

# Netanyahu's Holy Alliance with Rightwing, Ultra-Orthodox

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*Until a few weeks ago, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's campaign tactic was to help the far-right Otzma Yehudit (Jewish Power) garner enough votes to enter the Knesset and thereby [ensure a 61-seat majority](#) for his right-wing, ultra-Orthodox bloc of parties. The party's racist agenda did not matter to Netanyahu as long as it helped him hold on to power. It was reported on Feb. 13 that Netanyahu's close associate Natan Eshel had even tried to persuade the ultra-Orthodox Yahadut HaTorah to instruct some of its followers, members of the smaller Hasidic courts, to [vote for Otzma Yehudit](#), as if the Hasidim were tradable commodities. Eshel also reportedly appealed to senior religious Zionist rabbis, asking them to express public support for Otzma Yehudit rather than Yamina, their home party.*

Nothing transpired from the outreach to Yahadut HaTorah, and polls commissioned by the Likud showed that in any case the small Otzma Yehudit will only be wasting right-wing votes if it runs in the March 2 elections, as it would still not have enough support to get into the Knesset. On Feb. 18, reports emerged that the Likud was exerting strong pressure on Rabbi Dov Lior, one of the most radical religious Zionist rabbis, to convince Otzma Yehudit Chair Itamar Ben-Gvir [to drop out of the race](#). Ben-Gvir, however, has stood his ground. Not only does he not intend to bow out, he is offering his voters a "worthwhile deal": Vote Otzma Yehudit, and I'll protect Netanyahu.

Billboards and other campaign ads make no mention of Otzma Yehudit's [fascist ideology](#), its hatred of Arabs, its xenophobia and or its loathing of the political left. Instead, the message is simple: Without Otzma Yehudit, a right-wing coalition government is impossible, or put another way, Netanyahu will not be able to continue as prime minister, so if you want him to remain in power, vote Otzma Yehudit. Two for the price of one. Viewed from another angle, Otzma Yehudit will unreservedly back the person who is now doing all he can to prevent its running for election to the Knesset. This is a strange relationship between friends. One side is trying to subvert the other, which, in turn, is offering love and support.

Ben-Gvir did not craft this strange formula. All the right-wing and ultra-Orthodox parties appear to be under the same spell as their leaders, blindly following Netanyahu, who appears to have convinced their voters that he is the be all and end all. Take for example Yamina, the alliance of right-wing parties led by Defense Minister Naftali Bennett. Netanyahu has relentlessly bashed Bennett and humiliated him at every turn (although in a moment of weakness he did [give Bennett the job overseeing the Defense Ministry](#) last fall). He has sent emissaries to religious Zionism's prominent rabbis to exhort them to withdraw their support for Bennett, but like some kind of indentured servant, Bennett is unable to escape Netanyahu's clutches.

Has anyone ever seen an election campaign anywhere in which the representative of a competing party campaigns for the head of another party? Look no further than Yamina's. In recent days, Yamina has begun [posting Bennett's photo alongside Netanyahu's](#) under the caption "Only a strong Yamina will ensure that sovereignty is imposed [on the settlements] and will prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state." What if a voter were to ask why he or she should vote for Yamina when they can vote for the original, Netanyahu's Likud? Only Bennett knows the answer to that question.

Yamina and Bennett do not have a copyright on this weirdness, of course. The ultra-Orthodox Shas adopted "[Vote Shas, Protect Netanyahu](#)" as its slogan. What happened to the social equality messages of the party founded by the late Rabbi [Ovadia Yosef](#) to fight discrimination against Jews of Sephardi origin? All that remains of that agenda is the struggle for one man, who is not even the party leader, Benjamin Netanyahu. The same thing occurred during the two election campaigns in 2019, with Shas billboards featuring photos of party leader Aryeh Deri alongside Netanyahu and the caption "Bibi [Netanyahu] needs a Strong Aryeh," playing on the Hebrew word for "lion."

Yahadut HaTorah, Shas' Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox rival, is also committed to Netanyahu. While it doesn't fly posters and banners bearing the prime minister's photo, the fact that Netanyahu took the liberty of offering to trade the party's voters to boost Otzma Yehudit proves the extent to which he has the party in his thrall. There is no magic involved, or divine intervention, in the pathetic attempts by the ultra-Orthodox, right-wing bloc to elevate Netanyahu to sainthood. The explanation for their devotion lies elsewhere.

Since Netanyahu was first elected in 1996, he has been willing to give the ultra-Orthodox parties whatever they want. He forged a political alliance with Rabbi Yosef early on. A secular Jew who does not observe the Sabbath and sometimes eats non-Kosher food, Netanyahu has given Shas what it wants more than anything. Money. Lots of money for its institutions.

In addition to funding, there is also the matter of right-wing ideology. Shas was never a right-wing party, and Rabbi Yosef was a pragmatist. After he died, Shas "converted" and adopted a right-wing ideology under Netanyahu's influence. As in the case of the right-wing parties representing West Bank settlers, the term "Greater Land of Israel" is no longer a foreign concept to Shas. This shift trickled down into the party ranks under Netanyahu's guiding hand and became underpinned by the leaning of its Mizrahi voters to the right and their opposition to a Palestinian state. As far as they are concerned, Netanyahu is the man who will realize the vision of the right and preserve Rabbi Yosef's "legacy." That's why Shas will protect Netanyahu to the end. Meanwhile, Netanyahu will keep the money flowing and dare not do anything to undermine the religious-Orthodox status quo.

Netanyahu also enjoys a strong alliance with the settlers. From his first day in power, he has done all he can to guarantee their allegiance. Their leaders and rabbis enjoy unfettered access to the Prime Minister's Office, and Netanyahu always endeavors to avoid angering them, sometimes to a ridiculous extent. For example, in 2012 the Supreme Court ordered the destruction of buildings erected illegally, on private Palestinian lands, in the Ulpana Hill neighborhood of the [Beit El settlement](#). Netanyahu came up with an amazing solution: dismantle the buildings block by block and reassemble them elsewhere, budgetary considerations be damned, as long as the settlers wouldn't have to endure the demolition of an illegally constructed house.

Now, after all those years of giving, Netanyahu is asking for a return on the (state's) money, and the right-wing and ultra-Orthodox parties are willing, motivated by calculated, short-term political considerations. After the elections, [Netanyahu will face a criminal trial](#), starting March 17, on charges of corruption, and will certainly be in an even more generous mood toward his allies to retain their support and form the next government. Anything to keep the give-all and take-all alliance intact.

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