

# From the Margins to the Fore?

## Religious Zionism and Israeli society





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# **From the Margins to the Fore?**

Religious Zionism  
and Israeli Society

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Credit: Zoltan Kluger, Israel Government Press Office

Lower picture: Young people raising flags at the Jerusalem Day celebrations, Damascus Gate, 2012

Credit: Yonatan Sindel, Flash90

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# Introduction

Yair Sheleg

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Anyone who takes a close look at the development of Israeli society over the last few decades sees that one of the most conspicuous processes that have taken place is the rise in the standing of religious Zionism. Today men in “knitted” kippot and their female counterparts are prominent not only in the defense establishment and settlement project—the classic fields of Zionist endeavor in which they enlisted even before the birth of the state and entered with greater energy after independence; they also stand out also in relatively new areas, such as high-tech and the economy in general, the law, the media, culture, and more. During the last decade, the heads of the Mossad and General Security Service, the Police Inspector General, and the Attorney General have been religious Zionists. Their representation on the Supreme Court and senior political echelons has increased, though not necessarily through the traditional sectoral party.

This makes the internal processes within religious Zionism doubly important, because they influence Israeli society as a whole. Ever since its coalescence as a formal organization, only five years after the establishment of the Zionist movement itself, religious Zionism has oscillated between three poles: that of religion and tradition, that of Jewish nationalism, and that of modern liberalism. The history of religious Zionism since the founding of the Mizrachi organization in 1902 can be depicted as a constant undulation among these three poles. It is interesting to note that these are also the three poles of modern Jewish identity; in this sense religious Zionism is a microcosm of that identity—a microcosm that sometimes expresses and exemplifies the spirit of the age, and sometimes makes a major contribution to its shape.

This is also the reason for our special interest in the story of religious Zionism.

The fundamental element in the story of religious Zionism is the gulf between where its adherents thought they should be and where they actually found themselves. Religious Zionism was born as part of a Zionist movement that had a distinctly secular leadership and character; its founders saw themselves as full partners with that leadership (while posing demands to guarantee their followers' rights) and willingly accepted their own subordinate status.

But the key question continued to gnaw at them: how could it be that the idea of the Return to Zion—the vision of the prophets, the vision that had survived two thousand years in exile only thanks to the prayers and customs that linked believing Jews to the Land of Israel—how could that idea be realized by those who had discarded religious observance? Over the years, religious Zionists increasingly adopted the prophetic ideas of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Hacoen Kook. He held that a dialectic process was at work; it did indeed begin with secular dominance, because that alone could trigger the great revolution required to rip free of the exilic conservatism; but in the future it would be motivated by a religious spirit and led by those faithful to the Jewish religion.

Starting in the 1950s, and with greater momentum after the Six Day War, religious young Israelis began a push to lead society in the spirit of Rabbi Kook, under the influence of his son, Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Hacoen Kook. The process began with the Torah education of their own sons: the establishment of the hesder yeshivot (which integrate conscript military service with religious study) and enrollment in post-secondary yeshivot (such as Merkaz Harav) out of a desire to prepare oneself for the challenge of providing society at large with a Torah-based leadership. As they saw it, the sense of crisis and the undermining of the faith in the Zionist vision that followed the war proved the truth of Rabbi Kook's

vision that only a leadership guided by the Torah could cope with the major challenges of Jewish sovereignty, especially in the Middle East.

This idea and the processes it set in motion—notably the project for Jewish settlement in Judea, Samaria, and the Gaza District, led by the sons and daughters of religious Zionism—naturally set off a reaction among the adherents of the “old” secular Zionist outlook. The text of their resistance, sometimes expressed in fierce hostility, focused on their fears of the moral, demographic, and political implications of settlement in the territories. But the subtext, which was frequently made explicit as well, was their fear not only of settlement but also of the very idea of an alternative rationale and vision for Israeli society: a religious vision, described by many as messianic, to supplant the secular political concept they perceived as more rational. These voices are also heard in the debate that has been raging in recent years about the imposition of religion (*hadata*) in the educational system and IDF.

The opposition to the vision of Greater Israel promoted by religious Zionism has received concrete expression twice since the Six Day War: the withdrawal from Sinai in 1982 and the evacuation of the settlements in the Gaza District and northern Samaria as part of the 2005 disengagement plan. But as is the way of the dialectic of history, these developments triggered counter-reactions within religious Zionism. On the one hand, especially right before and after the Disengagement, there were separatist calls to disengage from a degenerate Israeli society and especially its formal institutions; on the other hand, there were attempts to interpret the situation in a more sober and realistic light and less as a matter of religious determinism. Along with all this, as noted, the main development is that members of the religious Zionist sector are finding their place in an ever-wider range of social niches: not only those mentioned above, but also among the advocates of the liberal and

feminist concepts that have been cultivated and spread by the secular discourse of previous decades.

Where, then, does religious Zionism stand with regard to its place in Israeli society? Thirteen years after the Disengagement, it is clear that the separatists are a tiny minority, and the most violent elements among them are even fewer in number. On the other hand, the power of the messianists, too, seems to be dwindling. The silent minority consists of those who aspire to leadership positions but are attentive to and seek dialogue with other sectors of society. As usual, though, with social processes, here too everything is dynamic; what is true today may not still hold tomorrow, in light of the complex interplay of influences and counter-influences.

This volume attempts to map several of the salient processes that are affecting the position of religious Zionism in Israeli society today, the fields in which it is influential, and its desired role in society. It is divided into three sections. The first section examines several types of influence on the image and status of religious Zionism. It opens with a basic presentation of the issue by **Rabbi Dr. Amir Mashiach**, who surveys the theological underpinnings of religious Zionism's integration into society at large. **Dr. Yitzhak Hershkowitz** writes about the ways in which religious Zionist thought finds expression in the State Religious school system. **Dr. Hanan Moses** looks at the religious Zionist bubble, meaning the extent to which religious Zionism is able to isolate itself from various developments in society at large. **Dr. Gili (Mivtzari) Zivan** examines the impact of post-modernism on religious Zionism. **Dr. Tomer Persico** considers how it has been influenced by neo-Hasidism, in a process that has been expanding in recent decades. **Prof. Shlomo Kaniel** writes about one of the seminal moments in Israeli history, the murder of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin by a young man who identified with religious Zionism, and how the assassination affected the world of religious

Zionism. **Prof. Motti Inbari** looks at how three rabbis affiliated with the messianic current in religious Zionism reacted to the Disengagement in 2005. **Dr. Nissim Leon** writes about the encounter between ethnic traditions and the desire to assimilate into the general Israeli milieu, as manifested by the sector of religious Zionism.

The second section looks at several fields in which religious Zionism already has a conspicuous presence and influence and asks how this influence is manifested. **Dr. Elisheva Rosman-Stollman** leads off with a discussion of the role and influence of the religious Zionist presence in the Israeli military. **Dr. Mati Dombrowsky** presents the groups of idealistic young religious Zionists who have settled in many Israeli towns as an example of the model of the expanding social diffusion of religious Zionism. **Dr. Ines Gabel** writes about the relations between religious Zionism and the media. **Prof. Zehavit Gross** looks at the special place of religious Zionism in the Israeli education system. **Prof. Hannah Kehat** writes about the impact of religious feminism on both the religious Zionist discourse and feminist thought in general. Finally, **Assaf Inbari** examines the problematic place of religious Zionism in Israeli culture.

The third section consists of short essays in which 14 contributors, not all of them religious Zionists, examine the current and appropriate place of religious Zionism in Israeli life. They are: author and screenwriter **Yair Assulin**, **Dr. Ruth Calderon**, **Rabbi Yuval Cherlow**, **Rabbi Bezalel Cohen**, **Dr. Shuki Friedman**, **Rabbi Prof. David Golinkin**, **Maj. Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacohen**, **Dr. Baruch Kahana**, the publicist **Moti Karpel**, **Dr. Moshe Meir**, **Rabbi Shai Piron**, **Prof. Avinoam Rosenak**, **Prof. Eliezer Schweid**, and journalist **Yair Sheleg**, a research fellow at the Israel Democracy Institute.

We would like to thank all those who contributed to this project, made it possible for this collection to take shape, and devoted themselves to its realization. First of all we thank the 28 authors, who gave of their time and effort—some of them through several drafts—so that this

volume would be as excellent as possible. Special thanks to the language editor, Daphna Lavie, and the entire staff of the IDI Press, who produced an outstanding product, as always. We all hope that this collection will foster a lively discussion of the important issues it addresses—and this will be the reward for our labors.

**Yair Sheleg**

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