
Unsettling

On February 16, 2005, Israel's parliament voted, 59-40, to authorize the government to remove all Jewish communities within the Gaza Strip, as well as four small communities in the northern Samaria region. Four days later, the Israeli cabinet, in a 17-5 vote, decided to put the Knesset's authorization into practice. Barring a major turn of events, this coming summer will see the evacuation of some 8,000 Jews from their homes—some of them by force—and their relocation elsewhere in Israel.

The withdrawal of Israel's civilian presence from the Gaza Strip, known as the “disengagement” plan, presents one of the most severe domestic crises in Israeli history. For the first time, the Jewish state, backed by a solid majority of its elected representatives, will voluntarily renounce its claim to a part of the historic land of Israel in the most unequivocal way, by physically

uprooting Jews from their homes. The image of the destruction of Jewish communities resonates powerfully in Jewish history, and especially in its reversal of the classic Zionist principle of *hityashvut*—settlement of the land. But the wounds may go far deeper than the symbolism, and even beyond the suffering of the individual evacuees. When one part of the Jewish people accuses another of complicity in *hurban*—the most dreaded word in the Judaic lexicon, invoking the destruction of the Temple—the result could be a schism so profound that the Jews of Israel will no longer feel bound by a common destiny. Regardless of whether one supports disengagement as the correction of a historical error or opposes it as the betrayal of founding principles, disengagement should be recognized as a critical moment for the Zionist enterprise as a whole.

But disengagement represents a special challenge to religious Zionism. Although not all religious Zionists support the settlement movement, the two have been deeply intertwined. The most prominent and popular version of religious Zionism is one that identifies the idea of an ancestral land as one of the central pillars of Jewish faith, and has led the charge in settling the biblical land of Israel in the last generation. That stream has not only built the communal and educational institutions of the community as a whole, but has also provided its spiritual leadership, infusing a generation of young people with a determination to persevere regardless of any trial.

For this reason, disengagement has been so difficult for many religious Zionists to fathom. For the tens of thousands who have been taught from childhood that Jewish settlement of the land of Israel is not only inviolable but central to a divine plan, the Knesset and government decisions on withdrawal are an inconceivable reversal of the nation's destiny. They are perceived not only as a threat to the communities which they have dedicated their whole lives to building, but as a wholesale rejection of the values upon which their worldview rests.

Much has been written about the possibility of violence that might accompany the withdrawal; no less troubling, however, is the possibility that the disengagement will alienate significant elements of religious

Zionism from the Israeli mainstream and from Zionist ideology. One increasingly common critique voiced among religious Zionists is that secular Zionism has ended its mission; some even question religious Zionism's historic decision to enter into a partnership with secular Zionism, and wonder whether the Haredim were not right after all when they opposed entrusting the leadership of the Jewish people to secularists. Those voices strengthen isolationist trends evident in recent decades within a part of the religious Zionist camp.

So far, public debate has focused on ways of reducing the intensity of the conflict over withdrawal, such as the demand that the Sharon government enhance its legitimacy by holding new elections or a national referendum on the pullout, and the demand that settlers and their supporters repudiate any form of military insubordination. Beyond those calls for moderation, however, little thought has been directed toward the question of how religious Zionism will find a place in Israeli society if and when the greenhouses of Gush Katif are abandoned. Both sides of the debate should consider steps that will help the Jewish people emerge from this ordeal with its basic sense of commonality intact.

To begin with, supporters of withdrawal need to recognize that the destruction of Jewish communities is not only a sectarian, but a national, tragedy. The Gaza settlements, after all, were not foisted by settlers on an unwilling country, but established with the active support of successive Israeli governments, beginning with the Labor Party government of Golda Meir in the early 1970s. The Gaza settlers were celebrated by both Labor and Likud as exemplars of the Zionist ideal. To turn them now into emissaries of a specific political camp is to distort the historical record and to shirk responsibility for our collective endeavor.

Yet the main responsibility for maintaining the cohesion of Israeli society through the trauma of the Gaza withdrawal belongs to religious Zionists themselves. It begins with the recognition that supporters of withdrawal

are no less committed than they are to the well-being of the state. Reducing the demographic threat to a Jewish majority, preempting the threat of an international campaign to isolate and demonize Israel, and establishing consensus borders of defense are goals that require serious debate, not dismissal. One may question the judgment of those who support withdrawal, but not denounce them as post-Zionists who have lost the will to fight for Israel's survival. In the last four years of war, Israeli society has demonstrated a resilience few other societies in its place could have managed. Civilian Israel reclaimed its public spaces, while military Israel shifted the war from the coffee shops and city streets to the Palestinian home front. Those are not the achievements of an exhausted nation.

Religious Zionists must therefore reject the temptation of a purist separatism from the "corrupted" Jewish mainstream. The model of separation from the rest of the Jewish people practiced by a significant part of the Haredi community is hardly worthy of emulation: In the last century, this community has largely exempted itself from every major political struggle adopted by the Jewish people, from reestablishing Jewish sovereignty to freeing Soviet Jewry. Indeed, the historic insight of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the central thinker of religious Zionism in the first half of the twentieth century, was that peoplehood is a foundation of Judaism, and the well-being of the Jewish people is a central religious value. That realization led to Rabbi Kook's second great insight: That secular Zionism, with its passion for peoplehood, was not so much a rebellion against Judaism as a partial fulfillment of it.

The twentieth century's assault on the existence of the Jewish people reinforced the urgency of those insights. In our time, totalitarian movements that have aspired to world domination—Nazism, communism, and now Islamic fundamentalism—all identified the Jewish people as its primary enemy. Natan Sharansky has suggested that in each era of history, anti-Semites targeted the very facet of Jewish identity that marked the Jews as unique. In ancient times, the pagan enemies of the Jews attacked monotheism; during the medieval era, when much of humanity had become

monotheistic, anti-Semitic animus focused on the refusal of the Jews to abandon their way of life and convert to Christianity or Islam. In modern times, when the unifying force among Jews became simple Jewish loyalty, Jewish existence rather than belief has been targeted for eradication. Zionism, which begins with a celebration of Jewish peoplehood, is an intuitive Jewish response to the anti-Semitic assault on the legitimacy of the Jewish nation.

Religious Zionism has the resources to reconstitute itself and reclaim a position of leadership for the State of Israel, and for the Jewish people as a whole. Although the movement has thus far failed to convince the nation as a whole to embrace the biblical homeland as a core value, it did succeed in creating a broad and dedicated community from which Israeli society may yet learn a great deal, and which represents classic Zionist values—including the importance of Jewish reconnection with the land of Israel, regardless of its final borders; the value of defending the Jewish state through military service; a belief in Zionist idealism and the rejection of fashionable cynicism; the importance of building family-based communities; and the centrality of Jerusalem to Jewish history and identity. Indeed, it is religious Zionism alone that has consistently advocated a strong role for Jewish tradition in the formulation of Zionist theory and policy.

Though often accused by its detractors of reducing its ideology, since the 1967 Six Day War, to the single focus of settlement, in truth religious Zionism has maintained multiple Zionist commitments. Bnei Akiva is one of the largest and most passionate Zionist youth movements; religious Zionist youth serve, far disproportionately to their numbers, in the IDF's elite units and in its combat officer corps; *hesder* military yeshivot have been established not only in settlements but in development towns throughout Israel; and religious Zionists in the Diaspora have been at the forefront of every major Jewish political initiative of the last generation. The vitality of the Jewish state and the Jewish people depends in no small measure on the continued vitality of religious Zionism, and on its continued commitment to the general Zionist enterprise.

So long as the government of Israel remains committed to the goal of ingathering the Jewish people to its sovereign state, it must be respected as the embodiment of Zionist aspirations. Willingness to compromise on the borders of the Jewish state is not a fair measure of that commitment: The Zionist movement, after all, has been arguing with itself about territorial compromise since the early 1920s. The same government that is preparing to evacuate Jews from Gaza recently decided to airlift to Israel thousands of Falashmura, descendants of Ethiopian Jews who converted to Christianity and now are returning to Judaism. Only a government dedicated to Jewish peoplehood would act to protect the interests of European Jews confronting a renewal of anti-Semitic violence, to encourage Jewish education in Eastern Europe, or to maintain a level of Jewish knowledge among secular Israeli students. The burden of religious Zionism after disengagement, then, is to recognize the decisive role that the State of Israel continues to play in promoting the interests of the Jewish people.

Zionism's goal of transforming the Jews from disparate communities back into a people has scarcely been achieved. The mass immigrations of the last two decades, from Ethiopia and the former Soviet Union, have not yet been successfully integrated into Israeli society and the Jewish people. Along with that internal challenge to the cohesiveness of the Jewish nation is the growing challenge around the world to the legitimacy of Jewish nationhood. This generation's struggle is to fulfill Zionism's promise of renewing the Jewish people and confirming its place among the nations. Meeting those challenges requires the best efforts of our most committed people; religious Zionism has a crucial role to play.

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