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# Religious-Nationalism in Israel/Palestine

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**Abstract**

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This dissertation describes and analyzes the reasons for the changing nature of the religious-Zionist community in Israel. It offers an innovative sociological framework to discuss recent social, ideological and religious trends within the religious-Zionist sector in Israel, which challenges the prevalent conceptualization of religious-Zionism as a *sui generis* ideology. In contrast to researchers who emphasize the synthesis of Orthodox Jewish religion and militant Zionism in the religious-Zionist ideology, it argues that the religious-Zionist identity is based primarily on social connections (kinship, geographical, institutional) among the members of the group. The dissertation focuses on several case studies within the religious-Zionist community, demonstrating that there is no ideological core that brings together all religious-Zionists. Based on interviews, participant observation and textual analysis, the dissertation describes the different ideological responses by religious-Zionists to the evacuation of Gaza settlers in 2005, with regard to loyalty to the Israeli state, on the one hand, and the religious authority of rabbis, on the other. Another phenomenon described in the dissertation is the rise of American conservative

movement in the religious-Zionist community and its attempts to establish a new religious-Zionist hegemony in Israel.

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## **DEDICATION**

To all life forms that exist between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea.

# PART 1: THE HYPHEN CANNOT HOLD: CONTEMPORARY TRENDS IN RELIGIOUS-ZIONISM

## ABSTRACT

This part presents an innovative sociological framework to discuss recent social, ideological, and religious trends within the religious-Zionist sector in Israel. It challenges the prevalent conceptualization of religious-Zionism as a *sui generis* ideology. In contrary to researchers who emphasized the synthesis of religion and Zionism in the religious-Zionist ideology, I argue that the religious-Zionist identity is based primarily on social connections (kinship, geographical, institutional) between the members of the group. I use this approach to make sense of recent religious-Zionist trends: post-Zionism, the 'religious-lite,' Orthodox Feminism, and neoliberalism.

## INTRODUCTION

When Yosef Burg, the leader of the National-Religious party during the 1970s, was asked what is more important in the religious-Zionist identity - Jewish religion or Zionism, he replied: "The hyphen." His response represents a traditional understanding of religious-Zionism as a pragmatic ideology trying to bridge over the contrast between Orthodox Jewish religion and the secular Zionist movement. Since 2005, this moderate approach has been constantly contested by religious-Zionist individuals, and the traditional religious-Zionist leadership is facing a great ideological crisis. Internal debates have polarized the movement to the extent that it is impossible to find even one issue that all religious-Zionists would agree upon. Moreover, the religious-

Zionist sphere of influence now includes individuals and groups that are not necessarily religious, Zionist, or either one. How can we account for this phenomenon? Has ‘religious-Zionism’ turned into a simulacrum, a floating signifier with no signified?

The term ‘religious-Zionism’ has been used continuously since the establishment of ‘HaMizrahi’ in 1902, in order to signify the group of non-Haredi Orthodox Jews who supported the Zionist movement (and later the state of Israel). Likewise, the term is also used to refer to a specific ideology, which provides a theological justification for the Zionist movement and the Israeli state. However, there were two watershed moments that forced religious-Zionists to rethink their commitment to the hyphen. First, the results of the 1967 war brought religious-Zionists to abandon their historical alliance with the Labor Zionist hegemony. Following Rabbi Zvi Yehudah Kook, they sought a more prominent role in national politics that prioritized settlement in the occupied territories. In 2005, this ideological and physical project was challenged by the Israeli state’s decision to evacuate approximately 9,000 settlers in Gaza and Northern Samaria. This event caused religious-Zionists to question their commitment to Zionism, but more importantly, their understanding of ‘religion’ has also been dramatically changing. Thus, for many who grew up in the religious-Zionist community, the hyphen can no longer hold.

Despite these developments, most academic literature still refers to ‘religious-Zionism’ as signifying a distinct ideological worldview. This approach builds on what I refer to in this article as the ‘ideological narrative.’ This approach has some merit, but overlooks the plethora of social, religious, and political identities within the non-Haredi Jewish Orthodox population in Israel. I do not wish to challenge this narrative as history but, rather, to show how this specific

understanding of the nature of religious-Zionism cannot account for the more recent developments within religious-Zionism, specifically after the evacuation of Gaza settlements in 2005 (Inbari 2012; Mozes 2009; Hellinger, Hershkowitz, and Susser 2018). Religious-Zionism is no longer an ideological movement, but a diverse society. Therefore, it is necessary to develop an approach that will account for the diversity characterizing religious-Zionist identity today.

This article places recent religious-Zionist trends within the broader body of literature on religious-Zionism. I argue that the etymology and theoretical conceptualization of religious-Zionism as an ideology which brings together the supposedly distinct domains of modern nationalism and the Jewish religion is now outdated and misleading. Moreover, this approach's focus on the hyphen limits the researchers' ability to address contemporary trends within the movement.

Therefore, this paper will present a sociological approach. I introduce a non-ideological definition of religious-Zionism, which emphasizes the social connections (kinship, geographical, institutional) between the members of the group. Shifting to a non-ideational conceptualization enable us to better understand the fierce internal debates, as well as adopting more fluid definitions of the group's social boundaries. Most important, this conceptualization sheds light on the recent cultural and political developments and suggest possible new trajectories for research on the movement. I conclude by presenting some of the literature on these new trends, demonstrating how the sociological approach enables us to understand them as a *sui generis* religious-Zionist phenomenon, despite their divergence from 'mainstream' religious-Zionist ideology.

## UNDERSTANDING THE HYPHEN

In order to distinguish them from the non-Zionist *Haredi* (Ultra-Orthodox) Jews, the religious-Zionist group [*haZionut haDatit*] is also frequently referred to (and its members self-identify) as ‘national-religious’ [*Datiim-Leumiim*]. This fact suggests that the hyphen is no less important than the religion in the identity of group members. The function of this hyphen is twofold. First, it refers to a hybrid identity bringing together Orthodox Judaism and support for the Zionist movement, providing the possibility of coexistence with secular modernity. On the other hand, the hyphen also implies an analytical separation between the domain of religion and nationalist politics, which must be bridged upon.

The rise of religious-nationalism is by no means an exclusively Israeli phenomenon. The sociologist Rogers Brubaker identified it as a distinctive form of nationalism, which challenges secular nationalism and provides a religious national program which uses religion to fuse state, territory, and culture (Brubaker 2012). However, in the Israeli case, religion has played an important role in creating the national identity and fusing ‘state, territory, and culture’ even within the secular labor-Zionist movement (Kimmerling 2001). Therefore, a more nuanced conceptualization is required to account for the distinct Israeli form of religious-nationalism.

In studies on religious-Zionism it is almost obligatory to refer to Charles Liebman and Eliezer Don-Yehiya’s seminal book on civil religion in Israel, in which they classify ideal-type ‘responses’ of traditional religion to modernization and secularization. According to their typology, the first type of response, characterizing the *Haredi* community, is rejection’ – segregating and isolating themselves from the secular culture through the creation of alternate values and symbols. The second response, which characterized ‘classical’ religious-Zionism is ‘compartmentalization’ – limiting the role of religion to certain aspects of the personal and

public life, while accommodating modernity in other aspects that are considered to be irrelevant to religion. The third reaction, which became prevalent among religious-Zionists after the 1967 war, is 'expansion' – an attempt to reinterpret modern culture as an expression of religion, and thus attempting to subject modern society to the religious values (Liebman and Don-Yehiya 1983).

Liebman and Don-Yehiya conceptualize the complex interrelations between religion and secularity, politics, nationalism, and Zionism, which are crucial for understanding the ideological foundations of religious-Zionism. However, they still view religious-Zionism primarily as an ideology. The next sections will provide an overview of the scholarship on religious-Zionism, explaining why conceptualizing it exclusively through the ideological prism serves a certain narrative of religious-Zionism that is no longer adequate, and thereby demonstrate the need for a non-ideational approach.

## THE IDEOLOGICAL NARRATIVE OF RELIGIOUS-ZIONISM

Most scholarship on religious-Zionism tells a similar story of the developments in its ideology over the past century. According to this narrative, religious-Zionism was established in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as a pragmatic movement, viewing the immigration to Israel as a practical solution to European antisemitism. The 1967 war brought a religious, political, and cultural revolution within the religious-Zionist movement, and its adherents began to increasingly demand a more influential role in state affairs.

According to this narrative, the first religious-Zionists organized through the 'HaMizrahi' movement in 1902. The movement offered a unique hybrid ideology, seeking to live according to the Orthodox-Jewish halachic code while taking part in the Zionist movement and the establishment of a modern nation for the Jewish people (Schwartz 2009). This hybridity was

enabled through a theological interpretation of the Zionist movement as a practical solution to European antisemitism, rejecting any religious significance to the national movement and immigration to Israel. This pragmatic approach enabled religious-Zionists to promote sectoral interests, such as establishing an independent (though publicly funded) education system. This period of cooperation with the hegemony of the secular Labor Party (Mapai), was later known as ‘the historical alliance’ (Gross 2003).

The narrative then goes on to describe a theological, political, and cultural revolution within religious-Zionism. The younger religious-Zionist generation started to challenge the pragmatic approach in the 1960s. On the one hand, they came to realize that the ‘historical alliance’ only continued religious-Zionists' marginal influence on ‘major’ political affairs, which caused feelings of inferiority and frustration for this generation. On the other hand, religious-Zionists felt denigrated by the Haredim, who doubted their commitment to Orthodoxy due to their cooperation with the state’s secular establishment (Aran 2013). These feelings brought young religious-Zionists to question the historical alliance and a new leadership, known as ‘the youngsters’ [*HaTze’irim*] began to gain influence within the National-Religious Party (Sagi and Schwarz 2017).

Concomitantly, a small group of young religious-Zionists with similar feelings began to gather around Rabbi Zvi Yehudah Kook and joined his ‘Merkaz HaRav’ Yeshiva. They were attracted to his messianic theology, which was influenced by the theology of his father, Chief Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaCohen Kook, though much more activist (Ravitzky 1996; Aran 2013). According to this theology (sometimes referred to as ‘Kookism’ or the ‘Merkaz HaRav school’), the Zionist movement and the state of Israel are both vehicles for the realization of the divine redemption process. Therefore, the secular state of Israel is endowed with sanctity and

must be treated accordingly. Religious-Zionists began to interpret and evaluate historical events from a messianic point of view, and argued that political considerations must be subjected to religious reasoning. Thus, participation of religious Jews in state leadership, military service, and settlement of the land were perceived as religious obligations (Aran 2013; Taub 2010; Feige 2009).

The Kookist theology offered religious-Zionists a novel interpretation for the role religion in national politics, though it remained marginal within religious circles until the 1967 war. The results of the war were enthusiastically interpreted by the Kookists through their messianic framework. The occupation (they would say ‘liberation’) of East Jerusalem, the West Bank, the Sinai Peninsula, the Gaza Strip, and the Golan Heights, were construed as the actualization of God’s promise to Abraham that his descendants would inherit the Land of Israel. Moreover, the events of the war were specifically viewed as foretold by a prophecy given by Rabbi Zvi Yehuda three weeks prior to the war.<sup>1</sup> Interpreting the results of the war in this manner led his followers to establish the Gush Emunim (Bloc of the Faithful) movement in 1974 and settle in the occupied territories, thus cementing the Jewish presence there (Aran 2013; Barzel 2017; Feige 2009; Ravitzky 1996; Taub 2010; Inbari 2012).

The growing importance of Jewish settlement in the occupied territories led by adherents of religious-Zionism has fueled increasing scholarly interest in the religious-Zionist movement. Many Israelis view this settlement as harmful and unjust, threatening not only the possibility of achieving peace with the Palestinians and Arab states but also Israel’s existence as a Jewish and democratic state. Gush Emunim’s actions in the 1970s and 1980s stirred a fierce political debate within Israeli society. In a broader perspective, the debate over the settlements reflected the

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<sup>1</sup> For an elaborate description of this event and its implications see Aran (2013).

anxiety of hegemonic Labor Zionists, who felt their hegemony was challenged by religious-Zionists (Kimmerling 2001; Filc 2006; Mautner 2011). Therefore, researchers concerned with religious-Zionism's influence emphasized its seemingly absolutist worldview, its unwillingness to compromise or exhibit pragmatism, and its adherents' readiness to act violently in order to actualize their messianic goals (Sprinzak 1991; Newman 1985; Lustick 1988; Rachlevsky 1998).

In conclusion, we can see that the 'ideological narrative' of religious-Zionism focuses on the effects of the internal revolution the movement underwent after the 1967 war. These secular researchers were concerned with the challenge posed to secular Zionism by the 'new' religious-Zionist ideology. Therefore, they focus primarily on the role of religion in the formation of the Gush Emunim movement and the establishment of settlements. Some of these researchers are specifically interested in the plausibility of withdrawal from the occupied territories as part of the two-state 'solution' to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and therefore analyze the struggles by religious-Zionists to prevent evacuations (Alimi 2013; Inbari 2012; Feige 2009; Aran and Feige 1987; Shafir 2017). Before I go on to demonstrate the shortcomings of that narrative, I will present some of the scholarship on religious-Zionism written by religious-Zionist academics and discuss how it converges and deviates from the ideological narrative.

## RELIGIOUS-ZIONISTS ON RELIGIOUS-ZIONISM

An important characteristic of the scholarly writing on religious-Zionism is presence of a large body of work written by authors who self-identify socially and ideologically with the religious-Zionist movement (Caplan 2017). Many of them are at Bar-Ilan University, the premier academic institution affiliated with religious-Zionism, which boasts the only academic center for the study of religious-Zionism. In their book on obedience and civil disobedience in religious-Zionism, Hellinger, Hershkowitz, and Susser assert that there exists a "deep gulf between the

settler's self-image and the one presented by its opponents and by most of the research" (2018: xi).<sup>2</sup> While religious-Zionist settlers see themselves as authentic patriotic pioneers, the secular left views them as religious zealots bringing a political (and moral) disaster on Israeli society. Therefore, just as the ideological narrative was shaped by a political perspective, we can expect writing on religious-Zionists by religious-Zionists to be informed by one as well (Caplan 2017).<sup>3</sup>

Before I go on to discuss the substance of these arguments, it is important to note some external characteristics of the scholarship on religious-Zionism written by insiders. These books were all originally published in Hebrew and only a few have been translated into English. In addition, many of the books I will discuss were published in Israeli commercial presses (Karmel, Am-Oved) and are therefore intended for a broad readership. This helps explain the dominance of the 'ideological narrative' among scholars, since the materials challenging it can easily be overlooked by academic researchers working and publishing primarily in English.

Two main themes are discernible in the writing on religious-Zionism by religious-Zionist writers. The first is the focus on theology and the in-depth analysis of rabbinic texts. For these authors, religious-Zionist ideology is articulated by religious authorities and community leaders in their books, public speeches, internal publications, and even online halachic responsa. These studies contribute to the scholarship on religious-Zionism by calling attention to the theological diversity within religious-Zionism, problematizing the 'ideological narrative.' This scholarship

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<sup>2</sup> All three authors are from Bar-Ilan University, and two of them self-identify as religious-Zionists.

<sup>3</sup> The distinction I make between a secular 'ideological narrative' and religious-Zionist writing is a generalization, and of course, there are secular writers who acknowledge the ideological diversity (Harel, 2017; Inbari, 2008; 2012) as well as religious scholars who accept the 'ideological narrative' (Liebman and Don-Yehiya 1983; Don-Yehiya 2014).

demonstrates there is no unified religious-Zionist ideology, and that features that were considered to characterize the movement in certain periods, such as pragmatism vs. messianism (Ravitzky 1996; Schwarz 1999), settlement of the land (Schwarz, 1997), democracy (Geiger 2016; Kaye 2013; Schwarz 2018) and, most importantly, the status and authority of the Israeli state (Helinger et al. 2018; Roth 2014), are constantly contested and debated among religious-Zionists.

The second characteristic of this body of literature is the emphasis on the centrality of the *mamlachtiyut* (state-centrism) value in religious-Zionist thought and practice. The emphasis on this concept is a mirror image of the political inclination of secular writers, who frequently fail to notice its significance or otherwise misinterpret the concept by viewing it as merely instrumental – that the holiness of the state is derived from its role to materialize messianic ends. Therefore, some religious-Zionist writers explicitly present their writing as a response to the secular ‘orientalist’ academic writing on religious-Zionism, which they perceive as unjustly characterizing the movement as ‘fundamentalist,’ in contrast to the researchers’ self-image as of rational-liberal subject (Fischer 2007; Rosenak 2013).

For these religious writers, the value of *mamlachtiyut* is so essential to religious-Zionist ideology, that it is in fact employed to define the boundaries of the group. For example, in Anat Roth’s book on the struggle against the 2005 evacuation of Gaza, she argues that the value of *mamlachtiyut* was the main reason that the religious-Zionist protesters did not resort to violence. Moreover, when discussing factions that did call for the use of limited violence against the security forces, Roth is careful not to affiliate them with Kookist ideology, but rather with groups on the margins of religious-Zionism such as people from Yizhar (a settlement noted for its extremism), Chabad Hasidim, and secular right-wing movements (Roth 2014: 89-94).

Similarly, in their discussion of civil disobedience in religious-Zionism, Helinger et. al. argue that religious-Zionists hold a “theological-normative balance,” which explains that “[A]lthough histrionic violence was present, it did not go much beyond political theater. The state was not rejected or spurned by religious Zionism; neither did mass, organized resistance occur” (2018: xvii). However, their description of the debates within religious-Zionism are more nuanced compared to Rosenak and Roth, and they use a more inclusive definition of religious-Zionism, taking into account groups that show ambivalence about or even support for the use of violence against the state.

Besides the noticeable political inclination that characterizes this body of research, it also suffers from some substantial limitations. The focus on rabbinic discourse as representing the political views of the community is particularly problematic. This approach presents ordinary members of the religious-Zionist community as lacking any sort of agency, assuming they strictly abide by their rabbis’ rulings. However, while this is true for some, most religious-Zionist individuals do possess some agency and occasionally act explicitly against the rulings of their rabbis. One example is the participation in ‘price-tag’ vigilante violence against Palestinians and Israeli security forces, which has never been publicly authorized.<sup>4</sup>

Another limitation of this approach to the study of religious-Zionism is the implicit assumption that rabbis form their views based solely on halachic considerations, and thus their rulings are not influenced by social considerations or their political point of view. In fact, many of the authors acknowledge that these rabbis’ halachic viewpoints progress over time and are

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<sup>4</sup> This is not to deny that some rabbis implicitly support these acts. Many refuse to condemn them and, according to the Israeli security forces, the Jewish ‘underground’ of the 1980s received the authorization of Rabbis Moshe Levinger and Eliezer Waldman (Sprinzak 1999).

influenced by contemporary events. Rather, their focus on the rabbinic discourse tends to obfuscate the dynamics of mutual influence between the rabbis and their constituencies, and how the rabbis are influenced by popular opinion within their movement (Magid 2019).

To sum up, these bodies of literature diverge in the impetus for writing about the movement. While outsider secular scholars are overwhelmingly interested in religious-Zionism's role in the settlement movement and its struggles to prevent any evacuations of settlers in the occupied territories, the insiders' research is typically more interested in the theological debates within the movement from an intellectual standpoint, as they appear in rabbinic texts. Another difference between the bodies of literature, is that while the secular scholars emphasize the 'fundamentalist' nature of religious-Zionists, religious scholars tend to amplify the value of *mamlachtiyut*.

Nevertheless, this review of the existing literature on religious-Zionism demonstrates an agreement among religious and secular researchers regarding their descriptions of the ideological transformation the movement underwent in the 1960s, while they might disagree on its implications. More importantly, all scholars of religious-Zionism share the notion that religious ideology and practice define the boundaries of religious-Zionism. However, as I will demonstrate, this view is increasingly being challenged by recent developments.

## A SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH

Since its inception, religious-Zionists have expressed a variety of ideologies and demonstrated different levels of commitment towards strict adherence to Halacha. While some authors and political figures argue that there is still a core ideology shared by all religious-Zionists (Schwarz 2018; Sadan, 2020), others contend we can no longer speak of a unified religious-Zionism but rather of two (or more) religious-Zionisms (Mozes 2009; Herman et al. 2014). Currently, the

main split among religious-Zionists is between the mainstream ‘bourgeois’ tendency, supposedly representing the movement’s ‘classical’ values of pragmatism, vs. the *Hardal* (acronym for *Haredi-Leumi*) faction, considered more religiously Orthodox and politically hawkish. However, even those who implicitly acknowledge the split assert that an individual must be both ‘religious’ and ‘Zionist’ as a necessary (and perhaps sufficient) condition to be considered religious-Zionist.

The most striking fact about contemporary religious-Zionism is that one can be both religious/Orthodox and a Zionist and still not be considered part of this social group. For example, Sara Hirschhorn describes how a large group of modern Orthodox American Jews, who immigrated to Israel beginning in the 1970s and settled in the West Bank, were initially neglected by Gush Emunim and mainstream religious-Zionism. Despite their ideological commitment to both religion and Zionism, from a social standpoint they were not perceived to fit in with the Israeli religious-Zionist community (Hirschhorn 2017). Moreover, although Haredi individuals are increasingly undergoing a process of ‘Israelization’ and adopting nationalist ideologies, they are still not considered as part of the religious-Zionist camp, and their voices are not present in its internal discourse (Rosner and Fuchs 2018).

On the other hand, you may not have to be either religious or Zionist to be considered part of the religious-Zionist camp. An analysis of contemporary religious-Zionist society reveals that there is no distinct ‘religious and Zionist’ ideology shared by the members of the group that distinguishes them from other elements of Israeli society. This notion is supported by the conclusions of a large quantitative survey among over 2,000 religious-Zionists (Herman et al. 2014). They suggest that religious-Zionism has become a “society or ideological movement, that acts in the light of values that are conceptualized in a sense that is understood and accepted also

by people that are supposedly ‘outside’ the [religious-Zionist] camp with regard to their religiosity” (ibid.: 227).

Therefore, if there is no ideological core that brings together all non-Haredi Orthodox Jews in Israel, we remain with a pressing question: What do we mean when we talk about ‘religious-Zionism?’

In my research, I use a sociological conceptualization of ‘religious-Zionism’. The affiliation of ‘Religious-Zionism’ with a specific political movement was more adequate for the pre-state era, but it is now outdated. Therefore, I argue that the contemporary national-religious sector was created through the National-Education Law (1953), which guaranteed state funding to its school system. The creation of a separate ‘National-Religious’ (*Mamalachti-Dati*) school system cemented, but also shaped, social boundaries between religious and secular Israelis, and separated religious-Zionists from ultra-Orthodox Jews. Moreover, after the 1967 war there was an emergence of ‘nationalist Yeshivot.’ These institutions ‘Zionized’ the Haredi model of an all-male intensive Torah-learning institution subjecting all life-aspects to a strict religious code, isolating them from society (Don-Yehiya 2014). The high school yeshivot (*Yeshiva Tichonit*) and post-high school *hesder* yeshivot contributed to the socialization of young individuals into the religious-Zionist society (Abramovich 2020). In my own fieldwork among religious-Zionist settlers in the Halutza sands, many of my interviewees described their period in the Yeshiva as influential. During those years they adopted religious practices and internalized values that were in many cases contrary to those that they grew up on in their own religious (and Zionist) homes.

Therefore, for the purpose of my research, I define ‘religious-Zionism’ or ‘the national-religious sector’ as the group of individuals who were educated in the state-religious school system and/or in the nationalist Yeshivot. It is the intense socialization that happens within those

institutions (and complemented by youth movements, national-service for women, etc.) that creates the 'religious-Zionist' identity. Therefore, I still consider an individual as part of the religious-Zionist society even if they do not follow Halacha later in their lives. My sociological perspective also explains why some groups that are both religious and Zionist cannot be considered 'religious-Zionist' and, on the other hand, enables us to comprehend the non-religious and non-Zionist trends within religious-Zionism.

I will now go on to present the merits of this definition of the religious-Zionist social boundaries through a brief analysis of recent religious-Zionist trends. These diverse trends demonstrate the impossibility of defining the community using specific religious or ideological criteria. They contest and sometimes reject traditional religious-Zionist establishment, while also being integral parts of contemporary religious-Zionist society.

## NEW RELIGIOUS-ZIONIST TRENDS

### *Contestation*

Helinger et. al. argue that an essential characteristic of the religious-Zionist movement is the "theological-normative balance." This entails a strong commitment to the state, which religious Zionists perceive as holy. However, since the failure of the struggle against the evacuation of the Gaza Strip and northern Samaria in 2005, religious-Zionists have been increasingly challenging the religious-Zionist value of *mamlachtiyut* and blaming the failure of their struggles on the settlers' leadership. Those leaders, who had been prominent figures in Gush Emunim, were accused by young religious-Zionists of cooperating with the state by restraining the protests. The leadership aimed to avoid bloodshed and maintain national unity, though some settlers interpreted the unwillingness to 'go all the way' for the Land of Israel as hypocrisy.

As a consequence, many religious-Zionists began to adopt ‘post-statist’ views, prioritizing the sanctity of the land over the sanctity of the state, thus perceiving the state as merely instrumental in the ultimate goal of redeeming the Land of Israel (Inbari 2012; Mozes 2009; Taub 2011). Some went so far as to question their support for any Zionism whatsoever, and started following anti-Zionist rabbis such as Yitzhak Ginzburg. Others, following the neo-Hassidic trend, chose rabbis who proposed different models of Jewish sovereignty, such as Menachem Froman or Shimon Gershon Rosenberg (Harel 2017; Mozes 2009).

These notions are taken to the extreme among some members of the ‘hilltop youth’ (*no'ar hagva'ot*). These individuals express their resentment towards the Israeli state by illegally constructing outposts across the West Bank and clashing, sometimes violently, with the Israeli security forces who eventually come to evacuate them. Typically, these individuals will refuse to join the army, which they perceive as their enemy. Another phenomenon associated with this group is the ‘Price Tag’ policy, in which they vandalize Palestinian property in retaliation for the evacuation of outposts.<sup>5</sup> Some argue that these youth are following the teaching of Rabbi Ginzburg (Fisher 2009; Hefez and Cohen 2013; Hellinger et al. 2018; Sagi 2015; Tamari 2014), though others note that they lack a sufficient understanding of his complex theology, and that other than their rejection of Zionism, many of these individuals reject the religious-Zionist rabbinic authorities as well (Harel 2017; Friedman 2017; Katsman 2019).

This is where the sociological approach is most useful. Despite the fact that many of them are neither ‘religious’ nor ‘Zionist,’ these individuals must still be considered as part of religious-Zionist society for two reasons. First, because they grew up in religious-Zionist homes

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<sup>5</sup> In several cases the violence led to the injury and death of Palestinians, most notably in the case of the Dawabshe family murder in 2015.

and were educated in the religious-Zionist education system. Second, the hilltop youth do not necessarily see themselves as rebels but rather as activists restoring the spirit of the original Gush Emunim settlers.<sup>6</sup>

The contestation of what is considered to be ‘the’ religious-Zionist ideology is not only limited to the Zionist side of the hyphen. In this issue as well, the 2005 evacuation played a significant role. During the year leading to the evacuation, religious leaders consistently expressed their firm belief that God would not allow the plan to actually take place. The fact that the evacuation took place despite the promises of their spiritual leaders intensified the trauma among religious youth and caused many of them to undergo a crisis of faith (Inbari 2012). A recent survey on Judaism in Israel finds that approximately 50% of Israelis raised as religious-Zionists identify as *Masorti* (traditional) or *Hiloni* (secular) as adults (Rosner and Fuchs 2018). Moreover, a significant segment of young religious-Zionists today are not strictly adhering to Halacha, while still maintaining social connections to religious-Zionist society. Some identify as ‘religious-lite’ or ‘on the religious spectrum,’ while others self-identify as *Datlash* (acronym for ‘ex-religious’). While these individuals do not practice Orthodox religion in their everyday life, they still feel connected to religious-Zionist society, and specifically to its political and cultural values (Engelberg 2015; Gal-Getz 2011; Hadad and Schachter 2011; Herman et al. 2014).

Even among individuals who remain committed to Halacha, there is a significant decline in the authority of rabbis, and there is a noticeable move towards the privatization of religion (Ettinger 2019). My research found that many individuals in the religious-Zionist community no longer seek the moral authority of rabbis. Regarding political issues, many religious-Zionists told

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<sup>6</sup> See for example the letter written by Tzvi Sukkot to religious-Zionist leaders:

<https://www.facebook.com/tzvisokot/posts/1193428527351993> Retrieved 26 March 2019 (Hebrew).

me that they regard rabbis' statements as insightful opinions, at best. Thus, we see that from the religious point of view as well, there is no unitary and legitimate rabbinic leadership that the movement can center around but, rather, a diverse society with various levels of religiosity and observance of Halacha.

### *Feminism*

Another revolution that is currently taking place among those who grew up in religious-Zionist circles is related to the roles of women within the community. The core texts of Judaism were written by males through a male perspective, during a long period in which society did not acknowledge the equal rights of women, and women have traditionally been excluded from the power bases of Jewish society. This led to discrimination not only within the religious communities, but also in Israeli religious family law (Sezgin 2013). Over the years, as a society open to the modern world, the achievements of feminism have penetrated into the religious-Zionist movement. However, while religious women could now gain higher education and develop individual careers, these advancements highlighted the limitations and discrimination they continue to suffer within Orthodox patriarchal institutions (Shilo 2006).

Orthodox feminism first developed as a movement in American Judaism and came to Israel via immigrants from English-speaking countries. Some of the movement's struggles were external to the community and directed at the state's ultra-Orthodox rabbinic establishment. In 1998, the organization '*Kolech* – Religious Women's Forum' was established by Hannah Kehat. The goals of the organization were not only to advocate for the rights of women within Judaism, but also to purify Judaism itself and promote *Tikkun Olam* (healing of the world) through the religious participation of women (Shilo 2006).

A recently published book on Orthodox feminism asserts that while Kolech played a crucial role in creating a religious feminist identity and promoting women's struggles against the rabbinate, it was not until 2015 that feminism revolutionized religious-Zionist society (Artzi-Sror 2018). Feminist struggles did make significant achievements within the religious-Zionist society over the years, but religious women who considered themselves feminists were typically upper-class, Ashkenazi, mature, urban, and educated. This began to change in 2015, with the entry of religious feminism into social media, specifically through two highly popular Facebook groups. The women in these groups protested against discrimination within their own community and began to mobilize and find solutions. Through interviews with religious-Zionist feminist activists, Chen Arzi-Sror shows how in just a few years, these groups generated a feminist revolution within religious-Zionism, with regard to wide range of issues. Women are increasingly interested in studying Talmud and some prominent women scholars now advise and rule with regard to matters of Halacha. Women in Orthodox synagogues now demand to participate in religious rituals and assume a more active role in the prayer services, and efforts are made to enable their maximum participation within the boundaries of Halacha. Conversations about women's sexuality and couples' intimacy are no longer considered taboo.<sup>7</sup>

Another phenomenon that demonstrates the rise of a new religious-feminism is the increase in enrollment of religious women to the Israeli military, who in some cases even volunteer to serve in combat units. Even though the Israeli military is a conscription army, some social groups are exempted from service on a collective basis, among them Orthodox women.

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<sup>7</sup> It is important to note that all these issues, and specifically the study of Talmud and Halacha by women, have been the object of ongoing struggles for years, and many achievements were made in this domain prior to 2015. The main contribution of the Facebook groups was in providing like-minded women with a sense of community and courage.

But in contrast to Haredi women, the overwhelming majority of women from the religious-Zionist community volunteer for (non-military) national service for a period of one or two years. Although Orthodox women can choose to serve in the military, in 2002 the chief rabbinate issued a statement that the enrollment of women to the army is religiously prohibited. The majority of religious-Zionist rabbis hold a similar position. Nevertheless, over the last decade there has been an increase of 167% in the enlistment of women graduating from religious high-schools into the military, from 935 women in 2010, to approximately 2,500 women in 2019 (27% of 18 year old religious-Zionist women). This has generated a backlash from the more conservative segments of religious-Zionism, who launched a disparaging campaign scorning the women who choose to enlist. While some liberal rabbis permit enlistment, a recent study has shown that rabbinic opinion was a significant consideration among only 17% of the women who chose to enlist. On the other hand, more than 80% of them still consider themselves 'religious,' and, moreover, some explicitly mention religious-Zionist values as a major consideration in their decision to enlist (Budaie-Hyman 2016).

Finally, incidents of sexual harassment and sexual assault against women that were previously dealt with within the community, if at all, are now being exposed and discussed within the wider public. The case of Rabbi Moti Elon, who was accused of having sexual relationships with his (male) students, rattled the religious-Zionist community in 2010. Elon was a prominent rabbi, head of Yeshivat HaKotel, and his weekly talks were aired on the national radio and television. At first, a committee of rabbis tried to deal with the case without involving the police. However, the facts that Elon never apologized for his acts and that he was continuing to teach young children, led to the filing of an official police report. Eventually, he was convicted for forcibly sexually assaulting a minor and sentenced to six months of community

service. Since this case, many religious women have begun to share their stories about sexual assault and harassment, a phenomenon that increased during the international #MeToo campaign (Artzi-Sror 2018).

The significance of these feminist struggles is that, in contrast to the movements contesting religious-Zionist ideology, most of them are carefully carried out within the boundaries of Halacha. More importantly, these feminist activists possess a strong religious-Zionist identity, and perceive their struggles as attempts to improve their own society (Ettinger 2019). On the other hand, the fact that many of these struggles start as grass-roots initiatives (mainly through social media) and only later are endorsed by some liberal rabbis (if at all), challenges the literature on religious-Zionism, which focus on the opinions and rulings of rabbis as the way to understand the movement's collective beliefs.

### *Neo-Liberalism*

During the movement's first stages, religious-Zionism held a socialist inclination. The labor-oriented HaPoel HaMizrachi was established already in 1922 and had its own kibbutz movement, in which religious people lived within egalitarian communities centered around labor and social justice (Peled and Herman-Peled 2019). In 1956, the movement joined forces with HaMizrachi to form the religious-Zionist National Religious Party (NRP). According to Haim Druckman, who later became one of the most prominent religious-Zionist rabbis, this unification represented the true essence of religious-Zionism – labor and Torah [*Torah veAvodah*]: “Our holy Torah encompasses our whole life and all our matters and socialist approach stem from it” (Cited in Hominer 2016). The first settlement (re-)established in the occupied territories in September 1967 was Kfar Etzion, a kibbutz based on socialist values of shared property and labor. Moreover, the NRP's party platform for the 1992 elections explicitly stated their support for

worker unions and the need to guarantee collective contracts. Accordingly, a quantitative study has shown that Israeli religious individuals tend to hold more socialist views (Be'eri 2014).

In recent years, however, there has been a steady shift towards neoliberalism and even libertarianism among the religious-Zionist elite, though not necessarily within the entire community. Possibly this tendency began as a backlash to the 2011 social protests, which most religious-Zionists refrained from participating in due to the protest leaders' leftwing anti-settlements orientation. The trend became more evident when the hi-tech entrepreneur Naftali Bennett won the religious party leadership (by then renamed 'Jewish Home') in 2012. Bennett acted to change the party's constitution to explicitly support a 'free economy'. Moreover, Bennett is known for his antagonism towards unions, and once even stated that if the workers in his company were to form a union, he "would see that as a personal failure."<sup>8</sup>

An even more libertarian approach was presented during the 2019 election campaign by the religious-Zionist Moshe Feiglin, leader of the Zehut (Identity) party. According to Feiglin, individual freedom is the true essence of Judaism, and therefore the government's role must be reduced to minimum. Feiglin proposed extreme tax cuts, along with the privatization of the public education system, healthcare, and social welfare (Feiglin 2019).

Most religious-Zionists have not (yet) bought into the neoliberal economic worldview. In the April 2019 elections both Bennett and Feiglin ran in independent lists and failed to pass the election threshold (though Bennett switched parties and made it into the next two Knessets). This

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4618305,00.html>

indicates that while these ideas are gaining support within the community, they are still mainly held by the more vocal elites.<sup>9</sup>

However, the long-term penetration of neo-liberal thought into Israeli society has largely been carried out by the Tikva Fund, an American organization. It funds a number of projects, such as academic seminars, student fellowships, and a periodical dedicated to neoconservative thought, and donates to many other initiatives, all of which have a plainly neoconservative and neoliberal agenda. Most of those running their programs and institutions come from the religious-Zionist sector (Hominer 2016). Also the Kohelet Policy Forum, a conservative think tank with ties to the Tikva Fund, has a high representation of religious-Zionists, and is known to influence the agenda of the former Minister of Justice and Bennet's political partner, Ayelet Shaked (though she is secular).

In this case as well, the neoliberal agenda did not originate from the rabbinic literature. Some rabbis, such as Haim Navon, who has connections to the Tikva Fund, have adopted its worldview, though they are not the most prominent rabbis in religious-Zionist circles. Moreover, it seems as if the rabbis are expressing these opinions as a result of their recent popularity among the religious-Zionist elites, and did not necessarily promote similar views in the past.

## CONCLUSION

Religious-Zionist values are penetrating almost every aspect of Israeli society, and they are therefore a strong social force. However, the results of the three rounds of elections that took

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<sup>9</sup> This is not to say that the economic agenda was the only, or even primary, reason for the creation of these independent parties. However, their failure may indicate that neoliberal economic views are not a major consideration for religious voters.

place in Israel during 2019-2020 point towards what can seem as paradoxical results. While the representation of religious-Zionists in the Knesset and government remained strong, the religious-Zionist party itself has nearly vanished, eventually remaining outside of the center-right-wing coalition. This paradox is resolved by using the sociological approach I present in this article: Religious-Zionists no longer affiliate themselves with the ideological/political movement claiming to represent them.

My sociological approach also has implications regarding the future of religious-Zionist society. For some years now, religious-Zionists have been discussing the internal ideological split between the conservative Hardal (nationalist-Haredi) subculture and the relatively liberal streams. Contrary to the common prediction that religious-Zionist society will eventually split into two groups, I believe that the reports on the death of religious-Zionism are exaggerated. As I have argued in this article, the religious-Zionist education system serves as a strong centripetal force. Despite the ideological debates, the vast majority of religious-Zionists still send their children to the same educational system. It is only on the most conservative fringes of the society that parents send their children to a Haredi school. At the same time, the trend of ‘mixed’ religious-secular schools also remains negligible, though it is increasing.

This approach has important implications for the future study of religious-Zionism. The sociological approach enables us to understand how what initially might seem a parochial rejection of religious-Zionist ideology, can at the same time stem from social and cultural aspects of religious-Zionism. Therefore, as researchers of Israeli society, we must move beyond the ‘ideological narrative’ of religious-Zionism. We can no longer assume that all religious-Zionists share a similar political orientation, or assume that religious leaders’ statements represent the opinions of religious-Zionist individuals. In addition, when studying the influence of religious-

Zionism, we cannot limit ourselves to individuals who are currently religious, but rather must include all those raised in religious-Zionist institutions, even if they are no longer part of a religious community.

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## PART 2: RELIGIOUS-NATIONALIST SETTLEMENT IN HALUTZA

### ABSTRACT

This part describes the religious worldview of the residents of three rural villages, established since 2010 in Southern Israel. Focusing on religious authority, the article traces the complex relationship between rabbis to their communities which is rarely a simple “top-down” traditional authority model. On the contrary, both the rabbis and their communities are aware of the fragility of their relationship, and therefore created a complex belief system in which the rabbis’ recommendation is sought, but not necessarily considered binding. In addition, the article describes the “*Datlashim*” (Hebrew acronym for “Ex-religious”). This liminal identity characterizes individuals who grew up within these religious communities but decided to dissent in their adulthood. They do not feel committed to, and sometimes openly reject the Jewish religious code. The article contributes to the scholarly understanding of religious authority, as well as the diversity within the religious-Zionist community in Israel, which has become increasingly influential in Israeli politics and society.

### INTRODUCTION

The young religious family that wanted to move to a village in southern Israel had no intention to provoke such a controversy. Indeed, all members of the village selection committee shared the impression that the family was friendly and showed genuine commitment to village values. However, some committee members were concerned by the fact that the wife’s nose was pierced. While nose piercing is permitted according to Halacha (Jewish religious code), it is not socially acceptable among the more conservative Orthodox circles. The committee could not reach an

agreement. They decided to consult with the village rabbi, who ruled that they can accept the family. Nevertheless, some members were still not convinced. As a final resort, they took the issue to their top rabbinic authority, the head of the prestigious “Har HaMor” Yeshiva, with which many of the village members are affiliated. The rabbi listened to both sides, and eventually also ruled that they can accept the family. The opposers started arguing with him, questioning the ruling of their own ultimate religious authority, but the rabbi was steadfast. Eventually, the committee decided to reject the family.

This incident, which was described to me by members of one religious community in which I was interviewing, demonstrates one of the oldest problems in the study of religion. In the Platonic dialogue “*Euthyphro*,” Socrates searches for the definition of ‘the holy/pious’ [ἅσιος]. In response to Euthyphro’s attempt to define the pious as ‘what is loved by the Gods,’ Socrates asks: “Is the pious being loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is being loved by the gods?” (Plato, 2002, p. 12). In other words, is the conception of holiness arbitrary, simply denoting what the gods (represented by religious authority) have defined as ‘holy’? Or perhaps is holiness that which we human beings decide through a social process?

Similar debates appear also in the Jewish tradition already in the 5<sup>th</sup> century Babylonian Talmud,<sup>10</sup> and Modern theorists of religion still seem to be struggling with Euthyphro’s dilemma. The foundational thinkers of the social sciences gravitated towards one side of Euthyphro’s dilemma. Rooted in modernity and secularization, they viewed religion as a social construct. Endorsing the scientific method as their epistemological framework, Durkheim (1915) defined religion as a system of social knowledge, and Geertz saw religion as merely a “system of symbols... formulating conceptions of a general order of existence” (cited in Asad, 1993, p. 29).

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<sup>10</sup> The discussion on “The Oven of ‘Akhnai” (Bava Metzia, 59a-b) is probably the most well-known example.

Later thinkers, such as Asad and Mahmood, problematized that notion from the other side of Euthyphro's dilemma. They emphasized the importance of adherence to religious rites as a precondition for constituting the knowledge within the believer (Mahmood, 2005; Asad, 1993).

## RELIGION IN ISRAEL

Understanding the different approaches to Euthyphro's dilemma sheds light on the ongoing debates regarding the public role of religion and religious authority. Religion has fascinated sociologists since the emergence of the social sciences as an academic discipline, and there are ongoing debates regarding secularization and the changing role of religion in the public sphere (Casanova, 1994; Butler et. al, 2011). However, as Casanova famously states: "There is no consensus, perhaps there will never be, as to what counts as religion" (Casanova, 1994, p. 26). Therefore, it is necessary to "unpack" what it is we talk about when we talk about religion.

The problem of understanding social processes of secularization and religionization magnifies in Israel, where the Jewish religion serves as a strong force in civil religion and national legitimation (Liebman & Don-Yehiya, 1983; Abulof, 2014). A mix of ideological, political, and practical considerations kept religion as a strong force in the Israeli public sphere (Kimmerling, 2001; Katsman and Ben-Porat, 2019). Despite the inability to separate religion and state in Israel, the Israeli Labor movement was able to create a secular hegemony, in which the public role of religion was limited to certain domains. However, the gradual decline of the Labor-Zionist secular hegemony since 1977 has created anxiety among the secular public from the increasing social and political influence of the religious-Zionist movement. This anxiety has intensified over the last decade. Maniv & Benziman noted the rapid increase in public discussions of "religionization" [*Hadatah*] in Israeli media during the 2010s, pointing to an increase of 1000% in the use of the term over just three years (Maniv & Benziman, 2020).

Following the public debate, there are some attempts by researchers of Israel to account for this phenomenon and analyze different modes of religionization in Israeli society. In 2012 the *Israel Studies Review* published a roundtable discussion on the subject, in which scholars presented the empirical evidence for the phenomenon (Israel Studies Review, 2012). Israeli sociologist Yagil Levy went even further, arguing that the Israeli military has undergone a process of ‘theocratization,’ in which military orders are being subjected to religious authority (Levy, 2014; 2015). Recently, Yoav Peled & Horit Herman-Peled published a comprehensive account of religionization processes in Israeli society (Peled & Herman-Peled, 2019). In their book, they provide an elaborate historical analysis of the process, as well as demonstrating how almost every domain of the Israeli society has been affected by religionization.

In contrast to this body of work, Guy Ben-Porat argues that the Israeli society has actually been secularizing since the 1990s. Ben-Porat does not deny the increasing public role of Judaism in Israel, but rather makes an analytical distinction between ‘secularism’ as an ideology and ‘secularization’ as a social phenomenon. Following Mark Chaves (1994), Ben-Porat defines secularization as “the decline of religious authority and challenges to existing religious institutions” (Ben-Porat, 2013, p. 12). Applying Joel Migdal’s state-in-society approach (Migdal, 2001), he traces these developments that took place not as official state policies but rather as the result of individuals’ decisions frequently based on economic considerations. Focusing on four issues - Regulation on marriage, civil burial, the ban on selling pork, and commerce on the Sabbath, Ben-Porat demonstrates that religious authority is in-fact declining and an increasing number of Israelis are choosing are ignoring, and in some cases actively opposing, traditional religious authorities (Ben-Porat, 2013).

How can we reconcile these two opposing views? Is it possible that Israel is religionizing despite the decline of religious authority? Most authors point to the religious-Zionist sector as the primary agent of religionization in the Israeli society (Peled & Herman-Peled, 2019; Levy, 2015; Maniv & Benziman, 2020). However, my research on the religious-Zionist community in Israel reveals a more complex picture. On the one hand, as I will demonstrate in this article, religious authority is indeed in decline, and dissent is visible even among the most conservative religious-Zionist circles. On the other hand, this does not necessarily mean that individuals are undergoing “secularization.” Returning to the anecdote of the family with the nose-pierced woman, we can see that a religious consideration could be used in order to reject a more traditional religious authority. However, as Euthyphro’s dilemma teaches us, this is not necessarily “secularization,” but rather a different understanding of what religion is.

In the next sections, I will describe some findings from fieldwork carried out within three conservative religious-Zionist communities, recently established in the southern Israeli desert. I will present the unique context of their establishment, which gives us an insight into the different trends of contemporary religious settlements in Israel.<sup>11</sup> I will then go on to present my findings on the various approaches to religious authority among the village members, which will then shed light on the debate regarding secularization and religious authority.

## HISTORICAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND

On July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2001, Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon brought to the cabinet a governmental decision announcing a plan to establish five new villages in the Halutza sands. The primary

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<sup>11</sup> Since 1967, the settlement efforts of the religious-Zionist community focused primarily on establishing settlements in the lands occupied during the 1967 war. The settlements described in this are unique since they were established within the “Green Line,” i.e. within the state of Israel and not within the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

objective behind this decision was an attempt to prevent the evacuation of these lands as part of a future peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians. The Halutza sands are within the 1967 borders, but due to their proximity to the Gaza strip the Israeli representatives in the “Geneva Initiative” negotiations intended them for a “land swap” in exchange for the settlement blocs in the West Bank.<sup>12</sup>

The blunt political incentive behind this decision raised opposition from left-leaning MKs. Those wondered why the government does not allocate these funds to strengthen the existing desert dwellers. According to MK Taleb al-San’a, this decision is not only meant to prevent peace but rather also an attempt to ‘Judaize’ the space. Al-San’a mentioned the struggle of the Al-‘Azazme Bedouin tribe which has requested to establish a permanent village in that area, in order to resettle a village they were evacuated from in the 1948 war. In the past, he says, the government objected the establishment of a new village in the Halutza sands for ‘security concerns,’ claiming the area was a military ‘firing zone.’ “When the government wants to establish a Jewish settlement, the firing zones are annulled immediately,” said al-San’a bitterly.<sup>13</sup>

Government offices moved on in the planning and zoning of the villages despite the political opposition, yet it was unclear who would eventually live there. Discussing this plan in his 2003 book, Israeli geographer Elisha Efrat wrote that “there is a doubt if the Halutza sands could provide the infrastructure for massive settlement ... it seems, that settlement in that area is a futile and pointless step” (Efrat, 2003, p. 99). Indeed, for years the government was not successful in attracting people to settle the villages. The solution came eventually only in 2005, just after Ariel Sharon completed his plan to evacuate 8,000 Jewish settlers who lived within the densely

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<sup>12</sup> The Palestinians rejected this proposal during the negotiations, arguing that it is desert land. The final Geneva Initiative document does not include the Halutza sands in the areas intended for land swap (Klein, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> [http://knesset.gov.il/tql/knesset\\_new/knesset15/HTML\\_28\\_03\\_2012\\_09-20-03-AM/20010718@225-01JUL18@047.html](http://knesset.gov.il/tql/knesset_new/knesset15/HTML_28_03_2012_09-20-03-AM/20010718@225-01JUL18@047.html)

populated Palestinian Gaza Strip, known as the “disengagement plan.” Two of the uprooted communities reached an agreement with Sharon to settle in the planned villages. The same people who were evacuated from their homes in Gaza by the decision of Ariel Sharon were also those who went on to materialize his vision of settlement in the Halutza sands. The irony in this development did not go unnoticed. On the contrary, many residents find pride in this.

Today, there are three thriving religious communities in the Halutza sands. While all three communities are religious-Zionist, each has unique characteristics. The variation is a result of the different historical trajectories of their establishment, and they preserve their cultural difference through a vetting process for new members. The villages also vary in their formal organization structure: Naveh and Bnei-Netzarim were established as a “*Moshav*,” and Shlomit is officially a “community settlement” [*Yishuv Kehilati*].

Originally, the idea of *moshav* was conceived in the 1920s as a smallholders’ cooperative community. In accordance with the Socialist-Zionist ideology, the *moshav* was based on communal values. The agricultural land is collectively owned by the *moshav*, but each household is considered an independent economic unit and entitled to an equal share of the land which it is expected to cultivate. Due to government economic policies and a general decline in agricultural income, today residents in *moshavim* hold various occupations and most of them lease their agricultural land to larger farms (Sofer & Applebaum, 2006).<sup>14</sup>

A “community village” is a newer type of settlement, which was conceived and developed under the right-wing “Herut” government after 1977 in order to settle the West Bank. As a result, the community settlement is based on liberal-individualistic values and usually has no agricultural

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<sup>14</sup> Since the residents of the Moshav received the land in order to cultivate it, leasing it is formally illegal. However, it is a known secret and in most cases the state turns a blind eye towards this violation as long as the land is not used for purposes other than agriculture.

lands and no collective ownership. Nonetheless, despite the different economic models, both community types have a general assembly, an executive board, and committees which enable them to democratically reach collective decisions and preserve the sense of a community. Perhaps most importantly, these communities have an “absorption committee” [*va'adat Klita*], which is intended to preserve social homogeneity within the community by vetting potential members (Newman, 1984).

### *Naveh*

The settlement of 'Atzmona was initially established in 1979 in Sinai, as a protest against the Camp-David accords.<sup>15</sup> In 1982 the Israeli government evacuated 'Atzmona's residents and resettled them in the Gaza Strip. In 2005, just before the evacuation of all Jewish settlements in Gaza ('Gush Katif'), some settlers from 'Atzmona reached a secret agreement with the government.<sup>16</sup> According to the agreement, they were to evacuate their village peacefully and would be given the opportunity to re-establish their community in one of the intended villages in the Halutza sands.<sup>17</sup> After the evacuation there was a split within the community – 65 families established a protest city of tents near the Southern city Netivot and eventually agreed to settle in Shomriya, closer to Israel's center. A smaller group, approximately 30 families, moved to temporary housing in Yated in order to prepare for their move to the future village nearby in Halutza. At the time, they say, there was nothing in Halutza. The road just came to an end and all you could see was sand. Only after four years of intensive development was the village ready for the initial families to move in.

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<sup>15</sup> On 17 September, 1978, Israel and Egypt signed a peace agreement. According to the agreement, Israel was to withdraw its troops and evacuate all settlements from the Sinai Peninsula, which it occupied from Egypt during the 1967 war.

<sup>16</sup> This is a sensitive issue among the evacuees, and I have heard various stories about it. Some people deny that an agreement was reached before the evacuation.

<sup>17</sup> Some people told me that it was the farmers from the village who pushed to accept this agreement since they already had agricultural land in the area.

Since 'Atzmona's rabbi moved to Shomriya, the remaining community was in search of a spiritual leader. During the period in Yated, they asked Rabbi Mordechai (Motti) Hass, head of a religious institution in the West Bank settlement Elli and a close disciple of Rabbi Zvi Tau (head of "Har HaMor" yeshiva in Jerusalem), to be the spiritual leader of their community. Rabbi Hass had a unique vision for the creation of an ideal ultra-religious-Zionist community in light of rabbi Kook's theology, and he moved to Yated with a group of his followers from Elli with the intent to materialize it. Very soon, the original settlers from 'Atzmona stepped aside from the leadership (some left Naveh), and rabbi Hass and his followers became the dominant figures in the community's leadership.

Naveh is a *moshav* of approximately 130 households.<sup>18</sup> There is a consensus among residents in the area that it is the most religiously conservative among the three villages.<sup>19</sup> Unlike most residents in the other villages (and in the religious-Zionist community in general), all of my male interviewees from Naveh undertook extensive religious studies in a yeshiva, at least into their late 20s. The majority of them studied in "institutions of the line" [*Yeshivot HaKav*].<sup>20</sup> Although it is formally registered as a *moshav*, its economic structure is intended to support the residents' Torah learning and therefore deviates from the standard model. Above all, the agricultural lands are not allocated to the residents, but rather held and cultivated by a communal agricultural association. The village's collective agricultural association employs workers, some of them from the village, to manage the collective property and cultivate the lands. This arrangement does not necessarily stem from an egalitarian worldview but rather in order to enable most residents to focus

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<sup>18</sup> Eventually, it is planned to reach 350 households.

<sup>19</sup> Some even say it is the most conservative religious-Zionist community nationwide.

<sup>20</sup> "The line" refers to a specific tone within the Hardal subculture, which follows Rabbi Tau. The most notable institution of "the line" is Tau's Har HaMor Yeshiva, and the yeshivas in Mitzpe Ramon and Hebron are also affiliated with "the line." The name comes from the ideological rigidity in the institutions, which requires students to adhere to Rabbi Tau's ideological "line."

on the study and teaching of the Torah. To that end, Naveh runs a network of religious educational institutions, most notably the “Otzem” Mechina (pre-military preparatory institution). “Otzem” was initially established in Atzmona by Israel’s former Minister of Education, Rabbi Rafi Peretz, who currently lives in Naveh. The Mechina is considered prestigious among religious-Zionist circles and draws religious youngsters who want to strengthen their religious identity prior to enlistment. In addition, in Naveh, there are two religious elementary schools and two high schools (separate institutions for boys and girls), as well as an intensive-study yeshiva for high school graduates. All educational institutions are privately funded and are therefore not subjected to curriculum requirements of the Ministry of Education.<sup>21</sup> Most institutions are not yet economically self-sustainable and are funded by the village’s economic revenues and donations. Many members of the community are employed in these institutions. Private entrepreneurship is not common in the village.

### *Bnei-Netzarim*

Similarly, Bnei-Netzarim was also established as a result of a split within a community of evacuees from Gush Katif in the Gaza Strip. Netzarim was initially established in 1972 as a military base in the outskirts of Gaza city and was populated by temporary groups. The Jewish enclave later changed to a religious Kibbutz (communal agricultural community) in 1984, but was not able to attract many families who would bear the risk of living in the area. Finally, in the early 1990s, a group of students from Merkaz Harav yeshiva joined, and the Kibbutz turned into a community settlement in 1992. After the Oslo agreements, Netzarim was completely isolated from the other Jewish settlements in Gaza, and travel to or from the village required an armored military convoy.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> In 2011, 2013, and 2016 math proficiency tests, the boys’ elementary school was ranked in the lowest decile.

<sup>22</sup> On May 4, 1994, Israel and the Palestinians signed an agreement in which Israel would reorganize its military presence in the Gaza Strip. The new arrangement limited the Israeli military’s ability to guarantee the security of

The settlers of Netzarim refused to negotiate with the government before the 2005 evacuation, hoping that the plan would not be executed. Therefore, they had no living arrangements after the evacuation and were placed temporarily in the students' housing of the Ariel College in the West Bank. While in Ariel, a debate emerged within the community. Learning about the plans of their friends from 'Atzmona to establish new settlements in Halutza, some wanted to join them, while others preferred to stay in Ariel. This debate tore the community apart and they decided to have a vote, resulting in only a slight majority of those who wanted to move to Halutza. Therefore, the community sadly decided to split, allowing each household to decide individually if it wanted to stay in Ariel or move to Halutza and establish a new village.

After the decision was made, those who chose Halutza moved to temporary housing in Yevul, where they waited for their village to be built. In contrast to Naveh, the original settlers of Netzarim are still dominant in the community leadership, and they see themselves as a direct continuation of the original community in Gaza. Some residents told me that arguing for a certain policy because "that is how it was in Netzarim" is common in village assemblies. This idea of continuity is also indicated by the name of the village ("Bnei-Netzarim" is Hebrew for "children of Netzarim").

As of 2019, out of 45 families from Netzarim that initially moved to the Yevul, only 22 were still living in Bnei-Netzarim. All in all, approximately 130 families live in the village.<sup>23</sup> Bnei-Netzarim is also considered to be extremely religious, but it allows more heterogeneity than Naveh. All my male interviewees from the village went to "yeshivas of the line," but only a few of them continued with their studies into their late 20s. The model in Bnei-Netzarim is closer to the original

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drivers on the road connecting Netzarim to the other Gaza settlements. As a result, if they wanted to visit other Gaza settlements they had to leave the Gaza strip completely and enter it from the other border crossings.

<sup>23</sup> Like Naveh, also Bnei-Netzarim is planned to reach 350 households.

idea of the moshav, and many individuals cultivate their agricultural lands. The village's lands that were not claimed by individual farmers are leased to large agriculture companies by the village's collective agricultural association, which generates revenues for the community. My impression was that the majority of members in Bnei-Netzarim are teachers, entrepreneurs, or college-educated professionals. A small minority receive a stipend for full-time studying of the Torah. Today, individuals who want to join the village and claim agricultural land must go through a trial period. The village allows them to rent their land for two years and provides them with training and mentorship. After this trial period, the new members can claim their land permanently and officially join the agricultural association. The logic behind this system, as was explained to me by members, is that the village wants to avoid the sight of abandoned greenhouses, which became common in many moshavim.

Similar to Naveh, Bnei-Netzarim operates several educational institutions. All these educational institutions are supported by the village but also rely heavily on Zionist donors' money. The village does not accept donations from Christian organizations.<sup>24</sup> Compared to Naveh, it is more common to see signs thanking donors across the village. Unlike Naveh, however, in Bnei-Netzarim the gender-separated elementary schools are public. Therefore, they are required to accept religious students from all the surrounding villages, and the curriculum is subjected to the Ministry of Education's requirements. A private men-only religious high school with dormitories [*Yeshiva-Tichonit*] also operates in the village, in which students work in agriculture for half a day and study (mostly religious studies) for the rest of the day. Like Naveh, in Bnei-Netzarim there is a yeshiva for high school graduates. Other than the; educational institutions, the village operates a guest house for conferences and workshops. Within the village, there is also a

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<sup>24</sup> A member of the community told me that once they even insisted on returning a significant donation, after retroactively finding out that it was from a Christian source.

large regional health clinic, a privately-owned small grocery store, a yoga studio, and some small businesses.

Naveh and Bnei-Netzarim partner in some economic initiatives, most notably they both hold shares in one of the largest solar-energy fields in Israel. This investment generates a stable revenue for both villages.

### *Shlomit*

The third village, Shlomit, has a quite different character from Naveh and Bnei-Netzarim, and its establishment followed a unique trajectory. Shlomit was initially planned to be a small town, which will eventually populate 500 families and serve as a social and commercial center for the region.<sup>25</sup>

The state did not intentionally plan the village for a religious-Zionist community. For a long time, the state was not able to find enough people (secular or religious) who would agree to settle this undeveloped area. Eventually, the initial Gar'in (settlement group) for Shlomit consisted mostly of graduates of the "Otzem" mechina (religious pre-military preparatory institution), who were all young religious couples with one child or more. These first families moved to Shlomit only in 2011, after Naveh and Bnei-Netzarim were already established in their current location.<sup>26</sup> In contrast to Naveh and Bnei-Netzarim, the people of Shlomit did not have a predetermined religious or symbolic vision for the village in their minds. Primarily, they were interested in living within a national-religious community with like-minded neighbors. At first, residents hoped that also secular Jews would join the village, but those did not show interest. Today the village is officially open to accepting couples from the entire range of the religious-Zionist spectrum, but the majority of residents turned out to be affiliated with the more conservative "Hardal" (Hebrew acronym for "national-ultra-Orthodox") subculture.

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<sup>25</sup> There are discussions of extending the village to 1500 families, but those plans have not yet been submitted.

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4116115,00.html>

As of 2019, only 70 families lived in Shlomit. Due to the relatively low housing prices, it has been growing quickly and intensive construction was visible. The community in Shlomit is relatively younger than the neighboring villages (mostly under 35) and consists of college-educated professionals. From a religious point of view, Shlomit is the most heterogenous village among the three. All of my interviewees continued their Torah studies after high school, but many of them also served in the military for the full 3-year term.<sup>27</sup> Being a “community village,” Shlomit does not possess any agricultural land and its only source of revenue is “community taxes” paid by residents and donations. As a result, Shlomit lacks the means for independent development, and the public areas in the village are far less developed in comparison to the neighboring villages.<sup>28</sup> Many of the roads are not paved, and only a few streets have sidewalks. Shlomit’s synagogue was still in a temporary building and is the least impressive among the three villages. There is one daycare in Shlomit, but older children are educated outside of the village, mostly in the Bnei-Netzarim elementary school.

## RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY AND THE OBSERVANCE OF HALACHA

Scholars consider the religious-Zionist sector, and even more so the conservative ‘Hardal’ subculture which these three communities are affiliated with, to be ideologically rigid (Herman et. al., 2014; Pfefer, 2007). However, my research finds a great ideological heterogeneity even within this subculture. What does characterize this subculture, though, is the attempt to create social boundaries of their community by presenting their ideology and actions as the only legitimate interpretation of Halacha. According to the largest survey conducted within the religious-Zionist

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<sup>27</sup> In the “Hesder” yeshivas most students defer their service and enlist for a shortened term of 16 months. In the “yeshivas of the line,” it is common for students to defer even longer and enlist only for 6-9 months.

<sup>28</sup> This might also be a result of inadequate planning. A resident told me that the village was initially planned by an architect who used an urban neighborhood as a model and therefore lacks planned public spaces.

community, 95.6% of those who self-identify as ‘Hardal’ and 80.1% of ‘national-religious’ agreed with the statement “Commitment to Halacha is an integral part of my identity” (Beit-Hillel, 2014). Some individuals confessed to me that they are not always able to follow every commandment, but they are committed to the aspiration to do so. When they are confronted with religious disagreements within their own community, they insist that the source of disagreement is a shared desire to truly interpret God’s will. Those who are not committed to Halacha face harsh social repercussions.<sup>29</sup>

But who has the authority to determine God’s will? In traditional Judaism, this was the role of the rabbis. They were the community’s leaders, and they guided their community also with regard to social and political matters. This is still the case within the ultra-Orthodox society, where the sages promote the idea of “Daat Torah” [*the Torah view*] (Brown, 2014). A survey conducted among religious-Zionists in 2014 found that most religious-Zionists hold that belief as well. According to the survey, 54% of religious-Zionists (and 87% of Hardal) attribute high importance to the rulings of rabbis on national-political matters (Herman et. al., 2014).

My findings, which are based on in-depth interviews, reveal a more complex picture.<sup>30</sup> Despite their commitment to Halacha, the modern education they received brought them to adopt some of the normative claims of secularization theory. Secularization theory differentiates “the sacred” from other spheres of human activity such as economics and politics (Casanova, 1994). Accordingly, I found that religious-Zionists consider the authoritative role of the rabbi to be confined only to matters regarding the interpretation of Halacha. The rabbi may have an opinion on public matters or provide individual counseling, but his advice on these matters is not

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<sup>29</sup> One of my interviewees was forced to divorce and leave their community after they confessed that they do not consider themselves obligated to Halacha.

<sup>30</sup> Since my interviews took place only 5 years after both surveys, it is not likely that the opinions changed so drastically over that time period.

considered binding. Those who follow them unquestionably do it out of their own will. Moreover, many of the individuals openly stated that they do not always agree with, or follow, rabbis' religious rulings. This does not vary with regard to the level of religiosity but is ubiquitous across the religious-Zionist community. In many cases, those who have a stronger religious background will have enough confidence to research a matter on their own instead of asking the rabbi for guidance. However, since they do consider the rabbis' opinion on matters of Halacha as binding, in many cases they will not ask the rabbi for a religious ruling, in order to not explicitly disobey it:

I have a friend here that is a “*ba'al teshuva*.”<sup>31</sup> After he became religious he lived in a “Mizrochnik” village.<sup>32</sup> He couldn't understand their behavior – Why do they not adhere to explicit rulings of Halacha?! It took him time to understand that there are nuances. I was just speaking to him. His rabbi told him to vote for *Shas* (an ultra-Orthodox political party), so he is voting for *Shas*. I respect that, but I believe that each one of us has a mind. Just like I go to the doctor when I have a medical question, I consult a lawyer when I have a legal question, so I would ask a rabbi when I have a question about Halacha. [...] Once I ask the rabbi, though, I am obligated. That is a matter of black-and-white for me. I don't play games with Halacha. Let's take traveling abroad for example.<sup>33</sup> My wife and I now traveled abroad for the first time. I used to oppose that as an ideal. I don't anymore. Maybe I'm less idealistic. We really wanted to do it, so we did it. Now, can I tell you that it's 100% in accordance with Halacha? I know some rabbis will say it's OK and some will say it's not. So I didn't ask. I know there are rabbis who permit - so I did it.

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<sup>31</sup> A term to describe someone who was not born religious but joined the religious community later in life.

<sup>32</sup> A term used to describe “classical,” non-“Hardal” religious-Zionism. Refers to the first religious-Zionist political party - the “Mizrachi.”

<sup>33</sup> Most religious scholars prohibit leaving the Land of Israel for vacation.

Growing up within the Israeli society, which since the 1980s has become more individualistic, members of these communities want to make their own decisions. They expect their rabbi to give them guidance, not authority:

In public matters, it is important that the rabbi gives a general direction, but he cannot coerce. [...] Not everything is a matter that you need to ask the rabbi about. At the beginning of our marriage, we had many questions about *Niddah*.<sup>34</sup> My husband often went to the village rabbi and asked him. One evening the rabbi told him “come sit with me for a moment, you don’t need to ask every little thing.” You have Halacha books, you don’t have to run and ask the rabbi. He taught him – “this is prohibited, this is not.” The knowledge is yours. That is a rabbi’s greatness. Not to have the people dependent on you.

Some of my interviewees said they have completely lost their faith in rabbis’ counseling. One woman told me how she consulted with her rabbi about her abusive and violent husband. The rabbi suggested that she change her behavior in order to accommodate his needs and achieve domestic peace [*Shlom Bayit*]. After several months of this not working, and the violence persisting, a friend insisted that she contact the state social services. Eventually, she got a divorce, but her husband remained in the community and she was the one forced to leave. Since then, she told me, she has lost her faith in rabbis. Another woman told me how her personal experience taught her not to rely on rabbis:

Personally I identify myself with the Hardal subculture, but with regard to my faith in religious-Zionist rabbis... let’s say that I have a problem with what religious-Zionists colloquially call “faith in the sages” [*Emunat Chachamim*] I do not like the religious-Zionist rabbinic leadership. Every time I tried to rebuild my faith in rabbis something came

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<sup>34</sup> Niddah refers to a woman during menstruation, or in the period following it before the immersion in a ritual bath. During the period that a woman is considered “Niddah,” any physical contact with her husband is prohibited.

and brought it down. A rabbi transgressed... Even rabbi Druckman, who I consider our rabbi, and I highly appreciate his contribution to the Israeli society.<sup>35</sup> With one piece of advice that he gave me he was wrong. I don't 'burn' someone because of one mistake, but this experience taught me that I need to trust my own deliberation and not rely on rabbis.

I was surprised by these statements and wondered how the rabbis understand their role. Interestingly, they seem aware of these sentiments among their congregations, and they try to rule accordingly. The rabbi of one of the villages told me that he himself will not feel obligated to follow a public ruling of his own rabbi if he did not specifically request a ruling. This rabbi also described to me how he understands his role within the community:

I make a clear distinction. If I am asked about Halacha I say "this is what the Halacha says." With regard to public matters, I state my opinion as a general recommendation, try to illuminate some aspects... They recently consulted with me about the upcoming elections for village leadership. So we sat and discussed this matter. They are really interested in what I have to say, but not as a binding decision. I really try as much as possible to avoid being the one making the decision. I actually run away from this. This is also not healthy for the person asking. I believe that one's freedom of mind is important.

These findings are important since the majority of writing on religious-Zionism overemphasizes the importance of the rabbis' opinions. In some cases, scholars consider rabbinic discourse, represented in their books, public statements, and responsa, to represent the view of the religious-Zionist public (Hellinger et. al. 2018). An illustrative example of this is the debate over disobeying a military command to evacuate a Jewish village. Most religious-Zionist rabbis have ruled that a soldier must disobey an order to evacuate a Jewish settlement (Roth, 2014). In practice, though,

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<sup>35</sup> Rabbi Haim Druckman, a prominent religious-Zionist rabbi, head of the "Or-Etzion" yeshiva.

only 63 soldiers explicitly disobeyed orders during the 2005 Gaza evacuation. In a survey conducted among religious-Zionists in 2014, only 23% stated that “you must disobey” an evacuation order, showing that they do not consider rabbis’ ruling as binding (Herman et. al., 2014). We can conclude, therefore, that we cannot view public rabbinic rulings as representing the opinions within the religious-Zionist community. Moreover, the fact that there is a decline in religious authority does not indicate secularization. Even the most religious individuals I met presented ambivalent views regarding their rabbinic authority, without feeling that this compromises their religiosity.

## DATLASHIM

In this context, it is also important to discuss a group that is frequently overlooked in research on the religious-Zionism. During my interviews, I also encountered a significant number of “*Datlashim*” (plural of ‘*Datlash*’ - Hebrew acronym for “ex-religious”), who are part of an increasing trend in the religious-Zionist society. According to recent research, more than half of religious-Zionists are less religious than the house they grew up in (Rosner & Fuchs, 2018). However, socially, they cannot be excluded from the research on the religious-Zionist community (Katsman, 2020). The *Datlashim* I interviewed tend to reject the binary self-identification as “religious” or “secular.” The *Datlashim* do not feel committed to, and sometimes openly reject, Halacha, though some of them still adhere to certain aspects. At the same time, they do not break ties with their community, and in most cases still identify with it ideologically (Gal-Getz, 2011). Most *Datlashim* in the region are young (18-28), and were raised within these communities. The children in Shlomit are still too young, so there are currently no *Datlashim* in the village. Naveh is not tolerant of *Datlashim*, and most of them prefer not to stay in the village. Therefore, all the *Datlashim* I interviewed were from Bnei-Netzarim. Some still lived with their families, and others

moved to live and work in other secular villages in the area while maintaining a close connection with their family and village.

The *Datlashim* all shared feelings of resentment towards their religious leadership and the coercion they experienced within their communities during their teenage years. These feelings are mostly directed at people of the village who tried to control their physical appearance and the relations between sexes. They considered this hypocritical. They were brought up to value compassion and justice, but in the end, they felt they were judged superficially by the length of their skirts or the color of their hair.

I was a youth counselor at 'Bnei Akiva,' but eventually I quit.<sup>36</sup> I had a boyfriend from the village and I didn't want to hide and lie about it. When I started wearing pants in the village I didn't hear comments but there were constant stares.<sup>37</sup> I once took a walk with a friend, and the next day he showed me that he got a text - "How can you hang out with this outcast girl?" [...] I was really hurt by this, that this is all they see in me.

Another woman told me how tensions regarding the way she dressed brought her to realize that she is no longer part of the community.

I met with the education committee and the village Rebbetzin (rabbi's wife). [...] They started preaching to me about modest dressing. They told me: "You must understand, when people see you like this it shatters their dream. People came here because they want to live in a certain place. It's like a man will wear a skirt, it's strange." [...] Until then, I didn't think that there is anything wrong with the way I dressed, so now I need to think about

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<sup>36</sup> Bnei-Akiva is the largest religious-Zionist youth movement. Counselors are high school age.

<sup>37</sup> Most Jewish Orthodox communities consider wearing pants immodest, and women are expected to wear long skirts (the acceptable length varies).

this?! The way men view me? I understood that I don't belong. I'm outside of the line, and that sucks.

While they left their communities, and no longer feel obligated to Halacha, some *Datlashim* still seek a certain connection to Judaism, on their own terms. Some describe a spiritual connection to God and some admit they still partially observe Halacha, though they do not feel committed to adhering to every aspect of it. They feel free to pick and choose which commandments they want to follow. I asked one *Datlash* who expressed this ambivalent feeling if he considers himself religious. "I'm Jewish, brother," he said smiling. When I asked if he sees himself becoming religious again in the future he replied:

I'll tell you what it is. I like the religion, not the religious people. That's the problem. I try. I put up *Mezuzot*<sup>38</sup> in my house, I wear *Tefilin*<sup>39</sup> when I feel like it, not every day. Sometimes I recite the "*Shema*" before I go to bed.<sup>40</sup> Sabbath is still difficult. [...] I will eat in a non-kosher restaurant, but I will not eat a cheeseburger. I never ate shrimp.<sup>41</sup> But my house is Kosher in case my brother or father will want to come over.

While none of the *Datlashim* expressed commitment to Halacha, most of them still identified with the Zionist nationalist ideology they grew up in. Politically, they tend to identify with right-wing and even religious parties, and most of them are still committed to the idea of the sacredness of the land of Israel:

I think I can never get "The Land of Israel" out of my system. I don't know if I want to or not. Everything about it thrills me, excites me. It got to a point that I said "enough! I don't

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<sup>38</sup> Orthodox Jews interpret Jewish law to require a piece of parchment with verses from Deuteronomy to be placed on every doorstep in the house (except bathrooms).

<sup>39</sup> A pair of small black leather boxes containing scrolls of parchment inscribed with verses from the Torah. Orthodox Jews see high importance in wearing these every weekday morning during prayer.

<sup>40</sup> A verse from Deuteronomy 6:4-9, which is recited by Orthodox Jews three times a day: During morning prayer, evening prayer, and before going to bed.

<sup>41</sup> Shrimp and cheeseburger are forbidden foods for Jews who only eat Kosher.

want to feel this way anymore!” I always say that the Land of Israel is the actual (religious-Zionist) religion. That is the big thing. God. [...] Last year I started college. Academia is the biggest lie there is, and it drives me crazy that I’m a part of it. [...] It is so leftist! They tell you to “think outside the box,” but what they really mean is “think inside our box.” [...] This whole thing was a shock to me because in my own village I am the one called “the leftist” [...] I am studying this course on the history of the Middle-East, the lecturer is Arab. She showed us a film on the War of Independence from the Arab point of view. A lot of shooting, IDF soldiers constantly killing Arabs. I didn’t know what to do, at some point I couldn’t stay. I left the classroom.

These findings suggest that we must reconsider our understanding of the centrality of Halacha in the national-religious sector. As I have shown, even within the Hardal society rabbis’ rulings on public and political matters are not considered binding. Some may choose to follow their public rulings, but the society (and rabbis themselves) do not perceive this as an obligation. Even with regard to the interpretation of Halacha, where they do have authority, their interpretation is considered binding only when explicitly asked to provide a ruling. Also, there is a significant population that grew up within the national-religious education system that does not feel committed to Halacha whatsoever. They do not define themselves as religious but stay within the national-religious sphere of influence. They still hold to many aspects of the value system they grew up on and identify with the right-wing political camp.

## CONCLUSION

The religiosity of religious-Zionist settlers in the Halutza Sands provides a complex image of adherence to religion in contemporary Israel. Scholars of the Israeli society are concerned by the ‘religionization’ of many domains in the Israeli society, fearing their eventual subjection to

religious authority. However, my research demonstrates that even the most conservative segments of the Israeli religious-Zionist community do not necessarily accept religious authority unquestioningly. On the contrary, they partially accept the normative premises of secularization theory and confine religious authority to matters strictly related to Halacha. They will consider religious reasoning on public matters, but in no way will accept it as binding.

At the same time, the fact that religious authority is in decline does not mean that religion is in decline altogether. As Euthyphro's dilemma teaches us, there are two ways in which we can understand religion. Instead of interpreting religion as blindly following religious authority, Euthyphro's dilemma shows us that also individuals and societies have the power of constructing what religion is. The individuals I interviewed for this article believe that their religion requires them to have an independent mind and think for themselves. Even the supposed dissenters, the *Datlsahim*, are still connected to the Jewish religion, despite their complete disregard for formal religious authority.

Despite the predictions of secularization theory, religion is a stronger force than ever worldwide, whether these are formal traditional forms of religion or 'new age' spiritualities. This article offers a contribution to making sense of this phenomenon through the study and understanding of the contemporary religious-Zionist community in Israel. As this article demonstrates, understanding religious authority, dissent, and the self-perception of believers is crucial in the study of religion. This analysis of the different understanding of what constitutes 'religion' can be applied in various cases globally, and will hopefully contribute to the future international study of religion.

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## PART 3: RELIGIOUS-ZIONIST CONSERVATISM<sup>42</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

During 2020, an advertisement for the “Jerusalem” program on the foundations of conservative thought for outstanding graduate students began to appear on social media. The Tikvah Fund, who runs the program, offered each participant 15,000 NIS (~\$4,500) upon completion. When I came to read the program’s syllabus, I was surprised to see “The Prison Notebooks” written by the Italian thinker Antonio Gramsci. Why would an American fund with a strong religious-Zionist tone that is known for promoting neo-liberal economics to the Israeli society teach students the writings of a socialist intellectual who was critical of capitalism?

Later, through my interviews with prominent figures in the Israeli conservative movement, I came to realize the dual significance they see in Gramsci’s thought. First, it enables them to comprehend that despite the fact that between 1977-2020 the right-wing Likud party led the Israeli government for 32 out of 43 years, it has still not been able to materialize its goals. Gramsci asserted that politics in liberal-democratic societies are no longer a “war of maneuver” but rather a “war of possession.” To bring political change, the revolutionary group must tackle the ruling hegemony. This goal is not achieved merely by democratic elections, but rather through a prolonged process, in which organic intellectuals establish a counter-hegemonic worldview and slowly change the balance of power in the cultural and legal spheres. Applying this theory to Israel, conservative Israelis believe that leftists still control the Israeli media, culture, and especially the legal system, therefore preventing the right-wing majority from carrying out their worldview.

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<sup>42</sup> My use of “conservative” in this article does not refer to the Jewish religious movement. In Hebrew, the Jewish religious movement translates as “Masorti” (traditional) while the political movement I describe in this article translates as “Shamrani.”

More important than the analysis, though, are the political implications. Understanding how hegemonic struggles work, the conservative movement is consciously trying to establish a counter-hegemony – training young organic intellectuals, establishing NGOS and media outlets, challenging the legal system, and motivating supporters to enter the public service.

The conservatism conference, organized by The Tikvah Fund in 2019, was supposed to be the turning point. The conference was a remarkable success. 800 people registered for the conference (paying for their tickets), and more than 1,000 more remained on the waiting list. The event received public attention and was even covered by the Israeli left-leaning newspaper *Ha'aretz*. The conference brought together leading free-market activists, conservative intellectuals, hawkish politicians, and journalists. However, despite the conference organizers' attempt to appeal to the general Israeli right-wing public, most presenters and speakers were religious-Zionists. Out of the 36 speakers in the 2019 conference, at least 16 were religious-Zionists.<sup>43</sup> Visitors to the conference noted the disproportionate presence of religious-Zionists in the audience.<sup>44</sup>

The religious-Zionist community tends to support right-wing hawkish politics, but other elements of the conservative movement – particularly, the support of neo-liberal economics, seem foreign to traditional religious-Zionist thought. During the movement's first stages, religious-Zionism held a socialist inclination. The labor-oriented HaPoel HaMizrachi was established already in 1922 and had its own kibbutz movement, in which Orthodox Jews lived within egalitarian communities centered around labor and social justice (Peled and Herman-Peled 2019). Moreover, the National-Religious Party platform for the 1992 elections explicitly stated their

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<sup>43</sup> These figures refer only to those who I could confirm were religious-Zionist. I was not able to confirm the religious affiliation of some of the speakers. Religious-Zionists are approximately 11% of the Jewish population in Israel.

<sup>44</sup> <https://www.haaretz.co.il/magazine/the-edge/premium-1.7274758>

support for worker unions and the need to guarantee collective contracts. Therefore, these ideas seem like a foreign influence on religious-Zionist ideology (Hominer, 2016).

Based on fieldwork carried out in Israel during 2020, and 14 in-depth semi-structured interviews with religious-Zionist activists in the conservative movement, this article will analyze the reasons behind these ideological changes. Furthermore, it will illustrate the relations between religious-Zionism and the conservative movement, presenting the conservative movement as a distinctly religious-Zionist project.

## THE RELIGIOUS-ZIONIST CRISIS

In part 1, I demonstrated how researchers understand religious-Zionism as a unique ideology, bringing together observance of the Orthodox religious code (Halacha) and political commitment to the Zionist movement and the State of Israel (Katsman, 2020a). Gideon Aran's groundbreaking research on the origins and ideology of "Gush Emunim" described the theological, political, and cultural revolution within religious-Zionism. According to Aran, Gush Emunim's theology transformed the movement "from religious-Zionism to a Zionist religion (Aran, 1987). In other words, instead of being a religious sub-culture within the secular Zionist movement, the commitment to Zionism was now perceived as stemming from, and therefore subjected to, their religious worldview. Following Aran, researchers of religious-Zionism understood the religious-Zionist community through this theological framework, which also shaped their interpretations to the 2005 evacuation of Gaza settlements. According to these researchers, these events brought religious-Zionist theology to a dead-end, an internal contradiction. How can one comprehend the fact that the sacred Israeli state is supposedly going against God's will and violently evacuating Jewish settlers on the Land of Israel?

It is hard to overestimate the impact of the 2005 disengagement plan on religious-Zionists. This event was traumatic for the religious-Zionist community for several reasons (Inbari, 2012). First, the overwhelming majority of Gaza settlers were religious-Zionists.<sup>45</sup> Even those who were not personally affected by the decision had friends and families that lived in the settlements. Second, religious-Zionists interpreted the disengagement as a political failure. They led the political struggle but failed to gain active support from the broader Israeli society (Alimi, 2013). Most importantly, the literature describes the disengagement as a theological crisis. Many religious-Zionists hold a strong “statist” ideology [*Mamlakhtiyut*]. They believe that the Israeli state has a divine significance, being “The foundation of God’s throne in the world” (Kook, 1921). The uprooting of Jewish settlements, which were perceived as a redemptive fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham, seemed incomprehensible.

Therefore, these events brought some religious-Zionists to reexamine their religious identity vis-a-vis their commitment to the Israeli Jewish state. During the struggle against the evacuation, the settlers’ leadership sought to prevent violence and keep the protests within legitimate boundaries. Following the “statist” approach, they obeyed the military’s orders in most cases, and violence was rare and limited (Roth, 2014). Retrospectively, many religious-Zionists blamed these peaceful tactics as the root of the struggle’s failure. As a response, they adopted a “post-statist” worldview. The state is not intrinsically holy, they maintain, but rather holds only an instrumental importance as long as it advances religious goals. Therefore, there is no religious imperative to abide by state laws, and further evacuation of settlements must be fought at all costs (Hellinger et. al., 2018; Harel, 2017). This notion fueled violence against police officers during the evacuation of Amona in 2006 (Alimi, 2013; Roth, 2014), and more recently by the phenomenon

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<sup>45</sup> Out of 21 settlements, only 5 permitted driving on the Sabbath within the settlement

of the “hilltop youth” and “price tag” violent incidents (Hellinger et. al. 2018).<sup>46</sup> Also religious-Zionist authors, who tend to downplay the influence of “post-statist” sentiments among religious-Zionists, acknowledge the crises and speak of the “loss of naivety” and moving away from the messianic Kookist framework (Sheleg, 2015; Geiger 2011, 2014).

While there is no doubt that the theo-political crisis played a significant role in shaping post-2005 religious-Zionist identity, the emphasis on theology has led researchers to overlook other important effects. Religious-Zionist individuals vary in their level of religiosity, and many of them are not committed to the Kookist messianic worldview. These religious-Zionists support the settlement enterprise due to rational political considerations. They simply believe that the evacuation was carried out through a corrupt and undemocratic political process and has severely compromised Israel’s security (Cohen, 2005). These individuals have also protested against the disengagement and experienced it as a traumatic event. However, they experienced the 2005 events as a political (not theological) crisis and the scholarship fails to address the effects of this trauma on them. As I will show, religious-Zionists in the conservative movement describe the trauma of the disengagement as the driving force behind their activism. The rise of the conservative movement is the religious-Zionist response to this *political* crisis. I will now present a survey of the main institutions of the Israeli conservative movement in Israel and the important role religious-Zionists take in them.

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<sup>46</sup> “Hilltop youth” is a name referring to youngsters who establish illegal outposts in the WB. “Price tag” attacks are incidents in which Jewish settlers attack Palestinians and vandalize their property, sometimes as a response to Palestinian terror attacks.

## THE CONSERVATIVE MOVEMENT IN ISRAEL

Conservatism is a long entrenched political philosophy. Scholars have debated over the exact definition of conservatism, but according to Samuel Huntington, “All the analysts of conservatism, moreover, unite in identifying Edmund Burke as the conservative archetype and in assuming that the basic elements of his thought are the basic elements of conservatism” (Huntington, 1957, p. 456). Burke was a religious man, and he believed that religion is the foundation of civil society. Burke was skeptical towards French individualism and human reasoning, and preferred tradition, inherited order and existing institutions over man-made change. As put by the 20<sup>th</sup> century conservative thinker Michael Oakeshott: “To be conservative, then, is to prefer the familiar to the unknown, to prefer the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, the limited to the unbounded, the near to the distant, the sufficient to the superabundant, the convenient to the perfect, present laughter to utopian bliss” (Oakeshott, 1991). However, as this article shows, the Israeli conservative movement does not refrain from calling for substantial changes in the Israeli society and politics. This is not a unique characteristic of the Israeli case, but rather a phenomenon that can be observed also among the American conservative movement (Huntington, 1957). Therefore, while activists in the Israeli conservative movement present themselves as following the tradition of Edmund Burke, they are actually promoting a novel religious-nationalist ideal, influenced by their American counterparts (Sagiv, 2020).

The penetration of neo-liberal and libertarian economic ideas into the religious-Zionist society received considerable attention from the Israeli media. These economic ideas are only part of a broader ideological worldview, promoted by NGOs, think tanks, educational programs, news websites, and two publishing houses. Over the past few years, and specifically since the first conservatism conference in 2019, individuals and organizations acting in this sphere started to self-

identify as “conservative” [*Shamrani*]. This was a conscious attempt to brand this ideology and market it to a broader audience in the Israeli society, who might not be well-versed in political economy or constitutional law.

This phenomenon was not yet described thoroughly in the academic literature. Moshe Hellinger and Isaac Londin describe the neo-liberal tendencies in religious-Zionism. Writing in 2012, they describe neoliberalism merely as one of several political-economic worldviews in religious-Zionism, missing the significance of conservatism as a social movement, which was not yet quite developed at the time. (Hellinger and Londin, 2012). In 2016, the magazine “*Deot*,” published in Hebrew by the progressive religious-Zionist organization “*Ne’emanei Torah V’Avodah*,” dedicated a special issue to the subject. The articles in that issue described the origins of these ideas and debated them, but they focus on economics and thus overlook the greater hegemonic project (Hominer, 2016). In their book on the religionization of the Israeli society, Yoav Peled and Horit Herman-Peled analyze the religious-Zionist hegemonic process, but they only briefly touch upon the economic worldviews of religious-Zionists. Their analysis leads them to the conclusion that “in its quest for cultural hegemony Religious Zionism clearly does not mean to challenge the neo-liberal socio-economic philosophy or institutional arrangements that have dominated Israeli society since the mid-1980s” (Peled & Herman-Peled, 2019, p. 72).

Therefore, there has not yet been a thorough description of the conservative movement, and its significance as part of the religious-Zionist hegemonic process was generally overlooked. In the following section I will map out the main organizations operating in the conservative sphere in Israel, while emphasizing the leading role religious-Zionists take in them.

## SHALEM CENTER

A comprehensive description of the Israeli conservative movement must start with the Shalem Center [*Merkaz Shalem*], the pioneer conservative institution in Israel. Founded in 1994 by a group of conservative academics led by Yoram Hazony, The Shalem Center is not an integral part of the phenomenon I am discussing in this chapter but preceded it by more than a decade. Hazony is a thinker who writes about conservatism, nationalism, and political philosophy in the Hebrew scripture. The Shalem Center initially started as an attempt to introduce the American conservative think tank culture to Israeli society, and was funded by big American donors such as Sheldon Adelson, Ron Lauder, and The Tikvah Fund.<sup>47</sup> Besides serving as a think tank, the Shalem Center ran programs and seminars for students and researchers and published two conservative periodicals: “Hebraic Political Studies” and “Azure: Ideas for the Jewish Nation” [*Tchelet*], which was published in Hebrew between 1996-2012, and is considered to be the spiritual forefather of “*Hashiloach*” (see below).

Today, most activities in the Shalem Center are focused around the “Shalem College” [*Hamerkaz ha’Akademi Shalem*], founded in 2013. The Shalem College claims to be “A college in the service of the Jewish State.”<sup>48</sup> It is a 4-year-program college, inspired<sup>49</sup> by the model of liberal-arts colleges in the US, aiming to offer a broad education in the humanities, regardless of the student’s major.<sup>49</sup> The tuition in the college is high compared to Israel (approximately 11,000\$ annually, more than three-times the tuition in Israeli public universities), but the institution offers generous scholarships and living stipends.

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<sup>47</sup> <https://www.yediot.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5073031,00.html>

<sup>48</sup> <https://shalem.ac.il/en/>

<sup>49</sup> In Israel, most students enroll in 3-year programs, in which they pre-choose their major. As opposed to the US, Israeli students are not required to take many courses that are not directly related to their major.

The biggest contribution of the Shalem Center to the contemporary conservative movement is its publishing house, Shalem Press. Through its “Leviathan” series, they gave Israeli readers access to important philosophical works in their mother-tongue. Some of these books have canonical status regardless of their political orientation.<sup>50</sup> The *Leviathan* series also includes works by major conservative thinkers, as well as works by neo-liberal economists, subtly implying that these works share a similar status.<sup>51</sup> Some of my interviewees specifically mentioned reading these books as the first time they were introduced to conservative thought, and their influence on them. A religious-Zionist libertarian explained to me how he reached his worldview:

I read Hayek’s “*The Constitution of Freedom*,” which was recommended to me. It is terrific book. Another book, probably from one of Shalem’s sales, was Thomas Sowell’s “*Basic Economics*.” A terrific book that opened my eyes to all kinds of perceptions I have never thought about. For example, the problem of minimum wage. When you grow up you do not think about minimum wage as something problematic, it is just there. And then when he shows the difficulties that minimum wage causes you say to yourself “this is interesting.” Let’s say that you can blame the Shalem Press for the fact that I have in my house what I call “the black Talmud,”<sup>52</sup> with all their “buy 1 get 2 free” sales. Classics...

The Shalem Center introduced conservative thought and neo-liberal economics to the Israeli public. It was founded by excellent academic figures who were interested in diversifying the intellectual discussion in Israel, by introducing Israelis to ideas that were not accessible to them in Hebrew. While it is likely that there were political motivations behind the establishment of the

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<sup>50</sup> Examples would be Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, Mill’s *On Freedom*, Machiavelli’s *The Prince* and *Discourses on Livy*, and Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*.

<sup>51</sup> Examples for these books would be Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Friedrich Hayek’s *The Road to Serfdom* and *the constitution of liberty* and Milton Friedman’s *Capitalism and Freedom*.

<sup>52</sup> All books published in the Leviathan series are black. When put together on a bookshelf they can resemble a set of the *Talmud* books, which is very common to have presented in a bookcase in the living rooms of Orthodox Jewish houses.

Shalem Center, they were kept subtle, and the intellectual excellence and quality of the Center's activities were not compromised.

## THE TIKVAH FUND

The Tikvah Fund is the main political organization promoting conservatism in Israel. It was founded already in 1998, and by far enjoys the largest budget. The Tikvah Fund also supports smaller organizations in the conservative sphere. For example, the neo-liberal think tank, "Kohelet Policy Forum," (see below) received more than \$1 million over the course of five years.<sup>53</sup> The Tikvah Fund sees itself as spearheading and organizing the conservative movement in Israel, and in 2019 they held the first "conservatism conference" in Israel, which drew media attention and situated The Tikvah Fund as an important political actor in Israel. The chairperson of The Tikvah Fund is Roger Hertog, an American businessperson with close ties to the Republican Party establishment and a supporter of the Israeli prime-minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The Israeli branch of The Tikvah Fund has a clear religious-Zionist tone, and the CEO of the Israeli branch is Amiad Cohen, a religious-Zionist settler from Eli.

The Tikvah Fund was founded by Zalman Bernstein, an American-born Jewish philanthropist, who made his fortune through an investment company he founded. In 1989 he immigrated to Israel, where he lived until he passed away in 1999. After his death, his wife Mem Bernstein continued the philanthropic work. At first, The Tikvah Fund focused on organizing seminars for students in New York. These seminars fully fund the participants' travel and accommodation, together with a generous financial stipend. These seminars discuss Zionism, Judaism, conservative thought, economics, strategy and more. The seminars are known to have a

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<sup>53</sup> <https://www.yediot.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5073031,00.html>

strong neo-liberal inclination and many of the lecturers in the seminars are Israeli religious-Zionists.

It was not until 2010 that The Tikvah Fund began to seek more influence in the Israeli society. Among their first activities were the establishment of the “Mida” news website in 2012 and the PES (Political philosophy, economy, and strategy) summer programs. The founder of these projects described how this happened:

I met with them (The Tikvah Fund) and I told them “if you want to have influence here, I suggest you do two things. First, establish a daily website that will translate our conservative political values to timely events. [...] If there would be a daily website that will discuss what is happening now through these values so people will be interested. The second thing you must do is take the student intellectual elite and teach them what is not being taught at the universities. “conservative thought” they call it... I call it “classical liberalism” [...] Teach the best students in Israel conservative thought, and the effects of that will reverberate in 20-30 years.” That is how education works. It has influence in the long-term, not at once.

In 2016 The Tikvah Fund began to publish “*Hashiloach*” – a conservative periodical. The editor Yoav Sorek is also a religious-Zionist, and his deputy is Tzur Erlich, a religious-Zionist journalist and poet. Both Sorek and Erlich live in West Bank settlements. The editorial religious-Zionist influence is evident as many articles discuss religious-Zionist ideology and internal religious-Zionist debates. *Hashiloach* is a continuation of Shalem Center’s “*Azure*,” and “*Azure*”’s archive is available on *Hashiloach*’s website. As of early 2020, *Hashiloach* had approximately 4,000 paying subscribers, though all its materials are available online free of charge. Despite the attempt to present it as a sustainable project, it is subsidized by The Tikvah Fund. As one of my

interviewees told me, “The money that Tikvah receives from the subscribers to *Hashiloach* does not cover the costs of the coffee corner in their offices.” *Hashiloach* publishes long essays written on various subject by Israeli and international authors.

The Tikvah Fund is the driving force behind the rise of conservative thought in Israel over the past decade. Organizing the conservatism conference was a conscious effort by Tikvah to aggregate the organizations active in this sphere under the brand-name “conservatism” [*Shamranut*]. 16 organizations appeared as “partners” on the conference website, though six of them are merely projects completely operated by Tikvah from their offices. Almost all other “partner” organizations received financial support from Tikvah. Moreover, the American donors see the religious-Zionist public as carrying the greatest potential to relate to this worldview and promote it in Israel, since they are perceived as nationalist, religious, and socially conservative. This is demonstrated by the fact that many of its employees are religious-Zionist, and the high rate of religious-Zionists that participate in their programs. However, the strong American tone that characterizes the fund raises suspicion in the wider Israeli public, who perceive this conservatism as a foreign influence that is artificially imposed on the Israeli public.

## THE KOHELET POLICY FORUM

The Kohelet Policy Forum (KPF) has strong ties to The Tikvah Fund, but it is a more genuinely “Israeli” project. The KPF was initially established by Prof. Moshe (“Moish”) Koppel, an Orthodox-Jewish American-born computer scientist from Bar-Ilan University, who also serves on the board of The Tikvah Fund.

The KPF was established in 2012 as a non-profit organization. The co-founders of the forum, together with Koppel, were Dr. Aviad Bakshi and Prof. Gideon (“Gidi”) Sapir - two religious-Zionist law professors from Bar-Ilan University. Early on they brought Meir Rubin

(Neria), a young lawyer who grew up in a religious-Zionist family, to join them and serve as the KPF's CEO.<sup>54</sup> According to the KPF's website, it is a think tank that “strives to secure Israel's future as the nation-state of the Jewish people, to strengthen representative democracy, and to broaden individual liberty and free-market principles in Israel.”<sup>55</sup> The funding for the forum comes from the anonymous American donor mentioned above (through an American NGO called “American Friends of Kohelet Policy Forum”), The Tikvah Fund, and some smaller donors. A senior in KPF told me that their budget is practically unlimited – The donors give them a “blank check” to carry out any activity they find necessary.

As of 2020, the KPF employs more than 100 researchers, who work in several departments: Economics, law, international law, education, and litigation. They attempt to be prepared with an established policy position to present to politicians and state officials once discussion becomes relevant. The policy papers cover a wide range of subjects. For example, “Worker unions in Israel: A financial analysis and legislation recommendations,” which recommends putting more restrictions on the right of worker unions to strike, to weaken solidarity between worker unions, to make it more difficult for workers to organize in a workplace, and to allow workplaces to financially penalize workers for striking (Feder, Sarel and Zicherman, 2016).

Since 2009, the government in Israel has been led by the Likud, a right-wing party that promotes neo-liberal economics. Policy recommendations that were developed in KPF now enjoy easy entry to the Knesset. A KPF senior told me how this works:

In the government that we worked with over the past five years – more than half the ministers asked for our opinion on the legislation that is brought before the ministerial

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<sup>54</sup> Rubin is the great-grandson of Rabbi Moshe Zvi Neria, a disciple of Rabbi Kook. Neria was a prominent religious-Zionist rabbi and the founder of the “Bnei Akiva” Yeshiva in Kfar Haro'eh.

<sup>55</sup> <https://en.kohelet.org.il/>

legislation committee.<sup>56</sup> More than half of the committee members. And we saw an incredible correlation between our recommendations and the way that they voted. In other words, they really care what we think.

Besides writing policy papers, the KPF also actively lobbies in the Israeli parliament, and asks to join as *amicus curiae* in legal cases in which they see political interest. Their main objective is policy change, and they are not shy about that:

Always, always, our main goal is to change something in the reality. We want something to happen. That something that exists will cease to exist, or that something that does not exist will exist. Always the physical change. Let us take for example the “Nation-state law.”<sup>57</sup> We needed a conference - so we organized a conference. A policy paper was needed - so we published a policy paper. We will do whatever is needed. If a two-year-long research comes down to one text-message to the right minister at the right moment to convince them, then we did our job. End of story.

On top of the political work, KPF also engages the public with the intention to advocate their worldview. They organize conferences, give public lectures, run a podcast on conservative political thought, and publish regularly on topical events through the traditional and new media.

Another main concern of the KPF is the Israeli academia. The KPF’s flagship project is the “Eitam” program for doctoral students.<sup>58</sup> The person behind the program is Gidi Sapir, a religious-Zionist law professor from Bar-Ilan University and one of the founders of KPF. The “Eitam”

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<sup>56</sup> Every private (i.e., non-governmental) legislation bill promoted by an MK must be reviewed by the ministerial legislation committee. This practice guarantees that legislation proposition will not pass in the parliament unless they are endorsed by the government.

<sup>57</sup> “Basic Law: Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People” is a semi-constitutional law passed in the Knesset in 2018. This law was highly controversial, as it is seen as un-democratic and erasing the status of national minorities and compromising their rights. The KPF promoted the bill avidly (see more below).

<sup>58</sup> The program is named after Eitam Henkin, who graduated from the program’s first cohort and was murdered with his wife in a terrorist attack on October 1, 2015.

program selects a team of doctoral students who present academic excellence in the humanities and social sciences, who receive a generous stipend of 75,000 NIS (~\$22,000) annually over the course of two years.<sup>59</sup> During this program, the students are expected to participate weekly in a day (10am-4pm) of lectures at the KPF's offices. The lectures cover a wide range of subjects, but focus mostly on public policy, economics, and the judicial system. The explicit motivation behind the program is to help people with conservative worldviews get a job in Israeli academia, in order to counter what they perceive as an extreme left-wing bias.

What I understood is that I criticize the uniformity in academia, but I need to ask myself if even at the entry level, at the job talks, are there people who think differently? Or that are willing to identify differently? And if not – and you believe that your worldview has just, normative, intellectual, and ethical grounds - so come on and try to provide them the framework and the network of connections that will enable them to grow and become candidates that in 20-30 years will be professors. [...] I target people from the political center to the right, whom I identify as having a strong Zionist inclination.

The KPF is a continuation of The Tikvah Fund's project with other means. While the Tikvah Fund tries to influence public opinion and focuses on educational programs and funds smaller organizations – The KPF devotes itself completely to policy change. Together, they are responsible for the consistent increase in support for conservative ideas – both in public policy and in the Israeli public opinion.

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<sup>59</sup> For comparison, the Israeli Democracy Institute's program on human rights and Judaism, which is considered to be the most prestigious program for Israeli doctoral students, only offers 65,000 NIS (~\$19,000) annually.

## THE JEWISH STATEMESHIP CENTER

What the KPF's "Eitam" project is trying to do in the Israeli academia – the Jewish Statesmanship Center (JSC) [*Hamichlala L'mdinaut*] is doing for more than a decade now in the Israeli public service. According to the JSC's website, "The JSC was founded in 2007 with the goal of establishing a theoretical foundation for the public discourse and developing visionary, broad-minded and highly capable leadership which has the knowledge and skills to lead society and the State of Israel."<sup>60</sup>

The JSC initially operated from the religious-Zionist settlement Kedumim, and later moved to its current location in the pastoral Zipori Forest in Jerusalem. It was founded by two religious-Zionists, both graduates of the "Merkaz haRav" yeshiva - Dr. Assaf Malach and Amit HaLevy. Dr. Malach is a scholar of nationalism and political philosophy, who has close ties to the Shalem Center, where he was a research fellow and currently works as lecturer. Malach's co-partner, Amit Halevy, is a politician and activist in the right-wing Likud party, and he became an MK in July 2020.

The JSC was established just two years after the Gaza disengagement, preceding, but also fueling the conservative wave described in this chapter in a few years. While it is known for its nationalist inclinations, the JSC tries not to affiliate itself with a certain political camp, and people in the JSC try to distance themselves from conservative organizations. However, the JSC is partially funded by The Tikvah Fund, and has close ties to the KPF, whose founder, Moish Koppel, serves in the JSC's steering committee. The JSC fulfills two major functions within the context of the Israeli conservative sphere. First, it exposes students to the conservative ideology and provides them with a consistent worldview. Second, the JSC puts significant efforts to create an alumni

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<sup>60</sup> <http://www.statesmanship.org.il/en/about-the-jsc/vision>

community, which serves as a site of networking in the community. More than half of my interviewees part in the JSC's program, and some others were lecturers at the JSC.

The JSC's flagship program is "The Identity and Public Policy Program." This program consists of approximately 30 weekly meetings over the course of a year, dedicated to four main topics – Jewish identity, Israel in the international arena, Israel in the Middle-East, and Economic leadership and just society.<sup>61</sup> An indication to the program's prestige is that students are expected to pay tuition (approximately \$800 annually). A review of the educational program shows that almost all the lecturers have a right-wing orientation, and many of them are active in the conservative movement. There is a strong overrepresentation of religious-Zionists both among students and among lecturers. The JSC staff is aware of this, and are trying to diversify the program:

The JSC tries to be completely a-sectoral. I put a strong emphasis on this in the vetting process –religious people, secular, Zionist leftists, also non-Zionist leftists, capitalist not-so-Zionist right-wing... But there still is too much presence of religious-Zionists. I am not saying this negatively but regarding proportions. Also me, I am not religious but I grew up religious-Zionist. But you see, it is particularly important for the JSC that the person who runs the program will not wear a "kipah."

According to the program director, 250 out of 300 of their alumni work in the public service. Their most famous alumnus is MK Sharen Haskel, from the Likud party, who is known for supporting

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<http://www.statesmanship.org.il/he/%D7%AA%D7%95%D7%9B%D7%A0%D7%99%D7%95%D7%AA-%D7%94%D7%9C%D7%99%D7%9E%D7%95%D7%93/%D7%AA%D7%9B%D7%A0%D7%99%D7%AA-%D7%94%D7%9E%D7%A6%D7%98%D7%99%D7%99%D7%A0%D7%99%D7%9D-%D7%9C%D7%96%D7%94%D7%95%D7%A0%D7%A0%D7%99%D7%95%D7%AA-%D7%95%D7%9E%D7%93%D7%99%D7%A0%D7%99%D7%95%D7%AA>

neo-liberal initiatives. Haskel consistently leads the “Liberty Index,” a list published by “The Israeli Freedom Movement,” which tracks politicians and ranks them for their support of liberal economic policies. Other alumni of the program became prominent activists in the conservative sphere: Ran Bar-Yoshafat became the deputy director at KPF, Meir Buchnick is the deputy CEO at KPF, Michal Zelikovich is in charge of government relations at KPF, Riki Maman is a research fellow at KPF, Gil Bringer was the assistant of MK Ayelet Shaked when she served as Minister of Justice, and Akiva Bigman is the editor of “Mida” website. The list goes on.

The JSC preceded the rise of the conservative movement, but now operates in a complete symbiosis with it – People who are drawn to conservative ideas come to learn at the JSC and create social networks, and it introduces conservative ideas to students who are interested in entering public service. The JSC’s 300 alumni maintain a social network that enables them to cooperate in the promotion of conservative ideas and policies.

#### CONSERVATIVE IDEOLOGY: THE ISRAELI THREE-LEGGED STOOL

There is no cohesive ideology in the conservative movement. The activists in these organizations are bright, intelligent critical thinkers, and they do not like to fit themselves into ideological categories. When I asked them if they considered themselves conservative/liberal/libertarian/religious-Zionist, most of them refrained from defining themselves in such a way. Moreover, I could sense that some of my interviewees enjoyed playing the role of the contrarian. They would give me answers they thought I did not expect, and then smilingly half-apologize for “ruining my thesis.” However, despite this individualist character of people within the movement, it is possible to identify three central ideological themes that the conservative movement is concerned with. Ronald Raegan famously described the American conservative movement as a three-legged stool - standing on religion, national-security, and economics. The

Israeli conservative movement has a slightly different three-legged stool of its own: liberal economics and deregulation; judicial restraint (formalism); and Jewish nationalism.

The conservative movement, with its three legs, offers religious-Zionist individuals an ideological framework that enables them to bring together what might seem like incommensurable values. On the one hand, they support the liberal “small state” – cutting taxes, reducing regulation, and limiting the role of the state only to necessary functions. On the other hand, they oppose the Rawlsian perception of a “value-neutral” state. The state must have a strong Jewish identity, hold a strong conscription army, and actively defend conservative values. The “conservative” tag helps them avoid these blatant contradictions. For example, the right of LGBTQ couples to bring children to the world using surrogate mothers is a heated discussion in Israel. Most of my religious interviewees opposed this on the grounds that it objectifies women’s bodies and involves exploitation of third-world women. When I said that from a liberal point of view it is merely a consensual contract between two adults, one said “Let me solve this for you. I am a conservative – not a libertarian.” This flexibility enables the conservative movement to bring together under one umbrella a libertarian settler who wants to privatize healthcare, a semi-socialist religious-Zionists law professor who opposes judicial activism, and a secular lawyer who devoted himself to Israeli advocacy abroad.

### *Economics*

The most controversial aspect of the conservative movement is their support of neo-liberal economics. Sometimes, they will present this as a concern for freedom, individual responsibility, or community autonomy. They mention Adam Smith and Edmund Burke as their intellectual influences, but also later thinkers such as Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman. Friedman’s idea

of a voucher system for education is especially popular in these circles.<sup>62</sup> However, besides several individuals, most of the activists are not libertarians. Battles that characterize libertarians, such as a shift from conscription army to a professional military, or the legalization of drugs, are not advocated by people in the Israeli conservative movement. Instead, they focus on “deregulation” - a struggle spearheaded by the KPF’s economic department.

Many of my interviewees stated that growing up as religious-Zionists they were not familiar with liberal economic worldviews. Most of them mentioned the JSC or seminars organized by The Tikvah Fund as the first places in which they began to think about these issues. My interviewees emphasized that their economic worldview is based on a strong moral standpoint, which involves shifting from an external to an internal locus of control. It is not only that capitalist policies and deregulation are better for the economy, but they also encourage people to take responsibility on their lives, and not blame external factors like the state. The welfare state, they argue, is immoral because it takes the responsibility to be kind to your neighbor from the individual to the state. One interviewee told me about his moral considerations:

There is a place where it is time to cut all the reactions and feelings and mumbo-jumbo. You look at life as it is and decide – What do I want and what not? And it is the same point regarding capitalism, because in the end it is taking responsibility for your own life, and not thinking about what has been done to me, what I deserve, rights, etc., but what can *I* do? What do *I* want and how do *I* get there? This is *my* life! Will I start considering now whether to be religious because my rabbis slapped me in elementary school? Because my father forced me to wake up for prayers? I can relate to that, but it is childish. Stupid. If

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<sup>62</sup> Here there is a clear interest for both the religious-Zionist and Haredi communities, since many of them send their children to private or semi-private schools for secondary education. The voucher system will enable them to receive more public funding for these institutions and reduce the cost on parents.

religion is true - then it is true. It has nothing to do with what was done to me. Economics are the same. For example, I can say now that I deserve certain things morally, because of prior injustice, because I am marginalized – or I can think about what I want to do, where I am today and let's go. Don't take anything from me and don't give me anything. I am here from my own right.

### *Judicial restraint*

Criticism of the judicial system, and specifically the supreme court, is a long-entrenched theme in religious-Zionist thought. Rabbi Zvi Yehudah Kook was known for his critique of the Israeli legal system, which is not based on rules of the Torah, but rather on the British and even Ottoman legal systems (Aran, 1987). Some religious-Zionist rabbis have ruled that civil courts must be avoided, and financial disputes must be taken to a rabbinic court (Ariel, 1980). Later, this idea was used by “Gush Emunim” and their followers in order to argue that laws prohibiting Jewish settlement in the Occupied Territories are ‘illegal’ (Hellinger et. al. 2018).

The conservative movement preserves the religious-Zionist critique of the judicial system but secularizes it. This critique of the judicial system blends into the global populist trend, which emphasizes the democratic concept of the “will of the people.” In their eyes, democracy is first and foremost the rule of the majority, and ideas such as “substantial democracy” and minority rights are secondary. The leftist elites, through their stronghold in the courts, distort the democratic process by promoting judicial activism. This judicial activism overruns the legislative branch and impedes the balance of powers.

Judicial activism is a contentious issue in Israel since the 1980s, but more so since the “constitutional revolution” that took place under Aharon Barak’s term as president of the supreme court between 1995-2006. Israeli legal scholar Menachem Mautner (2009) describes some of the

main changes in the jurisprudence of the Israeli Supreme Court. Understanding judicial activism as “[T]he greater role it (The Supreme Court, HK) assumes vis- à- vis the other branches in determining the country’s values and the allocation of its material resources, the more activist it is considered to be,” Mautner argues that since the 1980s and 1990s the Israeli Supreme Court can be considered as extremely activist (Mautner, 2011: 54-55).

The Supreme Court’s activism played a key role in preserving progressive values, despite the continuous rule of right-wing governments. People in the conservative movement feel that for a long time the Israeli right has neglected the judicial arena, and therefore their agenda is blocked repeatedly, despite popular support. This situation persists, they assert, because the hegemonic academia justifies it and reproduces generations of law students who think this is a “normal” state of affairs. In Gramscian terms, this is the “common sense.” Many activists in the conservative movement are law graduates, who felt indoctrination in their studies:

The major problem, though, is that when you study law at the Hebrew University, or generally in Israel, you learn it in a very narrow way, with one opinion, which is not my opinion today. I can say that already as a student I said “I don’t feel this in the *kishke*, in my gut. I feel that what I am taught here is untrue.” But I did not have the intellectual tools to deal with what I am hearing [...] They asked me: “Suppose there is an issue, who is supposed to rule what the decision is?” I replied, “The Knesset, the people.” They looked at me as if I were an idiot and said, “The Supreme Court!”

The battles carried out in this arena are supported from within the government, with the appointment of MK Ayelet Shaked to Minister of Justice. Through her work at the judicial election committee, Shaked promoted “diversity” in the judicial system through the appointment and promotion of conservative judges, appointing a record 330 judges during her term. Most notable

was the appointment of the conservative Prof. Alex Stein to The Supreme Court. Stein has strongly expressed his negative opinions about the Israeli judicial activism, and Shaked met with him personally before suggesting his appointment to the committee. In addition, Shaked published an article in *Hashiloach*, in which she presents her criticism on the Israeli judicial system and the balance of powers, arguing for a more restrained Supreme Court (Shaked, 2016). Also the following Minister of Justice, Amir Ohana, has close relations to the conservative movement and is influenced by their ideas.

These views about the judicial system have been gaining increasing support in the Israeli public. Right-wing politicians regularly criticize The Supreme Court, knowing it will get them support from their constituencies. In addition, since they now have the majority in The Knesset, the judicial system is the only obstacle standing before the right-wing parties to implement their policies. The populist conservative framing of these battles as bringing the power back to the people finally provided a secularized critique of the judicial system. The religious-Zionist movement, which has for long been critical of the judicial system, has now finally been able to get support from non-religious Israelis for their agenda.

### *Jewish Nationalism and settlement*

The third leg of the Israeli conservative stool is Jewish nationalism. While the commitment to ideologies of neoliberal economics and judicial restraint can be lukewarm among some activists, they are all strongly committed to the ethno-nationalist idea of Israel as the state for the Jewish people. This is where the liberalism comes to a dead-end. In their eyes, non-Jews (i.e., Palestinians) may enjoy individual rights, but they do not deserve collective rights, most importantly the right for self-determination. The aspiration for Jewish sovereignty over the entire Land of Israel, and the ethno-nationalist interpretation of Israel as a “Jewish and democratic” state, were ideologies

that the religious-Zionists have been promoting for decades. Here again, though, these ideas have been secularized to appeal to a broader non-religious public. Instead of mentioning God's promise of the land to Abraham and justifying the settlement in the West Bank in messianic terms, Israeli conservatives see themselves as political realists, and their argumentation focuses on national security. This process is not unique to conservative religious-Zionism but is a trend among religious settlers since the struggle against the disengagement (Taub, 2011).

One of the main campaigns of the conservative movement, led by the KPF, was the legislation of the "*Basic Law: Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People.*" Since Israel does not have a constitution, this semi-constitutional law is the first time that Israel's character as a Jewish state is interpreted and specified in legislation. The law specifies the Israeli state symbols, declares Hebrew as the only official language (giving Arabic, previously official, a "special status"), and emphasizes the value of *Jewish* settlement. The legislation of the bill raised controversies, and generated mass demonstrations by Arab citizens, especially the Druze who serve in the military and see themselves as 'loyal' to the Israeli state. This bill, they argued, does not mention the value of equality, and turns them to second-class citizens.

From the conservative standpoint, this bill serves two main goals. First, it cements Israel's character as a Jewish state even if the Jewish majority is compromised. As of 2019, only 21% of the Israeli population was Arab, but the annexation of all or part of the West Bank might entail granting citizenship to the Palestinians in those areas, which will increase the rate of non-Jewish citizens in Israel. Second, this is a long-term strategic tool that can be used in the judicial arena. As for now, discriminatory laws can be annulled as unconstitutional. However, in the future, conservative judges will be able to use the "Nation-State Law" to justify laws that prioritize Jewish

citizens. Therefore, the law is an important milestone in setting the ground for an ethno-national democracy.

In addition, people in the conservative movement support Jewish sovereignty in territories occupied in the 1967 war. They support the annexation of the entire or parts of the West Bank, opposing the uprooting of Jewish settlements rejecting the “land for peace” idea. An activist told me that the KPF had an important role in initiating the declaration by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who announced that “The establishment of Israeli civilian settlements in the West Bank is not per se inconsistent with international law.”<sup>63</sup> This statement was received as a great victory for the Israeli-right, after the Obama administration regarded the settlements illegal and prohibited settlement expansion. This time, I was told, it was personal connections between people at the KPF and the American administration that enabled the declaration.

Five out of my 14 interviewees for this chapter currently live in West Bank settlements, and six others lived there for a considerable period in the past. They all presented a pragmatic approach to this decision and avoided the use of messianic terms. One interviewee told me that for six years he lived in the Kfar Tapuach settlement, which is known for its radical settlers and their militancy towards the neighboring Palestinians. When I asked him why he decided to move to such a settlement he said:

There are decent prices, I made a nice real estate move over there. A three-room house for 500 Shekels (~\$145) per month. Afterwards I bought it for maybe 170,000 (~\$48,600) and sold it for 600,000 (~\$171,400). We were there for a few years, it was nice, afterwards I had enough of that quietness.

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<sup>63</sup> <https://il.usembassy.gov/secretary-pompeo-comments-on-israeli-civilian-settlement-activity/>

Another religious settler explained to me that the fact that his village is in the West Bank has no significance for him:

This is not an ideological matter. Living in the Land of Israel – there is no difference if you live here or there. Not ideologically and not practically. I do not think that living there is more dangerous than in other places [...] I am not a person that says “let’s go and settle on hilltops.” I see the youth who build an outpost and every other day it is being demolished. This has no significance. It is for nothing. A children’s game. My approach is very realistic, also regarding the Torah. I don’t see anything mystical here. [...] I do not see myself as a settler. There are some advantages in living in this village for now, and that’s it. The fact that it is over the Green Line<sup>64</sup> does not change anything.

Also, when I asked my interviewees about their opinion regarding the “two-state solution” and the concept of “land for peace,” they emphasized their rational and realistic considerations:

My approach regarding the territories is realistic. If giving away the territories would benefit Israel’s security, then I would support it. But you need to look at things realistically and see that does not work. Not only does it not help, it does harm. So, my worldview is realistic – that’s why I am right-wing. I want what is good for the Jews, or good in general. I see things like Kissinger – Each side should take care of their own interest, also in the international level, and that will contribute to world peace and as stable system more than committees and organizations.

Regarding the entire settlement enterprise – We are here thanks to the power of the state, and not the other way around [...] I know that I am from the settlements but I am not a “classic” settler. “Land for peace” sounds to me like a reasonable equation if only there

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<sup>64</sup> The Borders of the state of Israel on June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1967, before the start of the 1967 war.

was someone to talk to. I am not an ideolog saying these territories are our patrimony. Not that it is not true, it is just not the right card to play. I am a national-security realistic pragmatist.

In conclusion, the Israeli conservative movement brings together three ideological trends – neo-liberal economics, judicial restraint, and Jewish nationalism. The “conservative” brand-name disguises and de-mystifies the religious-Zionist ideas, enabling the movement to appeal to non-religious-Zionist Jewish individuals. Some activists join the movement because they were drawn to a certain political goal, and only later adopted the entire worldview. However, there are activists who do not buy-in to the entire worldview, but are rather active in the movement because they want to promote a specific agenda. For the first time, religious-Zionists have a worldview that can appeal to other sectors of the Israeli society.

#### DISCUSSION: WHY NOW? THE POLITICAL CRISIS

Religious-Zionists have been seeking more influence in the Israeli public sphere already since the 1960s. However, the unique form of conservatism described in this chapter is a relatively new phenomenon. This urges the question - Why has the conservative movement been gaining support over the last 10-15 years? Most of my interviewees from the conservative movement mentioned the 2005 evacuation from Gaza as the main event that led them to become more politically activist. However, as opposed to the “Kookist” religious-Zionists who viewed the disengagement as a crisis of faith, the conservatives were more rational and pragmatic. Their main takeaway from the disengagement was that the state of Israeli does not have a theological problem, but a political one. To understand this, we must understand how the 2005 disengagement was perceived by religious-Zionists. First and foremost, Ariel Sharon, the prime minister who carried out the plan, was the head of the right-wing Likud party and a long-time supporter of the settlements. In 2002 he even

stated that “The fate of Netzarim and Kfar Darom (two isolated settlements in Gaza) is like the fate of Negba and Tel-Aviv” – meaning that just like Israel’s major city Tel-Aviv will not be evacuated, also the Gaza settlements would not be evacuated. However, one year later Sharon backtracked from his promises to his voters, and announced his plan to evacuate Gaza settlements. Religious-Zionists, many of them Likud voters, saw this as a betrayal and a blatant distortion of the democratic process. On top of that, many religious-Zionists believe that this was not a genuine change of heart. At the time, Sharon was accused in three cases of corruption. Religious-Zionists believe that the disengagement plan was an attempt by Sharon to divert the attention and avoid his criticism in the media (which mostly supported the plan).

In addition, in order to carry out the disengagement plan, Sharon used questionable political tactics. When it was time to bring the plan for vote in the government meeting, Sharon fired two ministers from the Hawkish *HaIhud Haleumi* party just 48 hours before the vote, in order to secure a majority. Later, in order to demonstrate public support for the plan, Sharon carried out a survey among Likud voters. Religious-Zionists undertook an impressive door-knocking operation, visiting homes of Likud voters and convincing them to vote against the plan. This campaign had a tremendous success. 59.5% voted against the disengagement plan, while only 39.7% supported it. However, despite these results, Sharon decided to move on with the execution of the plan, arguing that the results were not binding.

Sharon’s moves generated a great outcry among religious-Zionists, and they began to protest the evacuation. Religious-Zionists organized mass-demonstrations, sit-ins, and even roadblocks, demanding to stop the evacuation. During these protests, many religious-Zionists, 688 of them minors, were arrested.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3124997,00.html>

The fact that Sharon was able to carry out the disengagement plan led some religious-Zionists to the conclusion that something in the Israeli democratic system was not working. How can a politician so blatantly disregard the will of his people? If within the democratic system carrying out such an undemocratic process is legal – there is problem with the system itself. A senior at KPF, who grew up in Gush Katif, described these feelings to me:

I will never forgive them for this. My dream was to become an architect. I never thought about political things and policy [...] I want to remind you that the law for the implementation of the disengagement plan was actually passed in the Knesset just a few months before its actual execution. In other words, law-abiding citizens were given three months from the day the law was passed until they were violently evacuated from their homes. This is incomprehensible. [...] At that time, I understood my national responsibility as limited - to volunteer, to look to the sides sometimes, to be a law-abiding citizen, to pay taxes... In the end, I assumed there are responsible people taking care of the important things. And then I understood that no, there is no such person. A prime minister can come and create an incredible disaster and there is nothing I can do about it. And not just me, also my community's leaders will not. That was a terrible feeling. I understood that if I want influence, I must think what I want to influence, so I put some thought into it and once I completed military service, I registered for law school.

For others, the disengagement plan was a wakeup call from mystical theology. They concluded that the religious-Zionist “Kookist” idea of the Israeli state as “the foundation of God’s throne in the world” no longer fits reality. This understanding brought them to adopt a liberal perception of the state as value-neutral, an idea that is easily compatible with neo-liberal or even libertarian economic politics. As was put to me by one religious-Zionist libertarian:

What is a state? It is just a bunch of institutions. It is not a mystical entity, a “congregation of Israel” of some sort. Just institutions that you need to examine – Are they good or bad? This is a technical question. And this idea sat in the back of my head, and I think that a lot of my economic worldview, let us call it neo-liberal, sits on this point. The fracture that people felt after the disengagement. There are people that explicitly told me that the disengagement is what broke for them the aura of the state as something redemptive [...]

Another takeaway from the disengagement plan was that the struggle against the evacuation was perceived by the Israeli public as a religious-Zionist struggle. The secular and Haredi Jews who opposed the evacuation did not take active part in the struggles, which were led by the religious-Zionist community and had a strong religious messianic tone. Religious-Zionists understood that in order to prevent future evacuations, they must create alliances with the other sectors of the Jewish-Israeli society: The Haredim (ultra-Orthodox) and secular Israelis. Individuals with right-wing opinions in the secular Israeli society felt that they are perceived as ignorant. That there was no non-religious justification for their worldview. A KPF senior who grew up as a secular Israeli described this to me:

I remember the first time that I was insulted for being right-wing. In elementary school! Before Netanyahu... I said that the media is left-wing and someone told me: “of course, because in order to be a journalist you must be smart and left-wingers are smarter.” [...]

Also, in college, someone told me: “look, I can speak to you but you are a right winger, you think emotionally, not rationally, so there is no point.”

As I described above, the conservative movement provides a non-religious ideological framework to support Jewish nationalism. This way, religious-Zionists and secular individuals gain a sense of belonging to an intellectual community.

The emergence of the Israeli conservative movement cannot be solely attributed to the events of 2005. Not all activists in the conservative movement interpreted the Gaza disengagement in this way. Seeing themselves as rational non-mystical individuals, some of my interviewees stated that despite their opposition to the plan, it did not lead to a personal, religious, or national crisis. Moreover, the movement's intellectual roots and first institutions preceded the disengagement plan by more than a decade. However, the emerging conservative movement in Israel provided a coherent worldview, and more importantly – money and institutions, for the individuals who were motivated to take political action after the disengagement.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, I presented the emergence of the Israeli conservative movement and its connection to the religious-Zionist community. In its essence, conservative movement is a conscious religious-Zionist attempt to achieve hegemony in Israel, and some individuals in the conservative movement admit that is indeed their intention:

Just having political leadership is not enough [...] You must also have some more important things. You must have capital, you must have media, you must have a *shofar*,<sup>66</sup> an intellectual intelligentsia that can write in the *shofar* or on Facebook or on Twitter. You must have a strong middle-class, that's the base, and you must develop leaders. And it is important that all these will be in the different apparatuses – media, NGOs, state servants, political representatives, and people with capital. Religious-Zionists understood this [...] They understood you must have all these things to achieve hegemony.

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<sup>66</sup> An ancient musical horn typically made of a ram's horn, used for Jewish religious purposes. Colloquially used to refer to a media outlet in service of a political party.

Gramsci famously stated that the rise of “organic intellectuals” is the first stage in the creation of a counter-hegemonic process (Gramsci, 1976). The educational programs at Tikvah, KPF and the JSC precisely intend to do that – by filling the intellectual vacuum in the Israeli right-wing. Moreover, hegemony is achieved through ideological compromises and political alliances. Religious-Zionists realize that in order to promote their political goals, they must adjust their ideology and make certain compromises, such as downplaying the messianic elements in their worldview, in order to gain the support of secular and Haredi Jews. Other sources of hegemony, such as the media, judicial system, and public service, were also described in this article as areas that the conservative movement targets.

This article also analyzed the key role of the 2005 Gaza evacuation in the rise of the conservative movement. In contrary to the literature that describes this event as a theological crisis, this article unfolds the political implications it had on non-messianic religious-Zionist individuals. For decades, religious-Zionists were frustrated by their inability to prevent territorial withdrawals, even under right-wing government. The 2005 evacuation, which was perceived by many religious-Zionist individuals as a distortion of the democratic process, served as a wake-up call. Political action was necessary, and it came about in the form of the conservative movement.

It is hard to predict the future of the religious-Zionist attraction to conservative ideas. While these ideas are gaining increasing presence in the society, they are still mostly fueled by capital of American donors. Writing these lines in late 2020, we still fully felt the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economy. Many questions remain open. Will the American money keep flowing that freely to the Israeli conservative movement? Can the conservative institutions survive without it? If not, will religious-Zionists remain committed to this ideology? Further research is also required to thoroughly describe the Israeli conservative ideology, which I only

briefly discussed. As for now, this article provided the much-needed analysis of the main conservative institutions, and the reasons behind the strong presence of religious-Zionists within them.

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## VITA

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