



HA'ARETZ

Interview with Prof. Moshe Kaveh that appeared in the weekend edition of Ha'aretz magazine

'God is not an insurance policy'

By [Shahar Ilan](#)

"There is no need to replace the rabbis. One need not listen to them. They were not elected by anyone, so in the political-cultural-public sphere they have the status of public figures like anyone, like you and me," says Prof. Moshe Kaveh, the president of Bar-Ilan University. "Accordingly, what I say is as good as what any rabbi says."

Are you actually proposing the breadth of academic horizons as a substitute for rabbinical authority?

Kaveh: "I am not saying that there is 'authority contra authority.' I am saying that bringing the laws and rules of the synagogue into the Knesset is a great danger. Rabbis will set the rules in the synagogue, in the beit midrash [religious study hall], but not as state rulings. Therefore I say to the religious politicians: Consult with them as public figures, but a party that is subject solely to the opinion of rabbis has no democratic prospect, because it is bringing itself under dual authority. A member of Knesset who has no authority to decide cannot be a Knesset member. It is my belief that religious Zionism's connectedness to the rabbinate on state matters constitutes a tremendous danger."

Prof. Moshe Kaveh, 62, became president of Bar-Ilan University 10 years ago. He inherited an institution that was psychologically battered after the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin the assassin, Yigal Amir, was a student at Bar-Ilan and rehabilitated its image. At the end of the last decade he served as chairman of the committee of university presidents. Kaveh was recently elected to another four-year term as president of Bar-Ilan and is now spearheading the construction of its new campus. He is one of the most important figures in the world of religious education in Israel.

Kaveh is under no illusions that this interview, which contains a frontal assault from him on the senior rabbis of the religious Zionist movement, will pass without harsh reactions. "Of course, there will be criticism," he says. "There are trenchant comments here. I do not have the shadow of a doubt that there will be criticism of one kind or another. However, intellectual decency compels one to speak his mind and withstand the criticism. I do so out of love."

The background to Kaveh's criticism of the rabbis is the disengagement, of course. He is scathingly critical of the calls by rabbis to soldiers to disobey orders and not to serve, as well as of the promises made by rabbis that the disengagement would never take place. As Kaveh is careful not to name the rabbis he is referring to, a brief guide to the positions taken by them is required. It was prepared with the



help of Nadav Shragai, the Haaretz expert on right-wing and settler circles.

To begin with, it is important to clarify the positions of the two rabbis who are considered the spiritual leaders of religious Zionism, former chief rabbis Avraham Shapira and Mordechai Eliahu. Shapira took the lead in calling on soldiers to refuse orders. Others who issued similar calls were Rabbi Zalman Melamed, head of the Beit El yeshiva, and Rabbi Elyakim Levanon, head of the Elon Moreh yeshiva. (Both yeshivas are in the West Bank.) Eliahu was less clear about refusal to obey orders, and his last declared position was that soldiers should say that they are unable to carry out the evacuation order. But he was the one who promised that the disengagement would not take place, and declared: "It will not happen." Against this background, it is difficult not to view Kaveh's remarks as a direct attack on the authority and the status of Rabbis Shapira and Eliahu.

Hundreds of pre-draft youngsters recently signed a petition headed "We will not be drafted into the Israel Defense Forces the army of expulsion and destruction." The petition, organized by high-school and yeshiva high-school students, states, in part: "I the undersigned declare that I will oppose serving as a soldier in the army that expelled Jews from their homes." None of the important rabbis called for refusal to serve in an army that evacuates Jews. This initiative sprang from the grass roots, from 12th-graders, but it is possible that some of the grass-roots rabbis encouraged them.

[A note: Prof. Kaveh often takes conceptual leaps which make it difficult to understand the continuity between his comments, so explanations have in some cases been added, in brackets, to make the subject-matter more comprehensible S.I.]

'DEFEAT BY KNOCKOUT'

"All the extremist rabbis who called on soldiers to refuse and those rabbis who said the disengagement would not happen, and said so with enormous confidence that is the destruction of the education of the young generation," Kaveh says. "I called them Sabbatians [referring to the followers of Sabbatai Zevi, the 17th-century 'false messiah']. Why Sabbatians? Because prophecy, we know, was given only to fools after the destruction of the Temple. I do not think they are fools. So it is Sabbatian. These extremists actually suffered a defeat by knockout, in the language of sports. People refused [to heed] them. The large, enthusiastic camp, in its pain, in its sorrow, did not listen to them, and I say, blessed be God. Blessed be God. There are those who say 'we failed' because [soldiers] did not refuse orders. I am happy that they were the ones who failed and not religious Zionism ... Those rabbis failed. They were not obeyed. Those people, who are continuing the struggle instead of admitting failure, those rabbis should, out of modesty if nothing else, stop talking. I would say that they should spend a year in silence. With modesty."

You are speaking as though they were the exceptions, but many rabbis from the religious Zionist movement advocated refusal of orders.

"Ninety percent of the rabbis objected to refusal to obey orders. You ask me how many spoke out and were interviewed? Few. But they are the majority of the rabbis of religious Zionism. I will say something grave: If you are right and you are not that they were the majority of the rabbis of the religious Zionist movement, then religious Zionism has finished its historic role. Because of the impression you are



referring to, that the majority of the rabbis [urged soldiers to disobey orders], I want to issue a call in this interview: You who are silent, you other rabbis who think differently, who were against refusing orders before the disengagement, stand up and let yourselves be heard."

The protest against the disengagement should have been nonviolent, Kaveh explains, not only according to the rules of democracy, but also according to Judaism, which imposes restrictions on verbal criticism of the government. "You know, that is forbidden in Judaism. To utter imprecations is against Judaism you shall not revile a chieftain of your people. These extremists violated the rules of democracy, but I want to emphasize that they violated parts of Judaism. Extremist pronouncements against the government must not be uttered. My disappointment is that the [other] rabbis did not condemn them. Not to mention the fact that some of the rabbis also uttered them [the imprecations].

"In contrast to the Haredim [ultra-Orthodox Jews], religious Zionism said it is a commandment to serve in the IDF, and to distort that, to say that this is a commandment that depends on the situation, is terrible. I did not see any religious person making his prayers conditional on what happens in the government. [The duty] to protect the State of Israel has existed in the Torah sources for 3,500 years. It is impossible to ignore this and to say today that to serve in the IDF is conditional. [Anyone who does this] makes his religiosity conditional on the reality of the situation. Above all, such a person has a lacuna in his understanding of religion ... Is it conceivable that some of the finest people this country has produced, from religious Zionism, will not serve in the IDF? Who will sign off on any such idea? Anyone who would is not worthy to serve in the IDF, because he enters the category of one who dissociates himself from the community" that is, someone who is wicked.

"Rabbis who affirm this conditionality are not only false rabbis, they are not only false prophets they are a danger to religion. They can say, do not go to the IDF, study Torah, become a Haredi. That is a great danger. [But] the religion has preserved itself in horrific situations, in indescribable crises across history. It will survive this, too. On condition that it will excoriate rabbis who engendered a hallucinatory vision, false messianism, according to which, if I pray that disengagement will not occur then it will not occur. That is against religion. That is a demand [of God]. It is a chutzpah. Otherwise, what is the meaning of prayer?

"There was one sanctified moment, in my view, of a transition from the right and duty of protest in a Jewish democratic state, to the duty to obey," Kaveh recalls. "It was, if I remember rightly, at midnight on August 17th [when the evacuation began]. The religious person educates himself that there is a certain moment in the week which separates between weekday activity and the restrictions of Shabbat, and he does not even doubt this."

According to Kaveh, there should have been an identical transition from protesting the disengagement to obeying the evacuation order. "But that sharp transition did not occur. I think that if the evacuation had gone as I said, [if the rabbis] had obeyed at the moment of holiness, they would have gone down in history as [reflecting] the glory of educational success. We were almost there. And there were some like that."

Of the IDF's behavior during the evacuation, Kaveh adds: "There is no doubt that it should be awarded all



the citations of heroism. We discovered that we have an IDF in a class of its own, a class of its own."

TWO MESSIAHS

Kaveh points out that there are messiahs in both camps. In the left-wing camp is what he calls the messiah of peace, which was created after Oslo. "Religious Zionism shut itself up in the messiah of the holy places, with its most important banner being that of settlement and land. That banner, which is legitimate [that is, legitimate when it is one of many banners], atrophied broad segments of Judaism, atrophied part of the religion. This is the danger of religious Zionism, in my opinion, that is its own enemy. It is not the 'other' [the enemy].

Not the other. It knows how to protect itself. But what it does not really know is how to mature into a new reality. If the religious Zionist movement does not produce a moderate leadership, which will wave several banners simultaneously, it will atrophy." He calls on both sides to understand that their messiahs of utopian peace and of settlement throughout the Land of Israel are a matter for the End of Days, and "to connect. Continue with your banners, but lower their height a bit," so as to define together how to deal with the problems of the Israeli society. "The distinctive connection between broad religious Zionism and broad 'general,' even secular, Zionism that is the challenge."

There are many in the religious Zionist movement who think that the conclusion to be drawn from the disengagement is that they and the secular population have nothing in common.

"In the Pesach Haggadah, who is called wicked? Only one person: the one who removes himself from the community. Religious Zionism and general Zionism have more in common than may appear to be the case ... What they share is tremendous. Tremendous. Both of us were pleased that Amos Oz received the Goethe Prize, right? He is a writer whom every cultured person reads. We all have a high regard for culture ... So if the differences bother the extremists so much, let them remove themselves from the community, both in this camp and the other camp ... They will be the 'other.' They will disengage from most of Zionism. They will be excoriated by the majority of the public. Religious Zionism, I assume, will shed the extremists naturally." And if they are victorious?

"If the extremist camp the camp of zealotry, the camp of dogmatism ultimately takes control of religious Zionism, which I do not believe will happen, that will be the end of religious Zionism. It will disappear. And if it disappears, that will be bad also for Jewish culture in the State of Israel. I call on the general camp to proffer a hand to the camp that needs dialogue with you just now, do not push it away. Let us undertake a true spiritual stocktaking. If they will have to defend themselves against attacks, the extremists will take over again."

The extremist rabbis whom you are talking about are the spiritual leadership of religious Zionism.

"Just a minute no. No. No. The fact is that that leadership, which issued extremist pronouncements, proved that it is not the leadership of this public. If they were the leadership, there would have been wall-to-wall refusal of orders. So, first of all, that is not the leadership. It is certainly not my leadership. I do not want to disengage from anyone. You are talking to me? I represent masses of people here, masses



who think as I do. I want to say that today 90 percent and more [of the rabbis of the religious Zionist movement] would never think of making extreme pronouncements of that kind of disengagement [from the state]. Today every rabbi is a kind of little pope of some small group. Take all those groups together and they still do not represent religious Zionism. Religious Zionism does not have one sole authority. Today, during the crisis, that is a blessing: There is no one person who says something and everyone automatically abides by it."

Former chief rabbis Mordechai Eliahu and Avraham Shapira who is the head of Merkaz Harav yeshiva are considered the spiritual leadership of religious Zionism.

"The faction of Merkaz Harav unfortunately became ever more extreme, ever more extreme. To say that this is religious Zionism? If that faction grows, I think religious Zionism will face a terrible crisis."

But maybe the extremists are right, in the sense that secular Zionism has become devoid of values?

"I want to emphasize that religious Zionism was not established on condition that we support the state if it does A, B, C and D. [The state] is us. Any disappointment is in ourselves. There are no others who are to blame. The weak person blames the 'other' in order to shirk responsibility. To say that the Jewish majority failed? It is they who failed ... if there is no content in this country. Where are you people? Where are we, religious Zionism?"

That is to say that the state as an instrument for the redemption of the Jewish people failed, is a flawed instrument.

"What is the state? It is not the state; it is us. I don't understand it. Does the state act? Does the land act? It is we [who act]. It is you and I. Whenever there is a crisis in the country, are we supposed to shut down? That is fatalism, which is contrary to Judaism. Judaism obligates the Jew at every stage not to fall into despair, but to do the best he can, and the Jews, even in the worst of situations, did not throw in the towel. I am certainly not despairing."

What is the religious Jew supposed to do with his disappointment with the secular partner?

"I am not disappointed. A person who is in a state of deep disappointment goes to therapy. Therapy does not take one day. I have in the university one of the best psychology departments in the world. I have not seen a therapist whose treatment is over in one day. This is a question that requires treatment, and to treat a nation is far more complicated. The first project is to get a sense of proportion.

"There will be some young people who I believe will experience a crisis of faith: God did not hear me. The crisis was created because that person never believed in God in the right way. He believed only in a God who does what he wants, and therefore he believed in himself. That is not belief in God. God is not an insurance policy. So, what is the lesson? The education in belief was flawed in this group unequivocally."

Here Kaveh explains the origin of his name. "My father, of blessed memory, who came from the



Holocaust, changed his name to Kaveh. He told me something lovely: It is written, 'Look to the Lord' [Psalms 14: 27]. What happens if it does not succeed? You go to the second half of the verse: 'Be strong and of good courage.' All that is incumbent upon you to do is to hope [lekavot, from which kaveh derives]. To force the Lord to hear your voice? That is effrontery. God is not an industrial contractor for every request. Prayer is always permissible. God may hear or not hear. But you cannot demand this. That is basic education in belief, which must exist in every yeshiva. It is a basic lacuna in religious-Zionist education ... In religious education it is untenable for the rabbi to have an exclusive monopoly. The parents must take responsibility and the milieu must also take responsibility. Is everything to be placed in the hands of a rabbi?"

THE SPIRITUAL CENTER

Throughout the interview it was difficult to shake off the impression that Kaveh thinks that Bar-Ilan University, and not the yeshivas, should be the spiritual center and educational focal point of the religious Zionist movement. He could not easily deny that this was his opinion, though occasionally he tried to demur. "Look at Bar-Ilan University, which was established in order to moderate, to get religious and secular into a dialogue it is the antithesis of the extreme faction. There are more secular than religious students. The 'being together' creates the culture. I do not expect that all of religious Zionism will be Bar-Ilan University. It is a process. On the other hand, we are absorbing its sons [of the religious Zionist movement] and hoping to open them up. Part of the path of Bar-Ilan is to expand the way of the student, who has hardly come into contact with the 'other' since kindergarten, and the way of the hesder yeshivas [combining religious studies with military service]. Here we teach the person to listen to completely different views. He hears the Christian doctrine. He hears the Islamic doctrine. He learns that there are fine things within secular culture. I do not know how much three years can do, but there is no doubt that the great majority of the students who come out of here, come out more moderate."

Religious Zionism, Kaveh says, "sees Bar-Ilan as the peak of its education system, and it will be so for many years to come. At Bar-Ilan I am trying to create a vast supermarket of Judaism, where every Jew can find a Jewish cultural product for himself.

I have a thousand courses in Judaism. I am ready to place this at the disposal of the public. I believe that Bar-Ilan is well on the way to turning out generations of educated people and that this will be the mainstream [in religious Zionism]. I do not deny that the extremists in the religious Zionist movement do not see the path of Bar-Ilan the way I see it and the way the leadership of Bar-Ilan has seen it down through the years. I agree that the extremists do not come to Bar-Ilan. With great pain I hear, 'Do not go to Bar-Ilan. Bar-Ilan is too open. It is too liberal. It is always thinking about how to connect one person with another. There is a danger in that connection. Maybe they will ruin you.' I say this unequivocally: Every rabbi who thinks that a young man after army service is not immunenot clear, has failed.

"It is inconceivable, in the ideology I am talking about, for a young man to ask a rabbi whether he should go to university or not. Religious Zionism offers freedom of choice. I have a high regard for rabbis; without rabbis there is no Judaism, without them it will fall apart. That is a compliment. On the other hand, the face of Judaism is as the face of the rabbis, and that is the part they do not like to hear."



It is essential for Judaism to develop a rabbinic leadership that possesses broad horizons, Kaveh adds: "Bar-Ilan, too, receives this message. We must have a rabbi who is connected to academia, otherwise he will not be able to connect [with the secular students]. There can be no such thing today as a rabbi without an education. The role of Bar-Ilan is to provide a broad Jewish ID card to every Jew who enters its gates, whether he is religious or a heretic."

BAR-ILAN AND ITS SAGES

"We still believe," Kaveh states, "that there are situations of Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai, that there are situations in which Yavneh and its sages save Judaism" referring to the situation in the Holy Land after the destruction of the Second Temple.

I want to understand: Are you proposing a university religious model in place of a rabbinic religious model?

"Correct. [Afterward Kaveh said he had been misunderstood and that he was not competing with the rabbis.] I talked about this many years ago with communities abroad. One person there asked me a proper question: 'Who gave you the authority to say what is good for Judaism?' That is a basic question. After all, I am not a rabbi which I could have easily been. My father, who was a rabbi, gave me his blessing to go into physics, which I loved, of course. I could have been a rabbi. I don't know whether Zionism would have been better off or worse off, in that case."

I have the feeling that when you mentioned Yavneh and its sages you were actually talking about academia saving Judaism.

"That sounds patronizing. But I will say this: Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai was against all the zealots, and history has found that the wise man is not a zealot. Those who are wrathful, those who are militant, do not have staying power. The zealots did not win in that war. He [Ben Zakkai] is a hero. He is a Jewish national hero. In true Judaism, the Judaism that engages in trenchant spiritual stocktaking, Bar Kochba was a false messiah, bar kuzeiba. So today I say to the religious Zionist movement: Do not look for messiahs. Do not look for authoritative rabbis. Turn to the silent majority, to the other rabbis, who are silent, good, pleasant."

Kaveh's criticism of the rabbis is not confined solely to the political sphere. "The country is experiencing distress that should upset religious people, but it does not. The prophets wept over what was happening to the poor, to the indigent, to the orphan and to the widow, and it is happening in Israel. I do not find a rabbi who is preoccupied day and night with the economic gaps and with the poor in the country. There is a great deal to be done, if the channel of energy of enthusiastic youth were to be focused on the area of social distress instead of on a few meters of land. This is a young generation that could do a great deal you know, enter all the places, the hospitals where help is needed. But there has been no such leadership." We are talking about a public that sends their children to private institutions and pays tuition that is enough for whole families to live on, so that their children will not attend school with the rest of the nation. Is this the public that is supposed to see about narrowing the social gap?



"It is hard, I agree. It is hard. It is hard. It is a historic mistake, this sector-oriented approach ... To go to ghettos I do not like the word 'ghettos' to become more insular, to live in places where only religious people live. Religious Zionists are needed in secular Tel Aviv. What's happening here? Don't religious people live in Tel Aviv? What is this? There should have been religious Zionists everywhere in Galilee, in Tel Aviv. Wherever there is no geographic connection between religious and secular that is a failure of religious Zionism. It is not the role of the religious person to say that he is weak and cannot meet the challenge. He must overcome. But you are right it didn't happen. There was a separation and a separation within the separation. If you ask me what banner I would like to hoist? Live in every place in Israel. Disperse. Disperse. Exert influence. It is impossible to exert influence by living in closed places."

If that does not happen, Kaveh adds, "then religious Zionism did not succeed." How do you expect religious people to live among a secular population with its permissive clothing, its street advertising?

"Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai was afraid that people would spoil him and so he spent 13 years in a cave. In the end he emerged. We have already emerged from those individual caves. True, according to the approach that I recommend, which Bar-Ilan is recommending, there will be people who in terms of ideology will become 'others,' who will change their outlook. That is part of the price. Maybe my grandson will be secular and your grandson will be religious. Both of us have to know that there is a price to be paid for dialogue. Just as there is a price it shouldn't happen to us for maintaining Israel's security with an army, there is also a cultural price for the existence of the State of Israel. If a person is willing to die for Israel, will he not be willing to live for it? And to take risks, even in the ideological sphere?"

NOT EVERYTHING GOES

After the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, Prof. Moshe Kaveh says, "we took a very hard position on freedom of expression and freedom of demonstration and its limits. Yes, its limits. Before the disengagement you would not have found one poster on campus that had not passed the ethical test. Not every statement is possible here today." Kaveh is convinced that this lesson has also been learned beyond the realm of Bar-Ilan.

"We got through the big crisis [of the disengagement] peacefully because the religious public internalized the lesson. There is a great difference between external relations [of the religious public] and internal relations. There is no rabbi today who does not understand what words can do and what the difference is between an utterance and incitement, apart from the extremists, who will always be with us. These things were honed and learned."

What changed, exactly?

"When rabbis tell their students, before the disengagement, that it is even forbidden to say things, let alone to push ... I am not talking about the extremists, who do not heed any authority. But I say that people have learned what extremism can cause."

Kaveh became president of the university two months after Rabin's assassination which was undoubtedly the most traumatic event in the history of Bar-Ilan University. "I was elected president after that event and



perhaps because of that event," he says.

The events marking the 10th anniversary of the assassination, in another month and a half, will again draw attention to the university, where the assassin was a student. "The reprobate Yigal Amir was barely studied here, but the damage he caused the university was tremendous," Kaveh notes. "Most of the time he was outside, demonstrating outside. I examined Yigal Amir's file. I was then rector. Would I have admitted him? There is no reason why not. He completed [the educational institutions of] religious Zionism. Good grades, no criminal offenses.

"My first act as president of the university was to establish a commission of inquiry chaired by retired Judge Yosef Harish. "They examined things, entered every place." The commission found that there was no basis for the allegation that Bar-Ilan had been a hothouse of extremism.

Kaveh: "We took a stand, we established nearly 15 centers of tolerance and dialogue. I have the largest center of dialogue between religious and secular in Israel. Is one immune from extremist acts? It is impossible to be immune, but Bar-Ilan lowers the probability of that by the most gigantic levels that can exist.

"All of us, from the president, the rector, the director general to the last of the professors, are committed with our very souls to eradicating extremism. There are very clear ethical codes of behavior, of speech, of protest, which can be learned from Bar-Ilan. Our faculty cannot say certain things in the classroom that are not related to the subject at hand. If I were giving this interview in my physics class, as a professor, I would demand that I be sacked. Because it is not within my sphere. Yes disengagement, no disengagement that is not a subject for academia. The severance between academia and politics is sacrosanct at Bar-Ilan. That is why academia and religion have become more distilled here."

It is a bit odd to hear you talk about Bar-Ilan University as a symbol of moderation its image after the Rabin assassination was that of a symbol of extremism.

"The answer is the influx of students to Bar-Ilan. I have to turn away students today for lack of place. Why am I building a new campus? If there is an extremist group that says that if there are religious students here, they must be extremists, they will not change, etc. I do not have a cure for every assertion ... I cannot appear in the media every day and say that we are doing our best. After all, what did Yigal Amir do? He struck at the source of the moderation. He came and plunged that knife in. So what do you say? Shall we also make the place of moderation extreme?