judea and Samaria are the biblical names of this area, which includes holy cities like Jericho, Hebron and Nablus.

nationalist or irredentist movements that claim the identity of the Jewish nation on religious grounds. Religious Zionism is naturally opposed to secular Zionism, the former being evidence of the failure of secularism. The State of Israel must consequently be based on Divine Law alone. The rules of democracy are subordinate to full compliance with the Torah, including the supreme compulsory duty to reconquer and defend the biblical boundaries of the Promised Land (*Eretz Israel*). Members of the Gush Emunim movement reject any compromise (land in exchange for peace). Any withdrawal from parts of this territory is immoral according to the council of rabbis of the West Bank, who combine a nationalist ideology with an intransigent theological conviction. As Newman notes:

Their territorial irredentism was based on a religious ideology, which viewed the whole land of Israel, as described in biblical texts, as having been promised to the Jewish People by God and, once conquered (or liberated in their language) in the miraculous events of the Six-Day war in 1967, not be relinquished voluntarily to any form of non-Jewish rule even through the democratic decisions of an elected government (1981, p. 192)

In fact, the Gush Emunim rejected the Allon Plan (1967) to limit the settlement to the Jordan Valley and an area around Jerusalem. In 1974, Gush Emunim settlers promptly started establishing illegal outposts at Sebastia (Samaria) and Ophrah (Taybeh in Arabic, the name of the Palestinian village in the West Bank not far from Ramallah, inhabited entirely by Palestinians), going against the wishes of Rabin's government. Shimon Peres, Minister of Defense, aided and supported the new settlements, pragmatically regarding these outposts as strategic protection for the army camps in the area.

Later, the leaders and militants strongly contested the 1983 Oslo Accords signed by Rabin and Arafat. They saw the transfer of land to the Palestinians in exchange for peace not as a serious political compromise, but as a betrayal of the covenant that God had established with the people of Israel – and those who betrayed Divine Law had no right to govern²⁴.

To understand the particular traits of Gush Emunim, we need to go back to the movement's birth in 1974, the year of the Yom Kippur war - one of the few defeats suffered by the Israeli army. Gush Emunim sprang from considerations about what happened. In 1967, the rabbis of the ovation had seen victory as the beginning of the Redemption and the reconstruction of the sacred borders of the Promised Land. The outcome in 1974 was interpreted as a setback, an admonitory sign from God. Instead of continuing to colonize all the occupied territories, Israel had been persuaded by the US²⁵ to seek a peaceful compromise with the Palestinians.

The line taken by Gush militants from 1975 onwards was clear. They would continue to build settlements even if the government opposed them. Indeed, while these settlements were being built, the movement tried to map the territories it intended to

24 It is worth mentioning that Rabin was murdered in November 1995, after months of furious and violent attacks on his person. The assassin was Yigal Amir, a 25-year-old former Hesder student, an Israeli yeshiva, who combined advanced Talmudic studies with military service in the Israel Defense Forces.

25 We can remember what happened when the US Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, visited Israel in August 1975 to encourage the government to embark on the path towards the peace agreements. Gush organized a noisy protest against him, calling him a "Jewish boy", and decrying those Jews willing to sell Israeli territories to the Palestinian enemy.

occupy, adopting a biblical toponymic policy. The new villages were renamed, giving ancient biblical names even to the streets and squares, erasing all traces of pre-existing Arab or Christian places.

Unlike Chabad, however, Gush Emunim acts not only as a religiously-motivated collective actor, but also as a political lobby within the system of parties sitting in the Knesset (the Israeli parliament). As Newman explained:

Gush Emunim was able to combine fundamentalism and pragmatism, with an ability to maintain an extra-parliamentary protest posture on the one hand while, at one and the same time, attaining legitimacy through cooptation as a party of the political and institutional framework of the State and Government, with access to public sector resources as a means of advancing their political and ideological objectives (Newman, 1981, p. 193).

The process of institutionalization culminated in 1977 when Gush Emunim clearly supported the Likud and its leader, Menachem Begin, who encouraged the expansion of the settlements. In the aftermath of the Likud's electoral success²⁶, Begin made a triumphal visit to the settlement of Elon Moreh²⁷ in Samaria. With the Torah scroll in his hand, Begin was acclaimed *melekh Israel*, king of Israel, and he said there would be many more Elon Moreh during his government.

The political alliance between the Likud and the Bloc was established with the approval for other settlements in the West Bank and Gaza, and especially when work started on the colonization of the city of Hebron as of 1979. The regrouping process for one of the cities occupied mainly by Palestinians was actually the result of a political compromise between the two allies. Begin had just signed the peace with Egypt, returning the Sinai Peninsula to the latter, and this had angered the Gush. But Begin preserved the political pact with the Gush by allowing Jews to enter the mausoleum containing the Tomb of the Patriarchs Abraham and Isaac (traditionally a place of prayer exclusively for Muslims), and to pray on Saturdays in the hall of Isaac, where a Torah scroll was to be installed for the first time. Despite these and other concessions, some Gush leaders decided to detach themselves from the agreement with begin and found their own political party, the Tehiya. This name is an acronym meaning the Movement of the Rebirth and of the Covenant among the proponents of the Land of Israel. Members of the Gush Emunim movement opted to support this new party, while preserving their own movement's autonomy in the social and political arena.

For Gush Emunim, the crisis began in 1982, with the war in Lebanon (what the Defense Minister Ariel Sharon called "Peace in Galilee"), and the death of the movement's spiritual leader, Rabbi Kook.

Prime Minister Begin decided for a military operation against the armed resistance of groups of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, judging it his duty to do so because these

²⁶ The political alliance between the Likud and the Bloc of Faith was ratified by a representative of the Bloc, Rabbi Druckman, being added to the electoral roll. The rabbi was elected and became part of the government.

²⁷ Elon Moreh derives from the name of Sichem (in Arabic: Nablus), the place where God appeared to Abraham according to Genesis 12, 7. According to Genesis 24, 1-28, it is also the place where the twelve tribes of Israel gathered under the rule of Joshua.

groups were threatening the lives of Jews. For the prime minister, annihilating Arafat and any armed Palestinian groups (defined as terrorists) was like eliminating Hitler, and aimed to save the Jews from a new Holocaust. The new leadership of Gush Emunim saw the “Peace in Galilee” campaign as a providential opportunity to reconquer the land between two rivers, the Euphrates and the Nile, that had been colonized by a generation of Jews leaving Egypt, according to Exodus (23, 31) and Deuteronomy (1,7).

The ideology of a Great Israel inspired the discourse of the movement’s rabbis and militants, but Lebanon ultimately escaped annexation and the right-wing government fell, partly because of the failure of its military operation, and the large number of victims it left on the ground. For Gush Emunim, this defeat was a heavy blow that accelerated a crisis already underway due to internal divisions between the pure and intransigent and the pragmatic souls of the movement.

A small faction detached itself to go and join Rabbi Kahane’s Kach movement²⁸, which theorized the use of violence to defend Jewish lives. When the first Palestinian Intifada erupted in 1987, the internal conflict in Gush Emunim widened further, and the movement went into a slow decline.

Conclusion: the mundus imaginalis of the Messianic movements

The two Messianic movements analyzed here differed from one another, but it is interesting to see how both involved a social action nourished by a religious ideology recalling the notion of *mundus imaginalis* applied by Henri Corbin (1958) to Shiite political theology.

The imaginal world is not an imagined world in the sense of a non-place to come. It is a place concretely manifest in history, where “spirits materialize in bodies and bodies become spiritualized” (Corbin, 1971: 11). Using another formula, it is a place where the mystical *habitus* takes shape, becoming a style of daily life, imposing itself as a holistic discipline. It is infra-mundane mysticism – not a *fuga mundis*, but a constant fervent tension to change the world.

In the Jewish movements discussed above, the Messianic tension presupposes an individual and collective ecstatic condition, a mystical experience shared by the community, not just a personal affair. Sacralizing a territory therefore means more than just the pure achievement of a lasting good that assures the survival of a group of individuals united by common vital interests. It is also an act of collective prayer, a way to sanctify oneself. Not only the body, but also the land is seen as an imaginal world, between heaven and earth, between what is already and what is not yet, but imminent, impossible to hinder or delay.

The Messiah has already arrived (in the Chabad variant) or is coming (in the Gush Emunim variant) to redeem the whole world. Though differing in their theological

²⁸ Kach was a radical Orthodox Jewish, ultranationalist political party existing in Israel from 1971 to 1994. Founded by Rabbi Meir Kahane in 1971, it earned a single seat in the Knesset in the 1984 election, after several electoral failures. The Israeli government banned the party in 1994 for racism and terrorism.

assumptions, militants of the two movements inhabit a sort of middle ground. They feel the transformative force of divine power that makes them capable of religious and political performances, unimaginable for most citizens of the State of Israel. The Chabad Messianic mysticism in particular produces a social empowerment and political mobilization to set against the secular political forces realistically more inclined to seek a compromise with the Palestinian enemy. Both of the above-described movements think the unthinkable and achieve the unachievable, but in doing so they expose themselves to the consequences of a secularization of their theological ideas in categories of the political, to resume the argument advanced by Carl Schmitt (1922). This is particularly true of Gush Emunim.

The core difference between Chabad and Gush Emunim lies in how the two movements stand in relation to the secularization of Messianic ideas in social and political action. Thanks to the charismatic and mystical dimension of its Messianism, Chabad manages to keep a certain distance from any direct involvement in political action. Gush, on the other hand, has shown how the fatal attraction of politics ended up making sense of its Messianic tension - so much so that the movement has gradually dissolved, while Chabad is still very much alive on the social-religious scene, not only in Israel but all over the world.

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