

Netanyahu Allies Donated to Groups Pushing for Third Temple

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Haaretz investigation reveals deputy defense minister and a key Netanyahu supporter in the U.S. donated to groups campaigning to impose Israeli sovereignty over Temple Mount.

Israel's deputy defense minister and a key U.S. donor of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu have donated to efforts aimed at re-establishing Jewish sovereignty on the Temple Mount, a Haaretz investigation has revealed.

The flashpoint site has been at the heart of the violence in the region over the past few months, amid Palestinian claims that Israel is trying to change the status quo at the site, holy to Jews and Muslims.

Netanyahu insists that Israel is committed to the status quo and that claims to the contrary are part of a campaign of incitement. But a Haaretz investigation shows that Netanyahu's deputy defense minister, as well as one of his key donors in the United States have financially supported those who wish to impose Israeli sovereignty over the Temple Mount.

The probe reveals for the first time that Deputy Defense Minister Eli Ben-Dahan donated 50,000 shekels (\$12,000) to the [Temple Institute](#), an organization that promotes the construction of the Third Temple.

Ben-Dahan, from the right-wing Habayit Hayehudi party, made the donation together with his wife in 2010 when he was head of Israel's Rabbinical courts, according to reports filed by the institute to Israel's Registrar for Non-profit Organizations.

Ben-Dahan's office said in response to a request for comment that the donation had gone to support the publication of a new edition of the Gemara, part of the body of commentaries that make up the Talmud.

"The deputy minister contributed to the publication of a Gemara tractate with new and elucidated commentary, which adds pictures and illustrations to the elucidation of the Gemara," Ben-Dahan's office wrote in an email. It did not respond to questions on whether Ben-Dahan shares the institute's views.

Netanyahu's office did not respond to requests for comment.

Since capturing the Old City of Jerusalem in the 1967 Six-Day War, Israel has left responsibility for the Temple Mount compound, revered by Muslims as the Noble Sanctuary, to Jordan, through a Muslim religious trust known as the Waqf. Under the status quo, non-Muslims are allowed to visit, but not to pray at the site. Over the last years any

fears, real or imaginary, of changes to this arrangement have sparked violent Palestinian protests.

While mainstream Orthodox Judaism bans Jews from visiting the Mount and believes the rebuilding of the Temple destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE can only occur after the arrival of the Messiah, some groups do not share this view and are eager to re-establish a Jewish presence on the site, even if that risks igniting conflict.

Ben-Dahan's contribution is just a fraction of the flow of money uncovered by the Haaretz investigation into donations to these groups.

The harp and the High Priest

The Temple Institute has been operating in the Old City of Jerusalem for decades. Established in 1987 by Rabbi Yisrael Ariel, its mission is to bring the issue of rebuilding the Jewish Temple on the Mount to the forefront of Jewish public awareness and action.

The institute's activities include the construction of a Temple model and the manufacture of vessels used in ancient rites. It is also active in education—for 1,800 shekels (\$480) it will provide 100 children with wooden blocks with which to build a model of the Temple, complete with a separate women's section, the roof of the sanctuary and vessels used there.

Young children can also produce oil for a "special Hasmonian lamp," participate in creative workshops or attend a play called "Micah, the cute harp," during which they learn some catchy tunes about the Temple. "The institute regards it as being of prime importance that increasing numbers of Jews learn about and work towards establishing the Temple, based on the concept that this is the center of Jewish life, comprising a living link between the Jewish people and our heavenly father," says the institute's website.

In past years—on Tisha B'Av, when Jews commemorate the destruction of the Temple—the institute has launched a video campaign titled "The Children are Ready," promoting the construction of the Third Temple.

It has also participated in [efforts](#) to raise a red heifer, a cow whose sacrifice is [deemed necessary to rebuild the](#)

Temple.

“May we be blessed again with seeing a High Priest emerge unscathed from the Holy of Holies sanctuary, knowing that our sins have been expunged,” said Mordechai Persoff, educational director of the College for Temple Studies, which operates in schools and kindergartens under the auspices of the institute, in an interview he gave last year.

The official Israeli position is that it opposes any change in the status quo on the Temple Mount, yet it finances the Temple Institute and sends girls doing their national service to work there. The Ministry of Education has supported the college to the tune of 2.2 million shekels (\$600,000) over the last five years, according to [a recent article by Haaretz correspondent Or Kashti](#).

The United States, which also strongly opposes any change to the status quo at the site, is tacitly supporting the Temple Institute by granting tax-exempt status to U.S. groups that funnel donations to it. In 2013, the institute received donations from the United States for over 200,000 shekels from two American organizations—180,000 shekels (\$46,000) from the One Israel Fund and \$10,000 from the Texas-based Temple Institute.

A year earlier the institute reported it received 2.86 million shekels in donations, including 195,000 shekels (\$50,000) from the One Israel Fund and \$20,000 from an anonymous source. The fund, as well as the Temple Institute, both in Israel and the U.S., did not respond to requests for comment.

Queries to the Temple Institute in Jerusalem about making donations with U.S.-based money were directed to two American charitable organizations, both of which are recognized for tax purposes. Donors on the East Coast were directed to P.E.F. Israel Endowment Funds Inc., while others were directed to an organization called Biblical Faith Ministries.

Based in New York, P.E.F. was established in 1922 by founders who included Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis and Rabbi Stephen Wise. It is one of the most significant institutions sending money to Israel, having donated more than \$1 billion since its establishment, according to its [website](#).

“P.E.F. invites gifts, bequests and contributions for specific purposes and institutions,” its website says. “As specifically requested by contributors, P.E.F. grants have touched almost every facet of Israeli life.”

P.E.F. supports over 1,000 organizations in Israel, many of which operate across the Green Line. One of them is the Temple Institute.

In 2014, P.E.F. transferred \$68 million to Israel, though supporting documents do not include a breakdown according to recipient. However, during its investigation into U.S. funding of West Bank settlements, Haaretz analyzed the reports filed by the Israeli non-profit organizations that received donations from American groups. These documents

show that, for example, the Eretz Hatzvi yeshiva in the settlement of Peduel received 250,000 shekels (\$63,000) from P.E.F. in 2013. The Bnei David Pre-Military Yeshiva in the settlement of Eli received more than 400,000 shekels (\$100,000) between 2009 and 2013, while the Temple Institute received 204,000 shekels (\$52,000) in 2010.

P.E.F.'s president, Geoffrey Stern, wrote in response to a request for comment that the organization “is a tax exempt public charity under Code 501(c)(3) which provides grants to Israeli charities which comply both with U.S. tax law and Israeli tax law and are under Israeli jurisdiction.”

Biblical Faith Ministries, the other U.S. group that collects donations for the Temple Institute, is a Texas-based organization that says it promotes “Jewish education.” In forms filed with the U.S. Internal Revenue Service in 2014, it stated—without specifying the exact amount—that part of the \$337,000 it transferred to Israel went to the Temple Institute. It also funded the institute in previous years. According to the Israeli file of the Temple Institute, Biblical Faith Ministries—which did not return calls seeking comment—donated to it more than 140,000 shekels (\$36,000) in 2010. In 2009 the institute received a grant of \$175,000 from a different American based non-profit, the Lillian Jean Kaplan Foundation. In a phone call to the foundation, a person who identified himself as the head of the organization declined to provide further details about that donation.

“Clear Israeli sovereignty”

Rabbi Yehuda Glick, probably the most recognizable face among the Temple devotees, is also supported by American organizations recognized for tax purposes. Glick, who was seriously wounded in an assassination attempt last year, works through two Israeli non-profit groups—the Temple Mount and Temple Heritage Fund, established in 2013, and HaLiba (the Hebrew acronym for [Jewish Freedom on the Temple Mount](#)), which was set up last year. Its activity is entirely funded by an Israeli non-profit group called the Keren Nahlat Atzmaut Yisrael (Israel Independence Fund), which in turn gets all its donations from its sister organization in the United States, also called the Israel Independence Fund, which was established in New York in 2008. In 2011-2013, the Keren Nahlat Atzmaut Yisrael received almost 5 million shekels (\$1.3 million) from its American counterpart.

The U.S. incarnation of the Israel Independence Fund is run out of the offices of American businessman Kenneth Abramowitz, a close associate of Netanyahu and the chairman of the American Friends of Likud. Abramowitz sits on the fund’s board and is listed as its treasurer. In a phone call during a visit to Israel, Abramowitz explained that the fund chose and supports 15 different organizations. “People who contribute to the Israel Independence Fund decide which organizations they want to contribute to and we

just follow their orders,” he said. He himself, Abramowitz confirmed, is one of the contributors, and chose different organizations to support based on their needs at a particular time.

He said Israeli groups need his fund to act as a pipeline in the U.S. because “they are generally small and sometimes American donors won’t know they exist.” He would not elaborate on the identity of the group’s donors, saying only that donations range from \$18 to \$5,000.

Ahead of the 2015 elections in Israel, Abramowitz donated 40,000 shekels (\$10,000) to Netanyahu, as well as making a donation to the primaries campaign of Defense Minister Moshe Ya’alon. Before the 2013 elections, he donated money to Deputy Foreign Minister Tzipi Hotovely, who in October was rebuked by Netanyahu for [saying in an interview](#) that her “dream is to see the Israeli flag flying over the Temple Mount.”

Hotovely also received campaign donations from two other members of the Israel Independence Fund’s board—Douglas Altabef and Helen Freedman.

Abramowitz has donated in the past to Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan, Israel’s United Nations ambassador Danny Danon and Transportation Minister Israel Katz. He was on the list of “Bibi’s millionaires,” a list of potential donors to Netanyahu’s 2007 Likud primaries campaign that was exposed by the daily [Yedioth Ahronoth](#) in 2010.

Abramowitz also funds an annual media prize given by Israel’s Media Watch (known in Hebrew as the Association for the Public’s Right to Know,) of which Dafna Netanyahu, the prime minister’s sister-in-law, is a member. The money finances a prize bearing Abramowitz’s name, awarded annually to journalists. Abramowitz expressed his worldview in a speech he gave at the 2010 award ceremony, in which he stated that the only objective paper in the Israeli media panorama is *Yisrael Hayom*, the pro-Netanyahu free daily funded by U.S. billionaire Sheldon Adelson.

[HaLiba](#), which is funded by the [Israel Independence Fund](#), is working to change the status quo on the Mount through a massive media campaign and activities such as funding buses that will transport large numbers of Jews to the Temple compound in order to “change the rules of the game.”

According to the Israel Independence Fund’s website, HaLiba seeks no less than the “imposing of clear and unambiguous Israeli sovereignty over the mountain.”

In October, while Netanyahu was meeting U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry in Germany, in an attempt to calm the violence, HaLiba shared on its Facebook page: “The Temple Mount, source of our longing, the place we yearned for over two thousand years, is now in danger! Today, Prime Minister Netanyahu is meeting Secretary of State Kerry in order to reach ‘understandings’ regarding the Mount. These understandings will mean only one thing—a complete transfer of the Temple Mount into foreign hands, which will rapidly lead to a loss of the entire land.”

HaLiba’s financial reports were not yet available, so it is unclear how much support it has received from the [Israel Independence Fund](#). However, HaLiba is listed on its website as one of its projects.

Aharon Pulver, who heads the Israel Independence Fund in Israel, is also one of the founders of HaLiba. Speaking to Haaretz, he confirms that his group supports activities aimed at securing Israeli sovereignty over the Temple Mount and has funded HaLiba since its establishment, with about \$100,000. Pulver compares the ban on Jews praying on the Mount to the blocking of desegregation in U.S. schools in the sixties. “It’s definitely a human rights issue” he says.

“HaLiba speaks of basic rights in an open public space in that compound,” Pulver says. “We’re not talking, God forbid, of praying inside the mosque.” HaLiba collects donations from hundreds of donors, Jews and non-Jews, he adds.

Asked if the group promotes changes to the status quo, he says: “The status quo is very pliable and keeps changing. With the rising extremism in the Islamic world in recent years, we see a similar development on the Temple Mount. I saw with my own eyes the flags of Hezbollah and Daesh (ISIS) fluttering there. The Waqf custodians do nothing about it. The current status quo is a of intolerable extremist developments.”

Asked if it is not paradoxical that the U.S. administration opposes any changes to the status quo, yet money going to the Israel Independence Fund is recognized for tax deductions, he responded:

“The Americans don’t recognize Israel’s hold on East Jerusalem, and it’s true that the current administration opposes any change to the status quo, but there are many funds in the U.S. that raise money for causes the administration doesn’t believe in,” Pulver says. “As long as the money doesn’t go to political causes everything is fine.”

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