

ARTICLE



## Fighting intermarriage in the Holy Land: Lehava and Israeli ethnonationalism

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### ABSTRACT

Lehava is an Israeli extreme right-wing organization dedicated to fighting intermarriage and especially preventing Arab men from courting Jewish women. This article presents the results of an ethnographic research on Lehava. The organization is examined in the context of growing Jewish ethno-nationalism in Israel and the contingent development of new urban extreme right-wing movements. The research presents an initial foray into this field. Lehava brings together traditional Mizrahim, teenagers from the margins of Haredi society, and the extreme right-wing fringes of Religious Zionism. The elements that attract members of these various groups are described, especially the patriarchal notion that religious and national honor is lost when Jewish women have sexual relations with Arab men. Lehava's positioning between extreme right-wing movements and religious organizations is explained. It is suggested that local elements including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Israeli ethnic and class relations play a role in shaping this phenomenon, and that it is also comparable to similar cases occurring in the context of post-colonial national and religious struggles.

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## Introduction

Lehava is an extreme right-wing religious organization. Its name, which literally means “flame,” is an acronym of “For the prevention of intermarriage in the Holy Land.” Chiefly, the organization attempts to prevent Arab men from courting Jewish women; other activities include attacks on alleged Christian missionaries, and demonstrations against the Gay Pride Parade in Jerusalem. The organization's founder and leader, Bentzi (Ben-Zion) Gopstein, is an extreme right-wing political activist and a follower of the late Rabbi Meir Kahane, whose political party *Kach* was declared racist and outlawed by the Israeli Knesset in the late 1980s.<sup>1</sup> Established in 2009, Lehava seems to be growing, with new branches opening up throughout the country; its official membership is probably in the hundreds.<sup>2</sup> As the survey of social media conducted for this research indicates, however, it draws the support of wider circles. Lehava and Gopstein often attract media attention; mainstream journalists regularly portray Lehava as racist – an accusation its leaders staunchly deny.

Who are the supporters of Lehava? How do they view their activity? What motivates them? What role does religion play in their world view? This article will address these

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questions, hopefully shedding light on the organization and, more generally, on current Israeli ethnonationalism.

Observers of Israeli society have noted that nationalist- and religious-based resistance to liberal discourse has become more prominent in Israel over the last few decades.<sup>3</sup> Ami Pedahzur claims that a “new right,” whose activity focuses on ethnic exclusion, has supplanted the “old right,” which was focused on geographic expansion. Pedahzur points to various minority groups that make up the “new right”: Traditional Mizrahi Jews, Haredi Jews, Religious Zionists, and immigrants from the FSU (former Soviet Union) (more on these groups below).<sup>4</sup> While the “old right” – i.e., the Religious Zionist settlement movement – has received much scholarly attention, organizations of the new urban right, despite their growing influence on current Israeli public discourse, have not. There are currently a few urban extreme right-wing movements in Israel, which make up one socio-organizational field in which Lehava may be positioned; another is that of religious organizations that share its stated goals – combating intermarriage and Christian missionary activity. The question of how these two elements come together in Lehava – extreme right-wing political activism and a religiously driven struggle against intermarriage – will be addressed below.

Israeli mainstream media and left-wing observers often reference mid-twentieth century fascism when discussing Lehava. This tendency was carried on by researchers of Israel’s extreme right, who likewise look Westward in order to analyze Israeli nationalist extremism, but focus on the current, rather than past, European extreme right.<sup>5</sup> Current European extreme-right movements have largely dropped the “old racism” that championed white supremacy, and instead believe that national cultures should be preserved in their respective homelands (e.g., they do not object to Muslim or Indian culture, but they believe that Muslims and Indians should remain in their countries of origin). They have therefore been characterized by researchers as xenophobic and espousing “culturism” (as opposed to racism, though some scholars claim that culturism is just a different form of racism).<sup>6</sup> These movements often support women’s rights and gender equality in the face of radical Islamist challenges to these values.<sup>7</sup>

In Israel, Daphna Canetti-Nisim and Ami Pedahzur found that despite the fact that Arabs are native to the land, they are viewed by extreme right-wing Jews as alien, and so attitudes toward them can be described as xenophobic and thus similar to those of European extreme right-wing movements toward immigrants. Nevertheless, Canetti-Nisim and Pedahzur noted a discrepancy between European and Israeli extreme right-wing movements with regard to the role of religion: While European extreme right-wing movements are secular and support liberal values such as gender egalitarianism, in Israel national extremism is usually linked to religious and conservative stands.<sup>8</sup> The current work, while not denying the influence of European fascism on the Israeli extreme right, shifts the analytical focus to the local, postcolonial, and Middle Eastern contexts, suggesting that they are of greater value to our understanding of Israeli ethnonationalism.

### *Israeli minorities and ethnonationalism*

Since Mizrahi Jews are by far the majority of Lehava members and supporters,<sup>9</sup> an analysis of their relation to ethnonationalism will be at the center of the discussion.

Mizrahi, which literally means Eastern or Oriental in Hebrew, is used by Israelis to refer to Jews of Middle Eastern or North African origin. There have been various attempts to explain the tendency of Mizrahi working-class Jews to identify with the political right-wing and to reject liberal human rights ideologies despite their own minority status.<sup>10</sup> Gershon Shafir and Yoav Peled have suggested that by choosing an exclusionary ethnonational discourse, Mizrahi Jews were able to eliminate Arab competition for resources in an ethnically-split labor market.<sup>11</sup> Yehouda Shenhav has focused more on status and less on the economy per se, but made a similar claim that adopting a right-wing worldview has to do with the aspiration of Mizrahi Jews to improve their standing in Ashkenazi-dominated Israeli society that disparages Arab culture.<sup>12</sup> However, in light of the passionate conviction expressed by Mizrahi right-wingers on political and identity issues such as the one discussed below, these rational choice style explanations are less than convincing.

In a recent publication, Nissim Leon has suggested that Mizrahi antagonism toward Arabs may go back further in history. Contrary to the image of an historical Jewish-Muslim symbiosis in Arab lands, which is popular in liberal circles, Leon depicts a more complex picture, in which demonization of the Arab gentile in Jewish liturgy was commonplace, alongside coexistence in daily life. Liturgical pieces authored by Jews living under Islamic rule expressed a yearning for a cosmic upheaval that would bring about the downfall of Ishmael – the liturgical signifier for Arab gentiles. This is not surprising given the legal and social subaltern status of Jews and Christians in Muslim lands. These historical anti-Arab and anti-Muslim elements of Mizrahi Jewish culture resurfaced in current embattled Israel. Leon's main point is that for many Mizrahi Jews, upholding the ethnic boundary between Jews and non-Jews is central to their identity.<sup>13</sup> The leaders of Shas, a Haredi Mizrahi political party that attracts many Mizrahi non-Haredi voters, put further emphasis on this animosity, since they espouse what Leon calls an ethnoreligious fundamentalist worldview. Shas's leaders remain critical of classical Zionism due to its secular nature, but rather than aspiring to dismantle the state, they seek to fix it by redefining it as based on Jewish identity and religion. They thus oppose all elements which they identify as un-Jewish, biologically or culturally, including Arabs, foreign laborers, and homosexuals.<sup>14</sup>

Nissim Mizrahi, in a recent contribution to this discussion, has referred to the honor vs. dignity division expounded upon by various thinkers.<sup>15</sup> According to this theory, in societies that prize honor, it is not considered universal but rather viewed as deserved (or not) based upon an individual's class and status, while in societies in which dignity is the central paradigm, it is viewed as equally deserved by every human being. Generally speaking, traditional societies tend to uphold an honor discourse while the dignity discourse is based on modern notions of equal citizenship. Mizrahi analyzed the clash between Israeli left-wing (mostly Ashkenazi) activists who believe in "the power of universalism and the liberal grammar of human rights" and working-class Mizrahi Jews who reject that message as "a heartless betrayal and a grave identity threat."<sup>16</sup> He asserts that these working-class Mizrahi Jews draw their self-esteem from the honor discourse and this leads them to support national/ethnic solidarity and to oppose attempts to cross ethnonational boundaries. To prove his point, he cites observations of Tel Aviv street demonstrations for peace and for refugees' rights in which Mizrahi hecklers made blatant protests against the demonstrators' message.

Nissim Mizrahi noted that the anger of hecklers was roused in instances in which “universalist” slogans were sounded. Regarding the research at hand, it may be surmised that if working-class Mizrahi Jews feel threatened by demonstrations supporting refugees or Palestinians, the fact that they feel threatened by Arabs dating their daughters and sisters should not come as a surprise.

Alongside traditional Mizrahim, another group which is of significance to our discussion is the Haredi public. Over the last decades the Haredi public has become nationalized, despite its continued disavowal of Zionist ideology.<sup>17</sup> This was evident already in the 1996 elections, in which the vote for the Knesset and the Prime Minister was separated, and in which Haredim voted en masse for the right-wing candidate, Benjamin Netanyahu. This preference for the right wing is, according to Leon, especially true for Mizrahi Haredim, who, despite their disagreements with Religious Zionists regarding the role of the State of Israel in the process of redemption, share, especially with more extreme elements within Religious Zionism, a theo-ethnocratic worldview. Leon suggests that this may lead them in the future either to compete for resources, or to “arrive at a theo-ethnocratic coalition.”<sup>18</sup> In fact, the second scenario has already materialized during the elections for the 20th Knesset (2015), in which former Shas party leader Eli Yishai formed a political party (*Yachad*) together with Religious Zionist extreme right-wing leaders (which was the party of choice for Lehava members).<sup>19</sup> This process of coalition-forming is currently taking place in Lehava itself: Gopstein, the head of Lehava, hails from radical Religious Zionist circles, while most of its members are traditional or Haredi Mizrahi Jews. How members of these groups come together in Lehava will be expounded upon below.

### *Romantic relations across ethnonational and religious frontiers – a comparative perspective*

Concern regarding women having sexual relations and marrying outside the group is typical of national and ethnic groups and is especially heightened in times of war. Referring to a famous photo of the public degradation of French women who were accused of sexually collaborating with the Nazis after liberation, Joane Nagel writes:

National and sexual boundaries are mutually reinforcing, since implicit in the meaning of national boundaries (“who are we?”) are certain prescriptions and proscriptions for sexual crossings. In this case, “our” women should not be having sex with “their” (particularly “enemy”) men. Second, is the ubiquitous double standard that applies to many sexual boundaries: “our” men can have consensual sex, rape, or even sexually enslave “their” women and not have their heads shaved, nor will they be tattooed and paraded around the town.<sup>20</sup>

Nagel explains that in patriarchal regimes, women’s sexuality is of concern to nationalists since women as wives and daughters are bearers of masculine honor. Ethnic boundaries are also sexual boundaries; penetration of one symbolically signifies penetration of the other.

There are two current cases of accusations that are leveled at Muslim males for using their sexual prowess to make national-religious gains. They are based, at least partially,

on the mode of thinking described by Nagel, and they may prove informative for the case at hand. The concept of a “Love’ Jihad” first gained national awareness in India in 2009 and later spread to the UK: Hindi nationalists accused Muslim men of feigning romantic interest in Hindu women in order to get them to convert to Islam. These widespread allegations have not been substantiated.<sup>21</sup> India, like Israel, is engaged in an ongoing war with Muslim neighboring nations, and has a local Muslim minority population that is viewed with suspicion by majority nationalists who are also concerned that Muslims may be seeking a demographic takeover. In both cases, religion plays an important role.

Another relevant case for comparison is that of the Christian Coptic minority in Egypt. As in Israel, the Egyptian laws of marriage are based upon the Ottoman Millet legal system that did not allow civil marriages. Egyptian law favors Islam, so that Christians may convert to Islam but the opposite is difficult. Since the Coptic Church does not allow divorce, some Copts have converted in order to divorce or to marry a member of the Muslim majority. Many Copts feel that there is a conspiracy on the part of Muslims aimed at eliminating the Coptic minority via marriage, but unlike the Indian and Israeli cases, the Copts are a marginalized minority within a Muslim state.<sup>22</sup> The groups opposing Muslims in these differing cases share a fear of Muslim men’s ability to seduce non-Muslim women to convert and ultimately bring... about the demise of non-Muslim groups.

Closer to home, a case occurred in the Israeli town of Mghar, in which both sides were non-Muslim Arabs. The incident combined religious tensions with the loss of honor via perceived sexual provocation. In February 2005, riots broke out between Druze and Christian residents of Mghar due to accusations by local Druze that a Christian high school student posted online pictures of Druze classmates, photo-shopped so as to seem nude, leading to widespread attacks by Druze on Christians.<sup>23</sup> The (perceived) affront to Druze women was regarded by Druze men as an attack upon Druze ethnoreligious honor, which male members of the group attempted to redeem through the use of violence. As we shall see, all three cases have parallels with the case of Lehava.

## Methodology

Ethnographic research was conducted from June 2015 until December 2016, focusing on Lehava. This included participant-observation at the weekly rallies held in downtown Jerusalem’s Zion Square, and ethnographic interviews – some impromptu, others coordinated and recorded – with the leaders, members, and sympathizers of the organization. Members of Lehava with whom I have spoken, other than Benzi Gopstein and his wife Anat, are given pseudonyms, and information that could lead to their identification has been withheld. Another research tool that was employed was an analysis of publicly-available comments and profiles of commenters on Benzi Gopstein’s Facebook page.<sup>24</sup> During the summer of 2016, Facebook profiles of 100 supporters and their responses to posts that dealt with the issues that are at the core of Lehava’s activity – intermarriage and Arab men courting Jewish women – were surveyed and analyzed, as well as those of a few detractors. The commenters were not Facebook-friended by the researcher, so only information that they made publicly

available was used. The goal was to gain insight into the sociological composition of Lehava's membership and the wider circle of its supporters.

## The Jewish theological base for resisting intermarriage

The importance of endogamy is a central and recurring theme in Jewish theological sources. It is especially relevant for the case at hand to note that in the Bible, concerns about intermarriage are expressed when the People of Israel enter and settle the Land of Israel, and not, as one might have expected, in exile, where the danger of assimilation is greater. In the Torah, God repeatedly admonishes the Israelites to refrain from conjugal contact with the Canaanites.<sup>25</sup> In the book of Ezra, referring to the much later period of the return from Babylonian exile, it is described how Ezra insisted that Jewish men divorce their gentile wives.<sup>26</sup>

The very word used in Modern Hebrew to denote extremism and zealotry (*kanna'ut*) is drawn from the description in the book of Numbers of how Phineas the priest kills an Israelite chieftain who was seen fornicating with a Midianite woman. *Kanna'ut* (zealotry/jealousy) is referring here to God's jealousy as a result of the chieftain's betrayal. God approves of and praises Phineas for his actions; however, the accepted rabbinic exegesis adds that it was not clear from the outset that this approval would be forthcoming, since Phineas acted as a vigilante. In later rabbinic Judaism, separation from gentiles and avoiding intermarriage became a central feature. Jewish law includes religious proscriptions, the stated intent of which is to uphold religious/ethnic separation and thus ensure endogamy (e.g., the stricture forbidding Jews to drink gentiles' wine or eat their bread.) So the link between zealotry, vigilance, and maintaining national/religious purity by avoiding sexual contact with strangers, and even the violent vigilante enforcement of this edict, has deep roots in Judaism and is related not just to fear of assimilation but to religious notions of holiness and national integrity. This is important to keep in mind as we go on to describe the war on intermarriage in Israel, where a Jewish majority exists and all-out assimilation seems unlikely.

## What is Lehava fighting? Intermarriage between Arabs and Jews in Israel

The percentage of intermarriage between Arabs and Jews in Israel is low;<sup>27</sup> this is not surprising given the persistence of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, the hard feelings it generates, and the social separation between the two groups. Very little research has been conducted on this subject.<sup>28</sup> Surveying the existing research as well as primary sources relating to intermarriage leads to a few general conclusions: Nearly all mixed couples are comprised of an Arab man and a Jewish woman, and opposite cases are extremely rare. Some of the marriages are a result of Arab working-class men courting teenage Jewish women from underprivileged backgrounds.<sup>29</sup> In other cases Arab men marry same-age middle-class Jewish women. Apparently left-wing student caucuses are a locus in which some of these latter relationships are formed. Among Limore Racin and Simon Dein's interviewees, Jewish women who converted to Islam were members of the first category, while those who remained Jewish belonged to the second.<sup>30</sup>

Publications by Lehava and other Israeli organizations seeking to prevent intermarriage (discussed below on p. 13) describe only cases of the first kind. They depict Jewish wives as living in misery after their Arab husbands reveal what they describe as the Arab men's true nature – a violent patriarch. These publications stress the fact that Jewish-Arab romantic relations are nearly always between Arab men and Jewish women. Lehava and other anti-intermarriage organizations view this as proof that these romantic relations are in fact acts of aggression by Arab men against the Jewish people, aiming to expand Islam and eliminate Judaism. The works of research mentioned above do not discuss the reasons for this gender imbalance at length; it is presumably a result of the patriarchal structure of Arab societies and families that are more willing to accept premarital flirting and sexual activity on the part of males, and the Sharia law that allows Muslim men to marry Jews and Christians but forbids Muslim women to do the same,<sup>31</sup> a law that may have indeed been originally instituted in order to bolster Muslim supremacy over Christians and Jews in the lands conquered by Mohammad's followers.<sup>32</sup>

### Lehava's activities

Lehava's highest profile public activity takes place on Thursday nights in Jerusalem's Zion Square, located in a busy downtown area that, at night, mainly attracts teenagers and is relatively close to Arab neighborhoods. Activists show up wearing the organization's uniform, black slacks and T-shirts with the organization's emblem – a yellow fist set upon a black background, a symbol borrowed from the outlawed *Kach* movement; some carry flags with the same emblem. It is hard not to note the resemblance to European fascist aesthetics. Lehava activists hand out pamphlets, wave their flags, and speak to passersby who show interest.

Besides the rallies, Lehava members are regularly mobilized via messages on Lehava's WhatsApp groups to "save Jewish girls" who are spotted dating Arab boys. Lehava members are divided into teams, and each team is overseen by an administrator (*menahel*); at least some of these administrators are themselves teenagers. The heads of the organization and team administrators with whom I spoke insisted that their activities are completely legal. They claim that when an Arab man is spotted hanging out with a Jewish girl, the couple is approached by Lehava volunteers who attempt to convince them to break up, but refrain from violence. There is evidence, however, that Lehava members and sympathizers have been violent, attacking random Arab passersby, as well as left-wing Jews, and threatening Arab-Jewish mixed couples, as is claimed by watchdog groups.<sup>33</sup> In fact, Lehava members themselves hint in private conversations at violent incidents in which they or the head of the organization were involved. Gopstein stated publicly that any Arab who would show up at his son's wedding would not come out standing,<sup>34</sup> and on a different occasion posted a video of himself roughhousing a Jewish left-wing activist. A completely nonviolent reputation would not serve Lehava members' self-image as powerful Jews, and so violence is denied but hinted at, or showcased in cases for which they cannot be prosecuted.<sup>35</sup>



## Lehava's membership's demographics

A survey of Facebook profiles and comments of Lehava supporters shows that they are mostly Mizrahi.<sup>36</sup> This is also true regarding the active members whom I encountered at the weekly rally; most are Mizrahi residents of Jerusalem's less-privileged neighborhoods who religiously identify as "traditional." This fact is not foregrounded by the organization's leaders, who claim that supporters hail from all sectors of Jewish society. As we shall see, the membership is indeed varied, but nevertheless limited to certain groups.

Lehava is not made up only of traditional Mizrahim: Haredi Jews are a noticeable minority group among the teenagers who attend the weekly rally. Like Haredim who join the Likud party,<sup>37</sup> Haredi teenagers active in Lehava belong to marginal groups within Haredi society: Mizrahi Haredim, Breslov Hassidim,<sup>38</sup> and the children of newly religious Haredim (*Hozrim bi-Teshuva*), who joined Haredi society but have not completely integrated into the Haredi mainstream.<sup>39</sup> "Respectable" mainstream Haredi youth steer clear of involvement in non-Haredi ideological organizations such as Lehava.

There is an even smaller, but notable, minority of ex-Haredim in Lehava. Their participation in an organization whose head supports turning Israel into a theocracy (both Bentzi Gopstein and his wife went on record with the author, stating that this was their goal) may seem surprising given their choice to reject religious precepts. However, Barzilai found, as early as the 1990s, that while former Haredim of previous generations tended to adapt antireligious views, current ex-Haredim encounter a "postmodern", secular society that lacks clear values, and therefore do not become ideological secularists.<sup>40</sup> Ex-Haredim in Lehava may be replacing religious belonging with national identity, or they may simply be seeking comradeship as many of them are estranged from their families and are in need of support.

Since Lehava is an organization that brings together youth from different backgrounds, some of whom are dropouts with no parental supervision, it should not come as a surprise that participation in activities has in some cases engendered changes in the religious identity of members. Doron, a 19-year-old Haredi Lehava team administrator, told me: "There are those [members] who leave religion (*hozrim be-shela*) and those who get stronger [in their faith] (*mithazkim*).” The Haredim who become secularized in Lehava were influenced, according to Doron, by their exposure to the world outside the Haredi enclave "because they came to the city [downtown], that's why they left religion, they didn't necessarily stop believing [...] they were exposed to the city nightlife, that lifestyle." Doron himself remains Haredi but has become a Zionist as a result of his Lehava involvement, and if he were not fearful of his parents and Haredi society's reaction to him enlisting in the IDF, he would take that step (mainstream Haredi society continues to object to members enlisting in the IDF, and those who do are often viewed as "fallen"). While Gopstein and his wife are proud of cases in which Lehava members became religious, they try to prevent the opposite scenario, of Haredim becoming secular. Needless to say, such cases damage their reputation in Haredi circles. They attempt to control this by forbidding Haredi members of the organization from participating in certain activities. A Lehava tradition has developed in which the participants



go barhopping in downtown Jerusalem after the weekly rally is over, until the wee hours of the night. Gopstein and his wife attempt to prevent the Haredi members from joining this activity, so that they are not exposed to the more insidious elements of city nightlife; Doron's comment indicates that they are only partially successful.

Lehava is linked to Religious Zionism. Bentzi Gopstein was raised in a Religious Zionist family and attended Religious Zionist educational institutions. Starting from a young age, he was active in Rabbi Meir Kahane's Kach party, which was later outlawed. As a young man he was arrested a few times for felonies such as assaulting Arabs and police officers. Later he became a member of the Kiryat Arba settlement city council. He teaches at Yeshivat Ha-Ra'ayon Ha-Yehudi, a yeshiva established by his mentor Rabbi Meir Kahane. Socially and politically, he is part and parcel of the politically and religiously radical wing of Religious Zionism. A few of Lehava's members hail from these circles as well, but they are a minority.

A group that is hardly represented in Lehava's membership, despite its ideological affinity with Gopstein, is the "hilltop youth." This term is used to refer to teenagers, most of whom are high school dropouts, who establish and reside in small unauthorized Jewish outposts in the occupied territories. They are also responsible for so-called "price tag" activities in the West Bank and Israel proper. These consist mostly of drawing graffiti, but have also included cases of arson against Palestinian homes and mosques. Like Lehava, they are in actuality a small group (experts put their overall number at no more than a few hundred). Most hilltop youth were raised in Religious Zionist families with whom they now have strained relations. They rebel against their parents and Religious Zionist bourgeoisie society through religious and political radicalization.<sup>41</sup>

Hilltop youths probably support Lehava's anti-intermarriage stand, but despite Gopstein's connection to this group (as was evidenced in his daughter's wedding, attended by many hilltop youth),<sup>42</sup> and the fact that they are close in age to Lehava activists, I have only seen a few individuals with their typical look (long, unkempt side-locks – as opposed to the Hassidic curled long side-locks – very large knitted kipot, trekking boots and ragged clothing) participating in Lehava activities. Hilltop youth were mostly raised in middle-class Religious Zionist families. They glorify nature, are strict in their religious observance, and do not partake in urban nightlife. Their lifestyle is very different from that of the working-class Mizrahi supporters of Lehava. This may be one reason that they are not as widely represented in Lehava activities. Their low level of participation was explained by a member of Lehava – an American immigrant to Israel, who is a bit older than most Lehava members (in his early twenties) and more educated (a university student) – as owing to a division of labor of sorts:

Because first of all they're in the Shomron [Samaria], it's a long shlep [haul] from the Shomron to Jerusalem, they are trying to keep the Jewish land, they also have their own problems with the IDF.<sup>43</sup> I would say that they do things that Bentzi would not do, like spray graffiti or burn down a mosque, which he would say that he might be OK with, but he himself does not do it because if he does one legal thing wrong he gets the rope [...] Bentzi cannot afford to be isolated in the Shomron – he has to be amongst the nation, in Tel Aviv. Everyone has their own purpose.

## Lehava's organizational location

When attempting to view Lehava in the context of Israeli political and religious organizations,<sup>44</sup> one is led to conclude that it is something of a hybrid, as there are two categories of organizations with which it shares common features: (1) Religious organizations that fight intermarriage, and (2) ERM (extreme right-wing movements), which are not religious.

The first Israeli organization that made the struggle against “assimilation and intermarriage” its goal is Yad L’Achim (a brotherly hand). The organization was established in 1950 by Haredi Jews and came to focus on combating Christian missionizing and preventing intermarriage. In other words, the organization wages war against what its members view as threats to the integrity of Jewish individual souls and to the Jewish nation. Religious and ethnic boundary maintenance is their mission. They have no official political agenda regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. At one point some of the members of Yad L’Achim split off and formed Lev L’Achim (a brotherly heart; the split was apparently due to internal Haredi and organizational politics). Both organizations are run by Haredi Jews but some of their volunteers are Religious Zionist. Yad L’Achim is famous for cases in which its agents, veterans of IDF combat units,<sup>45</sup> carry out military-style clandestine operations to rescue Jewish women who married Arabs and now wish to divorce and return to Jewish society.<sup>46</sup>

Lehava purports to engage in the same type of activity as the L’Achim organizations and they even cooperate with Lev L’Achim. However, their activity seems to be more sporadic and is based on younger, less experienced volunteers. In the past, Gopstein and his wife were employed by a shelter for at-risk women that they helped institute, servicing Jewish wives of Arab men who wished to leave their husbands.<sup>47</sup> A directive issued by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Services barred Gopstein and his wife from further involvement with this shelter. However, Lehava continues to be active in this field, maintaining a hotline. While speaking with me during one of the weekly rallies, Gopstein showed me pleas for assistance that he receives on his mobile phone on a regular basis via his WhatsApp account. This activity is showcased by the organization, which uses it to draw new members, seek funding, and garner support. For example, in a Facebook post from October 8, 2016 and on the Lehava website,<sup>48</sup> the organization described its activities in numerical terms: 1178 calls were made to its emergency number, and 107 women left their “gentile” partner, all allegedly due to Lehava’s activity.

The most important difference between Lehava and the L’Achim organizations is that Lehava seeks to recruit as many activists as possible, most of whom are teenagers, and to some extent, as Bentzi’s wife Anat admitted, can be seen as running a youth movement. Indeed, the Gopsteins are concerned with the welfare of their volunteers and consider volunteering in the organization to be therapeutic for their younger activists, many of whom are at-risk youth. Anat Gopstein does not have an official role in the organization, but she serves as a sort of mother figure, and her training as a social worker has helped prepare her for this role. In an interview I conducted with her at the Jerusalem Malha mall food court on September 7, 2015, she described to me how she had been hesitant to accept an “at-risk girl” and how eventually Lehava turned out to be a lifeline for her:

- Anat: This girl was really in trouble [...] she wanted to volunteer in Lehava. She had piercings all over her body and really looked “at risk” and I hesitated to take her in, but I sat and talked to her and she joined the organization, and the activity in Lehava really lifted her up.
- Ari: How?
- Anat: First of all, suddenly she had something to occupy herself with, she had meaning in her life [she came up with a scheme that promotes Lehava’s message]. Think about it: She was at such a low point, drugs and sex, under a court-issued restraining order.
- Ari: Has she changed her look?
- Anat: She hasn’t completely changed her look, but she’s engaged to be married to someone also connected to Lehava.

Serving a higher purpose and being part of a group is therapeutic for these teenagers, argue the Gopsteins (Bentzi made similar remarks in informal conversations). All this is in stark contrast to the Yad- and Lev L’Achim organizations, which seek contributions from the public, but do not recruit more than the relatively small number of qualified volunteers required to carry out their missions.

Lehava, besides engaging in the prevention of intermarriage, has political, religious, and educational aspirations. As stated above, there is a link between the Ha-Ra’ayon Ha-Yehudi yeshiva founded by the late Rabbi Meir Kahane, where Gopstein offers classes, and Lehava. Two of the interviewees (who are high-school graduates, older and more educated than most of the participants) described how they were first drawn to studies at *Ha-Ra’ayon Ha-Yehudi* and later to participation in Lehava activities.

Gopstein is also deeply involved in current Israeli extreme right-wing activity, encouraging supporters to come out for demonstrations and other activities. In this aspect, Lehava has more in common with extreme right-wing movements such as the group led by rapper Yoav Eliasi, AKA the Shadow, known as *ha-arayot shel ha-tzel* (the Shadow’s Lions), which is located in Tel Aviv and receives much publicity largely due to the celebrity status of their leader, and the Beitar Jerusalem football team’s ultra-fan club, *La Familia*.<sup>49</sup> The members of both of these organizations hail mainly from working-class Mizrahi circles. The Shadow’s Lions initiate right-wing activities, such as opposing left-wing demonstrations in the Tel Aviv region, while Lehava has a stronger base in Jerusalem as does of course *La Familia*. There are instances in which the various ultra-right organizations coordinate their activities. Yair, a teenage team administrator at Lehava, described it as follows:

We have our friends, Baruch Marzel [an extreme right-wing activist from Hebron], the Shadow, so we’re friends. Say, there was the wedding [of Muslim Mahmud Mansur and Jewish-raised Morel Malka], they [the Shadow’s Lions] came to help us [Lehava held demonstrations outside the hall]. So when they need help, why should we not also show up?

Mahmud and Morel’s wedding took place near the Shadow’s home turf, and he was apparently happy to assist Lehava in mobilizing demonstrators, even though the fight against assimilation is associated with Lehava rather than with his own organization.

Beitar Jerusalem Football Club<sup>50</sup> fans who are members of the *La Familia* fan club are famous for booing and yelling obscenities at Arab players, and for acts of violence against fans of rival teams. The association of ultra-fans with nationalist organizations is

a common feature in many countries.<sup>51</sup> A teenage Haredi Mizrahi member of Lehava to whom I spoke during the weekly rally stated that “all Lehava members are also members of La Familia.”<sup>52</sup> This is an exaggeration, but it demonstrates the overlap in the organizations’ membership. Doron, the 19-year-old Haredi group administrator mentioned above, described how, in his view, Lehava actually educates the hooligan fans:

And then there are the Beitar fans, so [their motivation for participating] is out of hatred for Arabs, but they come to the [Lehava] activities and in the end they understand why they are doing it, and what they are really doing, and not shouting ‘death to the Arabs’ or something like that, but actually participating in [an effective] activity.

Despite these similarities, there are also distinctions between Lehava on the one hand and the Shadow’s Lions and La Familia on the other. First, the identity of the leaders: The leadership of La Familia and the Shadow’s Lions is comprised mostly of Mizrahi Jews from underprivileged socioeconomic background, while Lehava was founded by Bentzi Gopstein, an Ashkenazi, Religious Zionist, right-wing activist. The second difference, as expounded above, has to do with Lehava’s clearly specified organizational goal: The struggle against assimilation in the Holy Land.

### **Ethnonationalist readings of Arab men courting Jewish women**

What is the explanation for the large number of Mizrahi Jews among Lehava’s membership and supporters? First, it should be noted that Mizrahi support for the extreme right-wing is not a new phenomenon as Gopstein’s mentor, Rabbi Meir Kahane, also won the support of many working-class Mizrahi Jews residing in Israel’s periphery in the 1980s, before the political party that he led was outlawed.<sup>53</sup> As mentioned above, Nissim Mizrahi claimed that the Mizrahi working-class right-wing supporters are especially upset by instances of boundary crossing in the name of universal values; he ascribed this to the honor discourse.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, honor seems to be involved in Lehava’s objection to Arab men courting Jewish women and it is not limited to Mizrahim. Nagel points out how in patriarchal nationalist thinking, when men of “the enemy” have sex with “our daughters,” it is considered a terrible offence against the nation, leading to reprimand and punishment.<sup>55</sup> When Arab men date Jewish women, they are seen by extreme right-wing Israelis as committing an act of hostility, humiliating the Jewish nation and causing it to lose honor.

The opposing view, the so-called “liberal grammar” ascribed by Nissim Mizrahi to the Israeli peace activists that he interviewed,<sup>56</sup> views individuals as free to choose their romantic partner regardless of his/her ethnic and religious belonging, love and sex being a personal and not a national issue. An incident I witnessed at the Jerusalem Zion Square rally, in which a teenage participant in an LGBT gathering was arguing with a supporter of Lehava and began screaming at him repeatedly “get out of my vagina!”, would seem to demonstrate this point of view.<sup>57</sup> Lehava supporters are not oblivious to such claims. In their view, however, when Arab men from Eastern Jerusalem go out to the Western parts of the city seeking women who are not limited by the conservative sexual standards enforced upon Arab women in East Jerusalem, they are not adapting liberal grammar. They do not bring their sisters with them to meet Jewish boys. In the

eyes of Lehava supporters, the lack of symmetry is clear: “They”, the Arabs, go out “hunting for our women”, while their own women remain secure at home. In the discussions conducted in Zion Square with passersby, Lehava supporters kept bringing up a tit-for-tat argument: Can we go into their neighborhoods? So why should they be allowed into ours? Can we date their girls? So why should they be allowed to date ours?<sup>58</sup>

Comments by Facebook supporters of Lehava buttress this understanding of their worldview. On Facebook, supporters have expressed their opinions more freely than members of the organization who were interviewed privately or at the square. A Facebook supporter in his twenties commented on a post by Gopstein that included a link to a television news item on an Arab man who is dating a Jewish woman: “They [the media] will never show a Jew going with an Arab woman, because this would offend Arab honor.”<sup>59</sup> In tune with Nissim Mizrahi’s analysis, honor is an issue here, and although the commenter is referring to Arab honor, this may be a reflection of his own attitude regarding Jewish honor. Similarly, another commenter, also in his twenties, wrote “When will they broadcast an article on a Jewish [male] citizen with an Arab [female]? They won’t because they are scared!”

These comments are illuminating since while Muslim religious law as well as Arab social codes allow for a Muslim man to date women of other monotheistic faiths, Jewish law does not allow either men or women to marry outside the faith. These commenters who would like to see a Jewish man dating an Arab woman are evidently concerned with national pride more than religion, and are demonstrating an honor-based discourse. They diverge here from Gopstein’s strict religious line; he would never make such a statement since, as said, Jewish religious law forbids out-marriage for both genders.

A different genre of comments, which also diverges from Lehava’s company line, consist of attacks on Jewish women who have had relations with Arab men, describing them as defiled and no longer fitting to be married to a Jewish man. A Facebook commenter whose profile identifies him as a Jew of Iranian descent in his twenties, commented on a post on Gopstein’s page by a young female Lehava activist describing her work “to save” Jewish girls who date Palestinians. He writes:

This scum and you who are trying to save traitors, [you] stupid idiots, enough with all this hypocrisy, you know Bentzi [Gopstein] that she isn’t worth anything anymore!!! Defiled forever!! Would you allow your child to meet such a creature, not to mention marriage????!! So, enough.<sup>60</sup>

This comment, at first glance, may be considered in line with Lehava’s demonization of Arab men and Arab culture. Lehava, however, is also involved, as described above, in assisting Jewish women who seek to leave their Arab husbands and return to Jewish society, and in this role they adopt a social services-like disposition, describing these women as victims.<sup>61</sup> Comments that contradict this message have been erased on occasion by Gopstein. It should be noted that although using religious terms such as defiled (*teme’ah*), these statements are not based on actual halakhic (Jewish law) rulings and seem rather to co-opt religious terminology to the ethnonational discourse. A comment posted by a woman, in response to accusations of defilement, quotes the rabbinic saying that “whoever saves a life, it is considered as if he saved an entire world”

(Mishnah, tractate Sanhedrin 4:5), applying it to the “rescued” women discussed in the post and praising Gopstein for his work.<sup>62</sup>

The differing attitudes on the part of supporters toward men and women who have exogamic relations raises the question of whether the attitudes expressed by the commenters are not in fact mirroring prevalent Middle Eastern religious and cultural attitudes, rather than European racism. Yohanan Friedmann explains the Sharia law that allows Muslim men, but not women, to marry members of the *dhimmi* communities (the Muslim traditional term for Christian and Jewish minorities residing among them), as a result of the superior status accorded to men in patriarchal societies. The marriage of a Muslim woman to a non-Muslim man would place her in a subordinate position vis-a-vis her non-Muslim husband, which is unacceptable, but the opposite case is not a problem. The comments of the Lehava supporters quoted above show that at least some of them share these assumptions regarding men, women, and group belonging.

Nissim Leon, when analyzing current Mizrahi traditional religiosity, posits that it should be viewed within a Middle Eastern cultural context.<sup>63</sup> I would like to make a similar suggestion regarding attitudes toward exogamy among traditionalist Mizrahi Jews. Ron, a young member of Lehava whom I had interviewed, asserted that “if we continue like this [with intermarriage], in a few years there won’t be a Jewish nation anymore.” This statement echoes comments made by Hindus and Copts who are concerned with Islamic expansionism via marriage, which are quoted by Mohan Rao and Saba Mahmood, respectively.<sup>64</sup> Menachem Klein has shown how Arabs and Jews (including Ashkenazi Jews) living in Palestine/Israel have influenced each other over the last century and a half, more than is commonly considered to be the case.<sup>65</sup> Lihi Ben Shitrit has pointed to similarities in patterns of thought among religious Jews and Arabs in current Israel/Palestine regarding issues of gender, religion and nationalism.<sup>66</sup> I would suggest that with regard to Lehava’s activity as well, local contexts including Middle Eastern patriarchy and religious extremism should be taken into account when attempting to explain this phenomenon.

## Conclusions

Concern regarding Arab men courting Jewish women began troubling the Israeli Jewish Orthodox public not so long ago. A milestone was the highly publicized ruling issued in 2010 by the Sephardi chief-rabbi of Safed, Shmuel Eliyahu, forbidding Jewish homeowners from renting or selling their homes to Arabs.<sup>67</sup> This ruling was a reaction to the rising numbers of Arab students attending the local college (which was, ironically, a branch of the Religious Zionist Bar-Ilan University) and seeking lodging. Rabbi Eliyahu claimed that “two days after moving in they already made a pass at the *midrasha* [religious seminary] girls. [...] If he [one of the Arab students] would have behaved to Arab girls in his village the way he behaves to Jewish girls, they would have thrown him down the stairs, slaughtered him in the town square.”<sup>68</sup> The fact that this statement was made by a leading Religious Zionist Mizrahi rabbi who presides over a town with a large working-class Mizrahi population, parallels and to an extent prefigures Lehava’s activity, as do his references to honor and Arab culture;<sup>69</sup> it is implied that while Arab students honor the women of their village, they do not honor the Jewish girls of Safed. His statement underscores how widespread these sentiments are among certain Israeli demographics.



As we saw, the notion of avoiding intermarriage, not only as a means for national survival in the Diaspora, but also to maintain national integrity in the Jewish homeland, has deep roots in Judaism; nevertheless, Gopstein's choice to focus on this issue is not self-evident. He and his wife tell an origin story that describes how two girls, who were their neighbors in the Kiryat Arba settlement, were courted by Palestinians and ended up marrying them. The Gopsteins were shocked and upset by this incident, and it led to the establishment of Lehava. I would like to suggest, however, that this story notwithstanding, for the Gopsteins, fighting intermarriage, as an organizational goal, was an auspicious choice. It unites two central logics that inform Israeli ethnonationalism – Judaism as a national identity that needs to be safeguarded, and religious piety – and so appeals to differing demographics that form the Israeli religious-ethnonational alliance: Mizrahi traditionalists, Religious Zionists, and Haredim, but apparently less to FSU immigrants, whose right-wing worldview has less to do with religious faith, and among whom there were high levels of intermarriage back in the FSU.

The theoretical contribution of this article is primarily to our understanding of Israeli ethnonationalism. First, following Leon (see above), and in tune with my findings, I find it justified to refer to religious ethnonationalism rather than simply to ethnonationalism. This intertwining of religious and national/ethnic Jewish identity is especially apparent in the case of Lehava, an organization that, as was shown, combines two distinct modes of operation based upon: 1) the model of Israeli religious organizations that work to prevent intermarriage, and 2) current Israeli urban extreme right-wing movements. Second, I have pointed out how Lehava is based upon a coalition of minorities with Mizrahi dominance, at least in numbers – a point that is often overlooked by observers.

A third, related point is identifying the context in which Lehava and Israeli religious ethnonationalism should be analyzed. While previous research of Israeli extreme right-wing movements focused on comparisons with Western fascism and racist ideology, this article draws attention to the similarity between Lehava's struggle and those of other Middle Eastern and postcolonial cases mentioned above. The Oriental identity of most members of Lehava (Mizrahi, literally, means Oriental) serves to underscore this point. This is not to say that European fascism has had no influence on Israeli religious ethnonationalism. Nevertheless, this research suggests that local and Eastern contexts should be given adequate consideration. In advocating this shift of the analytical focus, the current article is joining other recent scholarly works in analyzing various aspects of Israeli society and culture within the Middle Eastern context,<sup>70</sup> while also remaining sensitive to its idiosyncrasies as the world's only Jewish state.

## Notes

1. The Israeli government declared Kahane's *Kach* movement racist in 1988 and a terrorist organization in 1993. Kahane was assassinated in 1990 in NYC by a member of an Islamist terrorist cell.
2. The leaders would not disclose exact numbers. Based on the number of teams, nationwide, which they did disclose, and the average number of members per team, I estimated the number of actual members to be around 100. However, since that time new branches have opened up in new locations.



3. Mizrachi and Mautner, "Resisting Liberalism"; and Pedahzur, *The Triumph of Israel's Radical Right*.
4. Pedahzur, *The Triumph of Israel's Radical Right*.
5. Pedahzur, *The Triumph of Israel's Radical Right*; and Sprinzak, *The emergence of the Israeli radical right*.
6. Adjai and Lazaridis, "Migration, Xenophobia"; and Mudde, "Right-wing Extremism Analyzed."
7. Akkerman and Hagelund, "Women and Children First!"
8. Canetti-Nisim and Pedahzur, "Contributory Factors to Political Xenophobia."
9. This observation is based on the fieldwork and a survey conducted by the author of Lehava's Facebook supporters.
10. Mizrachi and Mautner, "Resisting Liberalism."
11. Shafir and Peled, *Being Israeli*; and Peled, *Labor Market Segmentation*.
12. Shenhav, *The Arab Jews*.
13. Leon, *Mizrachi Ultra-Orthodoxy*.
14. Leon, *Ethno-Religious Fundamentalism*.
15. Mizrachi, "Sociology in the Garden."
16. Ibid., p. 36.
17. Brown, *The Haredim*.
18. Leon, *Ethno-Religious Fundamentalism*, p. 32.
19. An interviewee stated that "all Lehava members" supported Yachad.
20. Nagel, *Ethnicity and Sexuality*, 108–09.
21. Rao, *Love Jihad*.
22. Mahmood, *Sectarian Conflict*.
23. See <http://www.haaretz.co.il/misc/1.1501361>.
24. See Bentzi Gopstein's profile page in Hebrew at <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100008557804470>.
25. E.g. Deuteronomy, chapter 7, verses 1–3.
26. Ezra, chapters 9, 10.
27. It is not currently possible to provide exact numbers. There is no civil marriage in Israel, so legally-binding mixed marriages take place abroad and are only partly documented. In other cases, Jewish women convert to Islam prior to marrying, so they do not enter the official count as a case of intermarriage, though it is considered so by Jewish tradition and by the organizations combating intermarriage, see DellaPergola, "Ethnoreligious Intermarriage in Israel."
28. Abu-Rayya, "Psychological and Sociocultural Adjustment of Intermarried Jews and Arabs in Israel"; Cohen-Golani, *A Phenomenological Study*; and Racin and Dein, "Jewish-Arab Couple Relationships in Israel."
29. Cohen-Golani, *A Phenomenological Study*.
30. Racin and Dein, "Jewish-Arab Couple Relationships in Israel."
31. Ibid.
32. Friedmann, *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam*.
33. See, for example, <http://www.fightracism.org/Article.asp?aid=471>.
34. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V-lfZlf9LZc> accessed March 9, 2018.
35. In November 2017, Gopstein was summoned for a pre-indictment court hearing for charges of incitement to terror, violence and racism; whether this will lead to a trial and an indictment is yet to be seen. Shaham "Extreme Right Leader to be indicted."
36. This is an estimation based on the surnames of commenters.
37. Hakak, *Gvarim Be-Shahor*.
38. Breslov Hassidim have historically been on the margins of Hassidic society and this tendency has continued in current Israeli society in which Breslov Hassidim are involved in street missionizing in manners considered less respectable by mainstream Haredi society. Here too the two groups merge, as many new Breslov Hassidim are of Mizrahi origin. See, for example, Baumgarten, "Between Morocco and Uman."

39. See, for example, Bunin Benor, *Becoming Frum*.
40. Barzilai, *Leaving Haredi Society*.
41. D.R. "No'ar Ha-Geva'ot"; Friedman, "Hilltop Youth"; Stern, "Post-Secular Ethnography."
42. This wedding was covered by news channels as it brought together the various elements that make up Lehava – Mizrahi city youth fans of Beitar Jerusalem and Hilltop Youth, and because it included a dance with knives. <http://www.mako.co.il/news-israel/local/Article-145fdecc6603341004.htm> .
43. He is referring here to skirmishes with the IDF as a result of the fact that they settle illegally in outposts, and the IDF, in some cases, attempts to evacuate them.
44. Lehava is not an official organization; it is not registered as an NGO and thus not recognized by the state bureaucracy. Sociologically, however, it fits the definition of an organization, and it is in fact a tightly run operation.
45. While the heads of the organization are Haredi, many of the operatives are not.
46. I am referring to these women as Jewish even though they converted to Islam. The two religions disagree over this issue, according to Islam they are now Muslims, while according to Judaism they remain Jewish. Given this disagreement I turn to Western liberal thought that privileges personal choice. Therefore, since at this point these women wish to return to Judaism, I will refer to them as Jews.
47. See *Haaretz*, May 7, 2011 "Kahane lives – in Welfare." Uri Blau and Shai Greenberg. <http://www.haaretz.co.il/misc/1.1173276>.
48. <http://shutaf.lehava.co.il/>.
49. Like Lehava, but unlike the L'Achim organizations, these organizations have no official standing; more about La Familia below.
50. This is referring to English football / American soccer.
51. Mikus, "Faggots Won't Walk."
52. Field notes, June 5, 2016.
53. See note 8 above.
54. See note 15 above.
55. Nagel, *Masculinity and Nationalism*.
56. See note 15 above.
57. Field notes, September 11, 2015.
58. Field notes, taken on various occasions that I attended the weekly rally between July 2015 and October 2017.
59. Facebook. Bentzi Gopstein's profile page August 18, 2016.
60. Facebook. Bentzi Gopstein's profile page July 2, 2016.
61. See Hakak, "Battling Against Interfaith Relations."
62. Facebook. Bentzi Gopstein's profile page August 30, 2016.
63. Leon, "The Secular Origins."
64. Rao, *Love Jihad*; and Mahmood, *Sectarian Conflict*.
65. Klein, *Lives in Common*.
66. Ben-Shitrit, *Righteous Transgressions*.
67. "The Halacha of Racism," Sari Makover-Belkov, NRG November 17, 2010 <http://www.nrg.co.il/online/1/ART2/179/044.html>.
68. Ibid.
69. Lehava was established in 2009 but gained momentum and public awareness only a few years later.
70. Ben-Shitrit, *Righteous Transgressions*; Klein, *Lives in Common*; Leon, "Secular Origins"; and Shenhav, *The Arab Jews*.

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