

Cults in Israel:

Don't Turn Back

by Rachel Ginsberg

Last summer, ten of Israel's leading kabbalists gathered in Jerusalem on a serious mission: to plead for Divine intervention against the newest threat to Israeli youth—the proliferation of satanic cults. Led by Jerusalem kabbalist Rabbi David Batzri, the group collected names from distraught parents of young family members involved in mystical cults and held an intense prayer session using rare kabbalistic prayers for these and other Israeli children currently involved in cults.

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This unprecedented prayer session was invoked the day after a teenage girl poured acetone over her body and set fire to her legs as part of a satanic cult ritual.

Cults of all types have found fer-

tile ground in the Jewish State, and controversy over the spread of cult activity in Israel has been gathering steam since the mid 1970's, when a variety of U.S. and Far Eastern religious cults began establishing branches in Israel. For groups like Hare Krishna, the Transcendental Meditation movement, followers of the Guru Maharaj Ji and the late Bhagwan Rajneesh, Scientology and others, the decision to seek out new converts in Israel was a logical move: In America, where up to 40% of cult

members are Jewish, it would follow that a country of four million Jews must be particularly fertile ground for new cult activity. The drift of young Israelis away from Jewish tradition, the popularization of Western diversions such as drugs and experi-

mental philosophies, and the economic and social pressures of living in Israel's tension-filled society, have all contributed to a spiritual vacuum among some Israeli youth that cults have been able to fill.

Seventeen different cults officially operate in Israel, and the Government is hesitant to interfere with their operations unless a specific law—such as drug involvement or physical violence—is broken. While some cults actually incorporate legitimate healing techniques and methods to create a higher spiritual consciousness (without using idol worship), today's most disturbing trend among Israeli youth is the pull toward mystic or satanic cults, which promote violence, hatred, rebellion and anarchy.

These satanic cults, whose literature is imported from California, use Neo-Nazi motifs such as swastikas and uniforms of black leather and metal, and incorporate such rituals as slaughtering cats and dogs and drinking their blood, holding lewd midnight revelries at cemeteries, and self-inflicting wounds, all to the background of heavy metal music, which purportedly energizes the Satanist.

"We don't have exact numbers, but there are dozens of these groups around the country," says Tzvi Cohen of Yad L'Achim's anti-cult and missionary task force. "Young people are especially attracted to these cults because it gives them a feeling of power and reaffirms their drive toward



nonconformity and rebellion against societal norms."

Guy is a high school senior from an upper-class family who taught him that independent thinking is a primary value. So, he says, he was willing to try anything. "A

friend of mine told me to come to one of their meetings, that there would be a lot of 'action.' The whole thing was so bizarre. The idea was to be as evil as you could be. Whoever could be the cruelest would be the bravest. During the day we were regular high school

students. At night we became animals.

"Cemeteries are a favorite meeting place. It seems like a good place to give sacrifices, no? The idea was to catch a live animal, preferably a cat, and then the ritual would begin. Everyone had to take out a knife and

cut the cat up alive and collect the blood in the cup. Some of the group would go into ecstatic trances. Then the cup would be passed around. Everyone had to drink. It sounds disgusting, doesn't it? At first you want to vomit, to faint, but then it becomes easier. Suddenly you find that killing becomes simple, and that you can go from killing animals to killing people, because you've turned off all your human emotions. In the satanic cult, that's the highest level, that's the ultimate sacrifice to Satan.

"Each time the cup would be passed to me, on one hand I wanted to escape, on the other hand I was drawn by the adventure, by the secrecy. When I think about some of the horrible things I did, I have to block it out."

Guy was eventually drawn away from the cult after a family member contacted the Yad L'Achim organization. "It wasn't easy to leave. I have nightmares that they're going to come after me and kill me."

Israelis paid little attention to these fringe groups until three years ago, when 16-year old Amit Molcho was brutally murdered by a 17-year-old acquaintance as part of a satanic ritual. The murderer, whose name was kept secret because he was a minor at the time of the murder, told the police that he committed the murder on the night of a full moon as per Satan's preference.

Avraham Feld, Jerusalem's somewhat controversial "mitzvah man" who pounds the

streets looking for down-and-out Jewish youth, is a professional cult-buster who is currently involved in breaking up a satanic cult in Tel Aviv, through counseling and coaxing out individuals as well as tipping off authorities when laws concerning controlled substances and chemicals are broken.

"We don't pull anyone out forcefully," Feld explains. "We offer these kids meaningful alternatives, ways of coming back to being normal Israeli

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integrated kids. For one kid it means going to yeshiva, for another it means going into the army, for another it means finishing high school, and for another it means going back to live with his parents instead of on the streets. We're trying to make these young people well-adjusted without cults in their lives."

Feld says the fact that its origins are Christian, makes Satanism a ridiculous cult for Jewish kids to be involved in, but, like other teenage rituals, it affords them the opportunity to gain control, power, pleasure, and meaning over their world.

Feld, 42, has rabbinic ordination from Yeshiva University and a Masters Degree in Psychology. He

claims to have thwarted the efforts of Reverend Moon and the Bhagwan Rajneesh to gain a foothold in the country, and more recently, held a dozen young people back from following David Koresh from Jerusalem to his Branch Davidian ranch in Waco, Texas—which went up in flames in 1993 together with all his groupies following an FBI siege.

Back in the 1970's, rabbis from Yeshiva University and Lubavitch in the U.S. originally recruited Avraham Feld to help bring young people out of destructive cults. He said he used the same tactics then as he does now—to be a better conniver and to provide an alternative of love and support. In the end, his goal is to mainstream the ex-cult members into Orthodox Judaism.

"I never got a *heter* (*halachic* exemption) to pretend I was a Moonie," says Feld. "That would be idol worship. But anyone can infiltrate a cult as a searcher. You don't have to accept their doctrines but you have the right to be there and ask tough questions. I would seek out both Jews and non-Jews who seemed willing to be coaxed out. Sometimes one non-Jew can influence another five Jews to get out."

Cult busting, says Feld, is not as dangerous or dramatic as it sounds, although he's had boiling tea spilled on him, and was once attacked with baseball bats. A Christian-Hebrew fellowship tour he infiltrated even prayed for his death.

Feld recently sent a team to India to pull Jewish kids out of a cult. Rumor had it that he was there himself. "I don't remember," he says. "I try not to leave Israel." Feld also tries not to disclose all his secret missions. That's one reason he refuses to be photographed. He says circulation of his picture would not be in the inter-

est of his health.

Many Israeli youth groups and high schools, whose administrators feel their own charges are a high risk for cult involvement, call on Feld to give what he calls "inoculation lectures"; to destroy the cult in a kid's mind before he ever dabbles in it.

"Take the Moonies, for instance," explains Feld. "If you knew at the outset that Reverend Moon believes Korea should rule the world and America should be its handmaiden, before even getting to doctrines of universal peace and whether Moon is the messiah, the reincarnation of Hare Krishna, Buddha, Moshe *Rabbeinu* or Adam *HaRishon*, you would say that's crazy and walk away. If you knew at the outset that Rajneesh was going to strip you of all your material possessions and take over your bank account, and that if you're a woman you'll be raped, and that if you're a man you'll come down with all kinds of sexual contact

diseases, you'll drop it before they start poisoning your mind."

In 1990, David Koresh, the leader of the Branch Davidians who claimed he was the reincarnation of Jesus, arrived in Jerusalem with one of his wives and assistant Dave Schneider, hoping to establish a branch of his cult here and bring his Israeli groupies back to the U.S. with him. Avraham Feld first observed Koresh on Jerusalem's Ben Yehuda Street playing a combination of Christian gospels and Chassidic melodies on his guitar. Koresh, whose real name was Vernon Howell ("a goy *gamur*," says Feld, countering the rumor that Koresh was a Jew), was an excellent guitar player and captivated both young men and

women with his good looks and charismatic personality. When he arrived, Koresh knew nothing about Judaism but enrolled in two Orthodox *yeshivot* for the newly observant. "I don't want to embarrass the institutions by naming them," Feld says.

"The whole thing was so bizarre. During the day we were regular high school students. At night we became animals."

After getting reports that Koresh was offering young people tickets to the U.S., Feld and his assistant Alan Klein decided they would become his "best friends" in the Holy Land and try to thwart his plans.

"I hung out with him day and night, slept at his apartment in the Old City, ate with him, and got drunk with him. I became his errand boy, his link to government offices, so I was able to convince him that he would have difficulties in Israel, that his followers would not get visas, that his group had no hope for getting land for a settlement or permits for gun licenses, and that he would be prosecuted for having more than one wife."



Koresh managed to convince 12 young people, all in their twenties, to go back to the States with him; following Feld's intervention, they all backed out, all except for Pablo Cohen, who followed Koresh to the very end, dying with him in the siege on his property. Said Feld, "With every person, we used a different tactic. One guy had a wealthy grandfather whom he was very close to. We told the grandfather of the plans, and he made a clear condition—leave Koresh, or lose your inheritance. Another young man was right out of the army and felt he deserved a trip to the U.S., or at least a good break here in Israel. So we spoke with his uncle, who owns a factory, and when he heard about Koresh, he gave his nephew the highest position in the factory."

Koresh, dejected, couldn't figure out why everyone was dropping out.

According to Feld, he felt his message was "going against a wall of rabbinic Judaism, and that the darkness of the Talmud prevented his light from penetrating." Koresh left the country, with Pablo Cohen his only prize. When the 51-day FBI siege on his ranch in Waco, Texas began, Feld tried to get all the people who knew Cohen to phone him and convince him to flee. But Cohen was loyal to his leader. After the Branch Davidian compound erupted in flames, Pablo's charred remains were found near the bodies of David Koresh and Dave Schneider.

Some cults like the "Divine Light Mission" headed by the Guru Maharaja Ji, have managed a successful foothold in Israel without their leaders tempting members with free tickets abroad.

The mission has two communes in Ramat Gan and smaller branches in Haifa and Jerusalem. Its Israeli membership is estimated at over 1,000. They meet regularly for prayer sessions at the Ramat Gan headquarters where they bow down before photographs of the Guru and pledge their allegiance to him. The Guru himself is an obese multi-millionaire of Indian origin, who regularly shuttles between his mansions in New York, Los Angeles and London. Israelis have also been attracted to many lesser-known homegrown gurus

as well. In the 1980's an eccentric poetess named Rina Shani established a bizarre sect which operated out of a rundown farmhouse in Zichron Yaakov. There, Shani's young followers used drugs, engaged in lewd behavior, and worshipped her as a prophetess with mystical powers. Her devotees surrendered all of their material possessions to her and consented to live in abject poverty in order to serve her. Shani ordered them to sever all family ties, renounce Judaism and refuse to do army service. The cult's activities came to light when a former disciple committed suicide the day after he was inducted into the Israeli Army. A subsequent investigation revealed that another devotee had been arrested and committed to a mental hospital after

attempting to stab his own father. Shani eventually fled Israel to avoid prosecution and was reported to have died in India from hepatitis.

A more recent local guru whose cult has been alternately called the "Cult of Death" or the "Cult of Love" is a young man from the Negev town of Arad named Amiad Kupermintz, who calls himself "Damian." Although he has denied reports that his group is a cult and claims instead that the several dozen

young people who join him each week get together to sing Israeli folk songs, former members claim that he hypnotizes his followers until they ultimately believe that he is G-d.

Batya Segal, a resident of Arad whose 18-year-old daughter Orna moved away from home and has been living with Damian devotees, claims Kupermintz kidnapped her daughter and she has filed a suit against him with the local police.

"It all started when her boyfriend urged her to come to a meeting," Batya told a reporter from *Yediot Achronot*. "I was nervous and decided to come along. Amiad said to us, 'You know that G-d is above, but he can also be here, in this room. I am G-d.' Then he told us to close our eyes, to imagine ourselves rising higher, and Orna said she saw a pillar of smoke and fire. I opened my eyes and saw how Amiad was looking at her intensely; she was trying to open her eyes but she couldn't. He had her under his hypnotic spell.

"After a few weeks she came home to visit and said that she is an angel and we are nothing. She said that she has to go to America with the group for an important mission and when she comes back she'll have to die. Then she said that we'd all be sorry that we weren't in the cult, that at her grave we'd be shocked to see how her body will rise above her grave. I'm afraid they're going to make her kill herself."

Although cult activities pose a threat to Israeli youth, government moves to restrict their activities would surely bring on cries of infringement upon religious freedom and individual rights. As it stands now, the government won't impose any serious anti-cult moves in order to avoid a thorny civil rights issue.

Unless cult busters such as Avraham Feld and Tzvi Cohen are successful in their efforts to save Israeli youth from these insidious cults, there seems to be little hope for an easy solution.

The kabbalists will just have to pray harder.

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