

*Religious Zionism
Post Disengagement:
Future Directions*

EDITED BY
Chaim I. Waxman

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The Demise of Self- Negating Religious Zionism

Moshe Koppel

Walk into many *yeshivot hesder* today and you will find young men from religious Zionist homes with *peyot* (sidelocks) and dangling *tzitzit* (fringes) with *tekhelet* (azure dye), often combined with unruly hair and tee-shirts. Talk to them about their political experiences and you will likely hear tales of being beaten by police and soldiers in Amona. Ask them about their short-term plans and they'll tell you about the elite army units they hope to join. Join them at a wedding and you'll see them dancing with a sort of uninhibited abandon that might make you slightly uncomfortable. Engage them in Jewish philosophy and you'll be as likely to hear an insight from the classics of Hasidut as from the classics of religious Zionist thought. Hang with them on a Friday afternoon and they'll take you for a

pre-Shabbat dip in a natural spring they uncovered in the hills of Judea and Samaria.

What are we to make of these kids? Some observers fear they are becoming haredi-ized. Some think they have become over-politicized. Others think they value experiential thrills over dedicated learning. All these analyses miss the point completely. In fact, these young men – and their female counterparts¹ – represent the end of the self-negating phase of religious Zionism.

The rest of this essay consists of my own admittedly subjective narrative of events leading up to this phenomenon and some thoughts on its significance.

*

When the prospect of the return to Zion began to gain momentum in Europe in the nineteenth century, it aroused considerable resistance. This resistance to the promise of Zionism was often attributed to a conservative reading of the “three oaths” (Ketubot 111a), but in fact it was rooted in substantive concerns. After all, Jewish tradition survived and flourished under difficult circumstances by being resistant to change. It was well adapted to the circumstances of *Galut* (Exile) and threatened by an unfamiliar set of circumstances.

First, in galuti (Diasporic) Judaism, the life of the spirit was paramount. Diaspora life offered Jews the opportunity to develop a self-definition divorced from territory and political sovereignty. Jews redefined power in terms of cultural autonomy, the power to live their lives according to their own traditions and to pass on their cultural and intellectual legacy to their children. The power to move armies was not among their aspirations. Working the land or soldiering were regarded as unfortunate burdens and not acts of personal redemption. The return to Zion required respect for a definition of power in which economic and military self-reliance would be paramount.

Second, the prevailing galuti version of Judaism was wary of any political authority, if not downright subversive. This was both a matter of principle – *avadai heim ve-lo avadim le-avadim* (“they are *My slaves and not slaves of slaves*”) – and a matter of bitter political

experience. The vision of return to self-rule in *Eretz Israel* was thus typically regarded not as the basis for a political program but rather as a distant beacon, its unrealized potential serving as an endless source of sustaining hope.

Third, Halakhah had adapted itself to a lack of political, economic, and judicial autonomy. It would function best at the level of individuals or communities not at the level of the state – and certainly not at the level of a modern state conceived in secular terms. Hence, the restoration of Jewish self-rule, especially in *Eretz Israel*, would prematurely create challenges for which religious Jews might be unprepared.

For these and other reasons, many *rabanim* (rabbis) in Europe rejected Zionism as being inherently incompatible with tradition. In some sense, this blanket rejection offered an elegant means of avoiding difficult challenges. Such rejection was ultimately self-validating. For, once the Zionist project was left to their secular opponents, religious anti-Zionists could plausibly relate to a secular Zionist government with the same subversive contempt as they would to any other government.

*

But for the typical tailor or shoemaker in Eastern Europe, the problems with Zionism were related primarily to social or economic uncertainty rather than to ideology. On the level of principle, he did not need to be persuaded that it was better to be part of a self-ruling Jewish majority in *Eretz Israel* than to be part of a persecuted minority in Poland. Such a Jew could imagine in his mind's eye what the alternative to his own existence might look like: Jews would be able to identify fully with their surroundings instead of feeling alienated and threatened. As a community, they would be economically self-sufficient rather than feeding off the margins of others' economy. The public square, the flow of time, the modes of dress and self-presentation would reflect their own values. Government institutions would protect Jewish freedom instead of threatening it. The legal system would reflect Jewish values. Jews would identify with their government. The fact that all this would take place in

Eretz Israel would add a sense of permanence, of return to early glories, and of opportunity to live a fuller life of Torah. In short, a Jew could dream of a life in which Jews could live their own culture organically, confidently and unselfconsciously.

For a tailor or a shoemaker, or anybody with healthy instincts and a bit of common sense, the ideological objections could easily be countered. The disdain for concrete forms of power and political establishments were a response to centuries of powerlessness. As circumstances changed, Jews would adjust accordingly. If Halakhah had not evolved public law, it would begin to do so as the need arose. In short, the potential rewards of self-rule were great enough to justify the challenges. Jews would muddle through.

*

Unfortunately, it was not tailors and shoemakers who ultimately determined the ways in which Zionism and religion would be reconciled. Rather it was theologians and polemicists. And, as is often the case, the polemical approach to proving compatibility of Judaism and Zionism ended up going well beyond what was actually called for. Rather than simply discounting over-heated ideology, polemicists countered ideology with more ideology. Not only were Zionism and Judaism compatible, it was argued, they were one and the same.²

The return to Eretz Israel shifted from a distant goal to a permitted act to a desirable act to an imperative and ultimately to an immediate overarching imperative more important than any other *mitzvah*. In fact, by this account, the faraway redemptive process of which Jews had dreamt was already under way and that process was an irreversible one.

The three key points of contention between religion and Zionism were turned on their heads.

First, the new definition of national power was embraced. The necessary tools of state-building – agriculture, military, industry – were not simply necessary burdens but sacred endeavors worthy of the kind of veneration earlier reserved for matters of the spirit. Army uniforms were the new priestly garments.

Second, political subversiveness was replaced by its polar opposite, *mamlakhtiut*: the doctrine that whatever apparent flaws the products of this redemptive process – the state and its institutions – might suffer from, they and their proximate agents should be regarded as endowed with a divine imprimatur.

Third, the state was designated as the appropriate authority for deciding and regulating religious matters. The state would appoint *rabanim*, enforce religious legislation, and fund religious services. Voluntary religious community organizations would be upgraded to state institutions. Secular officials, by virtue of being agents of the state and hence the bearers of profound religious and nationalist longings of which they might be unaware, could be trusted to manage religious affairs.

Thus was created an entirely new creature. Where once there had been religious Zionists – people committed to religion and to Zionism – there was now a highly ideologized and institutionalized, hyphenated concept known as religious Zionism.³ This religious Zionist ideology is the polar opposite of the instinctive reconciliation of religion and Zionism of the tailors and shoemakers. In fact, rather than helping Jews to live their own culture organically, confidently, and unselfconsciously, religious Zionist ideology has ensured that every political act is burdened by religious ideology and every religious act is burdened by political ideology.

This religious Zionist ideology also made life simple in a way. By validating the state-centered aims of Zionism, religious Zionism also validated the secular oligarchy that, at the time, best embodied and executed those aims. Although the relationship between Zionism itself and any particular Zionist leadership is only a contingent one, the conflation of the state with the oligarchy that runs it became one of the hallmarks of religious Zionist thought.

This conflation has determined the character of religious Zionism in two crucial ways.

First, religious Zionism is unwittingly self-negating. For the very concrete qualities that it sanctifies are ones that its own adherents – committed still to traditional values – are least in possession of. Ideological religious Zionists have internalized the idea that the

iconic macho *sabra* is the true Israeli. Their self-image is that of foster children. They do not take themselves seriously as policy-makers.

Second, ideological religious Zionism functions in a virtual reality. The state to which it ascribes divine imprimatur, which is indeed *yesod kisei hashem ba'olam* (the foundation of God's seat in the world), which is the embodiment of the national spirit, looks nothing like the actual state of Israel. The actual state is merely a poor reflection of the virtual state that is the focus of ideological religious Zionism's veneration.

*

Because religious Zionism takes neither itself nor the actual state of Israel seriously (although it takes the virtual state exceedingly seriously), religious Zionist politics function almost entirely on the symbolic plane. Several examples might help to clarify this point.

Mamlakhtiut – and its economic twin, socialism – both involve centralizing in the hands of the state powers and resources that would otherwise be left to the free market or to voluntary associations. In the name of these principles, Zionism effectively destroyed the elements of civil society by co-opting them to the state. Schools were nationalized, religious organizations regulated by a duly formed ministry, small guilds subsumed by the Histadrut, and charity organizations marginalized by the welfare state. The hopelessness of such large-scale attempts at social engineering is well attested and the Israeli case has proved to be no exception. Anyone not in the grip of seriously debilitating ideology must have noticed by now that the atrophy of those informal associations that had in the past been the source of Jewish communal vitality has led slowly but inexorably to the depletion of those qualities required for self-government: social trust, public responsibility, and respect for legitimate authority. Unfortunately, the last vestiges of ideological support for Big Government are found among the religious Zionist establishment. If you ignore the fact that the actual government of Israel is largely dysfunctional and focus your attention only on a wholly virtuous virtual government, you can persuade yourself that the bigger the government the better.

Religious Zionists have been deeply involved in the debates surrounding the Law of Return and the laws concerning marriage and divorce. Under the current Law of Return, several dozen American Reform converts and several hundred thousand Russian non-Jews have immigrated to Israel. A number of proposals to amend the law are now being considered (in the context of drafting a constitution for Israel) according to which the government of Israel would not take a stand on the religious question of who is a Jew but only on the political question of to whom it wishes to grant rights of residency and citizenship. The result would be a considerable reduction in the number of non-Jews eligible under the Law of Return; Reform converts would continue to remain eligible under the Law of Return but the state would be taking no stand on the question of their Jewishness. The compelling logic of the proposed amendment, along with its likely consequences, is such that it has broad support from all sides. The opposition comes from religious Zionist ideologues who are less interested in the consequences (which they agree are desirable) than in the principle: they do not wish to separate between the political question of eligibility for citizenship and the religious question of “who is a Jew” because they believe that in principle there is no distinction between politics and religion. The same situation exists with regard to proposals to amend the marriage laws in a manner that would reduce the number of *mamzerim* (children of adulterous or specific incestuous relationships, who are excluded from the Jewish community) in Israel while distinguishing between religious marriage and government-recognized marriage. Here too the opposition comes from religious Zionist ideologues for whom the symbolic desideratum of government involvement in religion is more real than that of any of its actual consequences.

One final example. In the debate over disengagement before and during the summer of 2005, there was only one strategy at the disposal of opponents that had a realistic chance of scuttling the plan. This strategy involved uniting secular and religious opponents of the plan behind a security-based argument and defeating the disengagement plan in the legislature. Instead, religious Zionists led a largely symbolic and hopeless ideology-based campaign that alienated

potential secular allies. But in the legislature, where something might actually have been accomplished, the best opportunity to turn the tide against disengagement was missed due to the indecisiveness of the National Religious Party.⁴

*

The conflation of Zionism with a particular oligarchy was a convenient fiction so long as that oligarchy did in fact embody the Zionist values to which religious Zionism was committed. But this was only the case for a short time, if at all.

The secular Zionist elites' commitment to Jewish nationalism was rooted in shared memories and ethnicity. As these bonds have inevitably weakened, Jewish nationalism, the very basis for secular Zionism, has come to be seen as atavistic. Moreover, the pool of Jewish knowledge available to young secular Israelis is inadequate to facilitate any significant resistance to global trends downloaded almost directly into their brains through the Internet and television. Since religion abhors a vacuum, the empty rhetoric of human rights and post-nationalism has become the new religion of the otherwise unrooted. Unlike more established religions, this new religion has not been around long enough to have been forged by reality into something viable.

Many of those who have inherited the status of secular Zionist elites have turned against the very definition of Jewish power that religious Zionists adopted from them. The deepening conflict between religious Zionism's commitment to Zionism as represented by these elites and its commitment to Zionism as an ideology now rejected by these same elites is the source of considerable cognitive dissonance.

The major recent trends in religious Zionism are reactions to this dissonance. Some have been overwhelmed by this dissonance and have suffered a crisis of faith. Some have rejected the actual state as now being an impediment to the redemptive process (which they still believe is under way). And some have simply gone native in the firm belief that one can only remain a Zionist by following the Zionist elites wherever they may lead.

*

If viewing the state through the lens of ideology has led to this impasse, perhaps we might consider an alternative. Let's now consider what such an alternative might look like.

As self-proclaimed spokesman for the tailors and shoemakers of healthy instincts, I am probably ill advised to attempt to articulate a coherent anti-ideology ideology. Nevertheless, I'd like to at least expose one lazy habit of thought that is the source of much surplus ideology: the tendency (all too common in our circle, especially among the chattering classes) to think in terms of some immutable ontology of ideology communities (e.g., Religious Zionists, haredim, and associated sub-sub groups of each), and to trumpet the, often imaginary, differences between the node in the ontology where one locates oneself and the nearest neighbors of that node.

If we are to avoid this habit of thought ourselves, let's begin by not exaggerating the proper operative significance of theological disputes regarding the foundation of the state. The determination that the state is *yesod kisei hashem ba-olam* or a manifestation of the *sitra ahra* ("the Other Side"), or something in between, should certainly influence the degree of gratitude its existence might evoke in us. Choosing sides on this question might be of supreme religious importance. But such determinations are entirely retrospective in nature. If our experiences in Israel teach us anything, it is that theological determinations regarding the state are of no predictive value. The assumption that the state is headed inexorably down a particular path is a poor foundation for making policy, especially when your adversaries refuse to play along. If, for example, you believe that disengagement will not happen because it is theologically impossible, you will likely damage the cause of those who believe that disengagement should not happen because it will bring undesirable results.

Thus, whatever importance we wish to assign to theological considerations, such considerations ought to be bracketed for purposes of making policy. (If such bracketing diminishes the gap between Religious Zionists and haredim, let us consider that a blessing, not a threat to our identities.) Removing theological considerations

from the policy-making equation does not mean that religious Zionists are doomed to relating to Israel in the same way Jews once related to Poland. It means that Jews should relate to Israel the way Poles relate to Poland. I am unfamiliar with the various theological positions of Poles on the metaphysical significance of Poland,⁵ but I assume that regardless of such, most Poles see it as their duty to defend their state and contribute to its political and economic welfare. The same principle could work in Israel as well.

By relating to Israel the ways Poles relate to Poland, religious Zionists would actually considerably increase the chances of advancing a religious and Zionist agenda. The first necessary step if we wish to influence policy-making in Israel is to reassess our actual situation. That is, we need to distinguish between the virtual state that we think we wish to see and the actual state such as it is.

In the actual state, religious Zionists are a small but growing minority with many potential allies in the political arena, provided that we judiciously pick our battles and the methods we use to fight them. We can, for example, pursue a more Jewish public square provided that we define our objectives in cultural terms that are sufficiently broad to carry meaning for those who are outside our community but share with us the rejection of the high-minded idea that, all else being equal, it is the “enlightened” secular vision of the public square that must always prevail. Stable compromises superior to the deteriorating status quo regarding the public nature of Shabbat, government recognition of marriage, and other points of conflict can be reached provided that religious Zionists regard compromise as an option.

In the actual state, government regulation and sponsorship of religious institutions hamper the independence of these institutions. Jewish communities in Morocco and Poland, Yemen and Lithuania maintained *mikvaot* (ritual baths) and *batei kneset* (synagogues) under far worse financial circumstances than ours, but only in Israel does a *mikveh* remain closed for a week because the appropriate government agency has failed to pass on the funding. Not every rav in those places earned the respect of his *balebatim* (congregants), but only in Israel could such a rav, as a tenured government bureau-

crat, maintain his position for life. Surely, mikvaot and rabanim are entitled to public funding no less than the opera, but we ought to carefully consider what we really want.

In the actual state, there is little sympathy for religiously motivated settlement and security policies but there is strong support for essentially the same policies when couched in (and actually motivated by) considerations of defense. Ironically, religious Zionists choose to promote rational security policies in irrational terms, while our opponents promote irrational security policies in rational terms. The tables should be turned.

In the actual state, the courts and prosecution, the army, the police, and the public press are in the grip of a self-perpetuating elite hostile both to religious aims and to Zionist aims. The one effective way for this grip to be loosened is via the passage of legislation changing the method of appointments to these offices. If religious Zionist legislators really wished to see these elites dislodged – and I have reason to doubt that they do – they would propose such legislation and advance it on liberal grounds.

To sum up, a coherent religious Zionist agenda can better be achieved by bracketing theology and pursuing politics than by bracketing politics and pursuing theology.⁶

*

The above program requires a radical change in mindset, a change in the way we perceive ourselves and the way we perceive the state. We have internalized the idea that we are foster children in the actual state, living in it at the sufferance of mercurial guardians. We choose to believe that our guardians are benevolent and loving, we pout and threaten rebellion when it becomes evident that they are not so, and we conjure a fantasy world in which we inherit the manor at the expense of the “real” children. The irony of the situation is that if we could truly overcome the feeling of being foster children, we actually would inherit the manor; many of the “real” children tend to dissoluteness. But we can’t simply choose to feel to the manor born; such a sense develops over generations.

We might be getting there. Some grounds for optimism may

be found among the young people I described at the beginning of this paper. To be sure, I have little interest in the immature political or religious views of these youngsters. But I have a great deal of interest in their instincts.

Consider this. Their teachers have tried to convince them that they, the students, have had their faith sorely tested by recent events and are operating in crisis mode. And indeed it is true that, especially among the youth, anger over disengagement, the shabby treatment of those dispossessed, and state-sponsored violence against nationalist demonstrators is still very great, and understandably so. In some cases, enthusiasm for joining the defense forces, which still might be used for unworthy political purposes, has indeed diminished. But what is most remarkable, under the circumstances, is how little this enthusiasm has diminished. By and large, students in yeshivot hesder and *mekhinot* are blithely unaware of their alleged disillusionment and are fighting to get into combat units.

To the extent that they are indeed disillusioned, it is in the very best, and most literal, sense of the word: they do not share their teachers' illusions. The next generation of religious Zionists do not feel like foster children whose fantasy of being heirs to the manor has just taken a kick in the teeth; they feel like true heirs to the manor dealing with alcoholic parents. Unlike their teachers, whose hollow self-conscious talk of taking over the country is self-evidently false bravado, these youngsters are genuinely confident about their collective future role in Israeli society. Precisely because they do not conflate the Zionist State with the Zionist oligarchy, religious Zionist youth are liberated from the debilitating conflicts from which their parents and teachers suffer. They are free to pursue authenticity.

As a result, these young people do not share some of their teachers' earnestly monochromatic attitudes toward Judaism. They suffer from no feelings of inferiority vis-à-vis secular Zionism and do not see haredi opponents of Zionism as their enemies. To pursue my metaphor, they no longer see haredim as rebellious siblings who are going to get all the foster kids in trouble. (They may justifiably resent their haredi siblings for not pulling their weight, but that is

a lesser form of resentment.) They are not afraid to grow peyot or to adopt other modes of in-your-face Judaism. Their outward appearance emphasizes those accessories that are distinctly Jewish and deemphasizes those that are the products of particular historical experiences. They are interested in learning from books that tow the religious Zionist line as well as those that tie them to their pre-Zionist heritage. They express spirituality in a freewheeling manner; the notion of a religious establishment is for them an oxymoron.

In short, there are some grounds for optimism about the future of religious Zionism. Its self-negating phase is drawing to a close. Instead of living by the ideology of polemicists, the new generation of (unhyphenated) religious Zionists is at last living the dream of their great-grandparents, the tailors and shoemakers. They are Jews in Eretz Israel living their own culture organically, confidently and unselfconsciously.

NOTES

1. I speak of boys only because I am more familiar with their situation. My own children of relevant age are boys.
2. As is well known, a vast array of ideological viewpoints on these matters have been articulated over the years. It is not my purpose in this essay to survey these views, to attribute views to particular individuals, or to hand out grades. I have chosen one mainstream view and deliberately over-emphasized it to make a point.
3. I discussed many of these points in an earlier paper, "Mamlachtiut as a Tool of Oppression: On Jewish Jews and Israeli Jews in the Post-Zionist Era," *Democratic Culture*, 3 (2000). Similar points have been made by my colleagues, Michael Abraham and Nadav Shnerb. See M. Abraham, "The Third Way or Religious Zionism without a Hyphen" [Hebrew], *Tzohar*, 22 (5765) and N. Shnerb, "The Wrong Donkey" [Hebrew], *Nekuda*, 293 (5766).
4. On October 26, 2004, the Knesset voted in favor of disengagement. Four Likud ministers considered voting against the bill, which would have entailed their resignation from the government and the government's likely fall. They ultimately decided against doing so in good part because the National Religious Party chose not to leave the government "for two more weeks."
5. Here is a lesson in the dangers of sarcasm. Since penning the first draft of this paper, I have been informed that there is indeed a considerable literature on the metaphysical significance of Poland.
6. It is perhaps worth emphasizing that this is not to say that the development and

promulgation of theological foundations for religious Zionist thought are not important for social, educational, and religious purposes. My claim is only that the nature of politics is such that, invariably, better policy is achieved when based primarily on more concrete considerations.