



CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN ISRAELI WARTIME RHETORIC:

**RELIGION, THE HOLOCAUST,
AND THE PRIME-MINISTERIAL SPEECH**

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Executive Summary

Purpose and Scope

This study examines how Israeli prime ministers have used religious, historical, and theological motifs in wartime speeches, focusing on **David Ben-Gurion during the 1948 War of Independence and Benjamin Netanyahu during Israel-Hamas war (2023–2025)**. It investigates whether contemporary claims of "religionization" (*hadata*) reflect a genuine increase in religious rhetoric in political speech or a reconfiguration of existing civil-religious traditions.

Methodology

1

Data Sources:

124 wartime speeches by Ben-Gurion (1948–1949) and Netanyahu (2023–2025) were collected from the Ben-Gurion Heritage Archive and the Israeli Prime Minister's Office.

2

Analytical Tools:

AI-assisted textual analysis identified references to:

1. Jewish religious sources (Bible, Talmud)
2. Religious figures
3. Holocaust imagery
4. Other Jewish historical events (Exodus, Inquisition, etc.)
5. Direct invocations of God

3

Validation:

Human review ensured near-100% precision in detecting religious motifs, with 80% recall and 95% accuracy in thematic classification

Key Findings

1 Continuity in Religious Language

Both leaders used sacred idioms extensively. Ben-Gurion referenced religious sources in 79% of his speeches, Netanyahu in 58% — a decline, but still a majority presence. Biblical and rabbinic imagery remains central to Israeli wartime rhetoric across eras.

2 No Simple Desecularization Trend

If *hadata* were linear, Netanyahu would surpass Ben-Gurion in all metrics. Instead, references to biblical heroes, historical epochs, and Holocaust analogies have been used significantly less by Netanyahu.

3 Shift toward Theistic Language

- **Netanyahu:** Increased explicit invocations of God (“With God’s help,” “God will avenge”), framing war as a divine partnership rather than purely historical destiny.
- **Ben-Gurion:** Used religious language mainly to support a secular Zionist teleology, portraying the IDF as the culmination of Jewish historical continuity rather than covenantal faith.

4 Holocaust Imagery Declines

Despite public claims, Holocaust references decrease from 27% (Ben-Gurion) to 22% (Netanyahu). Temporal proximity to the Holocaust likely explains Ben-Gurion’s heavier usage.

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Interpretive Insights

- Ben-Gurion: Integrated sacred texts into a secular-national narrative of state-building and historical legitimacy.
- Netanyahu: Reorients rhetoric toward theological intimacy, presenting war as a moral and spiritual undertaking requiring divine blessing.

Conclusions

- Israeli wartime rhetoric has always been infused with religious language, but its meaning and emphasis have changed over time.
- Contemporary discourse under Netanyahu signals a re-theologization rather than simple *hadata*:
 - God-centered appeals rise
 - Historical and Holocaust motifs decline
- This represents a discursive transformation: from secular-national destiny to divine partnership, reshaping how Israeli identity and legitimacy are articulated in wartime.

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 five 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. A total of 91 speeches were retrieved.
- **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."

ידידיי, עוד צפויים לנו ימים קשים אבל לא נרתע 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 three themes. Examples include

- **Religious figures:** Moshe, Bar-Kokhba, Rav Kook
- **God mentions:** God (ה'), Tzur Israel (צור ישראל), with God’s help (בעזרת השם)
- **Holocaust terms:** Holocaust (שואה), “six million” (ששת המיליון), Auschwitz (אושוויץ)
- **Other Jewish historic events:** Exodus from Egypt (יציאת מצרים), Expulsion from Spain (גירוש ספרד), two thousand years (אלפיים שנה)

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.

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:

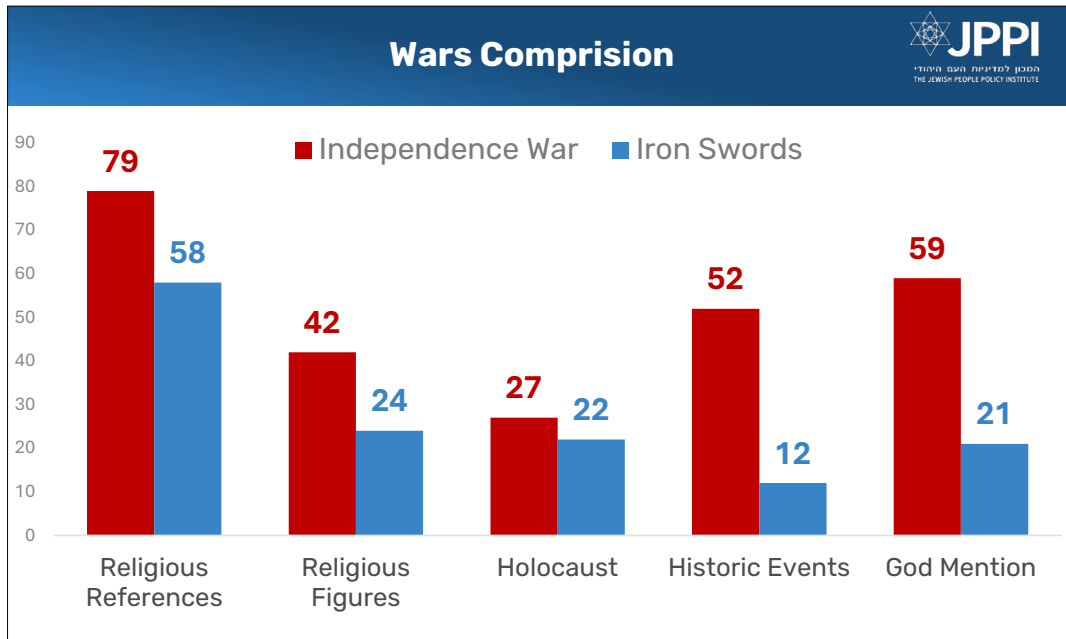
- A sample of 20 keyword instances was tested.
- Accuracy was 95%, meaning only one keyword was misinterpreted or misclassified in context.

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., “קִיבוּץ גְּלוּיוֹת” (“ingathering of exiles”)—to extended scriptural citations. Ben-Gurion could invoke Samuel with:

“וְשִׁפְטֵנוּ מֶלֶכְנוּ וְיֵצֵא לְפָנֵינוּ וְנִלְחֵם אֶת מֶלְחֻמּוֹתֵינוּ”

(“May our King judge us, go before us, and fight our battles”)

while Netanyahu, addressing Jerusalem Day, quoted Isaiah:

“הֵן עַל-כַּפַּיִם חֲקוֹתֶיךָ, חוֹמוֹתַיִךְ נִגְדֵי תָמִיד”

(“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 five metrics fall sharply. The modern prime minister speaks the language of Jewish history and tradition 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 with God's help (בְּעֶזְרַת ה') and may God avenge their blood (הַשֵּׁם יְקוּם דָּמָם). 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) and 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: Continuity, Change, and the Dialectic of Jewish Identity in Wartime Rhetoric

The findings reveal an intriguing dialectic: while Benjamin Netanyahu’s wartime rhetoric incorporates more explicit theistic language than David Ben-Gurion’s, it does not necessarily signal a quantitative increase in religious references overall. Instead, the data suggest a qualitative reconfiguration—a shift in the symbolic grammar of wartime rhetoric. This transformation is especially evident when juxtaposing the two Prime Ministers’ divergent modes of religious engagement.

Ben-Gurion’s oratory, while rich in biblical and rabbinic allusions, largely channeled tradition through a historical-national lens. His evocations of Exodus, messianic redemption, or biblical warriors were harnessed to construct a secular Zionist teleology. In this regard, Ben-Gurion stands squarely in the mold of early socialist Zionism—a movement deeply rooted in Jewish texts but firmly committed to modern, secular nation-building. His speeches offer sacred motifs not to invoke divine will, but to signal historical legitimacy and collective memory.

This interpretive thread aligns with Ben-Gurion’s own complex identity: less religious, but profoundly Jewish. He could quote the Prophets or Talmud not as doctrinal authorities but as civilizational anchors—signposts for a sovereign Jewish polity, not a halakhic state.

By contrast, Netanyahu’s war rhetoric displays a marked shift toward theological intimacy. The spike in invocations of “With God’s help,” “God will avenge,” reorients the locus of meaning: national struggle is no longer just a continuation of Jewish history, but also an enactment of covenantal destiny.

Crucially, it is not that Netanyahu abandons Jewish history—he in fact draws heavily on it, often invoking figures like Moses or referencing the Exodus. However, what differentiates him from Ben-Gurion is the explicit addition of the divine component that reframes Jewish tradition through direct appeals to God. This divine partnership is not present in Ben-Gurion’s speeches, where historical continuity and secular nationalism form the foundation of rhetorical power.

In this sense, Netanyahu signal a theological reactivation of motifs that were formerly filtered through secular historicism. Jewish history was always there, anchoring both leaders’ rhetoric in a shared national memory. But only with Netanyahu does God return as an active agent in the public narrative, and this marks a subtle yet

meaningful shift in the Israeli state's relationship to Jewish tradition.

These findings complicate linear models of Israeli desecularization. Contrary to the hadata thesis that presumes a uniform religious intensification, we find a nuanced recalibration. Three of the four measured motifs—Holocaust, biblical heroes, and long-span history—decline in frequency under Netanyahu. Rather than a crescendo of religious content, the rhetoric reflects a redistribution of symbolic emphasis: God rises, while Jewish history and collective memory, paradoxically, recede.

This shift suggests not a simple rise of religiosity, but a change in rhetorical theology—from national destiny and cultural heritage to personal piety and divine alignment. It is less about more religion per se, and more about the kind of religious lens through which Jewish identity is framed in moments of crisis. In this new paradigm, God is invoked, —a discursive act that subtly alters the place of tradition in Israeli public consciousness.