

ISRAEL'S WAR WITHIN

On the ruinous history of Religious Zionism

By Bernard Avishai

In August 1975, I stood outside the Knesset, in Jerusalem, witnessing a fevered demonstration against Henry Kissinger, then the American secretary of state. Thousands of young men in knitted kippahs chanted and danced in circles, their arms wrapped around one another, their voices echoing off the stone building. They were mainly West Bank settlers, I was informed, part of a fledgling movement called Gush Emunim—in effect, the Young Guard of the National Religious Party (NRP).

Kissinger had visited earlier that year, in winter, with the aim of advancing an interim agreement between Israel and Egypt, itself a marker in the step-by-step “peace process” he’d brokered in the wake of the horrific Yom Kippur War. What he’d proposed was an Israeli pullback from the Suez Canal in exchange for Ameri-

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can warning stations and various Egyptian steps toward normalization. But the Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin’s young government had rebuffed his proposals, insisting on an Egyptian commitment to “nonbelligerency.” This dismayed Kissinger and provoked him to ramp up diplomatic pressure during the spring and summer: he and President Gerald Ford would lead a “reassessment” of the U.S.–Israel relationship on all levels, including military aid. By this balmy night in August, everyone knew that Rabin and his key ministers were bound to capitulate.

With Kissinger’s blessing, Rabin and the Egyptian president Anwar Sadat had elided the fate of the Palestinians, though nobody doubted their centrality to any solution that was not “interim.” Nevertheless, settler zealots viewed Sinai withdrawal—any withdrawal—as a portent of what was coming for “Judea and Samaria,” their archaic name for the West Bank. The NRP remained a small, but important, part of Rabin’s wobbly Labor coalition, and Gush Emunim was by now assumed to be in alignment with the opposition: the populist, ultranationalist Likud founded by Menachem Begin. I had immigrated from Canada three years earlier, and had been contributing reports to the *New York Review of Books* since the Yom Kippur War. And I watched, with growing unease, as Gush Emunim came to represent not only the settlers in the West Bank, but the moral prestige of “Greater Israel.” This turn of events had been fostered as much by the euphoric atmosphere following Israel’s 1967 triumph in the Six-Day

War as by Palestinian terror, the grief of 1973, the inertia of occupation, and the long-incumbent Labor Party's alleged corruptions.

By 1975, even secular Labor politicians regarded Jerusalem as nonnegotiable, its conquest sacralized by paratrooper deaths, the Jewish right to rule—if not divine—then, more vaguely, historic. The stance preempted, one Foreign Ministry official told me, what might well have developed into an end to the occupation and peace with Jordan's King Hussein. A new series of Israeli pound notes had recently been introduced, and secular images—the atomic reactor at Nahal Sorek or the Knesset, for example—were replaced with renderings of the gates of the Old City of Jerusalem, as if these proved Jewish splendor since the time of King David, and had not been built by Suleiman the Magnificent in the sixteenth century.

As the chanting grew, I caught sight of Kissinger at the Knesset door. I could not make out the crowd's words at first, or at least I could not quite believe what I was hearing. The chant grew rhythmic, unmistakable: *Jew boy, Jew boy, Jew boy!* The epithet had reportedly been shouted at Kissinger by hecklers the year before, during the disengagement negotiations with Syria, in an apparent parroting of Richard Nixon, who was said to have denigrated him in this way.

Kissinger, joined by Rabin, winced and ducked back inside. The chant grew louder and slower: *Jew boy, Jew boy!* I remember the sinking feeling, a sense that insolence had been raised to the level of ideology. I suspected that this might be a turning point; that, as I put it in my *New York Review* report, the Israeli government's "policy of encouraging, or tolerating, various kinds of Jewish settlement in these conquered territories" had engendered "a spiritual élan heavily laden with vulgarized religious mysticism and messianic righteousness"—and that Gush Emunim had "grabbed the center of the stage."

I have often thought about the layers beneath that chant, and never with more disquiet than now. About Hamas's savagery on October 7 and the horrors endured by Gazan

civilians, there seems little to add, except to ask how relations between Israelis and Palestinians could have come to this, especially in view of the "peace process" that Kissinger set in motion. In time, Palestinians may wish to ask how Hamas, a jihadi national movement that has engaged in self-immolating attacks on Israelis for four decades, could ever have been perceived as a legitimate participant in democratic processes.

For Israel, the normalization of Gush Emunim, and the larger Religious Zionist settler movement that spawned it, has been no less ruinous. Their record of obstructing peace is longer than that of Hamas, while their reliance on state coercion has become second nature, and, much

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like Hamas, their program for remaking the state along orthodox lines is ambitious. Disquiet derives, correspondingly, from the ways that Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government has recently attacked the judiciary (as well as the academy, the entrepreneurial economy, and the press)—ways calculated, in part, to satisfy his Religious Zionist allies, such as his finance minister Bezalel Smotrich, the minister of national security Itamar Ben-Gvir, and ultra-Orthodox leaders associated with their theocratic vision.

That grim demonstration against Kissinger, in other words, seems to have been the portent of a two-front culture war—for the land, but also for the state apparatus—which has yet to be decided. And it rages on in Israel today, albeit alongside the calls for unity that have accompanied the Gaza invasion.

It is being waged to determine what kind of state Israel will be. The most authentic Jewish state, Gush Emunim believed, would never entertain the return of biblical land; moreover it

would privilege halacha (classical rabbinic law) and militarized tribalism over the norms of a secular Hebrew democracy. Their chant was a kind of battle cry for Greater Israel, seeming to suggest that Kissinger—a German-Jewish refugee who chose America and assimilation, and made the most of both—could not possibly fathom their toughness or messianic grandeur. Entertaining Jewish preeminence, the chant seemed, ironically, of a piece with an anti-Semitic slur.

Nor, on the surface, was Greater Israel consonant with the place I had encountered, first as a volunteer during the summer of 1967, and then as an immigrant in 1972. Standing on the other side of the culture war were descendants of the Zionist pioneers who had built the country and developed a secular Hebrew life that helped engender the coastal "Global Israel" of the Nineties. In contrast to them, Gush Emunim's Greater Israel seemed grotesque, alien to many secular Israelis—who were often more highly educated and likely to be in the professional class, and who were building a kind of Hebrew republic in Tel Aviv, Herzliya, Haifa, and the suburbs of Be'er Sheva. It was similarly a distortion of the liberal nuances I had taken for granted in the Jewish traditions of my native Montreal.

In early 2023, Global Israel finally pushed back, fighting to preserve the independence of the Supreme Court, rallying in the streets in the hundreds of thousands. Watching them demonstrate, journalists in the West have assumed that Netanyahu has been trying to disrupt the judicial order: to augment his power, say, or pander to his allies, or avoid prison. But this is a half-truth, and not the more interesting half. Netanyahu's government was attacking the judiciary not because he wanted fundamental changes, but because he supposed the Supreme Court did—that the status quo works for his Greater Israel ideology. And he wasn't wrong. Greater Israel coalitions have largely maintained power since Begin's election in 1977, and one has to ask why: What institutional life, what political ethos, had been so congenial to them such that—in spite of the legacy of pioneering secular elites—



annexation and orthodox Torah culture were generally valorized?

Indeed, Netanyahu and his allies have accused the high court of “judicial activism” in much the way Southern politicians did in the Sixties. They purported to invite a high-minded debate about the proper balance between branches of government, but in fact aimed to obstruct any disruptions of social norms that no liberal democratic republic should have tolerated in the first place. But without changes, the country will continue to incubate Smotriches and Ben-Gvir-like cultures in a laboratory; politicians who will not just forestall peace, but debase liberalism and Judaism both. And to understand what kind of changes are necessary, we must go back to the intellectual origins of the Zionist revolution itself.

Evangelical sympathizers and others often default to the idea that Israel, the self-described Jewish state, is a kind of congregation with an army—a devout people, of an ancient religion, militarizing against persecution. But pioneering Zionist settlement

in Palestine began as a secularist revolution against religious Diaspora parochialism as much as against pogroms. Condescending attitudes toward “religious” Jews extended over time to twentieth-century congregational variants in America—something I had often heard on collective farms and in the corridors of Hebrew University.

Chaim Weizmann, world Zionism’s first great leader after World War I, wrote that his cohorts “sought in Zionism self-expression and not merely rescue.” Jews who sought “merely” the latter—here Weizmann, a more “cultural” Zionist, was taking a swipe at Theodor Herzl’s political Zionism—had a more obvious refuge than Palestine. Of the nearly three million who left Eastern Europe by the early Twenties, some seventy thousand went to Palestine while more than two million went to America, where, so Zionists thought, they’d be stuck in a vanishing religious practice and, ultimately, in nostalgia and kitsch. Albert Einstein visited the Yishuv—the Jewish community in pre-1948 Palestine—just once, in 1923. He

wrote in his diary of his admiration for Tel Aviv, where “a modern Hebrew city with busy economic and intellectual life shoots up from the bare ground.” But he also visited the Western Wall and viewed Orthodox Jews “with their faces to the wall, bend[ing] their bodies to and fro in a swaying motion.” It was, he wrote, a “pitiful sight of people with a past but without a present.”

For Zionists, in other words, the challenge was to survive liberal modernity. The latter had to be embraced, but the real danger would be to embrace it in English, French, Russian, and German while Jewish poetics, texts, and music—beauty—disappeared through assimilation. To be resilient moderns, Jews needed, rather, a liberal nation rooted in the Hebrew language and a part of the ancient territory; a new Hebrew culture of poets like Hayim Nahman Bialik and, later, Nathan Alterman.

By the Thirties, European countries were increasingly roiled by class conflict and anti-Semitism, and after the Nazis came to power in Germany, more and

more Labor Zionists began, after all, to focus on refuge—on the pathos of assimilation, and on Palestine as a safe haven. Increasingly many religious Jews left Central and Eastern Europe for Palestine after 1924, when the United States decreed harsh new immigration limits. Still, even as Labor Zionist pioneers organized for self-defense, they did not abandon their original culturalist project—self-sufficient Hebrew-speaking farms, industries, and colleges—as prior to, and perhaps more urgent than, the task of statehood. Their socialism, its inwardness and self-sufficiency, was a way of incubating Hebrew. And that’s why it’s wrong to think of Israel merely as an answer to the Holocaust; horrifically, the Nazis murdered most of the liberalized European Jews who intended to bring a Zionist cultural revolution about.

As Labor Zionist leaders put in their 1942 Biltmore Resolution, the goal was “a Jewish Commonwealth integrated in the structure of the new democratic world.” The state’s Declaration of Independence six years later promised that Israel would “ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex” and “guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture.” Accordingly, after the United Nations required, in 1947, that the new state adopt a constitution, several proposals were drafted—the most prominent of which would have overturned rabbinic privileges inherited from the British Mandate.

Yet—and here the tragedy of Zionism begins—instead of adopting a liberal constitution, David Ben-Gurion, Israel’s first prime minister, chose to make common cause with the puny United Religious Front (largely, the precursor of the NRP) and set down the rules of government in a smattering of Basic Laws, generally eliding the separation of religion and state. The 1950 Law of Return conferred a privileged status on anyone who could prove having a Jewish grandparent, and, increasingly, the definition of Jew required some rabbinical endorsement. (Curiously, Ben-Gurion was typical of a secular Zionist: he flouted

dietary law, worked on Yom Kippur, and was interested in Buddhism.) And his reasons for this approach to government seemed compelling at the time. The Cold War was one: passing a constitution would have entailed either a coalition with the socialist left, including the Stalinists, or with the chauvinist right, including former Irgun terrorists. Siding with Religious Zionists gave Ben-Gurion a freer hand to design economic, military, and diplomatic policy. And he had other reasons. For instance, a bill of rights would have put Arabs on equal legal footing with Jews in a Jewish state that was still pursuing “ingathering of the exiles”—including, mainly, Mizrahi immigrants from the Middle East and North Africa, many of them political refugees. In the face of an

LABOR ZIONISTS TENDED TO TOLERATE RELIGIOUS ZIONIST ORTHODOXY RATHER THAN CONFRONT IT

Arab siege, Ben-Gurion thought to bind these new immigrants to their strange home with biblical archaeology and liturgical poetics. Besides, American Jews and their investment capital had to be mobilized, and Ben-Gurion would have to appeal to their religious sensibilities. Many had developed a new fascination with the ancient Land of Israel. But very few spoke modern Hebrew, and their identification with the new Jewish nation was almost entirely vicarious.

Still, the lack of a constitution meant institutional inertia. Mainstream Zionists had contrived a kind of provisional scaffolding that privileged Jewish settlement and immigration to bring a Hebrew democracy into existence: a land policy that prohibited the leasing of land to non-Jews, educational policies that coddled national-religious and ultra-Orthodox schools, and an immigration law that assembled “exiles”—defined as individuals with Jewish blood or religious origins. But even after the state was erected, the Zionist scaffolding re-

mained. This strange hybrid, eventually formalized in law as a “Jewish and democratic” state, remained a vague and syncretic ideal, engendering along with democratic norms both orthodox rabbinic dogmatism and an infectious nationalist populism that Labor Zionism—having mythologized its own pre-state settlements and militant improvisations—had little immunity to. Indeed, Labor Zionists tended to tolerate Religious Zionist orthodoxy rather than confront it. Many assumed that religious life would simply disappear within the precincts of modernity.

I had been something of a beneficiary of this political infrastructure myself, immigrating in 1972 under the Law of Return, and gaining material benefits from the now proto-governmental Jewish Agency. Yet I overlooked this inequity the way I imagined a survivor of Nazi death camps might have—as if I were not actually a middle-class Jew born a couple of miles from Leonard Cohen’s home. I took for granted that the state apparatus supported residual Zionist institutions that discriminated in favor of ethnic Jews at the expense of Arabs and theocratic orthodoxy at the expense of secular liberals. I did not grasp—not yet—that Israel’s messianists, while not the originators of this world, were going to be its beneficiaries and custodians.

Besides, the Israel I had discovered in the weeks after the Yom Kippur War was, well, free. I was taken in by a triumphal spirit; we cheered spontaneously in the streets of Tel Aviv at the sight of a captured Egyptian truck. There were the songs of greater Jerusalem, jingoistic, even irredentist claims on the Sinai Desert (“we received the Torah there!”), nervous jokes with one’s relatives about Arab military incapacity (“How many gears on an Egyptian tank? Four: one forward, three reverse”). A just war had brought peace, we thought, or if not peace, then safety through intimidation.

Yet the Israelis I met seemed enlightened enough, confirming tangled images left over from Montreal’s Hebrew day schools and summer camps:

the khaki shorts, the tans, the confident, reticent smiles, the uniforms, tractors, bonfires, the exotic songs of the desert. Jewish life seemed to have culminated in something as fragrant as a pear orchard. I volunteered for farm labor, and the *moshavnik* I worked for seemed to have achieved a Tolstoyan happiness. My host had never heard of Sam Bronfman, Montreal's liquor magnate and "Zionist" philanthropist, but *had* heard of Paul Robeson. He had never been to synagogue: nor had almost anyone I met in the Jezreel Valley, or Tel Aviv, for that matter. At every grill along the road, there was pork along with beef, chicken, and lamb: defying rabbinic law seemed another sign of such Israelis' wondrous temerity. The army mess, I was assured, did not serve pork.

Most revealing, in a way, was that my *moshavnik* referred to the Torah not as holy writ but as formative literature infusing colloquial Hebrew the way Shakespeare infused English. He told me (in retrospect, naively) that Moshe Dayan was "head and shoulders" above his contemporaries. I remembered the phrase from Jewish day school; it had been used to describe the future King Saul, in 1 Samuel (which, just as revealingly, my host had never read). The Hebrew I was taught was accented in the Mizrahi-Israeli pronunciation, not the Ashkenazi accent of the Eastern European rabbis who, we Zionistically blushed, carried the stench of parochial helplessness. It was rather Arab and North African Jewish junk dealers who drove horses and carts, yelling, quaintly, in a nasal, Ashkenazi Yiddish, "*alte zachen*," "old stuff," which is just what Yiddish and *kashruth* seemed to be.

Labor Zionism's descendants could be tin-eared when it came to personal crises, which were to be folded into the revolutionary emergency. The modern Hebrew word for "self-interest," even "individualism," was *enochiyut*, which actually meant "egoism" or "self-absorption." "Self-realization," in contrast, *hagshama atzmit*, could be used to mean farm labor or military duty. And government ministers played favorites, subsidizing farming collectives and labor organizations, proletarian

newspapers and health funds. In spite of this, or because of it, most of the Israelis I knew were social democratic, if not quite liberal democratic, versed in translations of Western classics and keen on technological innovation. The idea of coercing anyone to think one thing or another, worship this way or that, didn't seem possible. Elections, like the press, the academy, the judiciary, and market transactions, were that of an open society.

Nor did it seem possible to imagine that a Jewish state could be otherwise. I had always assumed a kind of liberal decency to be preternaturally Jewish—that halachic life refrained from efforts to straighten the crooked timber. I certainly never questioned whether, to valorize liberalism, I might have to repudiate halacha. On the contrary, as an undergraduate at McGill University, and a teenager in Quebec during the Quiet Revolution, I supposed that liberalism was a moral life that congregational Judaism had curiously prepared us for.

The Zionist icon Ahad Ha'am had written in 1897 that contact with "modern culture overturns the defenses of Judaism from within." I never quite knew what that meant, but I took for granted that liberalism catalyzed something latent in traditional Jews, a perfected version of what we already were. Almost every older Jew I knew in Montreal had immigrated from Polish or Ukrainian or Baltic territories of the former Pale of Settlement: people whose parents and grandparents willingly or by coercion wound up in the West with one foot in halachic practice and one in the liberal world.

The ineffable, fugitive Jewish God seemed to me much like the liberal's conception of ineffable, fugitive truth: faith should not entail miracles, sublime visions, perfect persons, or revealed texts; faith was a stark belief in the significance of things. Jews embraced material equality, I thought, which would be advanced by classical liberalism. "Where there is no flour, there is no Torah," one read in *Ethics of the Fathers*. And I picked up other such reassuring notions at McGill, the way a magnet

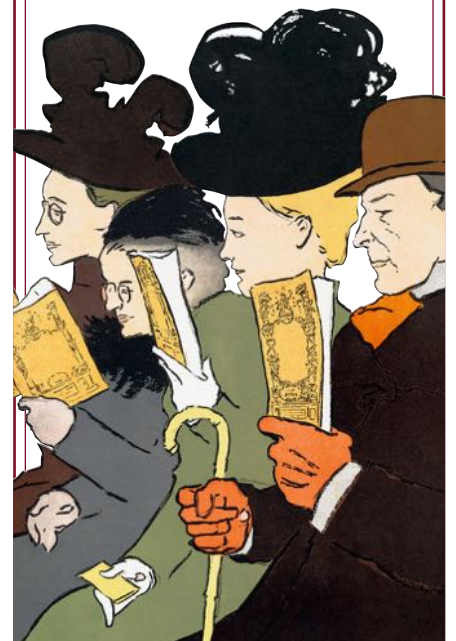
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picks up iron filings. The Talmud, which I read haphazardly, often seemed to me tedious in its antiquarian parochialism, but nevertheless contentious in an admirable way, with its idea that the right to interpret texts was more sacred than the text itself. The “sages”—it was convenient for “modern Jews” to lump them together this way—tried to clarify what was ethical and what was ritual, what was intentional and what was accidental, what was trivial and what was consequential. Yet there was to be “one law” for Jews and for the “stranger” who dwelled among us. Was this not a plea for universal human rights?

Perhaps most important, given the eventual claims of Gush Emunim, there was no place on earth one could be closer to God than any other, even, the medieval sage Maimonides wrote, if one could ascend to “the highest part of the ninth heavenly sphere.” One must rather ritualize what needed to be remembered about coming to the ancient land and then losing it. The key was to keep the peace and celebrate the humility that yields compromise—the personality, the *comedy*, that attends progress. “*Der Mensch tracht, un Gott lacht*,” or “Man plans, and God laughs,” was my father’s favorite Yiddish expression. It was somehow un-Jewish to fetishize any clod of earth, or any mere thing, for that matter. (My *moshavnik* host, accordingly, rarely visited Jerusalem; he called the Jezreel Valley, Labor Zionism’s heartland, his “holy of holies.”)

But I could carry this equivalence only so far. To me, liberal principles were explicit, abstract, vivid, while Jewish values were implicit, enmeshed in practice, and obscured by legend. (Next to Kant’s arguments for dignity in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, the biblical creation myth about people being made in God’s image looked to me a very rough draft indeed.) Immigrant Jews could be superstitious: your *bobe* pulled your ear if you sneezed while speaking of the dead; even at McGill, when we spoke of the future we added “*im yirtzeh hashem*,” or “God willing,”

as a hedge against hubris. Still, our Judaism—if that’s the word for it—affirmed idiosyncrasy, worldliness, dignity, science, exegesis, law, property, gradualism, poetic license, peace, freedom, memory, and humor. We could not shake the feeling that Jewishness had given us something of a head start. Leonard Cohen’s words of emancipation were, in this sense, familiar: “It begins with your family, but soon it comes around to your soul.”

By the time of that Gush Emunim demonstration in 1975, however, ambient pressures had undermined Labor Zionism’s claim that it was shaping what Israel would become. Yes, Labor leaders

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had presided over a disastrous war and seemed unworthy of public trust. But things went deeper than that: Israel was changing because of what had stayed the same. It still lacked a single, integrated, secular school system. It *did* have a single, integrated defense force, but the ultra-Orthodox were exempt from service. No state-employed rabbi would marry a Jew to a non-Jew. Land administered by the Israel Land Authority privileged Jewish settlement. Leaders of the Jewish Agency implied that the state represented world Jewry, not its citizens. To name a few.

Meanwhile, both settlements and legal anachronisms seemed to have been made permanent by the prime minister Golda Meir’s reliable sanctimony. She permitted a pocket of fanatic settlers in Hebron, later claiming to see a weirdly anti-Semitic impulse in their critics. (“Was it logical,” Meir would write in her autobiography, “for the world (including our own superpious doves) to demand of a Jewish government that it pass legislation expressly forbidding Jews to

settle anywhere on earth?”) Her government took equally dangerous positions on Israel’s conception of Jewish nationality: In 1970, the Supreme Court decided, in the landmark Shalit case, that the children of a Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother could be registered as “Jewish” in the population registry, thereby establishing in law the secular Hebrew nationality as a definition of “Jew.” Meir, threatened by the NRP, passed new legislation to counteract the decision. She told the Knesset that this would let the Diaspora know that Israel had not established a license to assimilation.

A kind of Jewish atavism seemed to be insurgent. Israel was becoming more Jewish in the ghettoized sense, but less Israeli—fertile ground for Gush Emunim’s conception of the state. “The State of Israel is divine,” asserted Tzvi Yehuda Kook, Gush Emunim’s foremost spiritual mentor.

Not only can/must there be no retreat from [a single] kilometer of the Land of Israel, God forbid, but on the contrary, we shall conquer and liberate more and more, as much in the spiritual [as in the physical] sense.

For Gush Emunim, Rabin, too, qualified as a “Jew boy.” Just before taking office in 1974, Rabin was reported to have said that he would be prepared for Israelis “to get a visa to visit Kfar Etzion,” the large settlement just outside Hebron on the West Bank. He might as well have desecrated a Torah. Ultimately, Rabin, caught up in a corruption scandal, was out of power by 1977, and regained the premiership only in 1992. Yigal Amir, an acolyte of Religious Zionism, assassinated Rabin in 1995, two years after he signed the Oslo Accords.

Gush Emunim is no more: its last major figure, Rabbi Haim Druckman, died in December 2022, survived by ten children and more than one hundred grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Given his own scandals, divisiveness, and strategic blunders leading up to October 7, Netanyahu himself may already have been forced out of of-

fice by the time this article appears. But the influence of Likud's historic alliance with Religious Zionism has been grave, and will outlast generational personalities. Since the beginning of the occupation in 1967, Religious Zionists have showcased their settlements as microcosms of what the entire country should become. Their message has only spread, to millions of young people in state-supported schools, the Bnei Akiva youth movement, and army preparation programs. (About 17 percent of Israeli students attend national-religious schools at the kindergarten level, while 24.3 percent attend ultra-Orthodox schools.)

And Gush Emunim's numinous views have morphed into something arguably darker than mere theocracy—views comprehensively documented by Yair Nehorai, a civil-rights attorney, in his 2022 book *The Third Revolution* (available only in Hebrew). Nehorai, whose father was a disciple of Tzvi Yehuda Kook, left the fold after completing his army service. Reading the lectures and sermons of Religious Zionist rabbis, which Nehorai compiled over the past decade, one grasps not only the backshadowing of Rabin's murder but also the larger design.

"We are a holy people, and we came to the land to instill the holy spirit, for the holy temple, to fulfill the commandments, so that the spirit of prophesy will return," Rabbi Eliezer Kashtiel, the head of a post-army yeshiva program preached in 2015. Likewise, Rabbi Eli Sadan, who set up the Bnei David army preparatory academy, preached in 2017 about the cowardice of the "spies" in the Book of Numbers who failed to urge seizure of the Land: "This is the hour when the people return to their land, and salvation progresses," he said. "Our mission"—that of Religious Zionism—"is to say: The Torah is our constitution." In the hermetic world Nehorai reveals, there are ritual commandments and sacred texts—and leaders who believe themselves morally secure by performing the former and ethically wise by study-

** The Bnei David academy and Rabbi Eli Sadan have sued Nehorai for defamation. They declined the opportunity to comment.*

ing the latter. A writer friend once told me that he felt he knew Emma Bovary more intimately than he had any lover; for settler communities—and supporting yeshivas around Jerusalem—King David is a more vivid leader than any Israeli prime minister. And there is comfort to be found within the boundaries of that Torah: Shabbat calm, congregational harmonies, family gatherings to celebrate seasonal festivals. There is also severe sexual modesty, repression, homophobia, and a belief in halachic routines that borders on hermeticism.

Indeed, the authorities that Religious Zionist rabbis quote from are almost exclusively Talmudic sages, whose comments are brief and cryptic enough to serve any political point. "Yes, we are racists," Kashtiel preached in 2015, justifying the occupation as a form of magnanimity. "Peoples have genetic deficiencies; and it is incumbent on us to consider how to help them." As for "secular nationalism," he added, this is "very dangerous." The following year, Rabbi Yigal Levinstein addressed himself to dangers of the liberal state:

Why does it seem that a culture war has broken out? That's because somebody decided to turn democracy into the culture of democracy—turn the character of the state into a state with liberal characteristics, so that the Jewish element doesn't have priority in the public realm.... There is a state and so, presumably, everyone should believe what he wants in his own synagogue. This is why Religious Zionism is the greatest enemy of the liberal state.

Nehorai fears the violence that lurks here. "Failing to keep Torah and commandments means the absence of tradition, national treason," Rabbi Yosef Kalner preached to his students in 2014. "You give a helping hand to the distortion of the national identity of the nation from which you came, and, in every nation, this is a wicked act." How might a nation protect itself from such treachery? Where would humanity be without the "life force" of the people of Israel? "In existential



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questions, every punishment is legitimate, up to a bullet in the head.” Nehorai told me that Yigal Amir answered his interrogators in the manner of a messenger:

He would not have killed Rabin without the justification of halachic rulings by rabbis he knew but would not identify. This was much like the fatwa issued by Iran’s ayatollah on Salman Rushdie. Except that Amir succeeded.

Given what Jews endured in the twentieth century, it would be tactless to call these Religious Zionist disciples fascists. Let’s just say they celebrate a nation that is enjoying divine election and frustrated glory, surviving through permanent, agonal war; a nation united by blood and faith, covering up irredentism with a rhetoric of covenanted motherland, educating by indoctrination, devoted to a code of behavior defined by hierarchy, and spreading cynicism about democratic norms, including the very idea of dispassionate truth.

Perhaps the hope of a Hebrew democratic republic was misguided from the start. The historian of messianism Gershom Scholem had been apprehensive about a nation reviving the Hebrew language. “One believes that language has been secularized, that its apocalyptic thorn has been pulled out,” Scholem wrote to Franz Rosenzweig in 1926; but if Zionists “resuscitate the language of the ancient books so that it can reveal itself anew to them, must then not the religious violence of this language break out against those who speak it?” For some Religious Zionists, the socialist colonies always seemed unconscious instruments of messianic redemption.

Yet Labor Zionism had not merely been pricked by Hebrew’s “apocalyptic thorn.” Its real achievement was in laying the foundations of a democratic republic, with universities, startups, theaters, and cafés; in its scientific research, some of the most robust among OECD member countries. Global Israel shoulders most of the burden of establishing the culture and defending it.

So the movement has been correct to prioritize augmenting the powers of the Supreme Court. Since the 1992 Basic Law of Human Dignity and Liberty, which the court has interpreted to be a proto-bill of rights, justices have cautiously targeted the state’s inherited deficiencies. The court has stipulated that at least some lands originally off-limits to Israeli Arabs should be made accessible; that ultra-Orthodox men should be subject to the draft; that West Bank settlers should not be permitted to encroach on privately held land. More reform seemed in the offing. Leaders of the protest movement have called persistently for the creation of a liberal democratic constitution, modeled upon Israel’s Declaration of Independence.

Yet Greater Israel retains a considerable advantage. The status quo is theirs. The occupation and “Zionist” institutions—like the absence of a constitution—are reciprocals of one another. To keep the occupation going, all advocates of Greater Israel have to do is say no to any peace process. Amiram Levin, the former head of the Northern Command of the Israel Defense Forces, has warned of the “apartheid” nature of the occupation that the settlers have enjoyed in the West Bank, where violence has only been increasing. Between October 7 and November 23, more than two hundred West Bank Palestinians were killed—and more than two thousand injured by Israeli forces and settlers.

Moreover, to live in the legal structures that incubate theocratic ideas, all their leaders have to do is continue to obstruct change. This is just what their attack on the judiciary was meant to accomplish. The Law of Return is still the reigning immigration law; civil marriage is still impossible; lands administered by the Israel Land Authority still privilege Jewish settlement (Arab citizens of Israel comprise roughly 21 percent of the country’s population, but just 2.5 percent of state land is under the jurisdiction of local Arab governments). In the words of the *Haaretz* writer Uri Mis-

gav, pietistic Zionists have “a double fantasy,” of

full Jewish rule over the entire area from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River, in concert with the erasure of Arab existence and the emergence of a halakhic state from the ashes of today’s liberal-democratic Israel.

Obstruction of this kind is not simply an Israeli tragedy. Palestinian peace advocates, too, have a culture war to win. (In his chilling film *Huda’s Salon*, Hany Abu-Assad’s protagonist declares that “It’s easier to occupy a society that’s already repressing itself.”) Even before October 7, both peoples have been foiled by movements devoted to unhinging peacemaking, Hamas with suicide bombings and rockets, extremist Religious Zionists with assassination, intimidation, and conquest. Both sides have, over generations, seen the emergence of armed factions purportedly doing God’s will by ridding the country of the other people. Worse, on both sides it has been hard for moderates to entertain the use of force against their own zealous factions. This is how the fatal tribalism of the Bosnian war becomes contagious.

Ultimately, moderates on the Israeli side will have the more consequential decision to make. Since October 7, Israeli media has been broadcasting military experts who say Hamas’s attack only proves that Israel cannot take chances with the West Bank. Other commentators, in a different vein, speak of Netanyahu’s assault on the judiciary as “finished,” as if, consequently, Israeli democracy has been saved. Whoever replaces Netanyahu—say, Benny Gantz, or another “centrist”—may be tempted to opt for caution and recoil from making fundamental change. This would be dangerously misguided. To defeat Netanyahu but refrain from reforming the laws and institutions that incubated his coalition is to invite calamity. And it is a calamity, sadly, for the Judaism of my youth, leaving fair-minded people questioning whether Religious Zionists have debased halacha—or merely exposed it. ■