

Ronen Tal

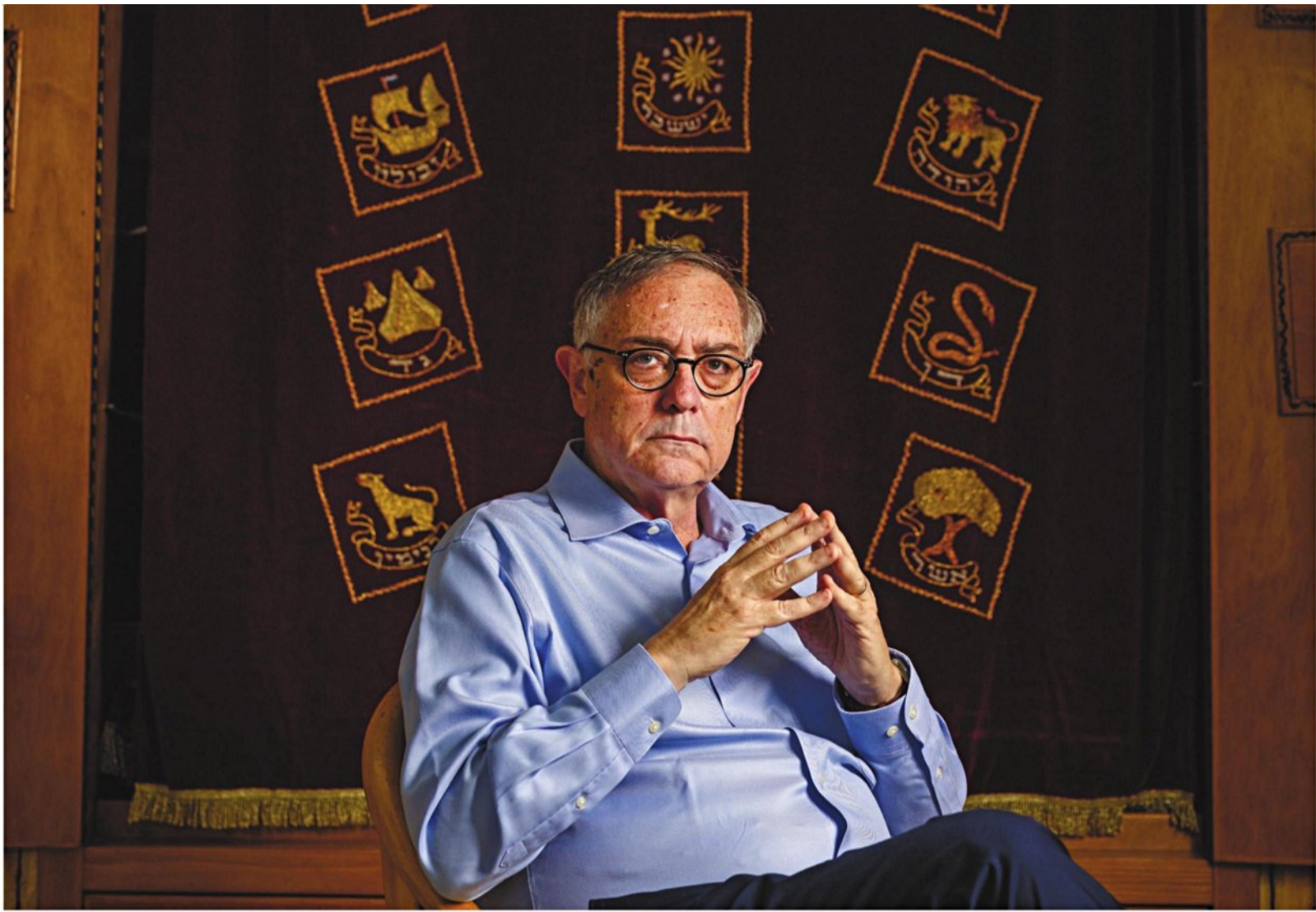
In a meeting with students at the Lod pre-military academy, Reform Rabbi Meir Azari found himself in a heated argument with one of the young women in attendance. Much like in similar past encounters, what provoked the most emotion was the issue of women's status. "A young woman is sitting in front of me with ripped jeans and revealing clothes – her entire presence says, 'I want others to see me as a woman,' but she is talking to me about the importance of modesty and complains that women can pray with men in our synagogue.

"She doesn't see the paradox here. This woman isn't religious, but when I tell her that up until recently in Jewish history there wasn't a woman's section [in synagogues], she doesn't believe me. She insists that 'the rabbi said so.' You get responses like that a lot more these days." These kind of encounters have a lot to do with social media, and the relentless way in which it spreads false narratives among young people. "You have rabbis and charlatans who tell children all kinds of nonsense," says Azari. According to him, all the amulets and spells talk, the initiation rites, the gematria explanations, the visits to rabbis' graves and the gender-segregated prayers in Tel Aviv serve a purpose, that is orchestrated from above to strengthen the nationalist trends in Israeli society. In secular jargon, this is called religionization.

"It's not that the government wants people to become observant," he continues. "But rather that it says to the ultra-Orthodox and the Orthodox, 'give power to the government and we will pay you political dividends, so you can open more and more yeshivot.' They don't understand – or maybe they do understand – that these yeshivot are nurturing ignorance, nationalism and racism and are creating a Jewish identity that liberal Israelis do not want to be a part of. It's an identity in which the status of women is inferior, the connection to other peoples doesn't exist, Israel doesn't recognize the stranger among us and they spit on priests and Christian tourists in Jerusalem."

Azari's new Hebrew-language book, whose title translates as "Leading the Way: Jewish Leadership Brings Change" (published by Kricha) is aimed at offering an alternative to the conservative trend that Orthodox Judaism promotes with the help of state funding. Azari seeks to show that the Jewish world is – and always has been – more diverse than the version most Israelis know, that side-by-side with strict halakha (Jewish religious law) was a Judaism of innovation and creativity that adapted religion to changing circumstances over time. Even halakha itself has a liberal worldview that stresses values like equality, social justice, resistance to authority and defense of the weak against the powerful.

Azari does this through a survey of Jewish heroes (almost all of them men) in the course of history, from Abraham and Moses through the prophets Isaiah and Amos, the Rambam and Rabbi Yohanan Ben-Zakkai through to Theodor Herzl, Golda Meir and Bob Dylan. In other words, the book is preaching to the converted. Azari knows that Haredi wheelers and dealers in the government and the "hilltop



Reform Rabbi Meir Azari. "I want liberal Israelis, who are losing their Judaism, to return to it."

Hadas Parush

# 'When Jews enter an Arab village and burn homes, that's Judaism?'

## In his new book, the Reform rabbi Meir Azari seeks to show that the Jewish world is more diverse than the version most Israelis know

youth" extremist settlers will stick to their own version of Judaism.

### A disaster has befallen Judaism

Azari, 65, was born in Haifa to a mixed family – Sephardi on his father's side and Ashkenazi on his mother's ("We were secular but on the holidays each of my grandfathers would drag me to his synagogue.") His parents, he says, didn't have enough money to send him to the Hebrew Reali School and so he attended the Leo Baeck School, which was operated by the Reform movement. At age 16, he met at his youth movement the girl who would later become his wife, Anna Azari, a diplomat who served as Israel's ambassador to Russia and Poland and is today the ambassador to the Czech Republic. At the beginning of his career, when she was consul-general to the Pacific Northwest, in San Francisco, Meir took on the main responsibility of raising their two children.

Azari has held various positions in the Reform movement and organizations affiliated with it. He stood at the forefront of the struggle to open Jerusalem cultural institutions on Shabbat, was invited by Meretz leader Shulamit Aloni to serve as a Knesset member for the party (and turned her down) and was also close to Shinui party leader Tommy Lapid (father of Yesh Atid leader Yair Lapid). In the early 1990s, he founded Beit Daniel in northern Tel Aviv, the first Reform synagogue in Israel, which also operates the world's largest center for non-Orthodox conversion.

This conversion process, he notes, is accepted by the state, unlike the alternative wedding ceremonies he has conducted over the past 30 years as a rabbi. "I have mar-

ried thousands of couples who want a Jewish ceremony but are opposed to the institutional element that exists in it. According to Orthodox Judaism, the wife is the man's property, and these couples want an egalitarian ketubah [marriage contract] and a ceremony where a woman can also serve as a witness. The absurdity is that Yigal Amir [murderer of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin] can be a witness for a wedding because he keeps Shabbat, but a female courtroom judge cannot."

Azari wrote "Leading the Way" in Prague after his wife was posted there as ambassador. "It was the first time that I was actually able to join her," he says. "Until then, I was always traveling, coming for visits and returning to Israel, working like crazy. This time I decided that this was the opportunity to tell the ideological story that I believe in."

*In other words?*  
"The book says, a disaster has befallen Judaism. Its development has been arrested. The basis of the Orthodox view is that what has preserved us as a people is the conservatism of Judaism. What was is what will be, Torah from Sinai – nothing must be changed. My book says exactly the opposite, that Judaism has persevered precisely because of its ability to maneuver between conservatism and innovation, and innovation stems from the place and time in which you live and the constraints you face. The book's message is to the liberal Israeli: Just as you took back the flag and went out to demonstrate in Kaplan, so you can take back Judaism. It is yours and it also includes the liberal world of which you are a part."

*You rely on texts that stress innovation and change, but there are also texts that prove the opposite.*

"There's no doubt about that. In one of the chapters, I analyze the story of Rabbi Meir Kahane and say, there's a basis for this [outlook] in the writings," he says, referring to the Brooklyn-born former Member of Knesset whose racist ideology has gained traction of late.

"In Judaism, there is certainly the hatred and madness of the Kahanists, but you need to take into account the context. When the Temple is destroyed and the Romans have defeated you, or when you sit in the court of a Polish nobleman and he collects taxes from you and pisses on you from above, you hate the gentile. "But in your own, independent country, how can you, as a rabbi, issue a halakha ruling that it is forbidden to rent

### Meir Azari: 'These yeshivot are nurturing ignorance, nationalism and racism and are creating a Jewish identity that liberal Israelis do not want to be a part of.'

apartments to Arabs? Or the statement by someone who is today the finance minister that his wife should not have to lay down in the same room with an Arab woman giving birth?" said Azari, referring to Bezalel Smotrich's support for the segregation of Arab and Jewish mothers in maternity wards in Israeli hospitals. "Think what would happen if New York's archbishop said something like that."

*One of the dramatic changes you describe is the ban on Jewish men marrying a second wife.*

Rabbeinu Gershom Me'Or Hagolah (Rabbi Gershom Ben Judah) "said at about 1,000 C.E. that the Jewish family needed to be composed of a man and a woman. Institutional Judaism saw that as a revolution; a large part of the rabbis rebelled. Hundreds of years later the Vilna Gaon said, 'If I could change something, it would be this – how dare you prevent Jews from marrying a second and third wife, what will a man do when his wife is a middah [ritually impure due to menstruation], you want them to go to prostitutes?' It's a dramatic change that was influenced by Christianity

and was not accepted in all of the Jewish world. In Sephardi Judaism, there were some who continued to marry more than one woman. My Sephardi great uncle was married to two women."

The book is filled with examples proving halakha flexibility, or just healthy common sense. Rabbi Moses Isserles (The Rema), a yeshiva head, halakha arbiter and philosopher from the 16th century in Krakow, agreed to marry a couple after Shabbat began, a step that would have gotten him fired today. "The groom's family tried to take advantage of the fact that the bride was an orphan, but the rabbi delayed the time of the wedding until he made sure the ketubah [Jewish marriage contract] did not short-change her," said Azari.

"In the Bible, we find the cancellation of debts in the seventh [sabbatical] year. It caused people to stop lending money out of a fear the debt would not be paid back. Along came Hillel the Elder who enacted the Prozbul, allowing the ban to be bypassed and the loan to be collected through the transfer of the money to the rabbinical court – or, in terms from our times, through the bank. The enactment allows the rich to continue to lend money to those who need it without fear the debt will be canceled."

*Why did the strict Orthodox approach become accepted here in Israel without almost any dispute?*

"In contradiction to what they teach the nonreligious in Israel – halakha is not the sole foundation of Judaism. The foundation of Judaism is tikkun olam [repairing the world] and social justice, and a person needs to complete the works of creation. When the land is devastated and we go into exile, halakha takes the central place with all of the minutiae that comes with it. Suddenly there is kosher for Passover water and unkosher water. What can be unkosher about water?"

"The Reform movement has a guesthouse in Jaffa and it hosts government employees and soldiers. We need to run it strictly according to the law and it's impossible to host without the kashrut stamp of the [Chief] Rabbinate. One day we received a message that it's not possible to serve corn on the cob. Not kosher, because it's possible the corn has bugs in it. Do you believe something like this would have interested King David? That Rabbi Akiva would have busied himself with it? It's not the Judaism the prophets dreamt about."

*What did the prophets dream about?*

"Prophecy is the very heart of Judaism. The vision of the prophets was the view that the world was created lacking. God recognizes this incompleteness and the role of the prophet is to try and turn the world into something more whole, more just. The prophets, mostly Isaiah and Amos, are amazing voices who speak about social justice and a better world, who aspire to a more just and moral society, and this is given expression in the attempt to limit the ruling power, too – not because the ruler is bad but because a potential for evil exists in power and glory, and the role of the Jew is to protect the weak and minority in society."

*Are the Kaplanist protesters of our time the new prophets?*

"Yes. I see a direct line between the prophets and the voices coming out against social injustices, against corrupt rule and corrupt religious leadership. Through-



Beit Daniel, which does non-Orthodox conversions. Ilan Assayag

out history Judaism has identified these things, and laws exist that help to establish social justice. But Israeli Judaism, instead of dealing with the moral question of who and what it is when it returned to Israel after 2,000 years, is busy with raising the walls, preoccupied with separating between us and them."

*They don't know all this in the Orthodox yeshivas?*

"In the Orthodox world, there is very little acquaintance with the prophetic literature. They focus more on the page of Talmud and that's also true for the Haredi [Haredi religious Zionist] yeshivas. I respect the Talmud and I quote from it in the book, but for me the main Jewish story is the story of the Bible. When you base yourself just on the Talmud, you receive a version of Judaism that belongs to the Diaspora, Judaism as a religion of technocrats, of permitted and forbidden."

*When did this happen?*  
It's a process that be-

gan in the Middle Ages and reached its peak with the publishing of the Shulchan Aruch of Rabbi Josef Karo in the 16th century. It's a book that comes to recapitulate halakha work, and it has all the answers in it – it's what a Jew does from the morning to night, and from the day they are born to their death, and it all ends with it. But the moment they created this guide, a lot of Jews stopped pondering over and questioning the mitzvot [commandments], they stopped wondering what was relevant and right for them. The Shulchan Aruch was right for the time in which it was written but since then the world has changed."

*One of the chapters in the book deals with Hasidism. You present it in a completely different manner than how it is viewed today.*

"Hasidism was an interesting attempt to break this all-encompassing circle. It's the Reform Judaism of Eastern Europe. An attempt to normalize Judaism and draw it out of the closed framework of the yeshiva world. Rabbis appear who say come and let us pray outside, instead of learning a page of Talmud in the yeshiva, let's sing and dance and drink good wine. Rabbi Nahman of Breslov, who today everyone is running to his tomb, was a revolutionary. He had a good connection with the goyim [non-Jews], loved nature, saw in it the embodiment of godliness. He would have been shocked if he had seen the filth his Hasidim are leaving behind in Uman. But the second and third generations of Hasidism are going backward, forming courts that are closed off to the world, and today's Hasidim are sitting in the same [political] party with the [non-Hasidic] Lithuanians – the mitnagdim of once – those who declared a world war against them."

*You emphasize the issue of social justice and treatment of the other. Doesn't the expression: "You have chosen us out of all the peoples," from the Jewish prayer book, hint at ingrained racism, Jewish superiority?*

"The interpretation of this expression by the nationalist and racist forces is wrong. It's not that we were chosen to be better than other peoples, but we were chosen to bring other peoples the tidings of the rule of law, social justice and proper behavior of elected officials and rulers."

*In other words, it's a phrase that is subject to interpretation, and you adapt the interpretation to the values you already espouse.*

"True. And they do it too. 'You have been chosen' in the meaning of hating the other is an idea that belongs to the Diaspora. It's an excuse for the Jews to say to themselves, after they were beaten by the Polish lord or the Turkish wazir, that their lives were

difficult and terrible, but the day will come in which everything will be okay. But now there is no lord or wazir. What there is, of course, are our problematic neighbors, and a disaster such as October 7 just fans these feelings. The question is whether we can get out of this by raising the walls, or by finding a path to peace – and if peace doesn't look possible for now, then don't we need to conduct a fair society?"

*Israeli society isn't fair?*  
"Israeli society excludes women and discriminates against non-Jewish citizens who live within it. In Shfar'am [an Arab town] a place where some of my family lived for generations, there are no public shelters, and in Daliat al-Carmel [a Druze town] they don't receive the community services that I receive in Ramat Gan. We ask that Jews around the world be treated well, and every time a synagogue is attacked there are cries and marches, and [people asking] why didn't someone condemn it. Here, they torched the Church of the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fish at Lake Kinneret, and Jews burned an Arab child."

The church's arsonist was convicted and sentenced to four years in prison. His lawyer was Itamar Ben-Gvir, now the national security minister. "When Jews enter an Arab village and burn houses on Shabbat, that's Judaism? It's nationalism that has turned into a disaster and it stems from the Jew from the Diaspora having brought hatred of the goy with him to Israel."

### Mafia rule

One of the decisive moments in Jewish history is the destruction of the Second Temple, which Azari says gave birth to a comprehensive reform in religious practice and how Judaism viewed itself. "Prayer replaced ritual sacrifices. What's a sacrifice? It's the desire of a Jew to express gratitude for what God gave him, to make a request, or ask forgiveness. For these things you would have gone to the temple and the priest would have mediated between you and God. But then the temple was destroyed, and Rabbi Yohanan Ben Zakai and those of his generation brought about a revolution – and in practice transferred religiosity from the priests to the lay person. You want to say thank you? Make a request? Pray? You can do it without being dependent on a middleman."

According to Azari, today's Orthodox establishment with its pursuit of positions and obsession with government funds, is not very different than the priesthood that ruled Judaism since the exodus from Egypt until they were removed from power after the destruction of the Second Temple. "There were five main priestly families in Jerusalem who, between them, shared the key positions. Each one held one of the secrets of the temple. One held the secret of writing, another the secret of the incense. The most important was the Yom Kippur incense whose preparation demanded special expertise. The High Priest would enter the Holy of Holies, render a prayer and light the incense, and it was supposed to rise to the heavens."

See AZARI, Page 7



Haredi students studying Torah at the Ponevezh Yeshiva in Bnei Brak.

Menahem Kahana/AFP



# AZARI

*Continued from page 8*

“One year, the family demanded a fortune for the incense, price gouging, the way El Al did this past year. The administrators of the temple came and said, we will bring incense from Egypt, and so it happened. But then the High Priest lit the new incense and it turned out it did not rise to the heavens nicely. They ran to the family’s home, bought the incense at an excessive price and relit it. Do you understand how corrupt it was? It’s a story from the Talmud. I didn’t invent it.”

*You’re describing the Mafia.*

“There was definitely the rule of mafia families in the temple. The priesthood was sold to the highest bidder and the government interfered in appointments. How did they pay for it? By imposing taxes, and the people caved under the burden. As opposed to

the priests, the rabbis were simple people. Rabbi Akiva didn’t know how to read and write until age 40. Today in Israel, the Rabbinate is passed on through inheritance like the priesthood of those times. They yell about the Supreme Court that ‘friends bring their friends,’” he says, referring to accusations by Netanyahu supporters that the appointment process of Supreme Court justices is flawed. “But where will you find more nepotism and corruption than in a situation in which one family rules the Chief Rabbinate for the third generation already? That seems normal to you? There are no Sephardi rabbis except for the Yosef family? Once the rabbis were good people who tried to give people hope, but with time they turned into an evil and sterile establishment, which doesn’t understand the process of the return to Zion, and goes around in the clothing of 16th century Poland.”

*What is your opinion on the project of building the Third Temple and renewing the*

*sacrificial service?*

“Insanity. Can you imagine the ceremony of performing the first sacrifice in a live broadcast on CNN to the entire world? God really needs to smell the sheep you burn so you will feel Jewish? But the State of Israel is spending millions on these plans.”

*As opposed to the Haredim, religious Zionism is busy with the cult of the land and holy places.*

“Religious Zionism was a partner in the vision to establish a model society, but after [the Six-Day War in] 1967 it enslaved itself to the battle to expand the borders of the State of Israel and its main efforts have gone toward taking control of the territories that were liberated or occupied, to return to this tomb or that tomb, which in 90 percent of the cases were not the right tomb; and that enslaved the entire country. This dream won’t work. You can’t be a model society when you rule over millions of people from another nation.”

*Writing a book like this one*

*demands a great deal of optimism, no?*

“I want liberal Israelis, who are losing their Judaism, to return to it. As far as they’re concerned, the proprietor of God is the Orthodox rabbi who is filling up their brains with kashrut, or is telling them how they need to act. Most of the people in Israel choose to make a bar mitzva for their children, light candles on Hanukkah and celebrate the Passover seder. It’s exactly what characterizes a Reform Jew in America, it’s just that in Israel they are called secular.”

*Aren’t you afraid that the battle has already been lost? That in a few more years they will outlaw you?*

“It could be. A lot of people I know live with such a feeling. If these processes continue, maybe we will have to pack up our things and leave. But I love this land, and I don’t think the Jews have better solutions in other places. It’s a battle for the Jewish soul of the State of Israel, and I am choosing to win it here.”