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## APOCALYPSE NOW

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**Highlight:** Staff and students at the Temple Mount Yeshiva see themselves as visionaries. Many others call them a lunatic fringe.

### Body

Leaning ever-so-casually against a small stone Islamic monument in the northeastern corner of the Temple Mount, **Baruch Ben-Yosef**, executive director of the Temple Mount Yeshiva, delivers the lesson of the day. The subject is conquest.

"We have verses in the Tora that say any place we put our foot on is ours," he instructs a handful of his yeshiva students, squinting against the harshness of the noon-day sun. "God told Abraham to show his presence in the Land."

There is, of course, no conquest without confrontation. The Temple Mount Yeshiva, which advocates rebuilding the Temple, last caused a stir earlier this month, when several students went up to the mount and swayed as if they were praying, knowing that actual praying by Jews is forbidden in the Temple Mount complex.

The act enraged Wakf officials on the mount, who engaged in a heated verbal exchange with several of the students. The students were forced off the mount by police, who feared the incident would become violent. Since they weren't actually praying, however, the students announced they planned to file a complaint.

On this day, however, the yeshiva students are merely conducting a stroll of conquest, followed by the obligatory police escort - there to protect them from the Moslems as much as to shield the Moslems from the yeshiva students.

It seems very still on the Temple Mount, as if its vastness somehow drowns out sound and dwarfs the few hundred people there. Though **Ben-Yosef**, 35, and his kippa-wearing group stand out, most of the Moslems on the mount don't even look up. The yeshiva students hardly constitute a significant presence.

**Ben-Yosef** doesn't care. He states unequivocally, "In tractate Baba Kama, walking constitutes a conquest."

The students may be gathering evidence for their next move, however. **Ben-Yosef** gestures towards an Arab family picnicking on the grass, at a small boy kicking a ball around - all in direct contravention of a High Court of Justice order, he points out.

He also notes a new carved stone tablet, which, he explains, with a certain amount of righteous wrath and indignation, is a monument erected recently to the victims of the Sabra and Shatilla massacre in Lebanon. This was also in violation of a High Court ruling, he says.

"We're like spies," offers Feivel Handler, 40, yeshiva student and ex-hippie from Minnesota, winning a certain amount of approval from his teacher. Handler orders an Arab to put out his cigarette, while wisecracking to the group, "Course, I want to smoke, man."

Trailed by his students, **Ben-Yosef** strides around the glittering attractions of the Temple Mount like he owns the place - which he, of course, believes he does.

Close to 3,000 years ago, King David, according to the Book of Samuel II, bought the threshing floor of Arvanah the Jebusite for 50 shekels (or 600, according to some commentators) and built an altar there.

This is the place where the Bible says David wrote his psalms and where the two Temples stood, the first destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE and the second by Titus's 10th Roman Legion in 70 CE.

Since then, traditional Judaism believes the mount has been defiled and degraded. Romans erected statues on the Temple ruins; Byzantine Christians used it as a garbage dump. Following the Arab invasion in the seventh century, Umayyad caliphs renamed the site Haram esh-Sharif, the Noble Sanctuary, built the two great mosques on the land and forbade entry to non-believers.

When Israel regained the Temple Mount in the Six Day War, defense minister Moshe Dayan decided to leave day-to-day control of it in the hands of the Wakf, the Moslem Religious Trust, which administered the site for Jordan.

The two chief rabbis at that time went along with Dayan's decision in line with mainstream rabbinic thought, which states that because Jews are today considered to be in a state of ritual impurity they may not walk on the site. There is evidence, however, that in Byzantine times Jews did ascend the mount, and that there was even a synagogue in one corner. Former chief rabbi Shlomo Goren contends that the southern section of what is now the Temple Mount was not really part of the Temple area and that the problem of ritual impurity does not apply there.

Irrespective of the passage of time, the various conquests, and halachic disputes regarding entry, most halachic authorities rule that David's original deed of sale is still valid. If it were up to **Ben-Yosef**, he'd reclaim Judaism's most valuable acreage and boot out the Moslem "squatters." In fact, he muses, as he tours the Dome of the Rock, he just might file suit on that basis.

It does not seem to bother him that many believe a grab at the mount might spark a regional war.

It's lunchtime at the yeshiva, basically a one-room study hall in a bare storefront overlooking the Western Wall Plaza. The atmosphere is more reminiscent of a university fraternity than a typical yeshiva. The eight full-time students, ranging from their late teens to mid-forties, are all American; there are also six part-time students. Three of the students sleep in a room adjacent to the study hall.

On a recent afternoon, five students sat around a plywood table that does double duty as the dining and study table. Along the sides, someone has carved graffiti: "Tel Hai" and "Kill the Enemy." Lunch is a turkey stew that **Ben-Yosef** made. Only one of the students remembers to wash his hands and say the blessing for bread. The musical accompaniment is an acid rock band blaring from a portable CD player. Piled next to it are disks that include reggae king Bob Marley, the Doors, and Deep Purple.

"Granted," says Handler, "we're not your typical yeshiva bocherim ( students) ."

During a conversation with the students one hears Kahanist rhetoric about Jewish pride and scathing denunciations of the government, peppered with a smattering of sports and comparisons of arrest records and past drug use. Some are angry young men. Others seem more interested in when they'll get hooked up to cable TV. Some are involved with the Kach movement; others aren't. Rick Sachs, 44, a student from Los Angeles, says the group as a whole is more right-wing than Kach.

The students clearly idolize **Ben-Yosef**. He cooks for them, teaches them and takes care of them. Seth Turner, 25, of New York City, who once worked on the touring company of the Grateful Dead, said, "When push comes to shove, he's not afraid to kick some ass for

Israel, they say, is not the Jewish state, but the "fascist, bolshevist, so-called Jewish state." **Ben-Yosef**, who seems to delight in being outrageous, says that he's all for razing the Western Wall. "It's a sign of exiles, of crying Jews who have no guts or strength."

Their backgrounds are checkered. Many are drop-outs and former hippies, who have done too much drugs and couldn't seem to find a place for themselves back home. Feivel Handler, 40, of Minneapolis, for instance, ran headlong into 1967 and got stuck. He lost several years somewhere in the middle of the 1970s, he jokes.

Another student escaped from police custody in New York less than a year ago, where he was facing three to five years in prison for prescription forgery. Earlier, he had gotten hooked on opiates following a serious car accident, and spent several months in prison for the same crime. During that prison term in New York, he was so badly beaten by Black Muslim prisoners that he needed reconstructive surgery. A third was kicked out of Greece for what he claimed was guitar-playing.

From time to time during lunch, **Ben-Yosef** winces at their outbursts and foul language, trying to calm one student who shouted threateningly at a haredi youth peeping through the door.

In fact, **Ben-Yosef** is an appropriate leader for this motley crew; this father of four, a rabbinic pleader by profession, has himself had numerous encounters with the law. He admits to having been arrested over 30 times both here and in the US. Since his youth, he has been linked to the late Kach leader Rabbi Meir Kahane, and is mentioned several times in the work of journalist Robert Friedman, author of False Prophet, a biography of Kahane, and Zealots for Zion, about the settler movement.

Born Andy Green in Brooklyn, **Ben-Yosef** was active in Kahane's Jewish Defense League as a teenager and attended a JDL training camp, Friedman says. He first came to Israel in the late 1970s and became a member of the Kahane-inspired "Terror Against Terror" group. He was first arrested in January 1978, for a bombing of an Arab bus in eastern Jerusalem. A month later, he was charged with conspiring to bomb the Arab Student Union in eastern Jerusalem and sentenced to 45 days in a military stockade. **Ben-Yosef** claimed that all he did was pick up a grenade he found on the road and hand it to the bomber.

After his release, the army transferred him to a unit serving in Judea and Samaria. The commander reportedly threw him out of the unit when he heard **Ben-Yosef** brag about plans to steal a tank and blow up Jericho.

Soon after, he became Kahane's chief aide. In 1980, he and Kahane were held for six months in administrative detention on suspicion they were conspiring to blow up the Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount. **Ben-Yosef** denies the conspiracy.

In the early 1980s, **Ben-Yosef** returned to the US to head the New York branch of Kach. There, he went into business with Robert Manning, who last week was given a life sentence for his role in the mail-bomb death of a secretary in Los Angeles. The two opened an unlicensed private investigation firm that specialized in child custody cases, deprogramming Jewish members of cults and kidnapping haredi men who refused to give their wives Jewish divorces.

In 1985, **Ben-Yosef**, Manning, and another Kach activist, Israel (Keith) Fuchs - now the Temple Mount Yeshiva's director of publications - were linked by the FBI to two bombing deaths, of Arab-American activist Alex Odeh in California and of a suspected Nazi war criminal living in New Jersey. The three were also implicated in up to five other bombings. In an interview a year ago, **Ben-Yosef** recalled that FBI agents "roughed him up," during their investigation of the murders, but the three were never charged in the killings.

**Ben-Yosef** returned here permanently in 1986 and now lives in Jerusalem's Gilo neighborhood. In 1989, he ran for Jerusalem city council on the Moledet list, on a platform of further settling eastern Jerusalem and annexing Ma'aleh Adumim. The list did not cross the electoral threshold.

In November of last year, he was sentenced to 28 days in jail by a military court for refusing to do reserve duty in the Jordan Valley. Friends said it was because he believed "the IDF is no longer the army of Israel."

"I'd much rather do reserve duty with a real Jewish army in Judea and Samaria," **Ben-Yosef** says. "I'd kill Arabs legally. If we have a real Jewish state, any Arab who stays here more than 72 hours will be shot."

The 10-month-old Temple Mount Yeshiva first made the headlines in November when its head, Rabbi Avraham Toledano, was nabbed at **Ben-Gurion** Airport allegedly trying to smuggle in weapons and bomb-making paraphernalia. He was also carrying about \$ 50,000 in cash which, according to **Ben-Yosef**, was the proceeds from his North American fundraising trip for the yeshiva. Police maintain that Toledano was planning attacks against Arab targets together with members of the Kach movement, which he headed for a time after Rabbi Meir Kahane's murder three years ago. Toledano is set to go to trial this week.

About two weeks after Toledano was indicted for attempted smuggling of arms, **Ben-Yosef**, Israel Fuchs, Aharon Weinstein Hacoheh - another yeshiva staff member - and three others with tenuous links to the yeshiva were remanded for about a week. Police say that Hacoheh, was found with a list of weapons in his diary similar to the 30 found in Toledano's suitcase.

Does this constitute the new Jewish underground that many Israelis are eager to believe exists?

Prof. Ehud Sprinzak, a Hebrew University political scientist who has written extensively about right-wing radicals, points out that undergrounds prefer to stay anonymous and shun the theatrical publicity-grabbing antics that Kach and its affiliates, like the Temple Mount Yeshiva, indulge in.

Genuine desperadoes, he says, don't attempt to bring a Pessah sacrifice up to the Temple Mount and notify the press beforehand, as **Ben-Yosef** did last year. (Police refused to permit it. )

That said, however, Sprinzak adds that the Temple Mount Yeshiva's leadership, if not the students, may well be quite capable of apocalyptic deeds. Toledano's alleged smuggling is one indication of this, he says.

"Certainly, the possibility is outstanding that they are trying to blow up the Dome of the Rock," he says. "**Baruch Ben-Yosef** is saying that he is preparing for the State of Judea if the government of Israel evacuates the territories and they would take over every square inch. This will be the future scenario of

confrontation."

Sprinzak wasn't surprised by Toledano's arrest, he says, claiming other Kach factions are trying to import weapons. "They're very much afraid and preparing themselves for major disaster. They are emerging with plans," he says.

Following Kahane's murder in November 1990, Toledano emerged as his successor mainly because Kahane's aides thought the movement needed a rabbi at its head. Less than a year later, Toledano was ousted by the current head, **Baruch** Marzel, and others for - of all things - his perceived moderation. A computer engineer and black-belt

in karate, Toledano shied away from the street-thug tactics of Kach. He disagreed with what Sprinzak terms "the pompous tactics" of Marzel - publicity-seeking, bullying and bragging.

"He's not more moderate than ( the others) , meaning that he wants the same things to be done to Arabs," Sprinzak says. "But, it's very clear that he was trying to get legitimacy for the movement. Personally, he is more civil and tried to tone down the hooliganism that has become the style of Kach. He tried to normalize the movement."

**Ben-Yosef** agrees that Toledano wanted to turn Kach into a more professional, less violent movement, but adds that he also wanted to be granted Kahane's absolute authority.

About the day-to-day workings of the yeshiva, Sprinzak is dismissive. "It doesn't look serious. They don't study Tora. It's not a very stable institution."

He speculates that they may be using their almost daily trip up the Temple Mount to "case the joint," but doesn't think they are likely to succeed in any of their endeavors. Security is tight on the Temple Mount, and the General Security Service is monitoring them closely, Sprinzak says.

David Bedein, a media consultant who has close ties with the religious right, calls them a publicity-happy "media stereotype," whose sole purpose is to draw attention to the fact that the Temple Mount is not in Jewish hands.

"They will say anything necessary to get into the media and scare the Arabs," Bedein says. "It's all bravado. They're guys with cap-guns. They're all chaff. Nothing."

The yeshiva grew out of the English-language program at Kach's Yeshiva of the Jewish Idea. Either for lack of space or lack of money - versions differ - the program was spun off last year, though one student says Kach provided some initial funding. **Ben-Yosef**, its prime mover, says he honed his interest in the Temple Mount during his days as a student at the Kach yeshiva, which went up to the mount once every week or so.

The yeshiva curriculum is heavily weighed towards issues of Jewish sovereignty and conquest, the Temple and the sacrifices. Just because no Temple has stood for almost 2,000 years is no excuse for not fulfilling all the Tora's commandments, including those pertaining to sacrifices, asserts **Ben-Yosef**. In fact, he says, the Pessah sacrifice is such an important part of the holiday ritual that it is incumbent upon people to perform it, whether the Temple is standing or

The traditional commentators are studied mostly in English translation. Students also take a class on the writings and thoughts of Meir Kahane and quote extensively from his books.

In **Ben-Yosef**'s scheme of things, if the State of Israel doesn't level the mosques on the mount, the country will lose its mandate and be destroyed, either by God or by internal rebellion, and a new Jewish state will arise.

"Israel has lost its right to exist," **Ben-Yosef** asserts. "We can't live here with Arabs and let them sit on the Temple." In the event of an evacuation of settlements, **Ben-Yosef** believes Jews would open fire on soldiers. Personally, he would leave his home to protect the settlers.

Sheikh Hamed Said Al-Jamal Al-Rifahin, deputy mufti and director of the Wakf, simply fumes at mention



of the yeshiva. On the other hand, he also refuses to acknowledge any Jewish connection to the mount and would not speak to a reporter until she agreed to stop using the "Jewish" term "Temple Mount."

"This mosque and the area around the mosque belongs to the mosque from the first step from any gate," says the sheikh. "The mosque is part of the religion of Islam and not for anyone else. It's forbidden for anyone who is not a Moslem to say 'this is my holy place.' There is no chance for others to pray here if he is not Moslem.

"They ( the yeshiva) are always trying to make problems, completely causing trouble," he continues. "They are like thieves and they have no manners. They like to show people they're very holy and this is politics. This group is trying to break up the peace."

Though there are other groups that ascend the mount, Sheikh Jamal is especially enraged with the Temple Mount Yeshiva because several months ago Seth Turner assaulted a Wakf official.

"I told him that if you hang out with Nazis, you're a Nazi," Turner explains. "He looked at me with hatred." Turner spent several days in jail and is now forbidden entry to the mount.

Turner has no regrets: "This is my land. If someone takes my car, I'd beat him. The Arabs should get the hell off of my land.

"We're not a bunch of stupid militants," he adds. "We're more intelligent than any stupid yeshiva bochers I've met anywhere."

## Graphic

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4 photos, 1. Members of the Temple Mount Yeshiva conduct a Talmud class on the Temple Mount under the Dome of the Rock Mosque. 2. A Talmud class in the Temple Mount Yeshiva in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City. 3. An Arab woman gathers up her children and flees from the yeshiva members, P.E. Kleinberg

## Classification

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