

# **Fundamentalism in Crisis—The Response of the Gush Emunim Rabbinical Authorities to the Theological Dilemmas Raised by Israel’s Disengagement Plan**

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In August 2005, Israel vacated the Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip—mainly in Gush Katif—as well as four settlements in northern Samaria. This action, known as the “Disengagement,” constituted a profound crisis for a significant section of the Israeli population that is most closely identified with religious Zionism and with the settlement movement in the Territories. The crisis was not only on the national level, as the state destroyed communities that it had established and nurtured for decades, but also on the community level, as thousands of people were removed from their homes. The Disengagement also caused a religious crisis, testing the very foundation of the beliefs guiding the political and religious behavior for the population. Accordingly, the Disengagement provides a test case for the way in which the religious Zionist public as a whole faced this crisis of faith, and, more specifically, the manner in which the Halachic guides of this public—those responsible for shaping its religious behavior—responded to the crisis.

This article examines the attitude of the rabbinical leadership of Gush Emunim (“Bloc of the Faithful”) toward the Disengagement, and whether the political processes led to any change in attitudes among these circles regarding the status and religious significance of the State of Israel as a secular Zionist nation. Consideration will also be given to the modalities by which the Gush Emunim rabbis reconcile the discrepancy between their religious ideal and events on the ground. In this respect, therefore, the article will constitute a case study of the

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religious response to crises of faith. It will also provide a test case for examining the circumstances in which religious institutions change their attitude toward the secular state and engage in a strategy to win state control.

The Six Day War (June 1967) created a new reality in the Middle East. During the course of the war, Israel occupied the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights and the Sinai Peninsula. These areas were not annexed to Israel, and continued to have the status of occupied territories administered by Israel pending their return in the framework of a peace agreement. Accordingly, immediately after the war, Israel did not, on the whole, initiate Jewish settlement in the occupied areas, with the exception of East Jerusalem, which was formally annexed to the State of Israel. From the outset, however, this principle was not strictly applied. Soon after the war, a number of Jewish settlements were established in the occupied territory. The first settlement in the West Bank was founded in 1967, in Kfar Etzion. The first settlement in the Gaza Strip was Kfar Darom, established in 1970. Both settlements were not typical in that they were established on the ruins of earlier Jewish settlements destroyed by the Jordanian and Egyptian armies during the War of Independence (1948). After 1967, the Israeli government also initiated the establishment of several settlements in the Jordan Valley and in the Yamit region in Sinai, as part of the security-oriented Alon Plan.

Jewish settlement activities increased dramatically after the establishment of Gush Emunim in February 1974. A group of young religious Zionists, who advocated the imposition of Israeli sovereignty over Judea, Samaria, and the Gaza Strip, founded the movement. This extra-parliamentary movement also managed to secure the support of a number of prominent secular public figures, such as the songwriter Naomi Shemer and General Ariel Sharon (retired), who saw the settlers as continuing the work of the early Zionist pioneers.

The first settlement action undertaken by activists from the organization, whose members were drawn from graduates of the Mercaz Harav Yeshiva under the leadership of Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Hachohen Kook, came when they entered a site in Sebastia without official permission. The authorities evicted the settlement several times, but the settlers then reached an agreement with Minister of Defense Shimon Peres that they would be housed in a neighboring IDF base—a decision that effectively led to the establishment of the settlement, despite some opposition within the Israeli government led by Yitzhak Rabin. After the Likud came to power in 1977, the pace of construction in the settlements increased, and they enjoyed enthusiastic support, including financial benefits, the construction of infrastructures, and legal protection. Ariel Sharon, minister of agriculture at the time, was a key source of support. In 1978, the Amana movement was established as the settlement arm of Gush Emunim. The number of Israeli citizens living in the settlements has

risen steadily since then.<sup>1</sup> At the beginning of 2004, the population of the settlements was estimated at 250,000, and approximately 40 percent of the territory of Judea and Samaria was included in the municipal areas of jurisdiction of the settlements.

The Six Day War created fervent hope among the younger generation of religious Zionists. The dominant school within this population, the graduates of Mercaz Harav yeshiva in Jerusalem, propagated the perception that the Israeli victory in this war reflected God's will to redeem His people. The post-war era, therefore, represented a higher stage in the process of redemption. Accordingly, the graduates perceived the State of Israel as imbued with absolute sanctity. Rabbi Zvi Yehudah Hachohen Kook, the leader of this group, went so far as to state: "We must remember for once and all: that which is sacred is sacred! [. . .] The State of Israel and the arrangement of government in Israel are sacred. And everything that belongs to observing this commandment, all the tanks and other weapons [. . .]—all belong to this sanctity."<sup>2</sup> The Gush Emunim mass settlement movement aimed to settle the territories occupied by the IDF in order to establish facts on the ground, and to settle the biblical Land of Israel with Jews. The movement saw settlement as a manifestation of the redemption of God's people.

Since the 1980s, however, the Gush Emunim settlement movement has seen an increasing conscience of crisis due to the discrepancy between their underlying religious belief, which considers the State of Israel to be the first step toward full redemption, portraying an image of the state involved in a process of redemption, and the actual reality of concessions and withdrawals.

After the peace process between Israel and Egypt (1978), and the Israeli withdrawal from Sinai (1982), many Gush Emunim supporters were forced to confront the increasing erosion of their basic beliefs regarding the character and destiny of the State of Israel. The Israeli withdrawal from Sinai, and the subsequent Madrid talks (1990) and Oslo process (1993), which led to an Israeli withdrawal from parts of Judea and Samaria, provoked a profound theological crisis, intensified by the demolition of Jewish settlements during the Disengagement (2005). The fundamental religious dilemma is profound: how can a state that uproots settlements and hands over parts of the biblical Land of Israel to Arab rule be considered "absolutely sacred?" What sublime religious meaning can be attributed to the actions of a secular state unaware of its purpose of serving as "the foundation for God's throne in the world," which threatens to destroy by its own hands the chance of realizing the messianic hope?

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1. Danny Rubinstein, *On the Lord's Side: Gush Emunim* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad Publishing House, 1982) [Hebrew].

2. Shlomo Aviner, *Discussions with Rabbi Zvi Yehudah: The Land of Israel* (Jerusalem: Hava Library, 5765) 269 [Hebrew].

The events that took place during the Disengagement are still fresh and it is too early to foresee the long term outcomes. Still a profound question has to be raised: will the Disengagement make a change in the long term attitude of the rabbinic leadership of Gush Emunim toward the state of Israel, or will a crisis be overcome?

Although religious Zionists account for less than 15 percent of the population, they maintain a disproportionate influence due to the nature of Israel's parliamentary system, which allows religious coalition partners to exert strong influence over government policies.

The examination of the activist wing of rabbis from the Mercaz Harav school does not reflect the positions of the entire settlement movement. Moreover, despite the militant calls from certain circles within this elite rabbinical group to refuse to obey the order to evict settlements and to engage in physical opposition, in reality these calls were not heeded. In particular, and with few exceptions, religious Zionist soldiers who were graduates of the Gush Emunim yeshivot did not heed militant calls. The number of cases in which soldiers refused to obey army orders relating to the Disengagement itself did not exceed 130,<sup>3</sup> so the scale of this phenomenon can be considered negligible. The failure of the militant struggle may also be due to ambivalent and mixed messages, as discussed below. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to dismiss the importance of this rabbinical group, if only because its members are the teachers and guides of many young religious Zionists. The education and values these young men receive in the "national yeshivot" will form the foundation for the next generation of leaders of religious Zionism as a whole. It can be assumed that the Disengagement will constitute a formative event for this generation.

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Soon after its emergence, religious Zionism has been required to consider dialectical perspectives that seek to imbue the Zionist enterprise with covert messianic significance. These approaches are identified, in particular, with the religious philosophy of Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Hacohen Kook (1865-1935). According to Dov Schwartz, many Orthodox Jews found it difficult to identify with the Zionist movement and act within the classic Zionist definitions. Zionist rhetoric spoke of the need to "normalize" the Jewish people and make it "a nation like all the others." The essence of Zionism was described as being "to build a safe haven for the Jewish people." All these definitions are inconsonant with Jewish tradition, which emphasizes a

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3. This figure was quoted in the religious weekly *Besheva*, 15 September 2005 [Hebrew]. The article disputes the claim by Chief-of-Staff Dan Halutz that only sixty-three soldiers were tried for disobeying orders. In either case, however, the numbers involved are relatively small.

distinction between Israel and the other nations, and proclaims that the Land of Israel has a unique theological function. Accordingly, many of those who developed the religious Zionist approach, led by Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Hacohen Kook, integrate the religious purpose as part of the Zionist idea.

These thinkers used the traditional rabbinical technique of *pshat* and *drash* (distinguishing from exegetical meaning) to describe the Zionist act. While ostensibly adopting the general Zionist definition of the movement's purpose, this definition was imbued with a specific religious meaning: the reinstatement of divine worship within the context of a theocratic national framework. The Zionist body acts in the material realm, but its innermost core aspires to eternal spiritual life, and this constitutes the "real" foundation for its operations and aims, even if the movement itself remains unaware of this.<sup>4</sup> The long-awaited theocracy is about to arrive, and it will be realized once secular Zionism chooses the true path, i.e. the complete worship of God. Zionism will then advance to its second phase: the revival of the monarchy, the restitution of the sacrifices on the Temple Mount, and the re-establishment of the Sanhedrin.

This dogma was present within religious Zionist circles almost from their inception, but it occupied a marginal position. Thus, during the period immediately preceding the establishment of the State of Israel (1948), certain religious Zionist circles raised the vision of a Torah nation; however, they abandoned it soon after independence. Asher Cohen argues that many religious Zionists indeed aspired to establish a theocratic regime, but during the transition to independence they recognized that, as a minority with limited public power and status, this goal was unachievable and unrealistic. Accordingly, religious Zionist politics centered mainly on preserving the status quo on religious matters that had been agreed upon during the pre-state era. The vision of a Torah state was not manifested in overt political demands, which centered on the right of the religious public to maintain its own way of life. The transition from the pre-state Yishuv to independence led to an awareness that the ideal of the Torah nation could not be reconciled with Zionist reality. Accordingly, religious Zionist leaders confined themselves to recognizing the secular state while struggling to preserve its religious character in certain fields.<sup>5</sup>

The Israeli victory in the Six Day War (1967), led to the strengthening of the activist wing of religious Zionism, dominated mainly by the younger generation of the National Religious Party.<sup>6</sup> In

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4. Dov Schwartz, *Faith at a Crossroads—A Theological Profile of Religious Zionism* (Leiden, Boston & Koln: Brill, 2002), 156-92.

5. Asher Cohen, *The Tallit and the Flag—Religious Zionism and the Vision of the Torah State during the Early Days of the State* (Jerusalem: Yad Ben Zvi, 1998), 48-55 [Hebrew].

6. Yoni Garb, "The Young Guard of the National Religious Party and the Ideological Roots of Gush Emunim," in *Religious Zionism: The Era of Change*, ed. Asher Cohen and Yisrael

the course of the war, areas of the biblical homeland were occupied by the IDF and Motte Gur, commander of the Paratrooper Division, made the famous declaration that “the Temple Mount is in our hands.” These dramatic events created a groundswell of opinion that would later fuel the establishment of the Gush Emunim settlement movement. Though established in 1974, the movement quickly became the dominant stream within religious Zionism.<sup>7</sup>

As noted above, the messianic ideology behind the settlement movement glorified the state, which it saw as imbued with “absolute sanctity.” However, the Israeli withdrawal from Sinai and the declaration of willingness to establish Palestinian autonomy included in the peace accords with Egypt (1978) led to the emergence of voices within Gush Emunim that challenged the ideology of Rabbi Zvi Yehudah Kook, the leader of Mercaz Harav yeshiva. The critics argued that the political regime of the State of Israel was no more than a tool designed to lead the People of Israel toward the ultimate redemption. Accordingly, if this democratic regime no longer served its covert purpose, in light of the concessions and withdrawals, there was no reason why it should not be replaced and a more suitable alternative presented.

Two key activists in the Gush Emunim movement represented this position: Yehudah Etzion and Rabbi Israel Ariel. The position of Yehudah Etzion is particularly pertinent, since the uncertainties he felt regarding the path of religious Zionism following the withdrawal from Sinai, and the conclusions he drew from these events, would eventually become common sentiments among a much broader public. The crisis of conscience undergone by religious Zionism over the past two decades, and particularly since the Oslo process of the early 1990s, and the culmination of this process in the Disengagement, created a broader wave of reaction consonant with the approach and spirit of Yehudah Etzion.

Yehudah Etzion is an independent and unique figure. The Israeli public first heard of him following the uncovering of the “Jewish Underground” in 1984. This group, led by Etzion, Michael Livny, and Yeshuah Ben Shoshan, committed a series of revenge attacks on Arabs in reaction to a terrorist attack on a group of Jews in Hebron in May 1980, including placing explosive devices under the cars of Palestinian mayors, some of whom lost their legs. Three Palestinian students at the Islamic College in Hebron were murdered in response to the killing of a yeshiva student in the city. The group also planned to blow up the

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Harel (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2005), 171-200 [Hebrew]; Eliezer Don Yihya, “Stability and Change in the Camp Party—The National Religious Party and the Young Revolution,” *State, Government and International Relations* 14 (5740): 25-52 [Hebrew].

7. Gideon Aran, “A Mystic—Messianic Interpretation of Modern Israeli History: The Six Day War as a Key Event in the Development of the Original Religious Culture of Gush Emunim,” *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* 4 (1988): 263-75.

mosques on the Temple Mount in order to pave the way for religious redemption and the construction of the Third Temple, but were caught before they could put their plan into action.<sup>8</sup>

After the exposure of the underground, Etzion presented his fundamental criticism of the mainstream of Gush Emunim in a series of articles published in the settler's journal *Nekuda* and in independent publications.<sup>9</sup> He argued that Gush Emunim had focused exclusively on establishing settlements, and had not tried to gain power and lead the people toward religious redemption. He saw this as a grave error: in the absence of active progress toward redemption in areas relating to the "Laws of Messiah"—the establishment of the Sanhedrin (law), theocracy (government), and the Temple (worship)—decline and retreat would inevitably follow. The redemption of the Jewish people demands active steps, and Gush Emunim, as the leading bearers of the message of redemption, lacked the proper tools for securing a breakthrough.

Etzion's barbed attacks, directed at the leaders of religious Zionism, focused on the view that it had proven mistaken to expect the secular Zionist establishment to guide the work of Zionism toward messianic theocracy, while remaining unaware of the momentous mission it bore. The divine mission had been neglected by those who were supposed to be its bearers, i.e. religious Zionism, and the result had been decline instead of progress. The desire to live a "normal" life had led the messianic cause to the edge of oblivion, the first symptom of which was Israel's willingness to abandon the Sinai peninsula in return for the peace treaty with Egypt.

According to Etzion, the desire to establish the messianic kingdom remained the "supreme strategy" of religious Zionism. However, the tactics to be used in leading this process needed urgent revision. The essence of the revision lay in religious radicalism and revolutionary theocratic activism. Etzion concluded that religious Zionism should stop relying on the secular State of Israel to move the people toward religious redemption. The public itself should now initiate an activist movement of redemption that would move toward the End Times, perceived as the effort to establish a theocracy.

The established leaders of Gush Emunim sharply criticized Etzion for his opinions during the 1980s, when they were considered exceptional.<sup>10</sup> Over time, however, these ideas became an integral part

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8. Ehud Sprinzak, *The Ascendance of Israel's Radical Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 252-60.

9. Yehudah Etzion, "To Raise the 'Flag of Jerusalem' At Last," *Nekuda* 93 (5745), 22-24 [Hebrew]; Etzion, "From 'the Flag of Jerusalem' to 'the Redemption Movement,'" *Nekuda* 94 (5746): 8-9, 28-29; Etzion, *The Temple Mount* (Israel: independent publication, 5745) [Hebrew]; Etzion, "Rabbi Feinstein Emigrates to Israel," *Nekuda* 98 (5746): 14-15, 36.

10. For example, see the extensive discussion in *Nekuda* relating to the uncovering of the Jewish Underground: *Nekuda* 75 (5744): 18-34.

of accepted discourse among sections of the rabbinical elite of religious Zionism. As the peace process between Israel and her neighbors accelerated through the Oslo accords, Etzion's "post-Zionist" positions became more prominent. After the Disengagement and the destruction of the settlements, such opinions have been voiced openly by a growing section of rabbis within Gush Emunim.

### THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

All fundamentalist movements respond to the outside world: some retreat from society in order to avoid the influence of secularity; others attempt to take over the secular regime. The study *Strong Religion* by Gabriel A. Almond, Scott R. Appleby & Emmanuel Sivan attempts to define fundamentalists' interactions with the world in four categories—world conqueror, world transformer, world creator, and world renouncer.<sup>11</sup>

The world creators and the world renouncers focus mainly on strengthening their own enclaves. World renouncers build high walls that separate them from the rest of society. They do not want to transform or to conquer the world; they just want to be left alone. The world creators also focus on their own enclaves, but they show some interest in changing the secular world—at least for their own benefit. Accordingly, the world creators act in order to recruit more followers of their lifestyle from the secular world.

It is tempting to argue that all fundamentalist movements hold a desire to conquer the world. But the desire to rule society can be moderated. Fundamentalist world transformer movements know they must act in a specific time and place, and if they do not hold enough power, they may lose their battle. Therefore, fundamentalist movements may adjust themselves to the secular regime and be part of it, although they reject the values of the secular world. In order to pursue their goals, they may enter the political in an attempt to influence the institutions, structures, laws, and customs of their society.

The Gush Emunim movement can be identified as a world transformer movement. Its theological framework sees redemption as a gradual process that may take centuries. Therefore, its mission is protracted. When the movement was established, it had some government opposition, but after the general elections in 1977, and the victory of the Likud party, there was a gradual support for the movement's goals. The fact that today 250,000 Israelis live in the West Bank is a direct result of the movement's ongoing political campaign over the past three decades.

What, then, creates change in the behavior of a fundamentalist

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11. Gabriel A. Almond, Scott R. Appleby & Emmanuel Sivan, *Strong Religion—The Rise of Fundamentalism around the World* (Chicago, Ill.: Chicago University Press, 2003).



movement, pushing it from a world transformer stance into the role of a world conqueror? In what circumstances can the movement no longer maintain its position of reconciliation vis-à-vis the world, and must it move to a mode of assault? In what conditions can the movement no longer conform to the secular regime?

The Society of Muslim Brothers in Egypt underwent a similar process of development. Hassan Al-Banna established the movement in 1928, in order to correct the flaws of the Egyptian society, which were perceived to be the result of the penetration of modernization and western values into Egyptian society. Al-Banna saw the establishment of a theocratic regime as the sublime goal of his movement, but only through mass education and re-Islamization of the society could he achieve it. The Egyptian regime persecuted the movement and Al-Banna was executed. This situation did not shift after the change of regimes in Egypt, and the rise of the Gamal Abed Al-Nasser to power (1952), with the help of the Muslim Brothers. The new regime continued to persecute its followers. As a result, the movement underwent a period of radicalization, and some of its followers turned to terrorism. Followers of the Muslim Brothers were responsible for the assassination of Egyptian president Anwar Sadat (1981).<sup>12</sup>

Shiite revolutionaries in Iran learned the lesson of the Society of Muslim Brothers. Due to the ongoing failure of the Brothers to win the hearts of the masses in Egypt, they took a new tactical approach. The conclusion the Shiites reached was that they must first take control over the state powers, and only then restore the role of Islam over the populace. This conclusion was also the result of severe government persecution of religious leaders in Iran. All those pushed the religious establishment into the revolution that took place in 1979.<sup>13</sup>

Accordingly, the feelings of persecution and siege led Muslim fundamentalists into trends of revolution and violence. This article argues that the Religious Zionist establishment is also undergoing a religious crisis due to the government's decision to uproot settlements. As a result, theocratic and revolutionary sentiments can find roots within the hearts of many followers. The following section attempts to identify the internal mechanism that pushes Gush Emunim's true believers into radical religious behavior.

#### RABBINICAL REACTIONS TO THE DISENGAGEMENT PLAN BEFORE THE EVICTION

As has been seen, the Disengagement plan presented the rabbis of

12. Laurence Davidson, *Islamic Fundamentalism* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1998), 19-30.

13. *Ibid.*, 31-48.

Gush Emunim with a religious dilemma. How could it be that, despite their devotion and intense efforts, a plan had emerged that was contrary to the divine promise for the Land of Israel? Accordingly, they almost unanimously opposed the Disengagement plan and the eviction of settlements, and the religious Zionist public was also virtually united in its campaign against the plan.

Attitudes were less monolithic, however, in terms of the strength and nature of this opposition. The rabbinical statements reflect several distinct reactions. By their nature, all the rabbinical reactions addressed the inherent religious dilemmas raised by the idea of the Disengagement and by crises of faith. They sought to provide activist responses to the question as to how the “evil hand” could prevail, while the divine plan, as they saw it, was not being realized.

All the reactions noted above were observed long before Prime Minister Ariel Sharon published his Disengagement plan. Some had already been seen during the campaign against the eviction of Yamit (1982), in the framework of the Movement to Stop the Withdrawal from Sinai, while others were observed during the campaign against the Oslo accords. Accordingly, the roots of this ideological soul-searching predate the planned eviction of the settlements, reflecting an ongoing sense of crisis.

Nevertheless, the Disengagement plan certainly exacerbated and emphasized a profound fault line running through the school of the Mercaz Harav yeshiva. This line divides between those positions that argue that the State of Israel, in its current, Zionist format, has completed its historical function, and an alternative political force must now be established to offer a “faith-based” theocratic regime; adherents of the “statist” approach, who seek to maintain the affinity and bond between the State of Israel and the religious Zionist public, argue that the State of Israel, as currently constituted, reflects the will of the people, and, hence, also the will of God. While those who favor the “faith-based” approaches advocate the gradual elimination of the secular state’s influence over the religious public, those who support the “statist” positions oppose a break with the state, and urge their followers to obey civil laws and maintain their commitment to national sovereignty.<sup>14</sup>

The dominant response to the Disengagement plan among militant religious Zionist rabbis sought to encourage opposition to the act of eviction. Those who favored this position argued that, since the State of Israel was acting in a manner contrary to the divine promises in the Torah regarding the Land of Israel to the People of Israel, it was

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14. I should note that while these definitions of “faith-based” and “statist”—are drawn from the internal discourse of the Gush Emunim rabbis, I employ them here in a slightly different sense from their original context. I use the term “faith-based” to refer to the phenomenon of “post-stateism,” although those rabbis who hold “statist” positions would obviously argue that their positions are also “faith-based.”

permissible to oppose the actions of the state. However, the opposition they advocated was limited to passive civil disobedience. This approach was particularly evident in the statements of two former chief rabbis, Mordechai Eliyahu and Avraham Shapira, as well as in the rulings of the Committee of Yesha Rabbis—the umbrella organization of rabbis of the settlements in Judea, Samaria, and the Gaza Strip. These rabbis did not call at any stage for violent opposition or overt rebellion.

On 15 October 2004, Rabbi Avraham Shapira, who formerly served as a chief rabbi of Israel (1983-1993), and who, at the time of his declaration, headed the prestigious Mercaz Harav yeshiva, declared that he supported the idea of soldiers refusing to obey the eviction orders.

Approximately one year before the implementation of the Disengagement plan, Avraham Shapira declared the expulsion of Jews from their homes a religious offense, and, accordingly, soldiers must not obey the command to uproot settlements. In an interview for the weekly religious journal *Besheva*, Rabbi Shapira stated: “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.” When asked to respond to the comments by other rabbis to the effect that the offense of expulsion rests with the state, and not the soldiers who commit the acts, Shapira replied: “What??! Every offense is an offense. In heaven it is not wanted [...], so it is forbidden for anyone.”<sup>15</sup> By claiming that the refusal to obey the order reflects God’s will, and that it is forbidden to obey the order, Shapira placed the divine order, as he interpreted it, above mundane laws, clearly stating that one must follow the divine command even at the price of confrontation with the authorities. In response to the question, “What if the prime minister has decided to evict Jews,” he replied: “He is not the master of the house,” adding: “We know what is permitted and what is forbidden. Torah or not Torah, that is our function. It may be that a soldier is weak and does not want to refuse, but the truth is the truth. You don’t play around with the truth!”<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Shapira reinforced the authority of his ruling, announcing that “those who evict will be punished in this world, and in the next world.”<sup>17</sup> Some seventy rabbis joined Shapira’s statement urging soldiers not to participate in the uprooting of Jews.<sup>18</sup>

Further support for Shapira’s position came in the ruling of Rabbi Mordechai Eliyahu, who also formerly served as a chief rabbi of Israel (1983-1993). Eliyahu stated one month before the Disengagement that the government’s plan “will not happen.” The declaration was issued

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15. *Besheva*, 14 October 2004.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Yediot Acharonot*, 20 October 2004 [Hebrew].

18. A list of all the signatories appeared on the website of *Arutz 7* on 24 November 2004—[www.a7.org](http://www.a7.org) [Hebrew], available online at: <http://www.inn.co.il/-news.php?id=92045>.

when the situation on the ground indicated that the destruction of the settlements would indeed proceed, in apparent contradiction to the biblical commandment that the Land of Israel belongs to the People of Israel. Indeed, there were those who interpreted Eliyahu's statement as a form of prophecy. After the publication of his comments, the Jewish residents of the settlements felt vindicated in their decision not to heed the government statements urging them to take steps to find alternative housing solutions outside the Gaza Strip. Accordingly, they refused to contact the Disengagement Administration, which was responsible for their rehabilitation, thus jeopardizing their economic future and their eligibility for compensation.

This difficult situation led to the emergence of the view, as presented by Eliyahu, that these events constituted a test of faith for the public, in which they were required to reach an ever-higher spiritual plane. This was the basis for the declaration, or perhaps even the prophecy, that the Disengagement would not materialize, so that the settlers should continue their routine—planting, building, and opposing any attempt to reach a compromise with the government. This declaration reflected a process of religious radicalization and a denial of objective reality, and led to the exacerbation of the tension with the state.

Thus, the theological response of Mordechai Eliyahu to the dilemma of the eviction of the settlements was a counter-reaction typified by cognitive dissonance. This well-known sociological theory in messianic movements argues that a crisis caused by prophetic failure may lead to the paradoxical phenomenon of the reinforcement of religious faith, rather than its erosion. The failure of the prophecy, which, in logical terms, should have led to a weakening of confidence in its accuracy, sometimes creates the completely opposite phenomenon, with a strengthening of religious belief and practice, in an effort to set the messianic process back on course, which is founded in the assertion that an individual will attempt to maintain his or her faith. When someone who believes wholeheartedly in something is committed to this belief, and has even taken irreversible actions on the basis of this belief, is confronted with ostensibly irrefutable evidence contradicting the erroneous belief, the individual may strengthen his or her faith, and invest renewed efforts in convincing others of the accuracy of their worldview.<sup>19</sup> Eliyahu's call to continue the routine of life in Gush Katif, due to be evacuated in less than one month, could be interpreted as an attempt to ignore reality and to act with heightened determination to realize the religious ideal. It is thus worth examining in greater depth Eliyahu's much-quoted letter:

To our brothers, the settlers in Yesha [Judea, Samaria and the Gaza Strip], powerful heroes and performers of His will, who are working and settling the expanses of our

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19. Leon Festinger, Henry W. Riechen, & Stanley Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1956).

ancestral homeland in Gush Katif—may your wellbeing ever prosper!

In this missal, I wish to strengthen your hands against the terrible moral evil of the intention to evict settlements and expel Jews from their homes—it shall not happen!

There is no act more moral than the enterprise of the revival of the people returning to its land after a long exile, whereby you are observing the positive commandment of settling the Land of Israel, and there is no greater moral wrong than the attempt to torture your souls with threats of expulsion and the abandonment of our ancestral land.

From that same clear, moral strength, we must not cause division in the public and among the heroes of our army; we are not ones to refuse orders for the sake of it. Soldiers who are required to commit the crime will reply, “I cannot.” And if they are coerced, they will sit on the floor and cry with the family they wish to expel from its home.

We are obliged to protest against this terrible moral wrong.

And to those who block the roads—this should be one only on the condition that there is an alternative route. We will not block a road to which there is no alternative, and we will not, God forbid, endanger human life.

*The Seer of the Generations in advance, who answered our Father Abraham on Mount Moriah, will answer us and bring our justice into the light, and no one shall stop the Divine process of the national revival of the People of Israel that is returning to its Land.*<sup>20</sup> (Emphases the author’s)

In the response that accompanied the letter, he addressed the question as to whether his statement “It shall not happen” was a “prayer or reality”—i.e., a supplication or a prophecy. In his reply, the rabbi stated that it was both a prayer and a reality—the prayer would help God nullify the emerging reality. Accordingly, Eliyahu ruled that people should move to Gush Katif, live there, and continue to work the land, to sow and to plant, despite the fact that it was evident that the date of the harvest would be later than the date set by the government for the vacating of the area. Similarly, Eliyahu ordered the residents of Gush Katif to refrain from preparing alternative plots. Their refusal, he argued, strengthened faith in God and in the promise of the Land made by God to Abraham.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, the letter includes a relatively moderate call to oppose the act of eviction, permitting only passive resistance, and not open rebellion. It is possible that this is the reason why the practical opposition to the Disengagement plan and the destruction of the settlements was relatively muted.

This activist school of militant rabbis was faced by a second school, also comprised of graduates of Mercaz Harav yeshiva: the “statist” school. Shlomo Aviner and Zvi Tau, two of the most senior Halachic teachers produced by the yeshiva, led this group of rabbis. The

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20. The letter appears in “Responsa of Rabbi Mordechai Eliyahu,” on the website: [www.moriya.org.il](http://www.moriya.org.il), dated 18 July 2005 [Hebrew], available online at: <http://www.moriya.org.il/Art/print.asp?id=877>.

21. Ibid.

exponents of this school argued that the struggle against the Disengagement plan must take place through public information and persuasion, and not through violence or irrational acts.

In this spirit, a discussion between Rabbi Zvi Tau and his students was published, in which he argued forcefully against the refusal to obey army orders and against civil disobedience. The principle behind his position was that, in order to prevent the Disengagement plan, it was necessary to act to secure spiritual renewal and to undertake a profound campaign of “settling the hearts.”<sup>22</sup> Tau argued that the Disengagement and the strong support for the plan among the public were a manifestation of the spirit of the people, which was still not ready for the spiritual message of redemption. The reason for this, he suggested, was the failure of the settlement movement to include dimensions of spiritual renewal in its mundane actions: “We engaged successfully in settlement, but we did not manage to advance a significant public spiritual transition in Israel. The People of Israel were left far behind us, and even deteriorated in spiritual and value-based terms, to the point that we find ourselves in the present conflict. This is a situation that we must change.”<sup>23</sup> According to Tau, the spiritual revolution was the only real action that could be taken before the implementation of the Disengagement, and it centered mainly on a broad-based campaign of information and education.

Tau stated that the struggle against the eviction of Gush Katif was intended as a message from heaven, in order to educate and inform the religious public. Moreover, only an assertive informational campaign could nullify the edict. Conversely, those who spoke of the disengagement of the religious public from the state or threatened civil war were actually strengthening the supporters of the Disengagement, since they legitimized the desire to attempt the eviction at any price. Tau emphasized that he was not negating the legitimate campaign of protest, within the confines of the law.

Regarding the tactics used in the struggle, Tau emphasized that not all means were acceptable. Sometimes “it is impossible to coerce reality through improper and rash means.” Accordingly, he rejected the possibility that the Disengagement could be stopped through threats or acts of force:

Creating an atmosphere of rift and hatred among the people, or, God forbid, even considering the idea that someone would raise a hand against his brother; referring to sections of the people as “rabble”; or expressing absolute despair with the State of Israel—all of these are a terrible affront to the most important values in the name of

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22. “Settling the hearts” has long been used in religious Zionist circles as a code referring to the need to engage in informational and outreach activities among the general public, alongside actual settlement activities.

23. Zvi Tau, *Responsa of Faith on Face-To-Face Activities in Light of Current Events*, Iyar 5765. Published on the website *NRG Ma'ariv*, 21 June 2005 [Hebrew], available online at: <http://www.nrg.co.il/online/11/ART/947/891.html>.

saving the Land of Israel.<sup>24</sup>

According to Tau, civil disobedience would indeed be necessary if the government acted in a manner contrary to the will of the people, but this is not currently the case. Accordingly, those who have true knowledge must act to change public attitudes through aggressive informational activities, going from home to home to spread the spiritual word, if necessary. If this happens, he claims, the government will be forced to reconsider its Disengagement plan.

Rabbi Yuval Sherlo, head of the Hesder yeshiva in Petach Tikva, and one of the leading young rabbis of religious Zionism presented another theological position within the “statist” camp. Sherlo explained that “sometimes prayers are not answered.” He argued that humans cannot know what God wishes, and that God is not bound by human preferences. Sherlo indirectly criticized the statements by Shapira and Eliyahu to the effect that the Disengagement constituted a rebellion against God’s will. However, he continued, the individual should continue to try to act in accordance with his conscience, in the belief that God indeed listens to prayer; the mere fact that a prayer is not accepted does not imply any weakness or any error of faith. “We do not condition our bond to Him on His doing what we ask. We continue our faithful and confident path, on the basis of our profound bond to the Word of God, and act in this world with all our strength.”<sup>25</sup> This is virtually the only reaction found thus far from within the central stream of Gush Emunim rabbis that implies even the slightest doubt as to the just nature of the struggle, and may even suggest the possibility that the campaign against the Disengagement may not, in fact, reflect divine will.

#### STRENGTHENING THE IDEA OF A TORAH STATE AS THE CONCLUSION FROM THE DISENGAGEMENT

Even after the implementation of the Disengagement, when the demolition of the settlements was, in fact, accomplished, the same fault line referred to above could still be seen in the responses of “faith-based” and “statist” rabbis. However, the gulf between the two schools was now considerably more narrow. The responses of both schools suggest that they aspire to the creation of a Torah state, and differ mainly over what tactical approach to employ.

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24. Tau uses the Kabbalistic term *erev rav*, which refers to “fake Jews” who attempt to prevent the redemption of the Jews, and whose physical annihilation is the only way to remove the last obstacle to the End Days. For more detailed discussion of this issue, see my article: Motti Inbari, “Uzi Meshulam’s ‘Mishkan Ohalim’: A Contemporary Apocalyptic Messianic Sect in Israel,” *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* 17 (2001): 74-87. Zvi Tau, *Responsa*.

25. Appeared on the website *NRG Ma’ariv*, 21 August 2005, available online at: [http://www.nrg.co.il/cgi-bin/nrgprint.pl?channel=channel\\_judaism](http://www.nrg.co.il/cgi-bin/nrgprint.pl?channel=channel_judaism).

The “statist” rabbis, such as Shlomo Aviner, argued that, despite the profound rift caused by the eviction of the settlements, the path of settling both the land and the hearts should continue unchanged. By contrast, the retroactive responses of the “faith-based” rabbis intensified the call to disengage from the state and from its sovereign authority, and to establish types of “counter-societies” intended solely for their own circles.

During the days following the completion of the withdrawal, a central thread can be found among most of the written and verbal reactions. Almost unanimously, the activist declaration was heard that now, following the results of the actions of the State of Israel, greater efforts must be made to establish a Torah state. This “post-Zionist” response embodies profound disappointment with the existing state, which failed to act in accordance with the divine plan as they now perceive it, uprooting settlements and expelling Jews from their homes. Accordingly, activists emphasized the need to lead the people toward religious redemption, which was to be gauged through the mundane criterion of establishing a theocratic regime. These goals can be reached through long-term persuasion and action in the political arena.

For example, the weekly broadsheet *Ma’ayanei Hayeshuah*, distributed in religious Zionist synagogues, abandoned its usual format on the weekend following the completion of the withdrawal. In place of discussions on the weekly Torah portion and regular opinion columns, the broadsheet presented a manifesto in shades of black and white. The main content of this manifesto was as follows:

We shall not forget—We shall not forgive

The anger and offense within us,

The tremendous sense of frustration,

Must be channeled in one single direction: working among the masses.

We must seize control of the mechanisms of government, gradually seize control of the State of Israel. We must transform it from “the first step of our redemption” to our actual, real redemption;

From “the foundation of God’s throne in the world” to God’s actual, real throne in the world.

We will remember the adage “little by little,”<sup>26</sup> in order not to fall into “End calculating,”

Yet we will demand of ourselves a full effort to observe “in its time—I shall expedite.”<sup>27</sup>  
[...]

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26. *Kim’ah-kim’ah*, referring to the need to move toward redemption through mundane, gradual steps.

27. This is a reference to a saying in the Babylonian Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 98a): if the Jews have merits justifying their redemption then “I shall expedite” this, and redemption will come speedily; and if not—redemption will still come, but only “in its time” as appointed.



With God's help, we shall live to see the building of the Temple and the actual return of the Divine Presence to Zion."<sup>28</sup>

Rabbi Hanan Porat, one of the founders of Gush Emunim and, for many years, a Member of Knesset for right-wing parties (1981-2003), adopted a similar stance. He presented his thoughts on the failure of the struggle against the Disengagement plan in the opening column in *Me'at Min Ha'or*, another weekly broadsheet distributed in religious Zionist synagogues. Porat concluded the failure of the struggle against the Disengagement demanded the development of new horizons relating to government and power. Porat urged all the religious streams—ultra-Orthodox, Orthodox and “traditional”—to present a suitable leader who could compete for power.<sup>29</sup>

Rabbi Zalman Baruch Melamed, the rabbinical authority behind *Arutz 7* (the radio station and weekly newspaper of the settlers), and the rabbi of the settlement Beit El “A,” sought a theological answer to the question as to why the Disengagement happened, despite the tremendous devotion shown in the struggle against the plan, and despite the perception of this act as contrary to God's will. How, then, could God permit such an act? Melamed found his answer in the hope that, from out of the depths of destruction, redemption would spring. In this interpretation, Melamed appears to be following the Talmudic saying, “Ben David [The messiah] comes only in a generation that is either entirely worthy or entirely guilty” (Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 98a). Thus, out of the profound crisis of secular society—a crisis, according to Melamed, characterized by rampant governmental corruption, a rotten legal system and media, rising violence among youth, and so on—a process of profound spiritual repair must emerge, ultimately leading to the return to the People of Israel of its Land, whose borders shall be “from the great River Euphrates to the Great Sea and to the River of Egypt, and God shall yet expand our borders, as stated in the Torah, beyond those promised to our fathers.” Thus the Disengagement is actually a crisis for those who have abandoned Torah, not for those who adhere to it—a crisis in the spiritual world of secular Zionism. For the religious public, then, the Disengagement is to be seen as a divine test that they are required to pass. Success means accepting difficulties and strengthening faith. “From the internal resilience, external resilience will also stem, and the Holy One will transform the curse into a blessing for His love for us.”<sup>30</sup>

This approach, which advocates action leading to the emergence of a new regime in Israel, was forcefully presented as “the Torah opinion” when the Committee of Yesha Rabbis issued a press release stating resolutely:

28. *Ma'ayanei Hayeshu'ah* 211, 22 Av 5765 [Hebrew].

29. *Me'at Min Ha'or* 311, 5 Ellul 5765 [Hebrew].

30. Appeared on the website of *Arutz 7* on 7 September 2005, available online at: <http://www.a7.org/print.php3what=article&tid=4834>.

The hand raised against the legacy of our fathers and the people of Gush Katif, in its monstrous and destructive form, the product of hatred of Israel and the Land of Israel, shall be cut off through a spiritual revolution with the collapse of secular Zionism.<sup>31</sup>

In an accompanying interview for the Internet news site *Ynet*, Rabbi Yishai Bavad, the secretary of the Committee of Yesha Rabbis, explained that the intention of the proclamation was to lead to “a religious prime minister, if not in the next round then in the one after that. This is a need that did not exist before. Now we want someone who wears a skullcap, and has God above him—whatever the color of the skullcap.”<sup>32</sup>

In this author’s opinion, these rabbinical declarations announcing the end of secular Zionism and the need to replace the leadership of the nation with “faith-based” leaders reflect an activist call to engage in ongoing political activity. These comments may also be interpreted as an attempt to strengthen the religious Zionist camp following the trauma of the people’s eviction from the settlements.

In the face of these positions, the adherents of the “statist” approach argued that, even after the Disengagement, their way must remain as before, and the settlement endeavors should continue. Rabbi Shlomo Aviner, head of Ateret Cohanim yeshiva and the rabbi of the settlement Beit El “B,” led the counter-position. Aviner’s basic stance was that a distinction must be made between the State of Israel, which has a sacred status as a manifestation of “the dominion of God’s throne,” and which must not be injured, along with the army, which bears special sanctity and must not be harmed at any price. On the other side, argued Aviner, the struggle against the leaders who hold power is legitimate as long as it is waged within the parameters of a legitimate public campaign. Accordingly, religious practice and settlement activities should continue unchanged:

Redemption is a wonderful thing that will not be spoiled by fools. The state and the army are a wonderful thing that we will not allow fools to spoil. We will continue to mobilize for the state and the army, for redemption is such a wonderful thing—even if there are some darkneses within, nothing has changed! It has only got harder, and we shall continue to build our Land, to be built in it, through the wonders of the Lord God of Israel, Perfect of Knowledge, the Redeemer of Israel.<sup>33</sup>

Aviner rejected the call to disobey orders and to resist the eviction of the settlements by physical means. He also opposed those who called on young people to refuse to serve in the IDF.<sup>34</sup> He argued that the army, in itself, was sacred, embodying three commandments: “A.

31. The quote appeared on the website of *Arutz 7* on 11 September 2005, available online at: <http://www.inn.co.il/news.php?id=124122>.

32. Quoted from the website *ynet.co.il*, 12 September 2005, available online at: <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3140749,00.html>.

33. *In Love and Faith* 526, 19 Av 5765 [Hebrew].

34. Shmuel Eliyahu, “As Live As It Gets,” *Olam Katan* 56 (5766), no page numbers [Hebrew].

*Saving the people*—saving the lives of many; B. *Saving the Land*—the commandment of the settlement of the Land and the conquest of the Land; C. *Sanctifying God's Name*, whenever a Gentile strikes a Jew, this is the desecration of God's name, but a million Jews rise up to defend one Jew, as one man and with one heart"<sup>35</sup> (emphases in original).

Although the army dismantled the settlements, the army is also involved in protecting the people and the Land. Accordingly, Aviner argued, the balance of its actions slant to the positive side. Although the prime minister used the army for impure purposes, it remains pure. Accordingly, military service is a commandment, and, despite the Disengagement, young religious Zionists must continue to serve in the army. This is also important for the sake of the future—if the religious soldiers left the army, “evil could run unchecked.” Accordingly, Aviner believes that it is an act of devotion to serve in the army, even when it is engaged in expelling Jews.<sup>36</sup> On the basis of the value of “statism,” and the perception of the nation as an expression of God's will to redeem His people, Aviner urged his followers not to disengage from the society, and to continue to act within it in order to influence the mechanisms of government.

It is worth noting that, due to their statements, Aviner and his colleagues were the object of fierce criticism within rabbinical circles in Gush Emunim. The criticism even acquired a personal tone when Rabbi Avraham Shapira, head of Mercaz Harav yeshiva and an advocate of the militant approach, fiercely attacked the “statist” rabbis, urging them to accept the rule of Torah and his status as the most senior Halachic guide. Shapira adopted the ultra-Orthodox concept of “the Torah opinion,” demanding obedience to the rabbinical hierarchy. Rabbis who declined to accept his rulings were dubbed “*rebbelikh*,”<sup>37</sup> an allusion to their alleged limited knowledge of Torah. In addition, Shapira's supporters attempted to malign Aviner, claiming that his knowledge of the Halachic laws relating to the family was defective, by presenting an alleged error in a Halachic ruling he had issued relating to the ritual impurity of women. By so doing, they sought to delegitimize his standing as a Halachic ruler, so that his positions could not be presented against those of the “Leader of the Generation.” An anonymous booklet was published, including numerous attacks on Aviner.<sup>38</sup> For their part, Aviner's supporters, led by Rabbi Zvi Tau, issued a statement defending the dignity of Aviner and opposing expressions of contempt for Torah sages.<sup>39</sup>

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35. *In Love and Faith* 528, 29 Av 5765 [Hebrew].

36. *Ibid.*

37. In Yiddish—“little rabbis,” with the diminutive used in a derogatory sense.

38. *Insisting on the Truth—Distributed with the Consent of the Leading Sages of the Generation* (Marcheshvan 5766), available online at: [www.aviner.net](http://www.aviner.net) [Hebrew].

39. *Makor Rishon*, 16 September 2005 [Hebrew].

## CONCLUSION

This essay has revealed a rift within the religious leadership associated with Mercaz Harav yeshiva, the leading rabbinical school of the Gush Emunim movement, as well as a shift to the religious “right” in terms, as the demand for religious perfection as an immediate goal, in the form of the Torah state. The ideas expounded by Yehudah Etzion over twenty years ago, and which were then perceived as lying on the margins of the Gush Emunim camp, are now being advocated, in varying degrees, by the core establishment of this sector.

We have also reviewed the rabbinical reactions among the leaders of Gush Emunim to the Disengagement plan. Several key trends may be identified on the basis of the examination of these statements.

A sense of disillusionment with the State of Israel as currently constituted, typifies the first trend, leading to the adoption of an approach that advocates replacing the current regime with a theocracy, as a faithful manifestation of the era of complete redemption. The exponents of this approach called for passive opposition to the eviction of the settlements, and urged religious soldiers to disobey army orders. However, these calls did not advocate overt rebellion against the state. This may explain the relatively moderate reaction of soldiers who were graduates of the Hesder yeshivot, the vast majority of whom did not act forcefully to oppose the Disengagement plan. Nevertheless, those who represent this position exhibit a profound sense of disillusionment with the actions of the state—actions that are diametrically opposed to their worldview.

A second trend sought to combat the Disengagement plan by means of a profound educational campaign among the public; accordingly, it opposed any manifestation of violence, rebellion, or even passive resistance. The adherents of this approach viewed the Disengagement as a manifestation of spiritual weakness that could be corrected only through heightened spiritual elevation. Accordingly, those who adopted this approach called for a broad informational campaign to “settle the hearts,” in order to correct the distortion embodied in the Disengagement plan.

As can be seen, the differences between the two approaches are tactical. Both seek to establish a Torah state in place of the secular state; the argument is merely over the method—political activism as opposed to the activism of religious revivalism through the “settlement of the hearts.”

A third trend, though marginal within Gush Emunim, nevertheless deserves mention. This position argued that if implemented, the Disengagement reflected God’s will. Accordingly, the campaign against the plan lacked legitimacy. This trend, represented by Rabbi Yuval Sherlo, challenges the entire theological foundation of Gush Emunim, which views the integrity of the Land and the settlement drive as the manifestation of God’s will to redeem His people.

The split within the Gush Emunim rabbis is becoming stronger. Although the campaign against the Disengagement plan did not cause a civil war, it created a growing sense of disconnection from the state, and raised a revolutionary call for the replacement of it into a theocracy. There is an opposition to those trends, but still those who oppose are seen as weak in front of the radicals. Therefore, a process of radicalization is witnessed that is pushing Gush Emunim rabbis to a world conqueror stance.

It is still too early to determine which trend will become the most dominant. An objective examination of the behavior of the religious public during the period immediately prior to the Disengagement shows that only a minority participated in demonstrations against the plan. Of approximately 750,000 religious Zionists (about 15 percent of the population), and 250,000 residents of the settlements, approximately 20,000 participated actively in the campaign, and only a tiny minority resorted to violence in opposition to the eviction. Thus, it emerged that the majority, while opposing the Disengagement plan, did so passively.

Some six months after the implementation of the Disengagement plan in February 2006, the Israeli government evicted another settlement, Amona, after the High Court of Justice ruled that this was located on private Palestinian land and was therefore unlawful. During this eviction, a more violent clash occurred between the police forces and the settlers, and the approach advocating a militant struggle apparently gained strength. After the elections in March 2006, the Kadima party came to power. Headed by Ehud Olmert, Kadima openly declared its intention to continue to evacuate settlements as part of its "Ingathering" plan. Only time will tell how these divergent trends will develop and what their manifestations will produce in the context of Israeli reality.