

Frayed  
The Disputes Unraveling Religious Zionists





Yair Ettinger

# FRAYED

THE DISPUTES UNRAVELING RELIGIOUS ZIONISTS

TRANSLATED FROM THE HEBREW BY

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*Frayed*  
*The Disputes Unraveling Religious Zionists*

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*For Sivan*





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## Foreword

**G**od is eternal. The vast debating society that is the Jewish people endures. The voice from Sinai never ceases to call. The bundle of contradictions that is human nature abides. And history is moving and changing all the time. God, Torah, Israel – all draw their commanding power precisely from their challenge to the relentless flux of experience and time, their challenging us to pause in the mad flux, fix our sights and our actions on what truly matters and endures, while never trying to escape the necessities and obligations of life in this world and our immersion in the river of time.

The broad categories we use – like religion, nationalism, secularism – and the narrower ones familiar to this volume’s readers – Modern Orthodox, Religious Zionist, Mizrahi, on the *derekh*, off the *derekh*, yeshivish, hasidic – are all attempts to capture lives in midflight, attempts as necessary as they are partial and ultimately doomed, the closer we get to how we actually live our lives.

But we have to start somewhere, and so gamely we move with our categories in hand, making the best sense of things we can as we go.

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That's all right, so long as we periodically check reality to see how our familiar categories are holding up.

All of which is meant to say that thoughtful readers interested in the current fortunes of traditional Judaism in Israel, the United States, or anywhere else are deeply in debt to Yair Ettinger.

The slim volume you have before you is, as Hazal put it, “one of the places where a little held a great deal” (Leviticus Rabba 10:9), in particular, a procession of passionate, committed Israeli Jews who fracture our familiar categories: religious women who insist on serving in the IDF whether their rabbis like it or not, yet insist on halakhic scrupulousness; religious Jews who visit the Temple Mount in defiance of rabbinic authority; learned women who as *yoatzot halakha* lengthen the reach of rabbinic authority, and as advocates in rabbinic courts challenge it; egalitarian prayer groups that insist on *mehitzot*; the first *kippa*-wearing prime minister, reviled by much of the Religious Zionist camp that once looked to him as a savior; and much, much more.

In all likelihood, some, perhaps even most all, of these stories and people will be familiar to readers drawn to this volume. Ettinger's achievement here is to bring them all together, with a journalist's ear for candor and cant, an historian's eye for context, and a believer's mindful recognition of genuine passion. He manages to enter sympathetically into the worlds of his protagonists without ever surrendering his own inquiring mind and common sense.

Ettinger discerns a crucial thread running through all these stories – and it pointedly isn't the familiar dichotomy of liberal/conservative, or the slightly less tired moderate/radical. What he sees is “The Privatization of Religious Zionism,” challenges to monopolies (like the Chief Rabbinate) and leading institutions (the yeshivot that broke away from Mercaz HaRav); rabbinic authority having a vote but not a veto; do-it-yourself *minyanim*; nonprofit *kashrut* services appealing to non-Orthodox Israelis; and perhaps above all, a Religious Zionist community many of whose members, after the Gaza disengagement of 2005 and its tortured aftermath, no longer see themselves as the secular state's faithful supporters but as its new successors.

Indeed, one unmistakable feature of Ettinger's subjects, alongside their commitment to Israel and Torah, is deep self-confidence, or more accurately – and even when taking on new commitments and obligations – inner freedom.

It is that sense of freedom that enables people to take stands at variance from rabbinic authority and religious convention out of the conviction that doing so lives out a truer commitment that strengthens rather than endangers Torah and the people.

And it is here that one finds an especially valuable point of comparison between these figures and their counterparts abroad, especially in the United States. In an important study, Shlomo Fischer deftly illuminated the crucial differences between Israeli Religious Zionism, and Anglo Modern Orthodoxy.<sup>1</sup> His key insight is that “Israeli Religious Zionism is a Romantic Nationalist culture with a strong expressivist dimension; that is, a strong emphasis on self-expression and notions such as authenticity. American Centrist Orthodoxy continues the traditional Jewish pattern of emphasis on religious heteronomy; that is, the Torah and God's commandments are imposed externally on the Jew.”<sup>2</sup>

A little unpacking will be helpful here. Zionism, like other modern Jewish movements and all kinds of nationalism, arose in response to massive crises of Jewry in the eighteenth and nineteenth-century community that shook community and authority to their foundations. With the collapse of the premodern *kehilla*, which enjoyed genuine even if not sweeping autonomy and authority and buttressed the doctrinal basis of Jewish life, Jews sought new kinds of communal structures (e.g., hasidic courts, Lithuanian yeshivot) from without, and new sources of commitment and meaning (e.g., *devekut*, existential commitment) from within. The broader currents of Romanticism, of which nationalism and Hasidism were each a part, met the seeming eclipse of God in heaven by finding God anew from deep inside, from the deepest echoes of national

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1. Shlomo Fischer, “Two Orthodox Cultures: ‘Centrist’ Orthodoxy and Religious Zionism,” in Eliezer Ben-Refael, Judit Bokser Liwerant, and Yosef Gorny, eds., *Reconsidering Israel-Diaspora Relations* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2014), 146–68.

2. *Ibid.*, 146.

belonging, ethical life, and questing spirit – and bringing those echoes to expression.<sup>3</sup>

Zionism, like other nationalisms, encouraged Jews to actualize their own deepest impulses and creative energies, impulses and energies which to Religious Zionists, especially Rabbi Kook and his followers, were themselves features of God's revelation in the world and the royal road to the true freedom that the Rabbis said was the reward and goal of Torah (Mishna Avot 6:2).

Of course, it was not nearly as simple as that. For decades, Religious Zionism long contented itself with being the junior partner of secular Zionism, Labor Zionism in particular. Starting in 1967 and with mounting force after the earthquake of the Yom Kippur War in 1973 and ever since, Religious Zionism increasingly took hold of its sense of self as the true inheritor of the Zionist revolution. At the same time, the large, hegemonic stories and structures of the state establishment have given way to new ethnic, religious, and national groupings; the centralized state economy has moved largely to private hands (even if not to the same extent as in the United States); and this steady splintering of centralized authority has left its mark on Religious Zionism. Thus, neo-Hasidism seeks authenticity, the decisions of leading rabbis are for Nationalist Zionists not rulings but suggestions, and feminists are not afraid to challenge the rabbinic courts and to bear the wounds they suffer for it.

In America the situation has been different: a liberal, individualist society rather than a nationalist one, there the institutions which Jewish traditionalists have needed to define themselves in relation to are not Jewish secularism and the army, but non-Orthodox denominations, religion-state separation, and the university. This has yielded

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3. Fischer's understandings, as well as this author's, are deeply indebted to the magisterial work of Charles Taylor, especially his *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989). Fischer discusses this at length in his forthcoming, long-awaited volume on Religious Zionism, and this author has put forward his understandings in the introductory chapter to his work *Towards the Mystical Experience of Modernity: The Making of Rav Kook, 1865–1904* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2021).

a traditionalism in some ways more cosmopolitan and in others more hesitant and defensive, for better or for worse.

At the same time, American Jewry plays a subtle role in this volume too – any number of developments, especially as regards feminism and gender, charted in these pages, from Torah study to partnership *minyanim*, began in the United States, came to Israel with Anglo-Saxon *olim*, struck deeper roots there, and in turn have come to influence Jewish life in the United States.<sup>4</sup> This is an insufficiently noticed feature of US-Israel relations very worthy of further exploration.

Another dimension, implicit in, if not developed at length in, this volume, is the respective roles of Ashkenazic and Sephardic identities and traditions. The erasure of Sephardic identity in the early years of the state and its amalgamation into an undifferentiated, and regularly marginalized, Mizrahi identity, and its striking return, transformed into Ashkenazi-style ultra-Orthodoxy by the Shas Party, is a well-known tale. In a recent, penetrating study, Nissim Leon has observed that the Ashkenazic character of Religious Zionism is its own kind of erasure, its lumping together of religious traditions as varied as those of Germany, Lithuania, Galicia, and Italy into one homogeneous mass its own version of the then-ruling Zionist hegemonies.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, Mizrahim were not the only ones whose traditions were being erased in the nationalization of ethnic cultural traditions, even as they stayed religiously observant. In this light, Leon argues, the various fissurings of Religious Zionism, the neo-hasidic renewal, among Ashkenazim and Mizrahim both, is also a turning toward, or grasping for, a living ethnic heritage long since emptied by Zionist hegemony.

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4. In addition to all that is gathered in this volume, see, for instance, Ellie Ash, “Observant Feminism: The Transnational Origins of Partnership Minyanim,” *Modern Judaism* 42:2 (2022), 157–82; and Tamar Biala, ed. *Dirshuni: Contemporary Women’s Midrash* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2022).

5. Nissim Leon, “HaTzabar VeHaTzimmes: Leumiyut Mahapchanit UMasoret Adatit BaTzioniyut HaDatit,” in Yair Sheleg, ed., *Mi-Mashgiah HaKashrut LeNahag HaKatar? Ha-Tzionut HaDatit VeHaHevra HaYisraelit* (Jerusalem: Israel Democracy Institute, 2019), 191–212.

Indeed, while nationalism has proved itself time and again to be one of recent history's most powerful forces on the planet, the price exacted by its victories have been steep. Those prices have come in human lives, and in morals too.

One large subject whose absence sensitive readers will note in this chronicle of arguments is, ironically, the overwhelming focus of world attention on Israel, the painful and still unresolved conflict with the Arab world and in particular with the Arabs of Palestine. This was, to be sure, the subject of strong internal Religious Zionist debate in the past. But, as Ettinger notes in his introduction, the second intifada of 2000 and the Gaza disengagement of 2005 effectively removed the prospect of meaningful peace negotiations and the hard decisions those might entail as a live possibility, at least until a new and moderate generation of Palestinian leadership steps forward. (For that matter, the political dovishness of Israel's *haredi* parties is by now a thing of the past.) In particular, the Gaza disengagement and its aftermath effectively alienated and radicalized many younger Religious Zionists, leading them to conclude that rather than working within Israel's state and society they now had to wrest them from a compromised, globalized, flaccid elite. For them, the familiar image of the dash connecting *Dati-Leumi* as a bridge was to be replaced with a battering ram. While not all of the cultural struggles recorded in these pages were born out of Gaza, that newly combative stand is very much a part of them.

Yet more subtly, the peace process's sustained eclipse has in its very absence helped shape the contours and debates of Religious Zionism today. To begin with, one possible line of debate and demarcation has been largely removed. The deliberately porous borders of Religious Zionism have formed along questions of gender, halakhic norms, cultural openness, and rabbinic authority. In the absence of a meaningful political left to join, many have de facto stayed inside the camp. More deeply, the Palestinian leadership's rejectionism and inflexibility have largely mooted debates and discussions that raged as recently as the 1990s as to how Torah ethics can best comport with Jews' minority status and military strength. Finally, and disturbingly, among not a few Religious Zionist circles, including some very essential ones, the fusion of Torah and Zionism, of God's word and one national-political movement, has

become so complete as to be in the minds of many one and the same thing, modernity's distinctive contribution to the Devil's dictionary of idolatry.

In terms of self-understanding, can one really say that the range of issues the people in this volume are actively, creatively exploring – be it women and men's changing self-understandings, new horizons of Torah study, longings for the Temple, activism on behalf of *agunot* – is remotely captured by the term “Religious Zionism”?<sup>6</sup> And to what extent does one's self understanding as a “Religious Zionist” subtly but ineluctably encourage an identification of nationalist ideology with religious truth, an identification driving its adherents perilously close to the idolatries of national chauvinism and worship of state power?<sup>7</sup>

The stakes and ideas engendered by this book, in other words, go wide and deep.

Even as we keep these larger questions in mind, the book's vitality and charm lies in the striking individuals, one after another, whose voices are sounded on these pages, and who found, in Yair Ettinger, a listening scribe with a sensitive eye whose own participation in the currents described here, matched with journalistic acuity, make for a fascinating tour through vital happenings in Jewish religious life in Israel.

Ettinger's writing, free from ideological anxieties and academic theorizing, opens a thrilling window into the vitality and richness, in celebration and struggle, of being a free people in the Land of Israel. And, like all good books, is an invitation to more conversation, among and within ourselves.

Yehuda Mirsky  
Jerusalem

Author, *Rav Kook: Mystic in a Time of Revolution*

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6. This point is powerfully argued by Baruch Kahane, “Al HaMigzar VeHaNigzar Mimenu,” in Sheleg, *Mi-Mashgiah HaKashrut LeNahag HaKatar?*, 435–56.
  7. See on this the comments by Yair Assulin, “Laḥzor LeTafkid Masha”k HaDat,” in Sheleg, *Mi-Mashgiah HaKashrut LeNahag HaKatar?*, 381–94.





## *Introduction*

# Three Women

**B**ereavement struck three Israeli women. Three tragedies in the span of three years. And each blow brought a woman out of anonymity and into the spotlight, not just as a victim but as a hero. In their lifetimes, each played a decisive role in a field that had nothing to do with loss; a role related not to war or peace, but to what the modern world often downplays and frequently belittles: the formation of religious tradition.

In June 2014, Rachele Fraenkel lost her son Naftali, who was kidnapped and murdered by Palestinian terrorists together with two other Israeli teenagers, Gilad Shaer and Eyal Yifrah; the three had been hitchhiking home. By the time the teens were laid to rest, after an excruciating eighteen-day manhunt, Rachele Fraenkel and the two other bereaved mothers were household names. Many Israelis saw the three mothers, a constant presence in the media during the frenetic search, as symbols of dignity, inspiration, and faith. The boys' funeral, attended by tens of thousands of Israelis and broadcast live on television and radio, turned Naftali's mother into a religious symbol. Departing from conventional custom in Orthodox and traditionalist Judaism in Israel, Rachele Fraenkel stood over her son's body, alongside the

adult men in her family, and chanted aloud the mourner's prayer, the Kaddish. Although the act had been halakhically approved before by certain rabbinic figures, the sight of a woman saying Kaddish on TV was still a striking novelty for most Israelis – and especially most religious Israelis. Rachele Fraenkel shifted the consciousness of Jews in Israel and around the world.

In October of the same year, Cpt. Tamar Ariel was killed in an avalanche in Annapurna, Nepal. She was on leave and due to return to her squadron. Before then, many Israelis had known her only by her initial – “T,” the first religious female combat navigator in the history of the Israel Air Force. After she died, the army revealed her identity and personal story: she was not only a woman but a religious woman, who had swum against the tide to put herself through the most prestigious form of combat service in the Israeli military – IAF Flight School. Ariel had enlisted despite the staunch opposition of most Orthodox rabbis in Israel, who insisted that military service for women was a violation of halakha (Jewish law). In her life, Ariel was a role model for young religious women; but in her death, she came to symbolize a larger movement of religious girls who sought to serve, in uniform, in defiance of communal and educational public opinion. Tzahali, the women's religious pre-military academy, was renamed in her honor.

In January 2016, Dafna Meir was murdered at the doorstep of her home in the settlement of Otniel by a knife-wielding Palestinian terrorist. She was a mother of five, including two foster children, and a nurse by trade, who wrote prolific letters to relatives, friends, patients, and rabbis. Meir was part of a new culture in Israel's religious society, one that embraced an open conversation about femininity and sexuality. As a nurse, Meir advised religious women on delicate halakhic matters, such as the use of contraception and difficulties arising from observing the sensitive commandment of *nidda* – the prohibition on sexual intercourse, and even physical touch, during and shortly after a woman's period. This commandment is particularly onerous for women with a short menstrual cycle, who cannot get pregnant because abstinence forces them to miss their ovulation dates. Meir referred such women to rabbis who gave them special dispensation to shorten the period of

sexual abstinence after menstruation. This guidance brought her into conflict with at least one prominent Orthodox rabbi, Menachem Burstein, the head of the PUAH Institute for fertility and halakha, who, like others, believed that she had crossed a red line.

These three calamities – of one bereaved mother and two young women killed in the prime of life – were not just the stories of high-profile victims on a long list of Israeli bereavement. They were seminal events. They shed a bright light on the cracks that were already running through the walls of consensus. Only later, after the fact, was their significance fully felt.

In all three cases, it was tragedy that made each woman a household name in Israel and inspired Jewish women around the world. But many Israeli women had already heard of them. All three had broken a thick glass ceiling in Israel's religious society: Tamar Ariel in the army; Dafna Meir in the realm of halakha, sexuality, and fertility; and Rachelle Fraenkel, long before disaster struck, by pushing the frontiers of female Torah scholarship and religious jurisprudence as a teacher at leading Torah institutes for women.

These three women belonged to the second generation of the feminist revolution in Orthodox Judaism. All three were unmistakably religious and committed to the practice and study of Jewish law. They neither emerged from nor mixed in modern feminist circles, and they were certainly not members of progressive Jewish denominations. They came from small religious communities outside of Israel's big cities, and two of them – Fraenkel (from Nof Ayalon) and Meir (from Otniel) – came from fairly conservative and religiously exclusive communities, on the more stringent edges of Orthodoxy. None planned on becoming an icon for a new religious avant-garde, but all, and each in her own way, departed from the rabbinic-mandated status quo and charted a path of change.

The fact that their life stories were suddenly intertwined with Israel's national story had two peculiar consequences. First, the grief moderated and effectively muted the reactionary criticism that their religious derring-do might have otherwise provoked. Second, the spotlight gave them an outsized public influence, especially on Orthodox Jewish

women in Israel and abroad.<sup>1</sup> Their deeds, particularly those of Fraenkel and Ariel, resonated widely and won broad legitimacy.

In retrospect, each of these three women represented a particular side in polemics that have long thrummed through Israel's Religious Zionist society: the role of women in prayer, Torah scholarship, and religious jurisprudence; the role of women in the army and society; and the role of women at the juncture of halakha and medicine. But above all, the three women represented a sea change in the status of women as compared to men, and especially rabbis, and the old Orthodox order. Their personal stories told of the presence of a broad and diverse movement, which has neither a name, nor a leadership, nor a central address.

The three women's tragedies highlighted their trailblazing deeds, presenting them as not only legitimate but laudatory. It seems that even the most religiously explosive subjects in Judaism are rendered less flammable by the heartbreaking context of national mourning. The Religious Zionist movement in Israel may be fraying, but at its core there remains, always, a potent national sentiment.

The stories of Dafna Meir, Rachele Fraenkel, and Tamar Ariel might have made a suitable ending to this book. Their tales blunt the blade of division; they are tales in which unity prevails. But in Israel's day-to-day reality, these three stories are windows into disagreements that risk tearing the Religious Zionist community apart and might already be doing so. No revolution, large or small, is waged without a battle, and this one is already well underway: in raging screeds on social media, in

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1. Dramatic cultural and religious developments taking place within Religious Zionism are occurring not only in Israel but in Modern Orthodox communities across the globe, particularly in the United States. The impact that these communities have on one another is amplified by the easy flow of information across the world. The presence of a significant number of English speaking *olim* situated in Religious Zionist communities throughout Israel also contributes to this cross-continental influence.

Each of these communities is unique, yet they share many of the same challenges. They are each struggling to define the parameters of the role of women and LGBTQ people in Orthodox life. Similarly, they are each contending with the challenges of rabbinic authority, individual rights, and the proper relationships to non-Orthodox movements. We clearly see that the effects of globalization are felt throughout the Modern Orthodox world.

## *Three Women*

halakhic rulings and the official correspondence of rabbis, in funded campaigns and barbed discussions around Shabbat tables. This is a war over the identity of the Orthodox individual and the commandment-keeping community, over the very nature of Orthodoxy. Some of these battles have been resolved, or are being resolved, but the fundamental clashes rage on. These are confrontations over the role of women, the authority of rabbis, the attitudes toward the state and Western culture, the nature of prayer and the physical dimensions of synagogues, the appropriate educational doctrine, and what it means to be an observant Jew, to be Orthodox, in the third millennium of Jewish life.

Yair Ettinger  
May 2022



## Chapter I

# The Age of Bennett

### THE IRONY

The inaugural speech of an Israeli prime minister looks nothing like that of an American president. There are no towering backdrops and no beautifully tailored coats. No plumes of cold January air and no poet laureates. And yet, it is festive and familial, with mothers and wives and husbands and fathers in attendance. Sometimes the men wear flowers in their lapels. Generally speaking, the audience in the plenum, all 120 Members of Knesset, are reasonably respectful.

This was not the case on June 13, 2021, when Naftali Bennett was called to the lectern. Wearing a blue suit and his trademark small knitted *kippa*, Bennett got to his feet and clasped hands with his new coalition partners MK Gideon Sa'ar, a former Netanyahu loyalist turned rival, MK Mansour Abbas, the head of the Islamic party, Ra'am, and MK Yair Lapid, the face of centrist secular Israel. Jauntily, he approached the podium.

No one in Israel expected the speech to go smoothly. After all, this was the last day of Benjamin Netanyahu's rule – severed by Bennett's crossing of the Rubicon, his willingness to serve alongside a hard-left party like Meretz and a distinctly non-Zionist party like Ra'am. But

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few imagined the mayhem that would ensue, and more importantly, the primary sources of it.

Bennett, who later that day would be sworn in as the first religious prime minister in the history of Israel, a nearly unfathomable development during the early years of the state, was heckled most severely not by Arab MKs who support a single state between the river and the sea, but by three members of his own community, two of whom had served under him when he headed the Jewish Home Party. In fact, the first three MKs to be thrown out of the plenum that afternoon were Bezalel Smotrich, Orit Strock, and Itamar Ben-Gvir. Settlers all, religious all. Shouting “shame!” and hoisting placards, the three protested the rise of one of their own to the highest post in the land.

The scene was raw with irony: The Mizrahi movement, founded in 1902, had at long last sent one of its sons to the very seat of political power in Israel, but once ensconced, he found that only a part of his own camp was behind him; the other wing, the more religiously and ideologically conservative part of the community, was waging all-out war against him, dismissive nearly to the point of excommunication. Once seen as the salvation of the Jewish Home Party by many within this conservative camp, he was now viewed as a disaster and as a danger to the state, a prime minister who had to be ousted at all costs. Some of this had to do with his political maneuverings, his violation of explicit campaign promises, but it went well beyond that, to the cleaving and privatization of a political home that was being split into ideological shards.

There is nothing quite like the age of Bennett to illustrate the rift within the Religious Zionist world in Israel, which had long ago shaken off the illusion of unity, its calling card for decades, back when there was only one Religious Zionist party – the National Religious Party. Bennett played a major role in the political rending of the party, but it was a process that had already started earlier, the result of deep-moving ideological currents. Bennett, who stepped down in June 2022, was merely the emissary.

In the span of two years, from 2019 to 2021, Israel went through four election cycles. All four can be viewed as a single, ongoing political



event. The facts are many and muddled – and inextricably linked to a national referendum on Benjamin Netanyahu’s fitness to continue to serve as prime minister – but sifting through them reveals the fissures that run through the length of the Religious Zionist community, which has become a kingmaker in Israeli politics.

At the close of the fourth election cycle, in the spring of 2021, thirteen political parties (including two Arab parties) were sworn in to the Knesset; six of them had representatives from the “knitted *kippa*” community. All garnered support from the community and all saw themselves as its authentic representatives. They spanned a spectrum of ideological views, from the hard right, where support for Jewish supremacy and the forcible transfer of Arabs from the Land of Israel has gained a following, to the stately right, to the political center – a large group of disparate politicians who all shared what might be termed “the ideological trinity” of Religious Zionist ideology: a devotion to the Land of Israel, the Torah of Israel, and the people of Israel.

These core principles were presented and ratified at the Mizrachi movement’s founding conference in Vilna, Lithuania. The motto under which the conference was held was “The Land of Israel for the People of Israel According to the Torah of Israel.” The three sides of this triangle have, over time, shifted in relative size and importance, with one occasionally overshadowing the others. Taking the measure of the dimensional shifts allows us to chart the evolution of Religious Zionism.

## **THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL**

For Naftali Bennett, the most important part of this trinity, if we are to judge by his public remarks, is this one, and although he, as an Orthodox Jew, is a minority in Israel, it seems that his primary identity is Israeli and his overriding ethos is one of integration.

When Bennett entered politics, he arrived as the great hope of the sectarian Jewish Home Party. But in actuality, his arrival marked the end of the political and ideological unity within the community.

In his first election campaign, in 2013, he revitalized a lagging party, quadrupling its tally of seats in Knesset, to twelve. Late at night, talking to a crowd of knitted *kippa*-wearing supporters, who greeted him like a

rock star once the results of the polls were known, he said: “Today we’ve made history, we’ve ceased to be a sectarian political party.”

He and his political partner, Ayelet Shaked, both of whom had once worked under Netanyahu, sought from day one to increase cooperation between religious and secular Israelis, of the sort who serve together in the same uniform and work together in the same high-tech firms. He sees himself as situated more on the Israeli axis than on the religious axis, and upon entering the Knesset he declared that he would not be taking orders from rabbis. The Israelis – the name of the party that he and Shaked sought to launch in 2012 before their takeover of the Jewish Home Party – is also shorthand for where Bennett feels he truly belongs.

He and Shaked – a secular, Tel Aviv-dwelling politician and a staunch supporter of the settler movement – were joint leaders from the get-go. Their agenda, advanced both within the Jewish Home Party and subsequently in their other political endeavors, was non-sectarian, or post-sectarian patriotism. Beneath the fluttering flag of nationalism, he placed on a lower height the flag of Judaism, representing a brand of religion that wasn’t overly stringent, wasn’t repulsive to secular Israelis, wasn’t in favor of religious coercion and yet still served as a declaration of his identity and sense of belonging. The National Religious Party – the predecessor of the Jewish Home Party – used patriotism and settlement expansion in the service of religion; Bennett used religion in the service of his patriotism. The old NRP was a religious sectarian party, while Bennett, from his first day in politics, used the blurring of the old dividing lines between that which is religious and that which is secular as a wider stage upon which he could stand.

The party slogan that he used when entering politics was “Something new is starting.” This was true of him personally, too, as someone who sparked both curiosity and suspicion as an idealist who was not an ideologue, an Orthodox urbanite from Raanana, a bourgeois who never tried to hide the fact that his commitment to halakha was less than complete. Unlike his predecessors at the helm of the NRP, he did not come up through the political ranks or the education sector and, in contrast to many of his peers, he had not studied at a yeshiva after high school. Before throwing himself into politics, Bennett was

a high-tech entrepreneur who had made tens of millions of shekels in the industry.

At the outset of his political career, Bennett felt the sting of rabbinic critique, absorbing public barbs about the size of his *kippa* and comments about him “not having the scent of Torah.” It’s doubtful that the offensive remarks were wounding. They may actually have helped him early on, even within the community itself. The secret of his success was linked to his persona as a free-spirited and straight-talking individual who did not hide the fact that he was not observant for years after his army service, had married a woman who had been raised in a secular home, and, as a politician, that he would not be bound by rabbinic decree. These statements were codes, granting legitimacy to autonomous religious people who were not willing to accept the old hierarchy but nonetheless saw themselves as part of the community.

As prime minister, he did not fly a religious or messianic flag. He did not champion the settlement movement, which was once his chief cause. Instead, he advocated for unity and a “government of healing.” In his inaugural address – which was written in advance, though it seemed to be tailored to the in-house hecklers – he drew inspiration from two characters, both active in the revolt against the Roman Empire in the first century of the common era.

“I see here right before my eyes Simon bar Giora and John of Giscala,” he said, ticking off the names of two warring hawks, who split the people of Israel during the time of Roman rule and led inevitably to the destruction of the Temple. “Each was right, yet with all their being right, they burnt the house down on top of us. I am proud of the ability to sit together with people with very different views from my own. This time, at the decisive moment, we have taken responsibility.”

That was Bennett in his own words, laying out his doctrine and justifying the abandonment of Netanyahu and the right-wing base by advocating for an Israeli-Jewish partnership of religious and secular, right and left, even if in reality his government was made up of only some swaths of the right and large chunks of the left, including, for the first time, an Arab-Islamic party, Ra’am. His decision drove a wedge into his own community, even while he, as prime minister, sought to fill the cracks within the wider mosaic of Israeli life.

By his own logic, in the name of avoiding a national rift and “destruction,” a man of the right such as himself must serve alongside someone like Health Minister Nitzan Horowitz, the openly gay chairman of the Meretz Party, which has long advocated for LGBTQ rights and settlement withdrawals. He, he seemed to be saying, had chosen a thorny partnership over a comfortable sectarian isolation.

Bennett’s inaugural address was interpreted, rightly, as an apology for the covenant he made with his ideological rivals, violating explicit campaign promises. In truth, though, integration had been part of the Bennett ethos for years. In that he resembled the progeny of the founding fathers of the Mizrahi movement, who, unlike the other Orthodox sects – the Haredim – saw no inherent conflict between religious devotion and Zionism. But the founding fathers of Religious Zionism set themselves a more modest goal. They set out to serve as the *kashrut* supervisors on the mostly secular train of Zionism, which is to say to be a part of the larger community while ensuring that the Jewish tradition isn’t pushed out the door. Bennett, unlike them, grew up in modern Israel. He passed through all of mainstream society’s rites of passage: in the most elite field unit in the army, in the flourishing high-tech sector, and as a civil servant. As such, he was free of feelings of inferiority – both vis-à-vis the Haredim and the secular majority. He saw himself as a *kippa*-wearing Israeli, fit for leadership.

The outlook brought him to the top but also hastened his fall.<sup>1</sup> With the sectarian party disassembled, he found himself with scant support from the Religious Zionist community and little support of any other sector of the population at large. He was, for much of his year in office, an unpopular prime minister, lacking a base of support and hanging by a thread, and those who were most vocal in their appreciation of his service and who advocated for his government hailed mostly from the center-left of the political map, and did not, and will not, vote for him. Worse – Bennett, who has steadfastly put the people of Israel foremost

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1. In July 2022, after handing over the reins to Prime Minister Yair Lapid, Bennett announced that he would not run in the November 2022 national elections. His one-year term as prime minister was the shortest in the history of the country.

in his ideology, is despised by large swaths of the right-wing public, and particularly the public in which he was raised.

#### **THE LAND OF ISRAEL**

Bennett, like Smotrich, like most of the Jewish MKs in the Knesset today, has been a staunch supporter of Greater Israel. His career as a public servant began with his tenure as the head of the Yesha Council, and as a politician he mainstreamed the once-radical notion of annexing parts of the West Bank and imposing Israeli law upon it. And yet, upon closer inspection, there are notable differences between the two leaders and their contingencies. Not as regards the central diplomatic question facing Israel – the vast majority of the Religious Zionist community remains staunchly opposed to withdrawals from territory – but rather the lengths one should go to in fortifying the settlements, even in the face of opposition from the establishment, the army, the courts, and the international community.

The settlement enterprise, from its inception, has had a complex relationship with the various governments of Israel – a frictional embrace. Although governments from left and right have endorsed the founding of settlements, it is also hardly unusual to see settlers and soldiers clashing on hilltops and dunes, both during the initial move onto the land and later while clinging to it in the face of an evacuation order.

The oracle of the revolutionary and messianic ideology of Religious Zionism, Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook, dictated the narrative of confrontation when he famously said: “Over Judea and Samaria, over the Golan Heights – it won’t work without war.” The notion of warfare was further entrenched during the days of the Oslo Accords and it brought waves of confrontation between the state and the settler movement.

The greater the friction, the greater the need for rabbinic rulings: What may be done to stop the evacuation of settlements, rabbis were asked, and may soldiers refuse to carry out evacuation orders? The questions were of a strategic or tactical nature and often the answers were issued in the language of halakha.

The friction guided Religious Zionist ideology down two divergent paths: that of the decorous right, which clung to the sanctity of the

Jewish army and the symbols of the Jewish state, and the hard ideological right, which, when its back was to the wall, was willing to violate secular law and the dictates of the state. The first sharp departure came in the early 1980s, when the Shin Bet revealed the presence of a Jewish “underground,” which planned and executed murderous terror attacks against Palestinian targets. Its members were all of the Religious Zionist community. A decade later, in 1994, Baruch Goldstein, another member of the community, committed mass murder in the Tomb of the Patriarchs, gunning down twenty-nine Palestinians while in prayer. One year later came the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin at the hands of a Religious Zionist law student – a rupture within Israeli society, a long-reverberating trauma.

The NRP, despite its gradual acceptance of Gush Emunim’s Greater Land of Israel ideology, was used to having smaller, more hawkish parties to its political right, while it clung to the center, managing, even, to serve in the reigning governments of the Oslo Accords era. This is the very same party that would later be headed by Bezalel Smotrich and change its name to the Religious Zionism Party.

Diplomatically speaking, the matter of settlements has been largely removed from the agenda. The doctrine of land for peace was eliminated from the Israeli consensus first by the bloody Second Intifada and then by the 2005 Gaza Disengagement, which buried the notion of a unilateral withdrawal and settlement evacuation. The political center shifted rightward and even when the Israeli left-wing parties were included in Bennett’s governing coalition in 2021, after many years of exile in the opposition, it was blatantly clear that one of the central flags of their ideology would be left unfurled – conciliation with the Palestinians.

Although the right appears triumphant on the matter of the Territories, the question of force as a means toward a goal remains unresolved. Smotrich has adhered to a fiery and rebellious approach to many of the conflicts that have pitted his halakhic beliefs against the rule of law, an approach that Bennett and others on the right have condemned.

While Bennett on multiple occasions came out against nationalistic crime committed by Jews, Smotrich tended to denounce it in the gentlest of terms, if at all. In 2017, he called for the immediate pardon of

Elor Azaria, a soldier who had gunned down a long-since incapacitated Palestinian terrorist in Hebron, and two years before that, when most of the country was shocked by the torching of a home and the killing, by Jews, of a Palestinian family in the village of Duma, Smotrich published an opinion piece in which he argued that “the murder in Duma, for all its severity, is not a terror attack.”<sup>2</sup>

Yet he was not the far-right marker on the political map of Israel and of Religious Zionism. Beyond Smotrich stood מר Itamar Ben-Gvir, the head of the Otzma Yehudit Party and a disciple of Rabbi Meir Kahane, whose party, Kach, was banned from Israel’s parliament for its racist views. Otzma Yehudit was not similarly barred, but it too failed, until 2021, to cross the electoral threshold of the Knesset. That changed when Benjamin Netanyahu decided in the midst of a grueling election cycle that a religious nationalist party on the far right would serve his interests, ensuring that many thousands of votes were not thrown away in the course of yet another solo run by Ben-Gvir. Smotrich was only too happy to oblige. He brought Ben-Gvir’s party, Otzma, into the fold, along with Noam, a reactionary party founded by the staunchly conservative rabbis of Yeshivat Har Hamor. Its platform was illiberal and anti-gay.

These splinter parties put aside their quibbling differences (over matters such as the Temple Mount) and set their sights squarely on Bennett, a common enemy. In a November 2021 speech in the Knesset, Smotrich said of Bennett: “When the body expels the pus and cleanses itself of the germs, it returns afterward cleaner and better.” That “body,” created by Smotrich and Ben-Gvir, and carrying the name “Religious Zionism,” was infinitely more conservative and nationalist than any previous representation of the national-religious community. It did not reflect the movement at large, but it did prove that a Kahanist ideology of territory, placing the Land of Israel first and foremost, coupled with an Arab population transfer, long since excoriated by the stately wing of the right, had been whitewashed and normalized in swaths of Religious Zionist and Haredi society.

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2. “Price Tag Is Not Terror,” *BeSheva*, December 10, 2015.

## THE TORAH OF ISRAEL

The State of Israel is both Jewish and democratic, two fundamental traits that are often at odds. Some might say they stand in diametric opposition to one another. The prevailing notion in Israel and abroad is that the majority of internal tension, the fault line within Israeli society, is the democratic nature of the state: human rights, nationalism, ethnocentrism, the authority of the courts, the status of the Palestinians, the left and right.

But times have changed, and for a multitude of reasons it has become clear that the front has shifted. Many of the battles being waged today are less about the democracy of the Jewish state and more about the democratization of Judaism. Jewish identity, religious affairs, the balance between religion and state, identity and culture: all lie at the heart of our domestic debates. In the wake of Netanyahu's departure and Bennett's arrival (and departure one year later), we've seen these simmering issues boil to the surface.

Take for example the ever-combustible matter of religious services, as provided by the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, and the effect of this monopoly on the Jewish identity of the state. During the Bennett government (2021–2022), pitched battles were waged, almost daily, between two principal camps: on one side, Haredim, Religious Zionists, and religious traditionalists loyal to the Netanyahu base and now serving in the opposition in the Knesset, and on the other, members of the coalition – secularists and liberal Religious Zionists. At the red-hot center of these debates stood Religious Zionists, from either camp, the new median of Israel, locking horns over matters of identity and the proper interpretation of the Torah of Israel.

The ringleader was not Bennett but his once brother-in-arms, Matan Kahana – a former special forces operator and fighter pilot whom Bennett drafted into the Yamina Party.

Over the years Bennett shied away from matters of religion and state. Those issues may not have interested him all that much. But Kahana is a different story. He defines himself as a "*dos*," as someone who is one hundred percent committed to keeping the Torah commandments, but who also has sought change in the religious services provided by the state. Speaking of Bennett, he told me: "He's from the knitted *kippa* community, but it isn't the thing that he's most interested in dealing with.



And then I came along, ostensibly on the security ticket, and I said: I want that. He said: There's no one better. Jump on it."

Kahana was a surprising pick for Minister of Religious Affairs. He met Bennett in 1990 on the grounds of the Sayeret Matkal recon unit. The two became friends. Bennett, having made it through the grueling training phase, chose to attend officers' school and to serve in a different unit as a platoon and then company commander. Kahana did his time in "the Unit," as it's known, and then, rather than return to civilian life, enrolled in the IAF Flight School. He graduated the grueling course as a fighter pilot and went on to command a squadron of F-16 aircraft. He retired with the rank of brigadier-general and, with no prior political experience, was recruited by Bennett.

Immediately upon taking office, Kahana launched an initiative that was nothing short of radical. Within five months, he had privatized *kashrut* supervision in Israel. Private entities could for the first time lawfully issue *kashrut* certificates that were once the exclusive domain of the Chief Rabbinate. The monopoly of the rabbinate had been broken.

This may seem like a formality, but it cut to the essence of the state. Kahana's initiative, passed into law, marked the beginning of the end of the Chief Rabbinate's exclusive grip on matters of personal status such as burials, weddings, and births. The Chief Rabbinate predates Israel, having been founded under British mandatory rule, and it had retained, by law, exclusive control of halakha for decades.

After *kashrut*, Kahana set his sights on other reforms: the state-run conversion courts, the appointment of rabbis and heads of religious councils (where he placed an emphasis on the appointment of women), and marriage registration. No previous minister of religious affairs had ever dared to make such sweeping changes to the state-run religious services, which since the founding of the state had been seen as a sort of dowry that the secular state paid to the religious public in return for industrial silence – at first to the NRP and later to the Haredi parties.

Kahana's overarching goal was the mitigation of religious coercion.<sup>3</sup> The means: the insertion of competition into fields that were by

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3. In under a year as minister, Kahana managed to realize a small yet unprecedented part of the religious activists' agenda. He privatized *kashrut*, smashing the rabbinate's

definition monopolistic – *kashrut*, conversion, and more; a religious privatization that seized authority from a hegemonic group of rabbis. “The state of Jewish identity is very poor,” he told me. “You cannot force an identity on people. I believe that with less coercion people will opt for Judaism, they’ll want to be married ‘according to the law of Moses and Israel.’” His comments were issued after years of Haredi control over all state-run religious services.

Within the opposition he was promptly marked not just as a political rival but as a religious adversary. “Antiochus,” MK Moshe Gafni of the Haredi United Torah Judaism Party called him, likening Kahana to the first of the rulers who sought to annihilate Jews, 2,200 years ago, solely on the basis of their religion. This was but one of countless denunciations – in the Knesset, in rabbinic letters, in editorials and cartoons and social media posts, and in protests outside his house, where yeshiva students, wearing knitted *kippot* on their heads, cooked shrimp and other foods prohibited by Jewish law as a form of protest against his *kashrut* initiatives.

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state-granted monopoly. He changed the regulations regarding the appointment of municipal rabbis. He tried to promote, albeit without success, a change to the state conversion process, pressing for competition to the established rabbinic courts, and he managed to appoint ten women to religious regional councils all across Israel while also securing funding for female halakhic advisors. These moves – which were long part of the synagogue and state debates in Israel, and which were met with approval in parts of the Religious Zionist community – were eventually overshadowed by the culture war surrounding the Bennett government. The narrative changed as the government began to teeter and fall. Kahana and his colleagues were increasingly seen not merely as trying to weaken the rabbinate, but as enemies of the state’s Jewish identity. Smotrich began referring to the opposition, which included half of the Religious Zionist camp, all of the Haredi camp, and the religious and traditionalist voters of the Likud, who generally show respect to the rabbinate and to rabbis in general, as “believing Israel.” The non-believers, he made clear, included all of the religious members of the government. MK Dudi Amsalem of the Likud Party declared: “We are in an insane six months, in which every member of the coalition is running to erase more than his peers of Jewish values. It’s a competition.... I see it as an existential threat to the state of Israel.” The Netanyahu-affiliated Channel 14 put Kahana on the cover of its print magazine. The headline: “The Undertaker.” And beneath that: “This is how Matan Kahana is trying to bury the Jewish identity of the State of Israel.” The legitimate difference of opinion was rendered illegitimate.

The political battle became religious and ideological, nearly theological, and it touched upon the historical differences between the Haredi and Religious Zionist communities, the validity of each ideological path, the preferred degree of isolationism and of halakhic severity. “We are no less careful in the fulfillment of halakha and no less God-fearing,” Kahana bellowed at Haredi MKs from the Knesset podium in one of his speeches.

“Honestly, they were pushed from the sources of their power. They thought they had the deeds marked down in the real estate registry and it’s eating them up, that’s the reason. Power, power, power,” Kahana told me when asked why he has so outraged the Haredim. But in the offing – and this was understood by both his supporters and detractors alike – was something far deeper than a thirst for power. For within the question of what is kosher food and what is a proper conversion lies the question of who gets to define the nature of Judaism.

Since the nineties, and all the more so during the years of Netanyahu’s rule, it was clear to all to who had that right: the Haredi community. Gradually, during the Netanyahu years, an internal Orthodox opposition to the Haredi-Likud hegemony began to develop. It demanded less religious coercion, less severe rabbinic rulings, and a shedding of the corruption that has clung to the Chief Rabbinate.

In contrast with other previous battles, this was not a clash between religious and secular, but rather between two different types of commandment-keeping Orthodox Jews. Both saw Judaism as a top priority, but defined it differently. One supported a religious monopoly and a strengthening of the Chief Rabbinate; the other believed in competition. One stood guard over the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, which over the years had become a Haredi institution, and the other wanted to weaken it and give expression to other approaches. The Ashkenazic and Sephardic chief rabbis declared war on Kahana, and dozens of Religious Zionist rabbis joined their ranks. They especially emphasized the honor of the institution of the Chief Rabbinate, which to them held theological significance since the days of Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak HaKohen Kook, the first Ashkenazic chief rabbi. The campaigns took on the shape of a religious war.

Kahana managed to rally a handful of rabbis, some of stature, around his conversion reform, but hundreds of other rabbis signed

their names to sharp rebuttals, often casting Kahana as “an uprooter of religion.” In February 2021, at a conference organized by the leading Religious Zionist weekly newspaper *Makor Rishon*, a rabbi in attendance, Amital Bareli, refused to shake the minister’s hand. “When facing the swindling destroyers of Judaism there is no room for niceties and decorum,” he explained on Twitter.

#### **WHO IS A RELIGIOUS ZIONIST?**

Bennett’s coalitionary government was populated by other members of the Religious Zionist community who were also eager to alter the balance of religion and state. These Orthodox politicians, hailing from a variety of parties, were keen to bring change to the Chief Rabbinate, the nature of the public Israeli Shabbat, the exemption from army service for Haredim, and even the rabbinic council that controls the cellular telephone market in Haredi communities. They acted individually, independent of one another, but their behavior, and the manner in which they addressed the ideological trinity of Religious Zionism, spoke to a deep and significant similarity.

Bennett and his cohorts continue to represent a new generation within the Religious Zionist community. They are idealists, they are religious, and they feel comfortable in their own shoes; they are financially secure, firmly ensconced in the middle and upper classes, and they are seemingly devoid of any feelings of insecurity vis-à-vis other more idealistic or more devout members of the community, who have devoted their lives to the classic routes of education or settlement or rabbinical studies.

What brought about the change? The list of reasons is long, including the rise of individualism and the prevalence of social media, all of which will be discussed in subsequent chapters, but it is worth highlighting the summer of 2005, the Disengagement from Gaza. That move, led by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, struck a blow to the standing of rabbis in the community and, more significantly, put a dent in the theology of Religious Zionism. Specifically, it undermined the notion that messianic redemption, sparked by the return of Jewish sovereignty

over the Land of Israel, was moving inexorably forward. From amid that rupture, new ideas were formed, new leaders rose to prominence.

Politicians come and go, and so we may look at Bennett's cohort as a parable. Even if they all shortly vanish from the political arena, the religious and social phenomenon of which they are part will not fade away. MKs Matan Kahana, Elazar Stern, Yoaz Hendel, Moshe Tur-Paz, and Bennett himself – all represent a certain phenomenon.

They were raised within the Orthodox community and in adulthood lived in bourgeois religious towns and cities generally within the Green Line. They hold academic degrees and have had careers in the high-tech sector, the media, or the Israel Air Force, fields that demand individual excellence and independence, and also require a constant mingling with religious and secular Israelis, male and female. In other words, unlike the Religious Zionist politicians of old, who were predominantly rabbis and educators and party apparatchiks, these men were raised far from the isolationist bubble of the community.

In previous parliaments there were several women who also prioritized matters of synagogue and state (Aliza Lavie and Tehila Friedman of the Yesh Atid Party and Rachel Azaria of the Kulanu Party), but for the moment our focus is on the men, who acquired status and money and served in combat roles in the army. This significant period in their lives also influenced their path as politicians.

Their religiosity, and this speaks volumes, is given outward expression solely by their *kippot* (and in Hendel's case, the *kippa* is transparent, though he was raised within the community, sends his children to religious schools, and considers himself a part of the Religious Zionist community). Beneath those *kippot* they comport themselves autonomously. They do not see themselves as bound by rabbinic authority, and certainly not by that of the Chief Rabbinate. When I asked Kahana about his position on rabbis, he reverted to the jargon of the squadron. "I certainly consult with rabbis and listen very carefully to what they say," he told me, "but it's me on the stick and the throttle. I decide." The old guard of educators, then, has cleared the stage for a generation of successful aces with no inferiority complexes, and perhaps no abundance of modesty.

What is the linkage between an interest in matters of religion and state and military service? Is it coincidence that so many of these politicians emerged from within the elite ranks of the army?

For years the working assumption within large swaths of the secular elite was that religious soldiers and officers, when put to the test, would obey their rabbis and not their officers. The matter of obedience, in the face of, say, an order to evacuate a settlement, was questioned repeatedly in the media and on university campuses (including a book devoted entirely to the topic, *The Divine Commander: The Theocratization of the Israeli Military* by Prof. Yagil Levy). But it missed a larger and far more prevalent trend: religious officers who not only adhere to the very letter of the law of the military hierarchy, but also challenge the rabbinic hierarchy on matters of religious law.

Maj.-Gen. (res.) Elazar Stern and Brig.-Gen. (res.) Matan Kahana are prime examples. Both used their standing as senior officers to challenge the religious status quo. Stern, as a general in uniform, launched a religious conversion track within the Israeli army, dealt extensively with the burial of soldiers who were not halakhically Jewish, and curbed the autonomy of the Hesder yeshiva students. Those moves put him in direct confrontation not with the IDF General Staff but with the rabbis of his own community, in the army and in the civilian world.

The brass they wore on their shoulders and the experience they had had as combat officers granted them legitimacy. It is far easier to lead a campaign of change when your social status is secure and your prestige, as someone who has risked his life repeatedly for the country, is unassailable. In Israel in general, and in the Religious Zionist community in particular, a security background is a shield against much opposition and invective.

But it isn't just immunity that military service provides. It's also motivation. For if you do not encounter religious problems in the field, from up close, if you live in a separate society, the issues seem distant and irrelevant. When Matan Kahana wanted to convince the public of the need for change in state-run conversions, he posted a video that told the story of a female soldier who had served under his command and who was not considered as halakhically Jewish. He introduced her to the public and said, "We must do everything to bring her home to Judaism."

That could not have been done by a man who served in a homogenous unit of other likeminded religious men.

Bennett's cohort is a novelty. Not for nothing are they seen by many as a threat to the old order and as a group that collectively shuns the intensive ideological temperament voiced by Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook and others. Not for nothing are they seen by the conservative flank of the party as rebels, revolting against the very idea of Religious Zionism. Smotrich sees himself as the keeper of the old flame, the one who will yet rehabilitate the political framework of the community. And yet he too is a novelty. He advances opinions that in the past were seen as beyond the pale and even took the unusual step of welcoming peripheral figures to the fold, first and foremost Itamar Ben-Gvir, the man who, weeks before Rabin's assassination, held up the hood ornament of his car and announced that "just as we got to the ornament, so too can we get to Rabin."

Two dramatic events with lasting consequences took place during the last week of the 2022 calendar year. The first was the return to power of Benjamin Netanyahu after years of political deadlock. Netanyahu's coalition is the most right-wing and religious government in Israeli history. In fact, his government includes the ultra-nationalist parties of Bezalel Smotrich and Itamar Ben-Gvir. These parties have fourteen Knesset seats and unprecedented legislative power.

Two days before the swearing in of the new government, Rabbi Chaim Druckman passed away at the age of ninety. Rabbi Druckman was a symbol of the Religious Zionist community, having served it as a rabbi, educator, and political leader. In the last years of his life, he transferred his political support from Naftali Bennett and Ayelet Shaked to the more sectarian Religious Zionist party of Smotrich. He was alive to witness the enormous growth of Smotrich's party as well as the near political decimation of the more moderate religious camp lead by Shaked. More importantly, he saw the heated rhetoric that occurred during the election cycle, culminating with Smotrich stating that synagogues should not welcome those who vote for Shaked's party. While Rabbi Druckman had no chance of preventing the eventual split within Religious Zionism, his continued presence still allowed for the illusion of possible communal unity. With his death, and the

## *Frayed*

establishment of the new government, it seems that this divide within Religious Zionism will only deepen.

Who, then, is an authentic Religious Zionist?

The political arena serves as an illustration. In the chapters of this book, we will see the deep processes of change surrounding synagogues and schools, the army and the Chief Rabbinate of Israel. Smotrich, will assert that he is the authentic face of the community; so too will Bennett and Kahana and Stern and even Ben-Gvir. Each one sees himself as the honest reflection of the community, and each one is right and wrong in his own way. Once it was easy to say who is a member of the Religious Zionist community. Today, in the era of religious and ideological privatization, the mission is growing ever more complex.