

Continuity and Change in Israeli Wartime Rhetoric: Religion, Holocaust and the Prime-Ministerial Speech

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Introduction

Since the early 2000s Israeli journalists, NGOs and social scientists have warned of *הדתה* (*hadata*)—a “religionisation” that allegedly pushes Orthodox norms into fields once branded civic and pluralist. Typical flash-points include the public-school curriculum, the IDF, gender-segregated services and legislation that privileges Jewish identity. Peled & Herman-Peled trace the roots of this phenomenon to the post-1967 era but argue it accelerated after 2000 as religious parties gained bargaining power in the Knesset (Peled & Peled 2018). Polls show most self-identified secular Jews believe the process is under way.¹

October 7 2023 intensified the conversation. Neil Bar (2024) contends that Benjamin Netanyahu’s right-wing coalition, scrambling to preserve legitimacy after the Hamas attack, “actively invoked ancient Jewish historical narratives and figures” to manufacture national unity. If true, the Prime Minister’s rhetoric should look markedly more religious than that of the socialist-secular David Ben-Gurion in 1948.

To test that assumption, this study compares two emblematic episodes of large-scale conflict: David Ben-Gurion’s addresses during the 1948 War of Independence and Benjamin Netanyahu’s speeches in the current Operation Iron Swords (2023-25). Both prime ministers are self-identified secularists, but they represent very different party systems and historical moments. By mapping six thematic fields—(1) religious references to religious sources, (2) references to religious figures, (3) Holocaust mentions, (4) other Jewish historic events and (5) explicit invocations of God—we ask whether today’s rhetoric really marks a “new” religionisation or reflects a longer-standing civil-religious vocabulary in times of war and crisis.

Research questions

1. **Continuity vs. change:** Has the density of religious references in prime-ministerial war speeches increased since 1948?
2. **Repertoire shift:** Which motifs (biblical figures, Holocaust, festivals, God, etc.) rise or fall between times?
3. **Implications for *hadata*:** Do the findings support the thesis of desecularization of the Israeli society?

¹ https://www.ynet.co.il/judaism/article/rkbecwjlr?utm_source=chatgpt.com

Methodology: Analysis of Prime Ministers' Public Statements

Sources of Data

The analysis draws on 124 public speeches delivered by Israeli Prime Ministers during times of war—specifically, the War of Independence and Operation Iron Swords—by David Ben-Gurion and Benjamin Netanyahu, respectively. The speeches were sourced from the following repositories:

- **David Ben-Gurion:**
 - **Ben-Gurion Heritage Archive:** Speeches and letters were accessed using the archive's filtering system, targeting the period between **May 14, 1948, and July 20, 1949**, which corresponds to the War of Independence. A total of **33 speeches** were retrieved.
 - **Method of Collection:** Speeches were manually copied from the digital archive.
- **Benjamin Netanyahu:**
 - **Prime Minister's Office Website:** Speeches were collected by filtering publications using keywords such as "speech," "address," "statement," etc. The selected time frame was **October 7, 2023, through the end of June 2025**.
 - **Method of Collection:** Data was collected using **Python-based web scraping tools**.

Analytical Procedure

Analysis was conducted using the following AI tools:

- **ChatGPT 3omini (via API access)**
- **Google's LLM Notebook**, which allows for bulk text processing.

Extraction of Religious References

To identify direct and indirect references to Jewish religious sources (e.g., the Bible, Mishnah, Talmud), the following prompt was issued:

"Return direct or indirect expressions derived from Jewish religious sources such as the Bible, Mishnah, or Talmud. The expression does not have to be an exact quotation."

A guideline and example were provided to illustrate the inclusion of non-literal yet clearly allusive religious language:

Example:

"My friends, hard days still lie ahead, but we shall not fear nor retreat. The sword of David has been drawn from its sheath, and Jonathan's bow shall not retreat. I am confident we will emerge stronger than ever from Operation Iron Swords."

ידידי, עוד צפויים לנו ימים קשים אבל לא נירתע ולא נוותר. חרב דוד הוצאה מהנדן וקשת יהונתן לא תיסוג לאחור. אני בטוח שממלחמת 'חרבות ברזל' נצא חזקים יותר מאי פעם.

Although the phrase "**The sword of David has been drawn from its sheath, and Jonathan's bow shall not retreat**" is not a direct citation, it was treated as a valid allusion due to its biblical imagery and linguistic structure.

Additional Thematic Analyses

The analysis also tracked the presence of the following thematic categories:

A multilingual keyword lexicon defined four themes. Examples include:

- **Religious figures:** *Moshe, Bar-Kokhba, Rav Kook*
- **God mentions:** ה', צור ישראל, בעזרת השם
- **Holocaust terms:** אושוויץ, שואה, "six million"
- **Other Jewish historic events:** גירוש ספרד, אלפיים שנה, יציאת מצרים

Initially, attempts were made to automate this classification via AI tools. However, due to insufficient accuracy, a revised strategy was adopted:

1. **Pre-definition of thematic keywords.**
2. A **secondary AI review** using ChatGPT to confirm that keywords appeared in their **correct contextual meaning**.

Illustrative Case:

- "Today the Jewish people celebrate the holiday of Shavuot." "היום עם יהודי חוגג את חג "שבועות". → Valid holiday context.
- "We began the war a few weeks ago." "התחלנו עם המלחמה לפני כמה שבועות". → The word "Shavuot" here (meaning "weeks") was **correctly rejected** by ChatGPT as it lacks religious context.

Validation Phase

A **random sample of 20 speeches** (10 per Prime Minister) was selected for manual validation. Two independent reviewers identified and tagged religious references to compare with AI outputs.

- **Metric of Evaluation:** Rather than evaluating whether individual expressions were misclassified, the key question was whether **any religious expression in a speech was missed entirely**.

Results – Religious Reference Identification:

- **Precision:** 100%
(Every time the AI system claimed there was a religious reference, it was indeed present.)
- **Recall:** 80%

Results – Thematic Keyword Classification:

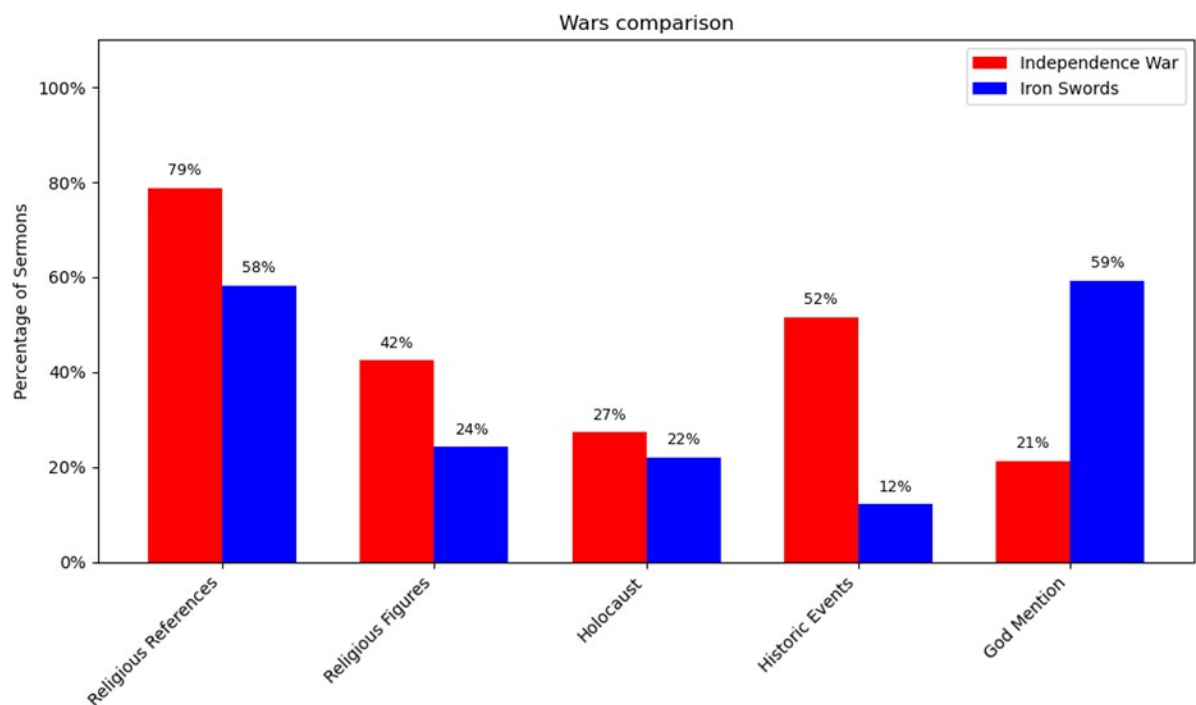
- A sample of 20 keyword instances was tested.
- Accuracy was **95%**, meaning **only one keyword** was misinterpreted or misclassified in context

Post-Validation Completion

Following the evaluation, manually identified omissions were added, including expressions such as:

- “Eternity of Israel” (נצח ישראל)
- “May God avenge his blood” (השם יקום דמו)
- “Redemption” (גאולה) – verified to ensure the term was used in a **religious**, not secular or territorial, context.

Analysis of the findings



Continuity in the Religious Baseline

Across both conflicts, religious references constitutes a central component of Israeli prime-ministerial wartime oratory. In quantitative terms, explicit or allusive references to Jewish sources appear in **79 percent** of David Ben-Gurion's 1948 speeches and **58 percent** of Benjamin Netanyahu's addresses during Operation *Iron Swords*—a decrease of twenty-three percentage points, yet still a clear majority. Such references range from brief formulae—e.g., *qibbuts galuyyot* (“ingathering of exiles”)—to extended scriptural citations. Ben-Gurion could invoke Samuel with:

“וְשִׁפְטֵנוּ מֶלֶכְנוּ וְיֵצֵא לְפָנֵינוּ וְנִלְחֶם אֶת מִלְחֲמוֹתֵינוּ”
 (“May our King judge us, go before us, and fight our battles”)

while Netanyahu, addressing Jerusalem Day, quoted Isaiah:

“הֵן עַל־כַּפַּיִם חֲקוֹתַיִךְ, חוֹמוֹתַיִךְ נִגְדֵי תַמִּיד”
 (“Behold, I have engraved you upon My palms; your walls are ever before Me”).

The persistence of such idioms demonstrates that sacred discourse has framed Israel's wartime narratives from the state's inception. Thus, rather than signalling a novel import of contemporary right-wing coalitions, the use of biblical language reflects a longstanding civil-religious repertoire that continues to shape prime-ministerial appeals under fire.

2. No linear de-secularisation trend

If *hadata* were a simple, monotonic process, Netanyahu's bars would tower over Ben-Gurion's across every category. Instead, four of six metrics fall sharply. The modern prime minister speaks the language of faith **less often** overall than his 1948 predecessor.

3. Shift rather than surge

Netanyahu's addresses pivot toward **personal theism**—evidenced by a 38-percentage-point rise in expressions such as *בעזרת ה'* and *השם יקום דמם*—and toward **liturgical time**, Conversely, collective-memory motifs—biblical and post-biblical heroes (e.g., Moses, Aaron, the Hasmoneans, Joshua ben Nun), Holocaust analogies, and long-span historical events such as *יציאת מצרים* (the Exodus), the Spanish Expulsion, the “two-thousand-year” motif, the First and Second Temples, pogroms, Crusades, and the Inquisition—recede sharply.

Moreover, Ben-Gurion's extensive use of epochal history positioned the IDF as the culminating instrument of Jewish destiny; Netanyahu's liturgical framing places greater emphasis on **divine** partnership (“With the help of Heaven, our soldiers...”) than on historical inevitability. This move subtly shifts locus of agency: victory is cast less as fulfilment of a millennial teleology and more as a contingent gift contingent on collective prayer and moral comportment.

4. Holocaust rhetoric re-assessed

Contrary to frequent claims that Operation *Iron Swords* “over-uses” Holocaust imagery, Shoah references decline from **27 percent** in Ben-Gurion's corpus to **22 percent** in Netanyahu's. Ben-

Gurion was more inclined to invoke Auschwitz, Treblinka, or the “six million” when framing Israel’s existential struggle—an unsurprising pattern given the temporal proximity of the Holocaust to the War of Independence.

Discussion

These findings complicate the dominant “de-secularization” and religiozization narrative. They suggest that wartime Zionist rhetoric has always fused sacred and national idioms; the variable is *which* idioms get foregrounded. When Netanyahu replaces Ben-Gurion’s Holocaust and Masada parallels with Hanukkah lamps and overt “with God’s help” formulae, he is not inaugurating but rearranging a civil-religious toolkit.

For the broader *hadata* debate, two implications follow:

1. Prime-ministerial war speeches are a poor smoking gun for recent desecularisation. Religious vocabulary saturated the discourse at independence.
2. Policy arenas (e.g. school curricula, public transport) may indeed be shifting, but the litmus test must lie elsewhere than the rhetorical genres studied here.