A House Divided: Grassroots National Religious Perspectives on the Gaza Disengagement and Future of the West Bank

EPHRAIM TABORY AND THEODORE SASSON

Israel celebrated its 58th anniversary in May 2006. Normally a time of excitement and national unity, some marked this Independence Day as an occasion to mourn the loss of the Jewish dream. Some rabbis identified with the Israeli Orthodox Jewish mainstream (henceforth, the national religious movement) and called for either withdrawing from Independence Day celebrations or celebrating what Israel might still become, rather than its past achievements. The chief rabbi of Haifa, for example, proposed a change in the established Prayer for the State. Rather than pray for Israel, a country that is “the dawn of our deliverance,” a one word addition, “shetihiyeh” would create a plea

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“that [Israel] should become the dawn of our deliverance.” The rabbi’s disillusionment was linked to Israel’s withdrawal or disengagement from the Gaza Strip in August 2005, a pullback that triggered great upheaval in Israeli society.

While the public face of the national religious camp was unified in its strong opposition to the disengagement, it was divided over whether responses should include civil disobedience or emphasize education and persuasion. Leading rabbis declared that Jewish soldiers should refuse orders to evict Jews from their homes in Gaza. According to one rabbi, “God-fearing soldiers and policemen should already make it clear now to their commanders that just as they would not desecrate the Sabbath or eat non-kosher food, so they will not uproot Jews from their homes.” Another rabbi tacitly encouraged Gaza settlers to ignore the government’s entreaties that they should prepare for relocation; the disengagement “will not happen,” he prophesized. More moderate rabbis rejected civil disobedience and instead championed public information campaigns aimed at “settling the hearts” of fellow Jews.2

Following the withdrawal, many rabbis expressed profound disappointment in, and alienation from, the state of Israel and called upon their followers to “disengage from its sovereign authority, and establish types of ‘counter-societies’ intended solely for their own circles.”3 Others, however, called for a more activist stance that would create a unified front of religious Jews (including ultra-Orthodox and traditional Jews alongside the national religious) to either elect a religious prime minister or to replace the secular state with a theocratic regime.4

However, when responses of national religious leaders in the public arena are assumed to represent the national religious public as a whole, a potentially misleading picture emerges. First, opposition to the disengagement involved the active participation of only a minority of national religious Jews. Of the estimated 750,000 national religious Jews in Israel, many passively supported opposition to the proposed action, and even placed orange banners signifying their stance on bags, baby carriages, and cars, but only about 20,000 engaged in significant active opposition (i.e. demonstrations and marches) to the plan.5 Second, support for the National Religious Party declined sharply in the wake of the disengagement, leading party officials to fear that they

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2. Ibid., 16.
3. Ibid., 17.
4. Notably, both of these responses envision a broader alliance between the national religious and ultra-Orthodox camps, a marked break from the historical alliance between the national religious camp and secular Zionism.
5. Inbari, “Fundamentalism in Crisis.”
would not meet even the minimum threshold required for election to the Israeli Parliament. Defections to the right and to the left prompted the party’s decision to merge with the far right National Union party in order to survive. Comparison of returns from the 2003 and 2006 elections shows support for these two right wing parties increasing in the Jewish settlements of the West Bank but declining sharply within Israel’s 1967 Green Line borders, suggesting a growing division in the national religious camp. Finally, according to opinion surveys, 25 percent of national religious Jews in Israel’s central region (i.e. not including those living in the West Bank settlements) actually supported the Gaza pullout. There are, therefore, several good reasons to suspect that rank and file national religious Jews, especially those living in Israel proper, think differently about the future of Gaza and the West Bank than their leaders.

Misconstruing the strident responses of national religious leaders for the views of the general public is not only empirically dubious, but potentially harmful. The Israeli mass media and academic discourse increasingly depict the country as polarized between opposing, antithetical camps. On the one side are religious Jews, depicted as right wing, Zionist, and conservative; on the other, the secular Jews, depicted as left wing, post-Zionist, and liberal. The metaphors describing the divide are ubiquitous: Orange versus Blue; Jerusalem versus Tel Aviv; Jew versus Israeli. Such labels have become

7. The electoral regions reported by the Israeli government cut across the 1967 borders in part, making precise calculations impossible. However, the “Yehuda” (Judea) region includes the bulk of the settlers, and few others, and can therefore serve as a useful proxy for the Occupied Territories. In the Yehuda region, between the 2003 and 2006 elections, support for the two right wing parties increased from 21 to 23 percent. In the country as a whole, however, support for the two parties decreased from 10 to 7 percent. Analysis of specific regions in Israel proper shows the same pattern: Support for the two parties declined in Tel Aviv from 5 to 3 percent; in Petach Tikvah, from 13 to 11 percent; and in Hasharon, from 8 to 6 percent. See: http://www.knesset.gov.il/ (accessed 8 August 2006).
10. These were the colors employed by rival mobilizations for (blue) and against (orange) the Gaza disengagement.
commonplace in the academic study of Israel. They have also permeated popular culture, which conveys the message, "You are either an Israeli or a religious Jew. There is no melding of the two identities." Social scientists also find these summary devices attractive; they appear to capture underlying tendencies and provide a road map to a complex social situation. In the case of the Gaza disengagement and future of the West Bank, the underlying realities are, in fact, much more complicated, and we therefore use such summary devices at our own risk. In order to provide a context for our study, a brief overview of the national religious population and its place in Israeli society will be presented.

THE NATIONAL RELIGIOUS IN CONTEXT

Identification along the religious continuum is among the most important ways Jewish Israelis identify themselves socially. According to recent estimates, the Israeli Jewish public is 5 percent ultra-Orthodox, 12 percent national religious (also identified as Orthodox), 35 percent traditional, 43 percent non-religious secular, and 5 percent anti-religious secular. The national religious camp occupies an ideological position located somewhere between ultra-Orthodoxy and secularism. For the ultra-Orthodox population, the Land of Israel is sacred but not the State of Israel. (To be sure, in recent years ultra-Orthodox Jews have become more engaged by and supportive of the State, but their deepening ties have only rarely been given ideological expression.) In contrast, most members of the secular public view the State as sacred but not necessarily the entirety of the Land. Located between these alternative positions is the national religious population, identified in various ways as the "generation of knitted skullcaps" or by its political party, the National Religious Party (NRP). A defining feature of this religious-ideological segment of Israeli society is its commitment to the sanctity of both the Land and the State. Its ideological position, crafted by Rabbi Avraham Kook (1865-1935) and subsequently by his son, Rabbi Zvi Yehudah Hacohen Kook (1891-1982), treats Zionism not as a secular revolt against God (the

ideological position of many ultra-Orthodox factions) but as the “dawn of our deliverance.” The State of Israel is thus invested with the sacred mission of bringing about the return of the Jewish people to their ancient homeland, thereby hastening the coming of the Messiah. The national religious population construes Secular Jews as sacred partners in the development of the State. Salvation will come when the People of Israel return collectively to both the Land of Israel and the Torah of Israel.17

The orientation of national religious Jews toward the State of Israel has been all-encompassing. Various studies have tried to examine the relationship between Israeli and Jewish identities, but for the national religious population, these identities have largely overlapped. National religious Jews have felt themselves to be both Israeli and Jewish. “Feeling more Israeli’ is seen as implying ‘feeling more Jewish,’ and vice versa,” wrote Simon Herman in his study of Israeli parents and students in the 1960s. This finding characterized the majority of all groups of Israelis, but it particularly characterized religious students (87 percent), followed by “traditionalists” (72 percent), and the nonreligious (54 percent). Herman cites a student to emphasize the overlap: “As a religious person, I see Jew and Israel as one and the same thing. Therefore the more Jewish the more Israeli and vice versa. It is easier to be a good Jew in Israel and there is a connection.”18

Many secular Israeli Jews would agree to this overlap. However, as noted by Herman at the time, they have greater difficulty than do the religious in expressing exactly what their Jewishness entails. For Israel’s national religious Jews, moreover, Israel has been a more or less integral part of their religious life. The state’s chief rabbinate declared, on the occasion of the first anniversary of independence in 1949, that that day would be a Yom Tov (holiday) forever, without concern for the future character of the state. A special benediction was instituted for the daily prayer service, and the period of mourning observed between the festivals of Passover and Shavuot (Pentecost) was held in abeyance. Independence Day was to be like Lag B’omer, and haircuts and weddings permitted on that day. In other words, the concept of Israel as a Jewish state was so central to Jewish life, that even Jewish religious law—Halakha—could be modified, and identification with Israel could become an integral part of one’s Jewish identity.

16. See Shmuel Avidor Hakohen, Against the Stream: Chapters from the Writings and Life of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Hakohen Kook (Tel-Aviv: Miskal—Yediot Ahronoth Books and Chemed Books, 2002 [Hebrew]).
The intertwining of a civil and religious identity strengthened for a younger generation of Israelis who experienced a "miraculous" Israeli victory in the 1967 war (or by now, learned about it in their history classes). God showed His hand in just 100 hours, and restored the glory of Israel, "May the name of God be blessed now and forever!" In the decades following 1967, the national religious movement viewed itself as the vanguard of the Zionist movement. Perhaps the lone Orthodox voice that foresaw the negative impact that that victory would have on Israel, as it led to the creation of what Gershon Gorenberg calls "The Accidental Empire," was that of Professor Yeshayahu Leibowitz. The young, Orthodox generation rejected his opinions, and to his chagrin, and despite his warnings, for many religious persons, the concepts of the People of Israel (Am Yisrael) and the Land of Israel (Eretz Yisrael) became fused in the State of Israel (Medinat Yisrael).

The ideological perspective described herein provides a meaningful context for the responses of national religious leaders to the Gaza disengagement. The initiative by the State of Israel to "disengage" from part of the Land of Israel set the two key dimensions of national religious identity at odds with one another. It undermined the national religious theological view and signaled the political failure of that camp. The fierce response of national religious leaders is therefore fully comprehensible. But what of the grassroots of the movement? How does Israel's Orthodox mainstream think about the Gaza disengagement and future of the West Bank? In order to analyze this, focus group discussions were conducted among rank and file members of the national religious population, and we present our findings following a description of our methodology.

**THE CONVERSATIONS PROJECT**

This work draws primarily on a sample of eleven focus group discussions among national religious men and women conducted between 2004 and 2006, a period including the year prior to, and the year following, the disengagement in August 2005. The data were collected as part of a larger project (including over forty discussion groups) comparing the political cultures of religious and nonreligious, and Eastern and Western Jews in Israel. Seven of the discussions were held in the center of Israel and four in a large West Bank settlement known for its residents' opposition to the disengagement. There were between four and seven participants in each discussion; most were middle-aged and middle-class (college-educated) professionals. Most

report having voted for the National Religious Party in the 2003 election (including equal proportions in the West Bank and Center groups); some voted for Likud, and a handful voted for other parties. An interviewer who matched the profile of the group moderated each discussion. Conducted in Hebrew, the discussions lasted between one and two hours, and were transcribed for analysis. 21

A series of issues were presented to the discussion groups and their responses were recorded. As a research technique, focus group interviews tend to illuminate the collective dimensions of political consciousness. The views emerging from such discussions tend to be those that circulate most freely within the participants' particular subculture. Therefore, the emphasis in focus group research is not on the views of the individual participants, but on the conversation as a whole as indicative of a particular sub-culture. 22 The interview schedule included questions on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, religious conflict among Jews, and Israel as a Jewish and democratic state. 23 We began with open-ended questions and then presented alternative perspectives from the media discourse. 24 The latter included specific prompts on the future of the West Bank and Gaza, although the interviews did not specifically address the Gaza disengagement. Throughout the period during which the interviews were conducted, however, the Gaza withdrawal plan topped the news agenda, and discussion participants related to the topic at their own initiative in every discussion. A set of taken-for-granted assumptions that shape the discourse across all eleven groups in the sample are described below. The sections that follow then compare the West Bank and Center groups, emphasizing the divergent qualities of those discussions.

21. The translations of conversation extracts that appear in the article are those of the authors, and the names of conversation participants are pseudonyms.
23. The paper draws mostly on the following question and follow-up statements:
   1. Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. In any negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, whether now or in the future, what do you think each side should be willing to do to reach an agreement, and what should each side not give up, on the way to a possible agreement? Follow-up Statements:
      1.1 Judea and Samaria and the Gaza District are as much a part of Israel as Tel Aviv and Haifa; they cannot—or should not—be negotiated away.
      1.2 Israel should work with the Palestinians to establish a Palestinian State in all of the territories of the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem, with the exception of minor border adjustments.
      1.3 Some say that the Palestinians are not truly interested in making peace—that for the Palestinians, any peace process is part of a broader strategy to eliminate the Jewish State. Others say that the Israelis are not truly interested in making peace, and as proof of that they indicate the continued construction in the settlements. What do you say about all this?
24. For a full discussion of media frames, see Myra Marx Ferree, William Gans, Jurgen Gerhards, and Dierter Rucht, Shaping Abortion Discourse (New York: Cambridge, 2002); William Gans, Talking Politics.
COMMON GROUND

All of the discussions in our sample reflected the taken-for-granted, and often explicitly stated, assumption that the West Bank (and sometimes Gaza) is the heart of the historical Land of Israel and the divine patrimony of the Jewish people. Not all discussion participants were deaf to Palestinian claims to the lands they call Judea and Samaria, but they also insisted upon the basic justice of their own claims. The hills of Judea and Samaria are the cradle of the Jewish people, a fact attested to not only in the Torah but in the holy books of Islam and Christianity. As one participant put it, “God gave this land to the people of Israel.” Indeed, from an historical standpoint, the West Bank of the Jordan River is more central to the Jewish people than the coastal plane along which most of Israel proper is concentrated. As shall be seen, participants disagreed with one another over the future of the West Bank (an area occupied by Israel since the 1967 war with Jordan), but none questioned the fundamental justice of the Jewish claim.

The groups also shared a deep distrust of the Palestinian leadership and doubted its ability to act as a “partner” in peace negotiations. Skepticism of the Palestinians’ willingness to live side-by-side with Israel, even following a peace deal, was ubiquitous, and is something that the national religious Jews in our sample share with most of their traditional and secular counterparts. In this view, the Palestinians aim to destroy Israel and “drive the Jews into the sea,” a perception that explains why the Palestinian leadership rejected Prime Minister Barak’s peace initiative at Camp David and responded with a Second Intifada. To be sure, in their view, the Palestinian people as a whole are not to be blamed; most would surely rather live in peace than in a constant state of oppression and deprivation, but they are victims of their leaders. Beyond these shared assumptions, however, the national religious groups exhibited divergent tendencies, as will be shown in the sections that follow.

THE WEST BANK GROUPS

Participants in the four West Bank discussions expressed strong and almost unanimous opposition to the Gaza disengagement and future territorial concessions in the West Bank. At most, their members would countenance Palestinian “autonomy” or self-rule in areas of high Arab residential concentration, but within an overall framework of Israeli sovereignty. Alternatively, participants occasionally suggested other arrangements, such as conveying sections of the West Bank, together with their Palestinian residents, to Jordan, or encouraging “voluntary” emigration by Palestinians to the Arab states in the region. The one exception to the near unanimous opposition to the establishment of a Palestinian state occurred in the most recent discussion, held after the
2006 election. The participant in question expressed support for the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank, but only if such a state could be created through “land swaps” designed to include Arab Israeli villages in the Palestinian state and large blocks of West Bank Jewish settlements within Israel. Such a proposal had been advocated during the election campaign by the leadership of the right wing party, Israel Our Home. This exception aside, participants expressed unanimous opposition to initiatives that would result in Palestinian sovereignty, illustrated by the following exchange:

**Cast:**

Smadar, a reflexologist, age 43.
Orly, an accountant, age 44.
Noam, an engineer, age 44.

**Smadar:** It’s a Jewish state . . . Gaza should have remained a part of us but didn’t. . . . We must not give up on a single inch [of the West Bank]. . . .

**Orly:** I don’t agree about returning territories. You give something back that you took from someone . . . But the lands that we live on we didn’t take from them. And if we did, then we would have to give back [the Tel Aviv and Jerusalem suburbs of] Ramat Aviv and Katamon as well!

**Noam:** I am in favor of their autonomy in their big cities, like Luxemburg next to France. (Group 33)

In their discussions of the Gaza disengagement, moreover, several participants in the groups that met immediately following the event expressed strong feelings of alienation from secular Israelis, whom they held responsible for the disengagement, and from the Israeli state. They related to the disengagement as a betrayal of Zionism, Jewish history, the Jewish people, and God. And they announced their intention to “disengage” from the state, opting instead for an enclave lifestyle like that of the ultra-Orthodox population.

The following extracts illustrate the theme of alienation. In the first, Shula begins by arguing that Israel is no longer on the path to redemption and has become a “state like any other.” Members of her group pick up on this theme:
Cast:
Shula, a librarian, age 44.
Moshe, a treasurer, age 48.
Yitzhak, an engineer, age 46.

Shula: The perception at the creation of the state was that we are aligning ourselves with the leaders of Israel throughout the generations, the Bible, and all those sorts of things, and today this has gone by the wayside, and much of the perception is that we are "a nation like all others," and leave it at that. . . .

Moshe: [There are] already several generations, three generations of entire communities in the state that are cut off from the Torah, and forget the practical implications of this—I am not examining their tzizit strings [religious fringes—to see if they follow religious standards] . . . Like in many fields, knowledge is a sort of internalization, regardless of whether you pray three times a day or three times a week, and this is missing—it is not just a gap in knowledge, it is more than knowledge. I think we are talking today about two communities that speak Hebrew, but each one speaks a different language, and they don't really know what the other is saying.

Shula: The question is, does the other side relate and have the desire to really define the state as a Jewish state? . . . What I find all the time when I come to some discussion group and ask people about their secular orientation—so I ask them how they are Jewish. So the things they say relate to the Holocaust or to the fact that they are living in Israel or to the army. Now these definitions to me are not related to Judaism, but to being Israeli, which is perhaps part of Judaism. . . . This is a Judaism that cannot last for more than a generation or two.

Yitzhak: Today, there is assimilation [abroad] with the goyim [gentiles] through intermarriage, and in Israel there is assimilation through disengagement from Jewish values. And we can make a comparison. When the Second Temple was built, and the olam [returning exiles] of Ezra and Nehemia came, those who came to the Land at that time were the simple people. And the Second Empire was based on them; everybody else stayed away. The rich and the privileged disappeared; we do not hear about them, they assimilated. Those who are part and parcel of the building of the Land and the Torah are the generation that will continue, and everybody else who disengages can disengage abroad. And they can disengage in Israel as well. (Group 34)
We hear in these extracts the sense that the state and secular Israelis have abandoned the national religious population and are no longer performing their designated roles in advancing the cause of Jewish redemption. Secular Israelis are depicted as “Hebrew speaking gentiles” who lack any commitment to the Jewish character of the state. In this view, a core component of national religious ideology—the notion that secular Israeli Jews are full partners in returning the Jews to the Land, thus paving the way for the Messiah—has proved misguided and must now be set aside. (We also see how members of this group resignify the term disengagement to use against their political opponents.) In the next excerpt, we hear Shula express the sense that, while she once willingly performed the role of Zionist leader, she will no longer do so in the future.

Shula: I want to tell you that until last summer, I thought that we [Religious Zionists] really have to do more to try. My understanding now is that they [the secular population] want to trample us. They know exactly what they want—to be like all other nations. They do not want to even smell Judaism at all, and we remind them of this thing. (Group 34)

As if to underscore their sense of betrayal and alienation, discussion participants in all four West Bank groups charged that the discussion questions were “biased” and reflected a leftist worldview. In one discussion, the participants inquired into the personal identities of the study’s authors, asking the moderator of the group if the researchers are “part of us” or “part of them.” In another, in response to the moderator’s question whether Israel should consider altering its flag and national anthem “to reflect the country’s growing diversity,” there was this exchange:

Cast:
Avraham, self-employed, age 35.  
Smadar, a reflexologist, age 43.

Avraham: After Gush Katif [the Gaza Strip] that’s a difficult question. Many things shattered for me last summer, and therefore the symbols [of the state] are lost to me.

Smadar: And so we need to throw out everything? To dump the baby with the bath water?

Avraham: What can I tell you? I don’t know exactly how to relate to the question. Once the flag and the anthem were a source of pride... but now they don’t mean a thing to me. (Group 33)
Such sentiments were far from universal in the settler discussions. But they were altogether absent in the discourse of the Center groups, discussed below.

CENTER GROUPS

In the Center groups, participants were more divided over the Gaza disengagement and the future of the West Bank. To be sure, some rejected any territorial compromise out of hand. Others, however, argued that they would be willing to concede all or part of the West Bank if doing so would ensure peace. Some also made the argument—increasingly common in the media discourse—that disengagement from Gaza and the West Bank is the only way to ensure Israel’s Jewish majority and status as a “Jewish and democratic” state. Both of these arguments are evident in the following exchange:

Cast:
Yael, an insurance broker, age 32.
Eran, an engineer, age 37.
Rachel, a Bible teacher, age 33.
David, a marketing executive, age 35.

Yael: There is no doubt that [Judea and Samaria] are part of the borders of the Land of Israel, but nevertheless if I believed that there was a chance to end the conflict then I would be willing to negotiate. At the moment, this doesn’t seem to be realistic, but if I thought there was a chance I would be willing to give up. . . .

Eran: All of Judea and Samaria?

Yael: If I thought that it would bring genuine peace, and the conflict would come to an end, and we could live two countries side by side.

Rachel: I don’t think anyone—or any Prime Minister—has the rights or ownership to this land. It is the property of the nation of Israel and not the private property of any individual. Just as no one can sell my house because it belongs to me, no Prime Minister or political party—even with a majority in the Knesset [Parliament] cannot . . . convey the Land.

David: I’m sorry but I must disagree with you. I would be glad if it were true, and there is no question but that this is the Promised Land, and there is no question but that these lands are dear to my heart . . . Nevertheless, I think that when you look at the situation that has taken shape since the [1993] Oslo Accords, and at the
natural birthrate of the Arab population, especially in these areas—and I don’t believe in Transfer [of Palestinians to Arab countries]—I don’t think it’s feasible, not only from a moral standpoint but also from a practical standpoint . . . [And] I don’t believe that it is possible [in the long run] to hold a population of millions without citizenship . . . Of course, I don’t think we should simply evacuate territories . . . But I do agree that if there were someone with whom to negotiate, and if it would bring peace, I don’t think we’d have any choice but to separate [from Judea and Samaria]. (Group 3)

More generally, the Center discussions differed from those in the West Bank in tenor and texture. Opponents of the Gaza disengagement spoke with less urgency and rancor. Participants in several groups discussed the tension between the ideal and the real, and expressed the need for political pragmatism. The transcripts convey the sense that these national religious Jews are willing to live with results that they do not especially like or welcome. Consider the following additional examples, drawn from several discussion groups:

Michael (a 37-year-old lawyer): If there were a utopian situation everyone would prefer that there would be Greater Israel—including Lebanon, Syria, Jordan—but we must recognize the limitations that exist. Of course it is possible to conduct negotiations over a part, over part of the land, yes, of course. (Group 2)

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Matan (a 32-year-old lawyer): It’s clear to everyone, even the extremists, that there will be a Palestinian state and that the State of Israel will not rule directly over the Palestinians, that’s how it will be in the end. The problem is that my own “red lines” are not the same as those of the State, so it is possible that things won’t end up as I’d like.

Motti (a 24-year-old law student): . . . Perhaps, as difficult and painful as it is, maybe we need to make compromises on part of the Land of Israel despite the fact that this would be contrary to our religious faith—but certainly not as comprehensive as they would like.

Yair (a 26-year-old accountant): I believe that from a standpoint of faith, from my own standpoint there is no difference between [the Jewish cities in the West Bank and the Jewish cities in Israel proper]. Israel is ours by right. In the short term, however, if it would bring peace, then it is possible to negotiate. (Group 16)
Shlomo (a 35-year-old working in marketing): I believe that if there is a chance for a solution, it will entail abandoning the subject of religion because if we fight over religion then there will be no chance for a solution, and we'll end up in a religious war. In the end, the ones who will remain here to fight will be the Jews and the Muslims, and not the Christians, and this fight will be between the extremists—their extremists and our extremists. What I'm saying is that if we take this to a place of religious conflict there will be no chance for compromise. Because in the final analysis there is only one Temple Mount and only one Dome of the Rock. If we go in that direction, it will mean eternal war. (Group 3)

EXPLAINING THE DIFFERENCES

In sum, most participants in the West Bank discussion groups seemed unable to reconcile with, or accept, Israeli withdrawals from Gaza or the West Bank. For them, the disengagement and anticipated withdrawal from parts of the West Bank constitute a deep personal crisis, not only because their homes are at stake. Participants in the West Bank groups described the disengagement as a profound betrayal of the Zionist cause, expressed their outrage at the secular Israeli public, and, in several instances, voiced their desire to separate from secular society altogether. Participants in the Center groups, in contrast, were divided over Gaza and the future of the West Bank. To be sure, many expressed opposition to any "land for peace" deal that would result in the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank. Others, however, expressed support for such a compromise if it seemed likely to bring about a genuine peace. Beyond this division, participants in the Center groups often indicated their willingness to live with the results of a political process that they might not personally endorse. There were no instances in which a member of one of the Center groups indicated a desire to withdraw from the broader secular society into a religious enclave. How can these differences be understood?

Some of the participants in the West Bank focus groups grew up in settler households; others moved to the settlements as adults. Among the latter, the decision to live beyond the Green Line (the border prior to the 1967 war) was anything but accidental. Rather, these individuals chose to live in Gaza and on the West Bank to enact their Religious Zionist commitment to the settlement of Greater Israel. Self-selection is therefore an important factor in the distribution of the focus group participants across the Center and West Bank groups. Nevertheless, social context continues to shape identities and worldviews across the life course, and this is true for national religious Jews living in both Israel proper and the West Bank. The social context of life in the
Center of Israel and in the West Bank settlements both strengthens differences rooted in self-selection, and creates those differences out of whole cloth.

The explanation of the relevant contextual factors draws on sociological and social psychological theories that examine the impact of interactions across social boundaries on the worldviews and identities of social actors. Theorists of "globalization" and "late-modernity" emphasize the growing complexity and internal differentiation of modern societies. For Anthony Giddens, the "pluralization of lifeworlds" defines late-modern society. Increasingly, members of modern society come into contact with diverse cultures, lifestyles, and practices, both directly (through social contact) and indirectly (through the mass media). One consequence of this growing pluralism is increased capacity among actors to move between diverse cultural settings. In Giddens's words, because the "settings of modern social life are much more diverse and segmented . . . modes of action followed in one context may be more or less substantially at variance with those adopted in others." In effect, Giddens contends, this pluralism undermines confidence in authority and encourages greater political ambivalence and uncertainty.

Growing social differentiation and complexity has also been discussed in the social psychological literature on identity and social conflict. In this connection, integration of diverse groups is generally viewed as a mitigating factor in social conflict. Thus, in the words of Marilyn B. Brewer, [T]he potential for intergroup conflict may be reduced in societies that are more complex and differentiated along multiple dimensions that are not perfectly correlated. Such a complex social structure gives rise to cross-cutting category distinctions that mean that, at the individual level, a person may be attached to one ingroup by virtue of ethnic heritage, to another by religion, to yet another based on occupation, or region of residence and so forth. . . . Such cross-cutting ingroup-outgroup distinctions reduce the intensity of the individual's dependence on any particular ingroup for meeting psychological needs for inclusion . . . perhaps increasing tolerance for outgroups in general.

Contact theory similarly addresses the benefits of cooperative


relationships that cut across social boundaries. This body of research holds that bringing members of antagonistic groups together, under proper conditions, can reduce conflict and lead to greater understanding and tolerance. As Gordon Allport discussed in his classic statement, the effect of contact is enhanced if it “is of a sort that leads to the perceptions of common interests and common humanity between members of the two groups.”

Merely bringing people together may not foster this perception, but keeping people apart certainly enhances the perception of different interests and increases the possibility of dehumanizing the other. Thus, as a corollary, we propose the “negative contact” hypothesis: Groups that live in social isolation from one another but relate in a competitive or antagonistic fashion tend to grow further apart and develop perceptions and stereotypes unfettered by reality. Moreover, the more isolated a group is, the more their worldview can be crystallized into a unified whole, unencumbered, and unchallenged by more external, dissonant elements. Alternatively, greater integration in society increases the likelihood that a group’s members will be able to take the vantage points of diverse others.

Thus, national religious Jews living in the West Bank, in relatively isolated, homogenous, and segregated settlements, have little cause in their daily lives to come to terms with the perspectives of secular Israelis who differ from them. As a consequence, these individuals tend to express the pure Religious Zionist perspective that regards both Judaism and Zionism as requiring Jews to settle in all of the historical land of Israel. Moreover, insofar as they hold secular Israelis responsible for pursuing policies contradictory to this requirement, their feelings of alienation from—and even hostility toward—secular Israelis are hardly surprising. In contrast, the national religious Jews in the center of the country, in daily contact with less religious and secular Israelis, must address political and theological dilemmas in a fashion that accommodates their diverse experiences and value commitments. As a consequence, they tend to be more divided and ambivalent, open to the alternative view, and flexible. They also seek out compromise formulations that enable them to balance their value commitments. For example, echoing a distinction made in the public


discourse by moderate religious leaders, some discussion participants attached greater religious priority to the People of Israel (“Am Yisrael”) than to the Land of Israel (“Eretz Yisrael”) arguing that land can be forsaken if such an act contributes to the security and continuity of the Jewish people.

Moreover, the disparate social contexts of life in the Center versus the West Bank foster what might be termed divergent patterns of identity integration. Members of the West Bank groups, for example, are religious, have long identified with the State, and their interpretations of both Judaism and Zionism emphasize the transcendent justice of Jewish sovereignty throughout Greater Israel. Thus, these individuals appear to fully interweave the Jewish, Zionist, and Israeli components of their social identity. The disengagement has proven utterly unacceptable and painful to these individuals because it implies that the Israeli component of their identity will no longer be compatible with Jewish and Zionist components. In contemplating their response, several individuals discussed pursuing the lifestyle of the ultra-Orthodox—a sequestered, enclave existence, i.e. Jewish, but not Israeli, thus contemplating giving up attachment to the state.

Members of the Center groups also identify as religious Jews, Zionists, and Israeli patriots, but their identifications tend to be compartmentalized or loosely coupled. Jewish law is authoritative but it does not necessarily extend to the realm of state policy. The Land of Israel is holy, but the State has the authority to give it up. Israel must be a Jewish state, but that does not mean that it can ignore the requirements of democracy or turn a blind eye to the imperatives of modern statecraft. In short, these individuals regard both the Land of Israel and the State of Israel as sacred but as belonging to separate spheres. To put it schematically, Zionism and the State of Israel belong to the modern world, and the Land of Israel to the religious domain.

Evidence for the distinction between intertwined and loosely-

32. This view is in sharp contrast to the claim of at least one member of a West Bank group. See the comments of Yitzhak, below, 118.

33. For example, a woman in one of the Center groups said that since the land now belongs to Israel, albeit as a gift of God, it is now the right of the state to do with it as it sees fit, including returning it to the Arabs. Another group member refuted this claim arguing that the Land belonged to the People of Israel throughout the generations, and while the people could decide as they wish, the relevant population to be polled includes all the Jews who have lived since biblical times.

34. Christian Smith and colleagues report a somewhat similar dynamic among conservative Christians who expressed support for both establishing Christian government in the United States and for the values of pluralism and individualism. “Most of the people we interviewed,” he writes, “tried to resolve this dissonance by compartmentalizing both beliefs, strongly affirming them as separate commitments, and preventing each from having to face the full implications of the other.” Christian Smith, “The Myth of Culture Wars: The Case of American Protestantism,” in Culture Wars in American Politics: Critical Reviews of a Popular Myth, ed. Rhys H. Williams (New York: Aldine, 1997), 175-95.
coupled identities can be found above in the comments of Shlomo and Motti. Further evidence can be found in the critical responses of some discussion participants to others who stepped outside of the boundaries of their group's common sense. In one Center group, for example, the response to an individual who spoke of a specifically Jewish obligation to keep the territories was swift and sharp: A fellow group member interrupted, arguing that it is dangerous to mix Jewish Law (halakha) and public policy:

Cast:
Zvi, a computer programmer, age 31.
Yehezkel, an IT project director, age 31.

Zvi: I believe that disengagement is a great disaster, one that will bring a true catastrophe. Oslo also led to compromises that we never thought we’d make. Compromising on settlements and territories that are truly an inseparable part of the Jewish consciousness—and in the final analysis this is a Jewish state—such compromises will bring about a disaster in terms of motivations in time of battle.

Yehezkel: I want to respond and say that, first of all, your statement about the Jewish state—to insert into the Jewish state some kind of halakhic viewpoint—makes me angry. The connection between Judaism and halakha—as they’re interpreted by most Jewish leaders, the connection to diplomacy—has already far exceeded that which is reasonable.

Zvi: I am speaking only about Jewish culture. (Group 35)

Yehezkel's message is that Jewish Law and public policy belong in separate domains and should not be mixed. Zvi, under pressure from the group, backs down. He responds that by "inseparable part of Jewish consciousness" he really meant only Jewish cultural outlook and not Jewish Law.

Turning to one of the West Bank groups, we see a common sense response to a culturally dissonant comment that also operates in a telling manner. In this case, Yossi, a surveyor, age 56, complains of the insufferable security checks that have become omnipresent in Israel, and describes his desire to achieve a more "normal existence." A fellow group member interrupts him:

Yitzhak (an engineer, age 46): It can emerge from what you said that since we live in such a situation, and we want to live normally... we have to reach a settlement with our neighbors. I call this surrender. It is simply surrendering and that is [their] way of
solving the problem, like they did in the disengagement. It is surrender. ... In practice, this is what is happening, and people are liable to say that if this is the problem, then let’s find a solution—we will remove the Jews from here and then there will be peace. So we will have one dunam less, so what? This is more or less what is guiding the process today, that the land is not holy, but the people are the holy ones. (Group 34)

In this excerpt, Yossi exposes a side to his identity apparently independent of the Jewish/Zionist/Israeli synthesis characteristic of pure or extreme religious Zionism. Moreover, his desire for normalcy opens the Religious Zionist embrace of Greater Israel to critique. Fellow members of his discussion identify the implications of his remark and respond critically. Like Zvi, above, Yossi withdraws his remark, and accepts the viewpoint of the group.

CONCLUSION

This essay describes a basic division in the world of the national religious population of Israel. For many settlers, the disengagement reveals the state’s failure to fulfill its mission to settle the historical Land of Israel and return the Jewish people to Torah. When a state is no longer seen to fulfill its basic purpose, it loses its legitimacy. An ironic outcome of this situation is that some extreme supporters of the national religious movement come to take a stance similar to the ultra-Orthodox Satmar movement, rejecting Zionism out of hand. The Satmar sect of Judaism believes it is wrong for Jews to supplant the role of Messiah in bringing Redemption. In contrast, other right wing national religious participants, who once embraced Rabbi Kook’s view of Israel as the “dawn of our deliverance,” feel that their fellow Jews have failed in acting on the opportunity that Messiah has provided.

On the other hand, most national religious Jews today live in Israel proper and express a more complex identity and consciousness. They distrust the Palestinians and believe that the Jews have an historical and divine right to the biblical Land of Israel or at least pay lip service to such a belief. Moreover, they embrace and pursue a wider range of values, including commitment to Am Yisrael—the people of Israel (conceived in both religious and secular terms), as well as to the democratic norms of a modern state. Accordingly, they express a reluctance to impose the entire gamut of Jewish religious law on the state. For many of these individuals, the bottom line is that, while the Land may be holy, not every last bit of it need remain under Israeli jurisdiction. Their comparative moderation was not reflected in the public discourse of the national religious camp during the debate over the Gaza withdrawal, but did contribute to the relative ease with which
the withdrawal was carried out.\textsuperscript{35} The moderation of the national religious grassroots perspective relative to the movement's leadership helps to clarify the decline and collapse of the National Religious Party (NRP). Over the years, the foundations of the NRP became increasingly shaky and the struggles over disengagement catalyzed the process of decline. Several months following the disengagement and prior to the 2006 election, former NRP supporters in the West Bank defected to the more extreme nationalist parties on the Right (Israel is Our Home; National Unity), while former supporters in Israel proper defected to the parties of the Center, including Kadima, Labor, and Likud.\textsuperscript{36} The NRP became so thoroughly weakened that its leaders elected to merge with the radical rightist party, National Union. The divided house could no longer support its roof, and the roof collapsed. The gap between the rhetoric of the national religious leadership and the beliefs of many of their former constituents helps to explain the NRP's collapse.

More significantly, this essay offers a critique of overly simplistic caricatures of the Israeli polity. Schematic descriptions are tempting; they are appealing because they reduce complexity and appear to provide a clear road map to contemporary society. Public figures who seek to draw clear lines and mobilize their supporters often support such simplifications. Indeed, research on culture wars in the United States documents significant gaps between the relatively strident rhetoric of activists and leaders and the more moderate and ambivalent positions of the general public.\textsuperscript{37} In the case at hand, rabbis speaking in public certainly tried to create the impression of a solid block of religious opposition to the disengagement. Slogans like "A Jew Doesn't Evict a Jew" resonated with a political map that divides the population neatly into "Israelis" and "Jews."

There are good reasons, however, to resist such simplifications. First, they are empirically suspect; they tend to pigeonhole complex individuals and obscure a significant middle in which loyalties and identities are complex or divided. Second, such simplifications intensify the problem of polarization. According to the sociological dictum of W. I. Thomas, "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences."\textsuperscript{38} The danger lies in contributing to a self-fulfilling

\textsuperscript{35} As Motti Inbari observes, the "pragmatic majority within religious Zionism ... sought to halt the examination of the Disengagement through the theological prism and to shift the debate into the realm of Realpolitik. ... Of all the reactions, this most moderate approach was the least evident to the Israeli public during the Disengagement itself, although it seems to have represented the majority view within religious Zionism." Inbari, Fundamentalism in Crisis, 25.

\textsuperscript{36} See n. 10.


\textsuperscript{38} W. I. Thomas, The Child in America: Behavior Problems and Programs (New York,
prophecy by which our depictions of the public actually contribute to the sense of “us versus them.” Finally, such depictions undermine efforts to mobilize support in Israel for a two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. As Dov Waxman has argued, to the extent Jewish Israelis believe a peace settlement with the Palestinians can only be achieved at the price of a Jewish civil war, they are more likely to opt for the status quo. A more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of political consciousness in Israeli society thus promises to reinforce the center rather than the extremes and provide a basis for pragmatic conflict resolution within Israeli society and between Israel and the Palestinians.

1928), 571-72.