

Report

## The Israeli Far Right's Man in Princeton

How did Im Tirtzu founder Ronen Shoval end up promoting Israel's judicial overhaul at one of the US's most prestigious universities?

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Protestors gather at Princeton's Center for Jewish Life to oppose Ronen Shoval's speaking engagement on March 27th.

Photo by Louisa Gheorghita courtesy of *The Daily Princetonian*

**ON MARCH 27TH**, several dozen protesters gathered in front of the Center for Jewish Life (CJL) at Princeton University and chanted, "Shame! Shame! Shame!" The object of their outrage was a right-wing Israeli activist named Ronen Shoval, who was giving a

talk at the CJL that day. In Israel, Shoval is best known as the founder and former leader of the ultra-nationalist political action group Im Tirtzu, an organization infamous for its belligerent [campaigns against](#) progressives and academics; since leaving Im Tirtzu, he has become [dean](#) of the Tikvah Fund, an American Jewish nonprofit that has helped finance the ongoing [rightward shift](#) in Israeli politics. Shoval wrapped up a yearlong appointment as a lecturer in politics at Princeton last month, and will hold the role of associate research scholar at the university's James Madison Program for American Ideals and Institutions—which is devoted to the study and promotion of conservative ideas—through the summer. At the CJL event in March, he was speaking in favor of Israel's proposed judicial overhaul—legislation that aims to [subordinate](#) the country's judiciary to its far-right legislature, and the impetus for [months of protests](#) in Israel.

The Princeton protest—which took place the same day as [other](#) US actions against the judicial overhaul and followed a night of [especially intense rallies](#) in Israel—drew not only undergraduates from Princeton's Alliance for Jewish Progressives, but also liberal Israeli faculty members. Yair Mintzker, an Israeli American history professor who helped organize the rally, addressed the crowd through a megaphone. "If I had to use one word to describe [Shoval] as a scholar, I would say, the man is a joke," he said. "What he is good at is provocations and expressing proto-fascist views." When Israelis in the Princeton community learned of Shoval's presence at the university, Mintzker told *Jewish Currents* in an email, their reaction "was one of puzzlement, embarrassment, and alarm." In addition to protesting the CJL event, Israeli faculty members published [two letters](#) in the school's student newspaper, critiquing Shoval's appointment and drawing attention to his political activism. In an email to *Jewish Currents*, Shoval called the protest and open letters against him an "attempted cancellation." "Reckless and

untrue accusations against me necessitated police protection following a talk I delivered at the Jewish Center on campus,” he wrote. “This experience underscores a broader concern: How has our society reached a point where even in Ivy League institutions, freedom of speech is under threat?”

The James Madison Program, which appointed Shoal, is known for bringing right-wing figures to campus—including some whose [political résumés](#) are longer than their scholarly ones. Since receiving his PhD in 2013, Shoal has not held a tenured academic position, in Israel or in the US, and his only published book to date is a [political manifesto](#) for the renewal of Zionism. (Notably, in public writing, he has [represented himself](#) as having graduated from the Sorbonne, the prestigious university in central Paris; in fact, he attended a different institution, Université Paris Ouest Nanterre. Asked about this claim, Shoal noted that Nanterre originated as part of the University of Paris system, which was collectively referred to as “the Sorbonne” until it was dissolved in response to the student uprisings of 1968.) Mintzker noted that Shoal also has a history of trying to curtail academic freedom in Israel: In 2010, Im Tirtzu tried to [shut down](#) the political science department at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev because of its [“anti-Zionist tilt.”](#) “Why is a man who sought to restrict the freedom of speech of other academics allowed to use Princeton’s name and resources to spread his heinous views?” Mintzker asked.

Im Tirtzu is known for a 2010 campaign to demonize the progressive New Israel Fund—in which it placed [billboards](#) across the country depicting NIF president Naomi Chazan with a [horn on her head](#)—and for a legal battle in which Im Tirtzu [sued](#) liberal critics for referring to the organization as “fascist” on Facebook. As part of the case, the Israeli historian Ze’ev Sternhell wrote in an [expert opinion](#) that Im Tirtzu “shows early and worrying signs of fascist potential,” and the court [ruled](#) against Im Tirtzu in 2013.

Israel's Supreme Court [dismissed the ruling](#) in 2015 because, it said, Im Tirtzu had no basis to sue the liberal activists in the first place. (The court also ordered Im Tirtzu to pay over 30,000 NIS to an animal rights group after attorneys for the liberal defendants argued that the group should be discouraged from filing similar suits in the future because they [aimed to stifle political speech](#).) Israeli liberals understand Shoval as part of a movement that has reshaped their country's politics. He brought "the violent, accusatory, populist rhetoric that the right in the US and Europe had been employing for a few decades to Israel," said Yonatan Levi, a research fellow at progressive Jerusalem-based think tank Molad. "While Israeli politics was always aggressive, before Shoval and his friends, public political speech did not center exclusively on pointing at traitors and completely delegitimizing your political opponents—which is exactly where we are today." Shoval's biography on the James Madison Program's website fails to mention his leadership of Im Tirtzu, instead listing his current employment as director of the Tikvah-affiliated Argaman Institute in Jerusalem, which describes itself as "an academy for the study of Jewish, Zionist, and conservative thought and policy." Asked why Shoval had been invited to Princeton, the James Madison Program, which is funded and managed independently from the university, did not respond to repeated requests for comment. In response to a query about why Shoval was also assigned to teach a first-year seminar in the politics department, the department chair wrote in an email to *Jewish Currents* that the appointment was made by the Dean of College's office. The Dean of College's office declined to comment.

To understand Shoval's route to Princeton, it helps to take a close look at the partnership between the James Madison Program and the Tikvah Fund—two institutions seeking to increase conservative influence at American universities. The former was founded in 2000, when [Princeton's appointment of bioethicist Peter Singer](#)

prompted right-wing donors to fund a conservative counterweight to what they perceived as the campus's liberal center of gravity. In the decades that followed, the Madison Program, which sponsors ideologically aligned scholars, forums, and speakers, has been [recognized](#) as an exemplar of the "beachhead theory"; the concept, which conservative philanthropists borrowed from military strategy, involves staking out a small area of hostile territory—in this case, the liberal university—and capturing it completely.

The Tikvah Fund, meanwhile, operates with a similar theory of change but a much broader scope. While many of the organization's projects in Israel have attempted to influence political discourse directly, its work in the US has focused on educational initiatives. In a 2010 [speech](#) at the conservative Philanthropy Roundtable's annual awards ceremony, Roger Hertog, then-chairman of the Tikvah Fund and a [supporter](#) of the Madison Program, worried that conservatives hadn't "invested enough time, energy, and treasure in the many spaces where young minds—and even more mature adults—are influenced." Shaul Magid, a professor of Jewish studies at Dartmouth College, called Tikvah's programming in the US part of an effort to "create an alternative study of Judaism, Zionism, and Israel to oppose what they felt was a growing left-wing, 'anti-Israel' inclination among many university professors and programs." Tikvah Fund executive director Eric Cohen wrote in an email to *Jewish Currents* that his organization has never funded the James Madison Program and "has no role whatsoever in funding Mr. Shoval's research position" there; he did not reply to detailed questions about Tikvah's broader efforts in academia and Israeli politics. But Tikvah and the Madison Program have worked in tandem to increase the presence of conservative ideas in education, collaborating this year on the [Lobel Teachers Colloquium](#), a two-week professional development seminar to help yeshiva and

Jewish day school teachers incorporate “Jewish classical education” into their curricula.

Shoval’s presence at an institution like Princeton gives him and his ideas “credibility and legitimacy that he might otherwise lack,” Levi said, adding that this form of reputation-laundering is all the more valuable because it is more or less inaccessible to a far-right figure like Shoval in Israel. Rami Hod, the executive director of Israel’s Berl Katznelson Center, a progressive ideas institute, agreed that in Israel, Tikvah has “stuck their hands in things that are much dirtier,” meaning that “their brand is completely connected to the judicial overhaul, which is unwelcome in liberal spaces like universities.” But Shoval’s post at Princeton allowed him to make the case for the overhaul in the rarified realm of the university’s campus, attaching its prestigious name to his controversial beliefs. Abigail Leibowitz, a Princeton undergraduate who was present at Shoval’s CJL [talk](#), said Shoval argued “that the current system of appointing judges has allowed the Israeli Supreme Court to be taken over by insular ‘elites’ who do not represent the Israeli public, and who cause the Supreme Court to overstep its power.” Leibowitz added that Shoval also compared the anti-overhaul protesters in Israel to the January 6th insurrectionists in the US, claiming that both were trying to obstruct democracy. Hearing such an argument at Princeton “jarred everyone in the audience,” Leibowitz said.

**SINCE ITS ESTABLISHMENT** in the late 1990s, the Tikvah Fund has endeavored to push nearly [every aspect](#) of Israeli political life to the right. Together with the Kohelet Policy Forum, a religious Zionist think tank that it [funds](#), Tikvah has [been credited with](#) helping to bring about some of Israel’s most significant recent policy shifts. This includes the passage of what is known as [the nation-state law](#)—which defines Israel as

the state of the Jewish people, rather than a state for all its citizens, and is [broadly understood](#) as a turning point in the country's open embrace of ethnonationalism—as well as US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's [declaration](#) that Israeli settlements do not violate international law. Most recently, the Kohelet Policy Forum [helped write and popularize](#) the country's controversial judicial overhaul plan, gaining [widespread notoriety](#) in the process. Even as they pursue a settler-driven, messianic Zionist agenda, Kohelet and other [Tikvah-funded initiatives](#) have seeded a recognizably American language of individual rights and government restraint in Israeli political life. “[American conservatism] provided religious Zionism with exactly what it needed: a theoretical toolbox that enabled it to operate in the public arena and speak to the heart of secular, right-wing circles. In contrast to messianic theology, conservatism's ideological platform anchored the legitimacy of the religious right with rational arguments,” conservative Israeli political philosopher Asaf Sagiv [told Haaretz](#) this year. (Kohelet did not respond to requests for comment.)

In addition to its more visible political work, Tikvah has long invested in conservative scholarship and educational programming in Israel. The organization's founder, Zalman Bernstein, was also a [major backer](#) of the Shalem Center, a Jerusalem think tank co-founded by right-wing political theorist [Yoram Hazony](#). Shalem, which became a college in 2013, has been an important site of the intellectual fusion of Zionism, free market economics, and, in Sagiv's words, “pious Judeo-Christian puritanism” in the Israeli public sphere.

Tikvah affiliates have seen room for a similar innovation in the US, highlighting the partnership between right-wing Christians and conservative Jews as an important political coalition. Meir Y. Soloveichik, a leading Modern Orthodox rabbi who received his PhD from Princeton's religion department—and who became known in

conservative circles for leading the 2012 [Republican National Convention](#) in prayer—has argued in [multiple Tikvah-backed venues](#) for an alliance between conservative Jews and Christians as a bulwark against rising secularism and emerging challenges to patriarchal family life. Speaking at Tikvah’s 2017 Jewish Leadership Conference at an event entitled “Jews, Christians, and the Conservative Alliance,” Soloveitchik noted that religious Jews and Christians shared a “traditional sexual morality,” and positioned American Orthodox Jewry as a leader in the contemporary struggle to voice “a conservative vision of the American idea.”

Tikvah has helped lay the groundwork for this ideological shift among American Jews through its educational programming, which includes partnerships at universities, as well as extra-curricular opportunities for middle and high school students. One of Tikvah’s largest ongoing collaborations in higher education is with Yeshiva University’s Torah and Western Thought Center, which is led by Soloveichik, and which, as its name and affiliation suggest, [seeks to](#) “create Modern Orthodox intellectual leaders who are well versed in both the Torah and western thought,” per its website. Tikvah’s humanities programming “incorporates a Jewish version of the Western canon model, sometimes called the ‘Great Books’ curriculum, which focuses mostly on works by white, male authors, and which is often used in neoconservative and even some neoliberal circles to deflect more critical assessments of literature and society from post-structuralism, postmodernism, gender studies, and critical race theory,” said Magid. “The political upshot is to maintain an apologetics of classical American democratic principles and, in the case of Tikvah, to place Jews as part and not distinct from that white American tradition.” Tikvah’s flagship summer program for [high school students](#), for example, features courses on “Zionism and Modern Israel” and “Jewish Thought and Ideas” alongside ones on “Western Civilization and

American Democracy.” The latter have titles like “Profiles in Classical Statesmanship” and “Freedom and Tradition: Alexis de Tocqueville On How To Live in America.” Writing in the Tikvah-affiliated magazine [Mosaic about his vision for such programs](#), Tikvah executive director Eric Cohen cited “mass civilizational confusion, both in the Western world in general and among the Jews themselves,” and referred to “fentanyl, TikTok, [and] pansexuality” as latter day “golden calves,” explaining that “the mission of Jewish classical education” is “to build a movement of civilizational renewal.”

The aspiration to seed programming on Jewishness and Western thought helped inspire Tikvah’s first partnership with Princeton, a collaboration with the religion department that began in 2007. Then the organization’s signature venture at an American university, it [included](#) funded fellowships, working groups, and a summer program for college and graduate students, all “devoted to bringing Jewish thought into conversation with the broader historical, philosophical, and theological traditions of the West and beyond.” The program ended when its funding ran out in 2014, but Tikvah renewed its institutional presence at Princeton when it [announced](#) that it would launch the [Lobel Center](#) this year, and would offer a two-week colloquium for educators interested in “classical Jewish education” as a joint project with the James Madison Program. The Madison Program, which has styled itself as a [staid defender](#) of the conservative intellectual tradition, has also provided a home to conservative academics and culture war figures like Stephen Wolfe, author of the door-stop tome *The Case for Christian Nationalism*, or [Solveig Gold](#), who leveraged the controversy around the firing of her husband and one-time teacher, former Princeton classics professor Joshua Katz, to become a prominent figure in conservative circles. The Lobel Colloquium appears to be informed by the conservative politics of both of its founding organizations: The “core principles” that undergird its definition of “Jewish classical

education” include “the belief that Jewish ideas lie at the heart of Western civilization and that Western history, literature, and culture are the heritage and responsibility of every Jew,” as well as “the belief that America and Israel are two exceptional nations, which every Jew should celebrate, preserve, and strengthen.”

Shoval’s appointment has prompted new scrutiny of the Madison Program and the ideas its affiliates have espoused. Rooya Rahin and Dylan Shapiro, recent Princeton graduates who wrote [an editorial](#) in the school’s student newspaper about the Madison Program’s ideological influence on campus, told *Jewish Currents* in an email that they were unaware of pushback against the program’s other appointees. When asked what made Shoval’s appointment different, they pointed to the professors who knew of Shoval’s political reputation in Israel and organized against him. Noting that incoming students are often unaware of the program’s politics, Rahin and Shapiro added, “As seniors who just graduated from Princeton, we hope that this moment will encourage students and faculty to continue to pay attention to the extremists that the James Madison Program brings to campus as speakers and fellows, rather than let this issue fade into the background.”

Some of that scrutiny may even extend to the Tikvah Fund’s efforts on campus. In his [letter](#) to *The Daily Princetonian*, Mintzker noted Tikvah’s role in the judicial overhaul effort, pointing out the organization’s relationship to Princeton affiliates and arguing that the university “should cut its ties.” Ultimately, he insisted, the issue was larger than Shoval himself. “It is incumbent upon anyone who enjoys funding from the Tikvah Fund to be informed about its involvement in the coup attempt in Israel,” he wrote, “and indeed to stop taking money from it.” **JC**

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*This article has been corrected to reflect that Shoval's appointment at the James Madison Program will continue through summer 2023. It has also been updated to include more information about a 2015 ruling by the Israeli Supreme Court.*



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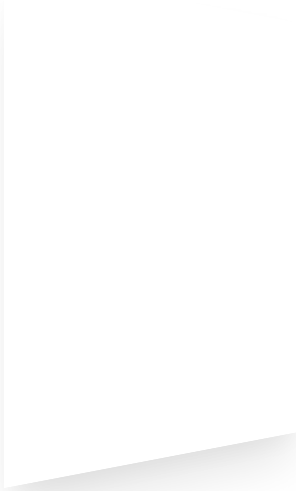
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