

# 'Frightening proportions'

## On Meir Kahane's assimilation doctrine

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**ABSTRACT** • This article deals with Rabbi Meir Kahane's assimilation doctrine, an under-studied aspect of previous published research on Kahane. The present study suggests that this doctrine is catalysed by a palingenetic myth of decline and rebirth, which also catalyses Kahane's ideology. By proposing this, this article aims to offer a new perspective on the understanding of what drives Kahane's ideology. It is further suggested that Kahane's palingenetic myth is in part built around a myth of 'intra-racial antagonism' between the American Jewish Establishment (AJE) and the 'common Jew'. Following Bruce Lincoln's theory of myth, it is here contended that Kahane's assimilation doctrine is presented as 'ideology in narrative form'. The study surveys the alleged causes and effects of assimilation, and what solutions Kahane presents to put an end to it. Among the alleged causes, Kahane singles out the AJE's purported gutting of Jewish religious education, which is said to have alienated Jewish youth from their religion. Aside from curtailing Jewish continuity, Kahane for example identifies Jews engaging in social causes that allegedly run counter to Jewish interests as one alleged effect of assimilation. To end assimilation Kahane promotes a solution of campaigning in Jewish communities to ultimately put a stop to intermarriage, to instil *hadar* and *ahavat Yisroel* among Jews by the means of a regenerated Jewish educational system, and to encourage Jews to 'return' to Israel.

### Introduction, aim and previous research

One of the effects of the Jewish Emancipation in the late eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth in Western and Central Europe was assimilation. Historically, assimilation has raised questions among modern-day<sup>1</sup> Jewish thinkers such as Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808–88), the founder of German neo-orthodox Judaism (Åberg 2003: 60). The point at issue was how to combine Jewish orthodox practice with the endeavour to integrate into the surrounding non-Jewish majority societies, yet without curtailing

Jewish continuity (Jewish Virtual Library n.d.). Assimilation is here defined by its etymological roots, which are traced to the Latin word *assimilatio*. The entry on this concept on *Online Etymology Dictionary* reads:

from Latin *assimilationem* (nominative *assimilatio*) 'likeness, similarity', noun of action from past principle stem of assimilate 'to make like' (see *assimilate*). Meaning 'process of becoming alike or identical'. (*Online Etymology Dictionary*: s.v. 'assimilation', italics in the original)

1 'Modern' is here defined in the terms of the historian and denotes the period from the Enlightenment and the eighteenth century until today.

To assimilate thus implies a process of 'becoming alike'. Here it denotes Jews religiously and culturally becoming alike their



Fig. 1. Meir Kahane, 1984. Photo by Bernard Gotfryd. Library of Congress.

surrounding non-Jewish majority societies by gradually moving away from Jewish religious and cultural practice. This process includes a gradual abandoning of what Jefferey S. Sposato calls 'superficial features' such as clothing and speech (Yiddish). But in the German-speaking lands, where the 'general populace' had the Jews lingering at the doorstep of society, some Jews underwent baptism and converted to Christianity. This measure was prompted by the hopes of reaching full acceptance from the surrounding majority society (Sposato 2006: 3). In most cases, baptism curtailed Jewish continuity.

Assimilation and its ensuing effects on Jewish continuity are still a cause of concern among Jews and spark debate between Jewish thinkers from different traditions of interpretation (see e.g. Reinman and Hirsch 2002; Sacks 1994).

'Orthodox Jews' all oppose assimilation.

But Jewish orthodoxy is not a monolithic entity which thinks and acts alike in religious matters. On the contrary, Jewish orthodoxy forms a disparate set of movements and traditions of interpretation. Thus it offers different solutions to how to combat assimilation.

Modern orthodox Jews embrace the modern world. Therefore they encourage acculturation, but oppose assimilation. Ultra-orthodox Jews, or *Haredi* Jews (also a disparate set of movements), on the other hand, shun the modern world. Therefore they create religious enclaves populated by adherents that all subscribe to some strand of ultra-orthodoxy. Messianic religious Zionist Jews encourage immigration to Israel as a solution to assimilation and conceptualise Jewish (ultra-)nationalism in messianic terms (Lundgren 2005: 50, 58, 61).

Rabbi Meir Kahane (1932–90), the founder of the ultra-nationalist vigilante movement the Jewish Defense League (JDL) is also a modern-day thinker who at length discussed the issue of assimilation. By drawing on Ze'ev Jabotinsky's hard-line revisionist Zionism, Kahane struck a balance between the *Haredi* doctrine of separation and the messianic Zionist (ultra)nationalist doctrine of immigration to Israel. In addition, he advanced a theology of revenge (Afterman and Afterman 2015) and ethics of violence (Magid 2015), and resented Israel's liberal parliamentary democracy – except for when it served his purposes (Pedahzur 2012: 74).

Assimilation and its effects on Jewish continuity are a recurring theme in Kahane's extensive body of books and articles and form part of his assimilation doctrine. The theme is vital to the understanding of Kahane's ideology, yet is an under-studied aspect of previous published research. There are exceptions, however. In the book whose title, *Heil Kahane* (1986), alludes to the Nazis, the journalist Yair Kotler briefly touches on Kahane's

concern with assimilation by addressing it in conjunction with Kahane's alarmist claims that Arab men in Israel and the Occupied Territories, disguised as Jews, are bent on wooing Jewish women to hold them captive and convert them to Islam by force.

Shaul Magid (2015) examines Kahane's 'ethics of violence' and addresses his critique of the American Jewish Establishment (AJE, which, as will be discussed below, Kahane held responsible for assimilation), and suggests that Kahane partly based his critique on a theory on perennial antisemitism. Magid also suggests that this theory bears some resemblances to colonialism: that the Jews were 'defined, threatened, controlled, and managed by an antagonistic other, even if that other sometimes acts benevolently' (p. 237). Within the confines of this theory, Magid suggests that Kahane viewed the AJE much as Frantz Fanon, for example, viewed the 'town dwellers', that is, as people 'willing to sell the Jewish soul to be accepted by the establishment' (p. 249). These studies all address Kahane's concern with assimilation, but only briefly and in passing. Aside from these, research on Kahane, the JDL and Kahane's ultra-nationalist political outfit in Israel, Kach, is extensive.

A few words on Kach are called for before addressing previous research any further. Kach was set up as a politicized JDL outpost in Israel in 1971 upon Kahane's emigration to Israel that year. There Kahane used Kach as a vehicle for his parliamentary political aspirations. The movement pandered to the marginalised and traditionalist Mizrahi Jewish community, which Kahane claimed was under the thumb of the secularised Ashkenazi elite, and gained traction among ultra-nationalist Jews. During the early 1980s, Kach shot to notoriety for its noisy party programme, overt anti-Arab racism and violent rallies in Arab neighbourhoods.

However, in the 1984 elections, the third time he ran for public office, Kahane gained 1.2 per cent of the votes and won one seat, and was thus sworn into the Knesset. But prior to the 1988 elections, Kach was banned from participating on the grounds of its racist and anti-democratic ideology (Friedman 1990; Pedahzur 2012: 75–6). Kahane was thus singled out as the unwanted *enfant terrible* of mainstream Israeli politics and booted out for good the country's socially acceptable political discourse.

As for the extensive research, which can be tracked to at least 1971 (Lumer 1971), both journalists (Friedman 1990 and Kotler 1986), and academics from a multiplicity of disciplines, such as political science, social psychology, sociology, history, criminology and, of course, Jewish studies, have contributed to the body of research on the JDL and Meir Kahane (Seibold 1973; Dolgin 1977; Russ 1981; Sprinzak 1985a, 1985b, 1991; Cromer 1987; Paine 1994; George and Wilcox 1996; Tydor Baumel 1999; Afterman and Afterman 2015; Magid 2015; Dorman 2016).

This article contends that Kahane's assimilation doctrine is vital because his concern with Jewish assimilation was – aside from safeguarding Jewish continuity and Jews' political and social interests and physical safety – one of the key catalysing components behind the establishment of the JDL, and Kahane's formulation of the JDL's and Kach's own brand of ultra-nationalist Revisionist Zionism (Kahanism). As will be discussed at length and in depth in what follows, this is because Kahane articulated assimilation as one of the chief reasons why Jews in the diaspora had become such easy targets for antisemitic acts, which culminated in the Holocaust.

With the research gap identified, this article aims to analyse Kahane's assimilation doctrine on US Jewry as it is articulated in

four of his books: *Never Again!* (1971), *The Story of the Jewish Defense League* (1975, reissued in 2000), *Why be Jewish? Intermarriage, Assimilation, and Alienation* (1977, reissued in 2009<sup>2</sup>), and *The Ideology of Kach: The Authentic Jewish Idea* (2013).<sup>3</sup>

To achieve this aim, this article will pursue the questions of how Kahane formulates his assimilation doctrine by surveying the alleged causes and effects of assimilation, and what solutions Kahane presents to put an end to it.

### Myths, narrative form and context

Kahane's writings display a particular mythical dimension that can be termed a 'palinogenetic myth'. The historian Roger Griffin (1993, first edition 1991) writes that a palinogenetic myth denotes 'the sense of a new start or of regeneration after a phase of crisis or decline which can be associated just as much with mystical (e.g. the Second Coming) as secular realities (e.g. the New Germany)' (1993: 32–3).

This article suggests that a palinogenetic myth foments Kahane's ideology, serving as its catalyst. This includes Kahane's assimilation doctrine. Here Kahane's palinogenetic myth is an intrinsic component at play: the rampant assimilation (partly) constitutes 'the phase of crisis or decline', which is the prelude to the 'regeneration' set in train by Kahane.

This means that Kahane's palinogenetic myth permeates his mythical and sweeping

narratives on Jewish assimilation and the ensuing effects of the latter on Jewish continuity, which influence Kahane's assimilation doctrine. To put it simply, when reading Kahane's narratives on assimilation the mythical is ever-present, adding a 'mythic glow' to them.

Surveying the empirics by employing the concept of a palinogenetic myth as an analytical tool offers a perspective that aims to provide a new understanding of the motors behind Kahane's ideology. It also helps to further the understanding of Kahane's ideology as ultra-nationalist in nature and structurally similar to other ultra-nationalist ideologies where palinogenetic myths are salient and foundational features.<sup>4</sup>

### The palinogenetic myth

Kahane's palinogenetic myth centres on catalysing the rebirth of an ideal pre-Exile Jew, whom Kahane styles as a battled-hardened warrior endowed with warrior ideals: God-fearing, physically strong, courageous, upright and proud of his Jewishness (Kahane 2000).<sup>5</sup>

- 2 This date of reissue is according to Google Books. The book itself does not contain any information about this.
- 3 This book contains neither the date of publication nor any information about the publisher, except that it was printed in Poland by Amazon Fulfilment; according to Google Books it was published in 2013.

- 4 For two convincing accounts of ultra-nationalist, racist and neo-Nazi agents and ideologies in post-war Europe and the USA where palinogenetic myths are salient and foundational features, see Goodrick-Clarke 2003 (first edition 2002); Gardell 2003.
- 5 To point to a potential area for future research, I discuss these warrior ideals in an article published in the Swedish pop-sci journal *Religion* (Magnusson 2019). This article can be seen as a pilot study to a more academically sound project on these ideals, and as Magid (2015: 239) points out, Kahane's notions on masculinity and gender. The concept of warrior ideals is inspired by Mattias Gardell's account of what he summarises under the term the 'revolutionary white racist counterculture' in the USA (2003).

Kahane calls this ideal type the 'old Jew', and as an example of how this ideal was embodied during his lifetime, he cites the soldiers of the Israel Defense Forces (Kahane 1971).

Shaul Magid addresses Kahane's view on Jewish history when he discusses Kahane's 'ethics of violence', which is 'an attempt to reconstitute the biblical psyche by reconstituting the Jewish subject emasculated by centuries of ghetto life' (Magid 2015: 238). But Magid does not formulate Kahane's attempt at 'reconstituting the Jewish subject' as part and parcel of a myth of decline and rebirth. Nor does Magid address how Kahane somehow idealises, not the 'life in the ghetto' itself, but its preservative effects on Jewish national identity.

Kahane thus appears ambivalent on this aspect of Jewish diaspora history. On the results of when 'the walls of the ghetto fell', he notes: 'Jewish national identity was discarded with guilty relief by the Jewish pursuers of freedom and all over Western Europe there sprang up various nationals of "Mosaic persuasion"' (2000: 58–9).

By resorting to essentialism, Kahane argues on the subject of JDL's nature that the Emancipation 'corrupted' the 'original Jewish idea', which the JDL was created to embody (Kahane 2000: 75). On the other hand, Kahane blames the ghetto for preparing the ground for the Jews to 'react with fright rather than with self-respect. This is what the ghetto does to a Jew.' But then, 'when the walls came down' things seemingly went from bad to worse; Kahane writes, 'And this un-Jewishness became institutionalized ... and the Jew fled from his faith to the great light of emancipation and assimilation' (p. 100).

It thus appears as if Kahane somehow idealises the ghetto life, but for its alleged preservative effects on Jewish identity, not for its secluded state as such. In spite of fear and mounting lack of self-respect the Jews had

their religion (at least) and persevered in preserving their identity, which in Kahane's eyes apparently trumps material wealth, status and success.

To return to Kahane's ideal type. This imaginary Jew was created at Mount Sinai during the Exodus, as narrated in the Book of Exodus in the Hebrew Bible, but was flushed out from Judaea by the Romans in 70 CE. From there the Jews spread across the diaspora. There – the post-war United States in particular – the Jew gradually fell from grace at the hands of a corrupt leadership and antisemitic 'Gentiles' and degenerated into what Kahane terms the *galut* Jew (the Diaspora Jew) whom Kahane styles as a soft and assimilated liberal who stands in stark contrast to the old Jew, because since the Emancipation, which followed the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, the (American) Jew has gone spiritually astray and become a sitting duck on whom for centuries it has been open season (Kahane 2000). Cultivating this worldview, Kahane called for a revolution to 'recreate the old [Jew]; to teach the Jews to fight back and to instil Jewish pride (Kahane 2000: 74–5, 82, 87, italics in the original).

In *Never Again!* Kahane unfolds a romantic narrative on the 'revival of Jewish pride and self-respect'. It captures the very essence of a palingenetic myth and comes loaded with Chiliastic rhetoric that transcends time and space as Kahane conflates the 'antisemitic Gentiles' of today with the antisemitic Gentiles of the past and merges them all into one:

Above all, we see a different Jew arising from the ashes and decay of Auschwitz [the phase of crises or decline slowly moving into the phase of regeneration]. It is a Jew who pauses to look the world in the eye; to stare directly at those who, for centuries, burned and stabbed and drowned

and hanged and gassed us; to softly say: Up against the wall, world [the new start or regeneration]. (Kahane 1971: v–vi)

### Kahane's use of narrative form

When Kahane crafted his ideology, he repeatedly used narrative form. This he did by drawing on his biased and one-eyed view of Jewish diaspora history, which he articulated as a one-sided string of doom-and-gloom events that ultimately culminated in the Holocaust. Here Jewish despair and suffering at the hands of the 'antisemitic Gentile', which knew no bounds, intermingle with triumphalist and revanchist rhetoric.<sup>6</sup>

The empirics reveal an idea of a 'trans-historical antisemitic Gentile'. On this subject, Magid puts it convincingly: 'for Kahane, antisemitism was not only an enemy to be feared; it was an enemy that could never be defeated because it was not circumstantial or contextual, it was ontological. For Kahane, antisemitism was part of what it meant to be a Gentile and living with antisemitism was part of what it meant to be a Jew' (Magid 2015: 237; cf. Kahane 2000: 5).

To return to Kahane's rhetoric. It also features romantic accounts of biblical history and a paradisaical world gone lost: the ancient Kingdom of Israel and the secluded life of the European ghettos prior to the Emancipation, two different kinds of utopias where the Jew allegedly dwelled in harmony and in tune with his alleged nature to obediently execute God's commands (Kahane 2000).

Therefore a plausible assumption is that Kahane's writings, characterised by high-flown language, hyperbolic claims and sweeping mythical narratives, feature the

expression of 'rhetorical history'. According to the historian John Arnold, rhetorical history is 'guided by the classical principles of literary composition, and driven by the twin desires to provide a finely wrought narrative, and to present exemplary "lessons" from past political events' (Arnold 2000: 37).

Considering that Kahane mixed actual historical events, such as the Emancipation, with biblical history ('sacred history'), reflecting on the following words might help explain what Kahane's ideology is partly about:

But, when looking at the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, we are observing cultures that saw factual 'truth' and religious 'Truth' bound together in an inescapable continuum. At stake was not only the truth about the past, but the truth of God'. (Kahane 2000: 37)

### Kahane's myths of antagonism

In addition to Kahane's palingenetic myth, his narratives entail two myths of antagonism. First, a myth of racial antagonism between the Jew and 'the Gentile'. Ehud Sprinzak notes that this myth casts Jews and non-Jews as two cosmic forces locked in a perennial struggle (Sprinzak 1991). Second, a myth that can be conceptualised as one of 'intra-racial antagonism' between the assimilated AJE and the 'forgotten Jew' or the 'common Jew'. According to Kahane the last two have been subjected to a process of rampant assimilation by the AJE for generations. Therefore, Bruce Lincoln's theory of myth (1999) seems useful to help further the understanding of these particular mythical dimensions.

Lincoln suggests that myth is 'ideology in narrative form'. By analysing written works of, for example, the Sturm und Drang philosopher Johan Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), Lincoln sets out to show 'why

6 For an account of Kahane's theology of revenge see, for example, Afterman and Afterman 2015 and Sprinzak 1991.

and how the category of myth ... came to be theorized in a discourse of *Volk*, and ... entangled with attempts to contrast Aryans and Semites'. Lincoln notes that the Nazis drew on this discourse and thereby thematised the 'opposition of Jew and Aryan as essential' (Lincoln 1999: 47, 75). Lincoln's theory of myth specifies the notion that myth is a 'taxonomy encoded in mythic form, a 'narrative [which] packages a specific contingent system of discrimination in a particular and attractive memorable form', which 'naturalises and legitimatises it' (p. 147). How Herder and the Nazis thematise the opposition of 'Aryan' and Jew resembles how Kahane thematises the opposition of Jew and Gentile on the one hand, and on the other, the opposition of the AJE and the common Jew which drives Kahane's palingenetic myth, and by extension, his ideology.

### Contextualising Kahane

Kahane's assimilation doctrine, including his palingenetic myth, was informed by the context of his times and personal experiences. When surveying Kahane's ethics of violence, Shaul Magid notes that his personal experiences came about as a result of Kahane:

Combining his Revisionist Zionist past (Kahane was a member of Jabotinsky's Betar Youth as a child), having absorbed the Holocaust trauma of many in his community (he was born in America and his parents were not Holocaust survivors) and his postwar Orthodox upbringing (with its antipathy towards Jewish assimilationism and liberalism) Kahane developed a theory of violence as a legitimate Jewish response to the challenges of his postwar American life. (Magid 2015: 235)



Fig. 2. Jerusalem, sticker: 'Kahane was right, about this there can be no debate'. Photo by Djampa, Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 4.0).

Kahane's palingenetic myth also draws nourishment from the Jewish American experience during the 1960s, and his interpretation of it. Three different factors can be identified. First, the overarching American context of the 1960s, which, among other events that shook the United States of yesterday to its core, witnessed the advent of 'countercultural militarism [that] was taking shape in the student protests and Black Nationalist Movement in the mid-1960s' (Magid 2015: 235). Second, Kahane's growing concern with 'black antisemitism' and 'black-on-Jew street crime' that was said to haunt Jewish blue-collar neighbourhoods because of the Jews' reputation as patsies (Kahane 2000). Third and last, Kahane's growing frustration with the AJE. According to Kahane, the AJE carries most of the blame for the assimilation, which had 'reached frightening proportions' (p. 61). This will be discussed at length in the section 'Assimilation: the causes'.

Kahane also accused the AJE of turning a blind eye to the antisemitism voiced by black nationalist leaders, and for refusing

to categorise ‘black-on-Jew’ street crimes as acts of antisemitism to boot. Kahane articulated the latter alleged phenomenon as ‘the de-Judaizing of Jewish problems’ (1971: 44; cf. 2000: 65).<sup>7</sup> Kahane even accused the AJE of being the ‘silent partners in the Holocaust’ (2013: 12; cf. 2000: 77).

7 The journalist Robert I. Friedman writes that Malcolm X (1925–65) singled out Jews as owners of ‘major businesses’ in ‘every major ghetto’, and that Stokely Carmichael (1941–98) equated Zionism with racism (Friedman 1990: 85). Both Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael rose to prominence within the black nationalist and African-American Islamic milieus in the United States during the Civil Rights era of the 1960s. As for Malcolm X, he advanced through the rank and file of the Nation of Islam during the second half of the 1950s. In 1962, Malcolm X converted to Sunni Islam and adopted black nationalism as his political ideology. Shortly afterwards, subscribing to an ‘essentialist view of black identity as a container of cultural and biological traits shared by all persons of African descent’, he extended his support to the pan-African cause. Malcolm X was assassinated on 21 February 1965 at the Audubon Ballroom in New York City (Curtis 2002: 88, 91, 101, 105). Stokely Carmichael, originally named Kwame Ture, was a Trinidadian-born civil rights and black nationalist activist during the 1960s. A member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Carmichael was initially a supporter of Martin Luther King Jr’s non-violent activism. But a combination of serving time in Parchman Prison following his arrest in Jackson, Mississippi, in tandem with witnessing violence, Carmichael abandoned non-violence for black power. This term was popularised by Carmichael after his release from prison at Greenwood, Mississippi, in 1966. The same year Carmichael assumed leadership of the SNCC and ‘purged whites from the organization ... and preached a strident form of Pan-Africanism’, writes Klaus Fischer (2006: 129).

## Assimilation: the causes

As described above, Kahane held the AJE accountable for Jewish assimilation in the United States, and the aim of this section is thus to outline the alleged causes of assimilation, by discussing firstly how Kahane constructs the AJE, and then the AJE’s policies that allegedly drove Jewish assimilation in the United States of the past as well as during Kahane’s active years in the JDL (1968–90).

## The American Jewish Establishment

The construct of the AJE that emerges in Kahane’s narrative is an expression of a populist worldview and ideology in narrative form. Here an imagined ‘common Jew’ is pitted against a treacherous cabal of assimilated fat cats, an aloof and ‘morally bankrupt’ elite ignorant of ‘true’ Judaism. In Kahane’s eyes, this elite is both mentally and geographically detached from and in denial of the everyday perils of the working-class Jew in America’s run-down inner-city areas.<sup>8</sup> The AJE is embodied in a whole slew of Jewish organizations, such as the hate watchdog Anti-Defamation League (Kahane 2000: 59).<sup>9</sup>

To elucidate his dichotomist view Kahane points out the supposed areas of residence of these two imagined groups when illustrating the socio-economic divide between the AJE and its supposed counterparts.<sup>10</sup> At the time when Kahane wrote his books, the AJE allegedly resided in well-to-do areas such as Manhattan’s Upper East Side, and in Great

8 Cf. Pedahzur 2012: 69. Pedahzur touches on Kahane’s populism during his political ventures in Israel.

9 For further organisations, see Kahane 2000: 59–60, 66 and 2013: 12.

10 For further affluent places, see Kahane 1971: 38. For where the ‘forgotten Jews’ live, see Kahane 1971: 34.



Neck, Long Island. The latter 'is not a *place* – it is more a *concept*' 'found on the outskirts of every city, the wealthy, status-minded "Jewish suburb"', writes Kahane in reference to the AJE, 'the spiritual murderer' (2000: 63 and 2013: 16, 19, italics in the original).

What makes a 'spiritual murderer'? What alleged causes preceded Jewish assimilation, the decline phase in Kahane's palingenetic myth? Kahane's view of Jewish assimilation, which springs from his particularistic and separatist interpretation of Judaism and the preconditions for Jewish existence, starts with the notion that the AJE 'long ago, cut its ties with authentic Judaism, with exclusive Judaism, with the Judaism of difference and separation'. The reason being that the AJE 'yearned to ... integrate with the gentiles' (Kahane 2013: 16).

Here Kahane reveals a conspiratorial view of the factors preceding assimilation. Ironically, this worldview structurally resembles the conspiratorial views on 'miscegenation' reproduced in ZOG discourse.<sup>11</sup> The argument seemingly runs that Jewish continuity has come under an acute threat through the sinister works of a treacherous elite that promotes 'race mixing'. Kahane writes:

[The AJE] plotted to make the Jewish community as ... similar to gentiles as possible. It is a Jewish leadership whose wealth and position made it strive to go beyond being a player on the narrow Jewish stage

11 ZOG is an acronym for Zionist Occupation Government. ZOG discourse holds that Jewish power is omnipresent and that society is in the grips of a Jewish cabal; hell-bent on exterminating the 'Aryan' race by the means of miscegenation, ZOG promotes immigration and integration of alleged inferior races. See e.g. Goodrick-Clarke 2003.

and dream of prancing on the national or even international one. All this for the shepherds meant making assimilation and integration and the lessening of the Jewish profile, a fundamental part of their plan for their sheep. (Kahane 2013: 16)

The Jewish community led astray has thus fallen victim to an alleged plot, orchestrated by the AJE and rendered possible by its financial and social capital. This plot has been set in motion to hollow out Jewish identity to help facilitate integration and, ultimately, assimilation. Here Kahane expresses the decline phase in his palingenetic myth. It serves as an ideological catalyst and is presented in narrative form, characterised by ill-founded conclusions, dispensed by sweeping narratives replete with hyperbolic language to mobilise supporters.

In 1975 Kahane expressed similar streams of populist thinking and the decline phase in his palingenetic myth. It is brought forward as ideology in narrative form and has the characteristics of rhetorical history. This narrative positions 'Eastern European Jews who poured in from Russia, Poland, and Galicia' as the subjects of an intraracial *mission civilisatrice* at the hands of their well-off fellow Jews who had migrated from Germany: 'Terrified, the respectable now-American Jews of the Upper East Side [of Manhattan] now hastened to its lower depths with funds that were aimed, above all, at Americanizing the uncivilized and backward poor cousins and remaking them in their own image' (Kahane 2000: 60).

### German Jews in America

Kahane accuses the German Jews of prompting assimilation amongst American Jewry when he unfolds the decline phase of his palingenetic myth – ideology presented in

narrative form: 'The Jewish population of America soared ... and both in numbers and in culture the Teutonization of the American Jewish community was accomplished. With them the German Jews brought their Reform [Judaism], their assimilation, and their Gentilization of the Jew' (Kahane 2000: 59).

Kahane uses the term 'Teutonization' as a synonym of assimilation. But Teutonization implies a difference in nuance. It denotes the cultural impact the German Jews had on American Jewry and the special part Reform Judaism, which originated in Germany during the 1800s, allegedly played in the process of Germanising the American Jews. In Kahane's eyes, Reform Judaism prepared the ground for assimilation to grow unchecked in the America of the past.<sup>12</sup>

Alongside assimilation and 'gentilization' Kahane also uses the term 'Teutonization', and at face value, interchangeably with assimilation. But here, too, a slight distinction can be identified. Contingent on context, 'gentilization' apparently alludes to an essentialist notion of Jews '*behaving* like the gentile' more than just moving away from religious practice and Jewish identity to ultimately put an end to Jewish continuity by the means of 'becoming alike the surrounding majority society'. Kahane again: 'if by happiness one meant material happiness ... opportunity to behave like and ape the gentile, and the chance to assimilate ...' (2000: 58).

Kahane casts the German American Jews as the protagonists in a rags-to-riches narrative who eventually became the architects behind assimilation in the United States. In

hindsight, the German Jews, now wealthy and powerful, created the preconditions for the AJE to emerge and Jewish assimilation to take hold. It began at a slow pace in the wake of the Enlightenment and French Revolution, but began to burgeon in Western Europe following the Emancipation. In the United States, it continued unchecked; Kahane writes, 'The German Jews who had come to America ... succeeded remarkably. Within decades they had become Americanized, successful, wealthy, and determined to continue their grip on the good life' (2000: 59).

The United States is a telling example of a 'melting pot', and according to Kahane, detrimental to Jewish continuity. Hence the reason for berating the AJE for its alleged policy on how Jews should relate themselves to it.

Kahane presents the decline phase in his palingenetic myth in narrative form: 'And so they became the most fanatical bearers of the banner of the Melting Pot. For the Hellenized Jewish Establishment, the Melting Pot became their Holy Grail.<sup>13</sup> It was the Eleventh Commandment – 'Thou shalt Melt!' (Kahane 2013: 16).

As Kahane seemingly viewed it, the reason for melting, articulated as an imperative, was 'the surest guarantee of the end of anti-Semitism'. Here Kahane again expresses his populist view to explain the order of things: 'the end of anti-Semitism was the vision and passion of the wealthy, powerful Jew who could then enjoy his life without fear or trepidation of the gentile' (Kahane 2013: 17).

12 Cf. Reinman and Hirsch 2003. In this book, a correspondence between the orthodox Rabbi Yosef Reinman and the Reform Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch, Reinman argues that Reform Judaism spurs on increasing assimilation in the United States.

13 Hellenised, Hellenistic or Hellenism alludes to the Hellenistic Jews during the second century BCE, 'who adopted the customs of the Gentiles' (Pedahzur 2012: 71). In Kahane's narrative the term Hellenistic Jews is used in reference to designated assimilated traitors akin to the Hellenistic Jews in the second century BCE.

Kahane continues to weave his ideological narrative form, which features the decline phase in his palingenetic myth. From a separatist standpoint he denigrates the results of the Emancipation: 'Part of the process of melting was the unilateral Jewish shattering of the barriers between Jew and gentile that had been the only things that preserved Jews throughout the centuries of Exile'. Kahane articulates this emancipative process as a 'crusade': 'Now, anything that kept Jews separate, that made them different, became the target of the Establishment's crusade' (Kahane 2013: 17).

### The AJE vs. Jewish religious infrastructure

What follows next in Kahane's narrative on decline is the AJE's alleged gutting of the American Jewish religious infrastructure. It includes *yeshivas*, Jewish community centres and synagogues. Kahane writes, 'Not only were synagogues turned into "temples" and "centers" with the accompanying change in service that made them into the kind of house of worship in which any Christian could feel at home, but the *yeshiva* ... which was the heart of the Jewish people, became anathema' (Kahane 2013: 17).

While the *yeshivas* were withheld funding from 'feudal barons' who ran the Federations and Welfare Funds, the Jewish community centres 'surely became' centres, that is 'centers for assimilation and interdating and intermarriage' (Kahane 2013: 18).

The synagogues became 'temples from which Jewish content was emptied', and were created 'as counters to churches, in the way that the minor Chanukah holiday suddenly achieved an inflated importance only because it had to match Christmas'. The rabbi who serves in the temple is cast as an ignoramus non-believer; because 'he believed neither in Torah from Sinai nor in the G-d who did not

give it to the Jewish people who were never there'. Jewish education is diluted too, and represented in universalistic rather than particularistic terms, that is as 'ethics' and 'universal values' (Kahane 2013: 19).

### Jewish parenting, Bernie and Bridget, and secular society

Jewish parents are responsible for the decline, too, 'the poor, fraudulent Jewish parents', 'pathetically struggling against intermarriage and then rationalising away surrender in a thousand ways' (Kahane 2013: 20; Kahane 2009: 14). Part of their blame lies in their failure to provide their children with proper spiritual and educational guidance, writes Kahane: 'They [the Jewish parents] told him when he came home from religious school as a child and babbling something about kosher food: "Now Bernie, you don't have to do *everything* they teach you there ..."' (Kahane 2009: 20, italics in the original).

But who is Bernie?

Bernie is one of the two protagonists in the 1970s television series *Bridget Loves Bernie*. This show revolves around the interfaith marriage between Bridget (Catholic) and Bernie (Jewish). In Kahane's rhetoric, 'Bernie' is the typical assimilated Jew, the new Jew who has chosen to marry a non-Jewish woman (whose offspring by default becomes non-Jewish, according to traditional Jewish matrilineal approach to Jewish status) over a Jewish woman. This article suggests that the concept of Bernie and his wife Bridget is employed as an allegorical trope to vivify the alleged causes and effects of Jewish assimilation in the United States. This process is accounted for in a logical 'step-by-step' fictional form and has the qualities of rhetorical history (see, for example, Kahane 2009).

The allegorical tropes of Bernie and Bridget are frequently used in Kahane's book

*Why be Jewish? Inter marriage, Assimilation, and Alienation* (2009, first issued 1977). Here Kahane presents a distressing diagnosis of the state of American Jewry's identity based on his separatist and isolationist view of what it means to be a Jew. It starts with interdating. Then follows intermarriage. From there it proceeds to alienation from Judaism and ends with assimilation – the curtailment of Jewish continuity.

Kahane pins the blame on secular liberal society for stoking intermarriage; because 'freedom and equality have brought the Jew the right to do everything that Bridget's father does, and to marry his daughter, too' (Kahane 2009/1977: 11). But 'the most powerful force for intermarriage possible' is, writes Kahane in a spirit of moral panic, the universities and colleges:

There the young Jew is at the mercy of a scholastic atmosphere which is unfavorable to religion and all 'parochial' trends and which radicalizes him into questioning the importance of a heritage he knows about only on a Bar Mitzvah child's level. He meets Gentiles who are his peers and finds them remarkably similar ... and he shares a major part of his life with them for at least four years. (Kahane 2009: 11)

Kahane continues to lament secular higher education's alleged detrimental effects on Jewish religious tradition and continuity:

The proportion of Jewish academics and professionals will undoubtedly increase in the future and it is precisely in these sectors that the religious tradition appears to be weakening, being replaced by an ideology of secular liberalism that views intermarriage permissively. (Kahane 2009: 12)

Kahane thus seemingly views academia in part as an arena where 'secular liberalism' and Jewish 'religious tradition' is locked in conflict over the hearts and minds of 'Jewish academics and professionals'. To Kahane's distress, secular liberalism is winning, stoking intermarriage, which curtails Jewish continuity through assimilation.

### **Assimilation: the effects**

As shown in the preceding section, assimilation in Kahane's rhetoric does not solely denote the curtailment of Jewish continuity. To be sure, it is the ultimate and dreaded effect, and Kahane was seemingly at pains to put an end to it. But the effects of assimilation also appear to be something akin to a disposition, or an approach to life and the world that includes different traditions of interpretations of Judaism. This disposition can be defined as universalist and internationalist and stands in stark contrast to Kahane's hard-line separatist and isolationist standpoint. Kahane overtly promoted a Judaism that 'calls for isolation and separation', because that, according to Kahane, is what 'authentic' Judaism calls for (Kahane 2013: 81).

This universalist and internationalist disposition is prevalent among Jews whom Kahane labels 'Jews who are for everything – *but* Judaism' (2009: 18, italics in the original). This is the result of 'assimilation on the grand scale', writes Kahane. Moreover, these Jews fall into the category of Jews 'who struggle for political causes that are non-Jewish and, many times, anti-Jewish' (2009; see also Kahane 2000: 146; for alleged non-Jewish causes, see Kahane 2000: 63) Among supposed anti-Jewish causes Kahane also lists Jews joining forces with Palestinian Arabs for the latter's statehood cause. The concern for Jews who engage in non-Jewish causes is a recurring theme in the empirics and reflects

Kahane's isolationist and separatist position (cf. Kahane 1971: 34, 63, 88).

Because these Jews are allegedly alienated from Judaism, they seek 'spiritual answers' elsewhere: in 'Christianity', 'Eastern Mysticism' or 'Satanism'. Because of their spiritual troubles and cultural confusion, they pursue chemical solutions such as drugs and alcohol (Kahane 2009: 18). Regarding these Jews' 'Jewishness', Kahane writes that it 'is not a thing to be despised but simply something that is utterly and totally irrelevant', apparently to the extent that if 'the new Jew ... marries another Jew' it is 'simply because he or she happened to "be there"' (Kahane 2009: 18).

### Kahane's use of empirics and newspapers

Kahane draws on 'statistics, trends, and everyday experience' to support his pessimistic outlook on assimilation in the United States, because these empirical observations supposedly made it clear that 'assimilation and intermarriage were increasing at a frightening rate'. Kahane continues and invokes a study by Erich Rosenthal, *Studies of Jewish Intermarriage in the United States* (1963). It 'shows a Washington, DC, 1956 rate among American-born husbands of American-born parents of 17.9 percent'. Kahane writes, however, that 'since that time ... the figures have become much bleaker' and 'the real-life version [of *Bridget Loves Bernie*] was far more foreboding' (Kahane 2000: 147).

Kahane also draws on newspapers to support his view, because in doing so, 'one can sometimes suddenly grasp an overall picture'. To be precise, in *Why be Jewish?* Kahane invokes anecdotal 'evidence' in the form of three different articles that have in common that they tell the story of Jews. In different contexts these Jews were inclined to universalism and internationalism (Kahane 2009: 18–19).

Kahane does not sugar-coat his words when commenting on these articles' content. He describes it as a 'litany of Jewish spiritual genocide, of young and once young Jews, lost, searching, indifferent to and alienated from their Jewishness'. This description is also an example of the decline phase in Kahane's palingenetic myth, which Kahane continues to unfold: 'The picture is a stark one – transcending intermarriage. It is the loss of a youth, the collapse of Jewish identity, the tragedy of spiritual suicide and genocide.' Kahane sums up the ultimate effect of this assimilation process: 'Bernie, the Jew turned "human being"' (Kahane 2000: 18–19).

These concluding remarks carry an air of racial mysticism. The reason is because the statement points to that Kahane entertained the notion that Jews who lead a life in step with Kahane's narrow definition of what it means to be a Jew form their own kind that is essentially different from Universal Man. This statement also resonates with how Kahane in *Why be Jewish?* overtly promotes the idea that Jews in fact are essentially different from Universal Man – in terms of greatness, destiny and purpose, idiosyncrasies encoded in the Jews by God (2009: 190–1, 221). In *The Story of the Jewish Defense League* (1975) Kahane invokes the blood to promote the idea that Jews are not only essentially different, but also superior to Universal Man: 'We believe that the Jew with his rich and magnificent record of civilization and culture, with his magnificent talent, is an intellectual monarch and a cultural aristocrat' (2000: 82).<sup>14</sup>

14 For a brief discussion on the similarities between Kahane's biologisation of cultural idiosyncrasies and Mattias Gardell's observations of how revolutionary white racists in the United States biologise spirituality (2003: 17), see Magnusson 2019: 29.

## Kahane's link between assimilation and antisemitic acts

This article has previously touched on Kahane's growing concern with so-called black-on-Jew street crime and the AJE's alleged proclivity to either turning a blind eye to it, or simply refusing to address it as a Jewish problem. According to Kahane, this passive stance was another effect of assimilation on part of the AJE. Thus Kahane established a causal link between the rampant assimilation, fuelled by the AJE, and Jews enduring antisemitic acts. In *The Ideology of Kach* (2013), Kahane also presents us with the decline phase in his palingenetic myth when he positions the antisemitic 'gentile' as "the Almighty's staff" ... for punishing the Jew for his refusal to be the kind of Jew created at Sinai'. In Kahane's eyes, this alleged refusal is the outcome of poor leadership on the part of the AJE. Therefore the 'greatest danger to Jewish survival was always the Jew himself', Kahane declares (2013: 11). In summation, assimilation awakens the wrath of God who mobilises the 'gentile' to bring divine retribution upon the assimilated Jew.

## The solutions to end assimilation

The passages in the empirics that entail proposed solutions to how to end assimilation are not as extensive as the passages that deal with its alleged causes and effects. Yet four different themes of proposed solutions can be identified. At their centre lies the regeneration phase that follows the decline phase in Kahane's palingenetic myth. The passages in the empirics that can be slotted into the regeneration phase are identified by Kahane's repeated use of 'res': 'reordering', 'revise', 'rebuild', 'regeneration', 'replanting', 'resurrect', 'revive', 'revolution', 'recreate', 'return', 'remove', and 'redemption' (Kahane 1971: 216–17, 223, 240–1, 243, 248; 2000: 74). Considering that

Kahane struck the AJE with repeated blows for fomenting assimilation it seems appropriate to start the discussion with the proposed solutions Kahane had in mind for the AJE.

First Kahane proposed campaigning in 'every Jewish community to combat intermarriage and assimilation'. The first stopping point for this campaign should be the Jewish leadership, which 'the Jew must throw off', if they are 'alienated from true Jewish values and observance and whose ignorance of Jewish obligations and destiny is horrendous' (Kahane 2013: 62). This solution is expressed as ideology in narrative form considering that it entails the myth of antagonism (JDL and the AJE) with a built-in imperative of exclusion (the AJE).

Kahane argued that 'No one who is intermarried should hold a position of Jewish leadership'. It has been noted above that Kahane identified colleges and campuses as hotbeds for interdating. Therefore he proposed interventions in the private lives of college students in the form of 'a drive on campuses to openly ask to put an end to interdating'. This 'drive' should go in tandem with the establishment of 'Jewish Identity Centers on every campus'. Their purpose: to present young Jews with Kahane's essentialist interpretation of Jewish values and 'authentic Judaism' (Kahane 2013: 74).

Secondly, the seemingly most important aspect that would supposedly put an end to assimilation was the two JDL principles of *badar* (dignity and pride) and *ahavat Yisroel* (love of Jewry).<sup>15</sup> These concepts should be

15 For a discussion on how Kahane articulates these two concepts, see Kahane 2000: 75–85). Rabbi Pesach Schindler writes that *ahavat Yisroel* was, according to early Hasidic tradition, one of three major objectives of the mission of Israel ben Eliezer, more commonly known as the Ba'al Shem Tov (c.1698–1760), the famous



Fig. 3. Cover of the book by Meir Kahane, 1972. Wikimedia Commons.

instilled among Jews and the younger generation as Kahane saw *hadar* and *ahavat Yisroel* as ‘the foundation of a Jewish program for survival that calls for both moral and physical Jewish power’ (Kahane 1971: 240).

Thirdly, to successfully instil these JDL concepts, a proper Jewish educational infrastructure is a vital prerequisite. Therefore

Jewish mystic from Poland and the founder of Hasidism (Schindler 1990: 92). The concept of *hadar* was originally popularised in Zionist discourse by the Russian-born Jew Ze’ev Jabotinsky, who developed the revisionist Zionist ideology. Kahane was a staunch follower and admirer of Jabotinsky and adopted the concept of *hadar*, making it into one of the JDL’s five principles, on which the JDL’s ideology still rests. For a lengthy account of these five principles, see Kahane 2000: 75–96.

Kahane calls for a ‘reordering of [Jews]’ priorities and the gathering of Jewish assets, energies, efforts, and moneys into a unified effort to meet Jewish problems’. As a top priority Kahane calls for ‘a minimum of 25 percent of *all* Jewish communal funds’ to be set aside ‘for maximum Jewish education’ in step with the Day School movement. Moreover, Kahane also proposes Jewish efforts to demand government aid to *yeshivas*, and that Jewish programmes offered to Jews in the Jewish day schools and the after-hour synagogue classes should be revised to include an ultra-nationalist curriculum that featured ‘courses in Jewish pride, with the emphasis on the beauty of Jewish tradition and heritage’ (Kahane 1971: 241–3, italics in the original).

Here the regeneration phase of Kahane’s palingenetic myth can be identified by his call for ‘reordering priorities and the gathering of assets’; because instilling the JDL concepts among Jews is part of the process of Kahane’s aim to recreate the old Jew, Kahane writes, ‘The beginning of this Jewish wisdom lies in the regeneration of the Jew, as a Jew’. It entails ‘replanting within him the seeds of Hadar ... and clear Jewish identity’, the prerequisites necessary to prevent ‘spiritual and cultural disappearance as a distinct entity’ (Kahane 1971: 240).

Lastly, Kahane champions the idea of a campaign in Jewish communities to ‘persuade Jews to go up to Israel both because it is the only land in which they ... will live fully as Jews’, alongside a campaign ‘to explain ... why the Jewish people who have returned home cannot ever again be exiled’ (Kahane 2013: 75). In fact, in 1972 Kahane dedicated an entire book – *Time to Go Home* – to this subject, that is to say to encourage American Jews to ‘go home’ to Israel.

## Conclusions

The alleged *causes* of Jewish assimilation in the United States are the results of the AJE's assimilationist policies; they have alienated Jewish youth from their religious tradition and gutted Jewish religious infrastructure and religious education. This has in turn stoked interdating, intermarriage and, ultimately, assimilation.

These narratives feature the decline phase of Kahane's palingenetic myth, which in part is built around a myth of intraracial antagonism between the AJE and the 'common Jew'. Thus, following Lincoln, Kahane's narratives are presented as ideology in narrative form, that is, as myths. Four different *alleged effects* of assimilation are identified in the empirics. They also feature the decline phase of Kahane's palingenetic myth.

The first effect is that assimilation leads to Jews engaging in all different kinds of civil-rights causes, but Jewish causes. The second smacks of moral panic and relates to Kahane's concern with Jews pursuing answers to existential questions within other belief systems and religious traditions and in chemical substances. The third is actual assimilation in terms of the concept's etymological roots 'to become like' the majority society. The fourth and last effect is the result of the supernatural at play. This refers to the work of a personal God who intervenes in human history to employ the 'Gentiles' to bring divine retribution upon the Jews for not being the kind of Jews allegedly created at Mount Sinai that followed upon Israel's deliverance from Pharaoh under the aegis of Moses, as narrated in the Book of Exodus in the Hebrew Bible.

At the centre of Kahane's *proposed solutions* to end assimilation lies the regeneration phase of his palingenetic myth. Kahane proposed, first, campaigning in every Jewish community to bring a final end to intermarriage.

Secondly, he proposed instilling the two Jewish concepts of *hadar* and *ahavat Yisroel* among Jews. This aim relates to the third theme, which is Kahane's proposal to reinstate a proper Jewish educational infrastructure. This solution is expressed as ideology in narrative form, because it features the intraracial myth of antagonism and an imperative for exclusion. These two interconnecting themes entail the regeneration phase of Kahane's palingenetic myth, because instilling the concepts of *hadar* and *ahavat Yisroel*, which required a proper Jewish educational system, was thought to set off the recreation of the Jew as a Jew, that is 'the old Jew'. The fourth and last theme is Kahane's proposition to embark on campaigns to encourage Jews to 'return' to Israel: for Israel is the only place where Jews can lead a fully Jewish life that resonates with Kahane's narrow ultra-nationalist revisionist Zionist interpretation of what it means to be a Jew. ■

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