

Racist Rabbis: A Trend Towards Religious Extremism in Israel

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Jews must not rent homes to “gentiles”. That was the religious decree issued this week by at least 50 of Israel’s leading rabbis, many of them employed by the state as municipal religious leaders. Jews should first warn, then “ostracise” fellow Jews who fail to heed the directive, the rabbis declared.

The decree is the latest in a wave of racist pronouncements from some of Israel’s most influential rabbis.

In October, Shmuel Eliyahu, the chief rabbi of Safed, delivered a ruling, signed by 17 other rabbis in the city, telling Jewish residents not to sell or rent property to members of the country’s Palestinian Arab minority, who make up a fifth of the population.

His followers turned words into deeds by attacking Arab students in the city and threatening to burn down the homes of Jewish landlords renting to the students.

Similar edicts have recently been backed by dozens of rabbis in Tel Aviv and nearby Bnei Brak, a suburb of 150,000 mostly ultra-Orthodox Jews. They have threatened to “expose” any Jews who rent to “foreigners” — in this case, a reference to migrant workers and African refugees who are crowded into neglected neighbourhoods in the centre of the country.

After many weeks of silence on these declarations, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was finally forced to issue a condemnation yesterday, describing the rabbis’ call as undemocratic and contradicting the bible, which, he said, called for Jews to “love the stranger”.

Nonetheless, racism in Israel is increasingly enjoying high-level sanction among the most influential sectors of the religious establishment.

The latest ruling was signed by Shlomo Aviner, a spiritual leader of Israel’s national-religious camp; Yosef Elyashiv, a senior ultra-Orthodox rabbi; and Avigdor Neventzal, rabbi of Jerusalem’s Old City.

Its sentiments have also been echoed by Ovadia Yosef, a former chief rabbi of Israel and the spiritual leader of Shas, an important political and religious party in Mr Netanyahu’s government. “Selling to [non-Jews], even for a lot of money, is not allowed. We won’t let them take control of us here,” Mr Yosef said recently.

Two months ago, Mr Yosef explained the logic behind his views and those of like-minded rabbis.

“Goyim [non-Jews] were born only to serve us.” Explaining why God allowed non-Jews long lives, he added: “Imagine that your donkey would die, you’d lose your income. [The donkey] is your servant. ... That’s why he [the gentile] gets a long life, to work well for the Jew.”

Mr Yosef’s remarks against “gentiles” were greeted with respectful silence by Israeli officials and most of the media. It was left to the United States government and the New York-based Anti-Defamation League (ADL) to issue rebukes. Abraham Foxman, the ADL’s head, accused the rabbi of advancing “hateful and divisive ideas”.

The rabbis’ use of theology to support racial discrimination is being applied to more than just housing.

This summer, Yosef Elitzur and Yitzhak Shapira, who head an influential seminary in the West Bank settlement of Yitzhar, published *The King’s Torah*, a 230-page guide to how Jews should treat non-Jews.

The two rabbis concluded that Jews were obligated to kill anyone who posed a danger, immediate or potential, to the Jewish people, and implied that all Palestinians were to be considered a threat. On these grounds, the pair justified killing Palestinian civilians and even their babies.

Last month Mr Shapira also backed the use of Palestinians as human shields, a war crime under the Fourth Geneva Convention, and a practice that Israel’s supreme court has outlawed.

The King’s Torah, far from being condemned by moderate rabbis, has been greeted with a general silence and enthusiastic support from a number of notable religious leaders.

Arik Ascherman, head of Rabbis for Human Rights in Israel, said the growing extremism of the the Orthodox religious establishment in Israel reflected the increasingly right-wing atmosphere in Israel that made the expression of ultra-nationalist views permissible.

In the current climate, he said, moderate rabbis were reluctant to speak out against their colleagues. Many of these rabbis belong to the Conservative or Reform streams of Judaism, which are not officially recognised in Israel.

“The religious sanction being given to the political right by these rabbis is dangerous. It makes their opinions seem more acceptable,” he said.

That is being reflected in public surveys, in which many Israeli Jews express support for anti-Arab views. A poll by the Israeli Democracy Institute published last week showed that 46 per cent of the country’s Jews did not want to live near Arab citizens, and 39 per cent felt the same about foreign workers.

Even more, 53 per cent, wanted Arab citizens to be encouraged to leave Israel and half believed Arabs should not have equal rights with Jews. Among the religious public, racist sentiments were more popular.

Israeli prosecutors, meanwhile, have turned a blind eye to the refusal of several prominent endorsers of *The King’s Torah* to obey a summons calling them for investigation. “Our holy Torah is not a subject for investigation or trial by flesh and blood,” the rabbis said.

In all, the rabbinical establishment is growing increasingly bold in promoting its vision of a Jewish state run according to holy law, according to Zvi Barel, a commentator with the daily newspaper Haaretz.

“They and their supporters are transforming zealous fundamentalism and the shameful The King’s Torah into the mainstream,” Mr Barel wrote recently.

The general trend towards extremism has not happened by chance, said Sefi Rachelevsky, a prominent Israeli writer critical of the Orthodox rabbinate. Israel’s public coffers pay the salaries of some of the most extremist rabbis, and the education system regularly falls under the political control of religious parties like Shas.

Mr Shapira, who advocates killing non-Jewish babies, receives large sums from the education ministry for his yeshiva — a seminary where he spreads his message of hate. Religious students also receive extra subsidies unavailable to normal students to encourage their attendance at such yeshivas.

The rabbis exert their influence on the youngest and most impressionable too. When the new school year started in September, 52 per cent of Jewish children in first grade attended a strictly religious school.

Pupils in some of the most religious schools, Mr Rachlevsky pointed out, are taught that Jews sit above nature, which comprises four categories: “inanimate”, “vegetable”, “animal” and “speakers” — or non-Jews, who are considered no more than talking animals.

Jonathan Cook is a writer and journalist based in Nazareth, Israel. His latest books are “Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East” (Pluto Press) and “Disappearing Palestine: Israel’s Experiments in Human Despair” (Zed Books). His website is www.jkcook.net.

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