

# Israel's Societal Renovation

*How One of the Worst Crises in the Jewish State's History Can Be a Great Opportunity for the Jewish People*

By Alan Haber

**L**ife has not been easy for the past eight months. That statement could probably be made by any Israeli, but for a resident of Gush Etzion such as myself, it is doubly true. Over recent months, we've had to make a lot of unwelcome modifications in our lives.

For one thing, we have found it necessary to get used to changes in scenery. The views on the country roads we travel used to be dominated by pastoral vistas of rolling hills and farms. Today those scenes are disrupted by soldiers standing in full battle gear as jeeps and tanks roll by and attack helicopters occasionally fly through the air above. Bulldozers building new army positions chop up the beautiful hills, and newly placed concrete barriers block our line of sight from the road.

We've also had to make adjustments in our daily routine. We can't travel to or from Jerusalem without first verifying that the road is indeed open, and preparing contingency plans in case it is closed unexpectedly. One has to always be prepared for a sudden change of the situation on the road, which can result in a delay or lengthy detour and turn a 20-minute trip into an ordeal of two hours.

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*Photo by Jack Hazut*

And, of course, being stoned, or stopped on a road because there is shooting up ahead, can be quite unsettling — even if one is not directly in danger. To cope with this, we often need to lower our expectations of what we can accomplish on any given day. We have come to appreciate simple things that we used to take for granted. Upon parting in the morning, people now commonly wish each other a “quiet day.”

Those of us who were here during the “first *intifada*” in the late 1980’s have found ourselves returned to a mode of thinking that we thought we had left behind, only to see it renewed in a much more dangerous form. (My ten-year-old daughter recently put it this way: “*Abba*, remember when we bought our car I asked you why we had special plastic windows put on? And remember you told me that ‘once upon a time’ the Arabs used to throw rocks at us, and that even though we don’t really need it because they don’t throw rocks anymore, we would get it anyway? Well, now they are throwing rocks again, but we still don’t need it because it doesn’t protect us against bullets!”)

We have begun to feel isolated, as visitors from abroad and from other parts of Israel come much less often. Especially in the earlier months of the crisis, we also felt abandoned, as some Israelis still clung to the point of view that we were the source of the problem, instead of its victims. And although that approach has thankfully become quite discredited, we still don’t always feel that everyone is behind us in our struggles.

And, of course, the most devastating part has been the daily news reports of violence throughout Israel. We turn on the radios now, not so much to find out *if* there has been violence, but just *when*, how much and if there were casualties. And we have seen far too many funerals, at some points on a daily basis. We have watched some in the news media, and unfortunately have participated in several up-close: we have buried three of our neighbors from here in Gush Etzion, and several

more from the neighboring Chevron Hills and Jerusalem.

As believing Jews, we have been praying daily for a resolution to the problem. But we know that one cannot rely on a miracle, and in addition to prayer we must do everything in our power to help ourselves. In the earlier stages of the crisis, a common response was to blame the government of Prime Minister Ehud Barak, and to concentrate our energies on bringing about a change of government. We worked hard to elect Ariel Sharon, and hoped that he would be able to change things. A month into his term, however, we still don’t know if he has a solution. One thing, however, is clear: even if he is able to eventually get us out of this quandary, it won’t happen quickly. Attacks continue on a daily basis, and, although the IDF is retaliating, their actions often appear only mildly effective. Sometimes we get frustrated and wonder why the government doesn’t take stronger action. Sometimes we want to go and protest against Sharon, just as we did against Barak. But after Sharon, what other government could we elect? Some of us have begun to wonder if a solution is even possible.

In such a climate, perhaps one could be forgiven for slipping into hopelessness and despair. However, I have not. I confess that I am fairly concerned and worried, but I am not pessimistic. In fact, to the contrary, I am quite confident. As odd as this may sound, I actually find “the situation” to be a cause for optimism. To borrow the slogan from a popular Israeli radio commercial (commissioned during the current situation by the tourism industry), “*davka achshav*” — specifically now, specifically *because of* this present state of emergency — I find much reason to hope for a bright future.

In order to explain this somewhat peculiar assertion, it may be instructive to take a look at some of the sweeping changes that have transformed Israeli society over the past several decades. Many of these changes began 35 or more years ago. However, they have

been the most dramatic in the past few years. Israel has been struggling over some very basic questions of self-identity and purpose, which have been intertwined with, and often overshadowed by, political and military debates over security. Particularly, Israel of today is a very different country than it was eight years ago, at the onset of the “Oslo Process”. Those societal changes, of course, are the causes of as well as the result of that process.

Specifically, I believe we can identify three separate phases in this development. We have been through the “thesis” and “antithesis” stages of a grand Hegelian dialectic,<sup>1</sup> and we are now presented with the possibility of creating the synthesis: the formation of a new Israeli consensus. In realizing all that we have been through, in confronting how our enemies have unwittingly shown us the flaws in some of our not-fully-developed understandings of ourselves, we have the opportunity to emerge from the crisis stronger, more united, and in a sense more Jewish.

## Thesis: The “Omnipotent” State of Israel

In the early decades of State of Israel, Israeli society was characterized by a certain overconfidence that was based on its military strength. This could be seen most clearly during the military parades that used to characterize Israel’s Independence Day, when the latest tanks and other equipment would be proudly displayed in the streets of major cities. However, the glorification of the army was felt in many other spheres as well. For example, most of Israel’s political leaders have consistently come from the top ranks of the armed forces.

The IDF’s stunning performances in conflicts such as the Six Day War and the Entebbe rescue, as well as its legendary deterrent capability (enhanced by the open secret of Israel’s possession of nuclear weapons) bolstered Israelis’ sense of confidence and led them to conclude that they con-

trolled their own destiny, and that their future would be secured by the awesome strength of the Israeli Army.

For Diaspora Jews as well, Israel's military prowess was a source of pride as well as comfort. American teenagers on summer tours to Israel typically returned with hats and T-shirts emblazoned with the IDF emblem and pictures of tanks and fighter jets, often bearing slogans such as: "Don't worry, America — Israel will protect you!" For Jews who had been accustomed to centuries of powerlessness, and especially to a generation of Holocaust survivors and their children, the idea that the Jewish People now had the capacity to defend itself brought great satisfaction. Jews also came to look upon Israel as a kind of "insurance policy," knowing that should they ever find themselves in distress in a country whose Gentile hosts no longer tolerated Jews, they would have a place to go and someone to defend them.

Of course, religious Jews were always somewhat uncomfortable with this heavy trust in military power. It seemed to smack of arrogance, and even heresy. Many pointed to the Torah's warning (Devarim 8:11-19): "Beware, lest you forget Hashem ... when you eat and are satisfied, and build nice houses and live in them ... and you will become arrogant ... and say in your heart 'it was my strength and the power of my hand that accomplished this victory.'" It was primarily because of this danger that many rabbis and religious communities stayed away from identifying too strongly, not only with secular Zionism, but also with the State of Israel and even the Land of Israel itself. For this reason perhaps more than any other, they even shied away from the goal of *aliyah*, which it seems should be a universally accepted Torah value.

Among Religious Zionists, this problem was resolved by emphasizing the miraculous, even Messianic, aspects of what had occurred. Although they certainly valued and encouraged army service, Religious Zionists saw the Hand of Hashem in Israel's victories. This was particularly true in the incredible

upheaval of the Six Day War, which returned Judea, Samaria and Jerusalem to Jewish hands. The movement to settle the hills and valleys of "Yesha" (Judea, Samaria and the Gaza Strip) — which began with the return to Gush Etzion just a few months after the war ended — was the clearest expression of confidence that the military successes of the IDF signified the beginning of the final stage in the Messianic Redemption.

## Antithesis: The Phenomenon of Post-Zionism

Within a few years, however, events began to force us to confront the limits of our power. The trauma of the Yom Kippur War, though it was a war that Israel ultimately won, still greatly shook Israel's confidence. The debacle of the Lebanon War dealt another blow to national morale, and then the *intifada* of the late 1980's wore us down even further. By the early 1990's, the Israeli public showed unmistakable signs of losing its will to fight. In addition to growing weary of war and its sacrifices, Israelis were also increasingly calling the very justice of their national existence into question. The phenomenon known as "post-Zionism," which has attracted much attention in the past year or two (most notably as a result of *A World of Changes*, the now-infamous 9<sup>th</sup>-grade Israeli history text that was in use for a short time, which presented Israel as the aggressor and the Arabs as victims), gained ascendancy during this period. Thus, the genuine Jewish desire for peace merged with the normal human desire for acceptance, and produced a uniquely Jewish form of self-hatred and self-denial in which Israeli society increasingly sympathized with its enemies and blamed itself for the attacks waged against it.<sup>2</sup>

It was this type of thinking, more than any other factor, which brought Israel to the negotiating table with the Palestinians. The beginning of the Oslo process in 1993 was widely seen as the end of the dream of "Greater *Eretz Yisrael*," as Israel gradually made its peace with the idea that a

Palestinian State was to arise in much of the lands Israel had captured in 1967. As the "Peace Camp" that had once been composed exclusively of the extreme Left entered the mainstream, the "settlers" and their supporters seemed to be pushed more and more to the fringe. The horrific murder of Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin, in which the entire religious/nationalist world was widely indicted, seemed to put a final end to the political Right, and to some extent even to the mainstream vision of classical Zionism itself.

This assessment, however, was overstated. As a resident of Yesha, I can attest categorically that the dream is far from dead. Building in the settlements has continued almost unabated under every Israeli government (even when "settlement freezes" were ostensibly in place). New neighborhoods and communities are constantly being created and populated with new families who want to build their future in the biblical heartland. Today, there are several hundred thousand Jews who live in these territories, and a far greater number, in Israel and abroad, who identify with our cause.

The Oslo process, which the majority of Yesha residents helplessly protested, did not kill our dreams. But, it unquestionably did temper them. The mood in the settlements today is quite different than it was eight or ten years ago. We were forced to confront the fact that most of the country had ceased to identify with our cause, and that our enemies were not prepared to simply go away. We were compelled to lower our expectations, to focus on short-term goals and incremental development. We never stopped believing in the dream that, one day, millions of Jews would once again populate the countryside, including ancient cities like Bethlehem, Chevron and Shechem. But we did realize that it may take a very long struggle to achieve these dreams, and that at least their complete fulfillment will only take place in the Messianic Era.

## Synthesis: “Neo-Zionism” as a Historic Opportunity

As the Oslo Process progressed, however, a parallel and opposite phenomenon began to take place. The weaknesses inherent in the agreements have exposed the fallacies of the dream of the Left. The insistence of Prime Ministers Rabin, Peres and Barak on overlooking Palestinian violations and refraining from taking strong action to ensure Israel’s security created a backlash against the euphoria of the early days of Oslo.

The backlash developed slowly over a number of years (beginning already in the Rabin/Peres era), but gained critical momentum after Arafat launched a campaign of violence against Israel this Rosh Hashanah. It culminated several months ago in the election of Ariel Sharon by a stunning landslide — a development that would have been literally unthinkable a mere few months previously. Sharon’s most basic security principle (which he has articulated consistently since his time as opposition leader, during the campaign, after the election and since assuming office) has been the refusal to negotiate under fire. Furthermore, he has stated repeatedly that when the violence does stop, he will return to the negotiating table — but not to the path of Oslo. His electoral victory and his success at establishing a unity government, with Oslo-architect Shimon Peres serving as foreign minister, have created a general consensus that the Oslo Process is now dead.

Thus, it seems that the end of Oslo has meant for the Left what the beginning of Oslo did for the Right. As the dreams of “Greater *Eretz Yisrael*” appeared to be shattered by the Rabin-Arafat handshake on the White House lawn, the dreams of “Peace Now” today appear shattered by that very same Arafat’s fingers symbolically pulling the triggers of the rifles aimed at innocent Israelis.

And like the media pronouncements of the death of the Right, those of the

death of the Left are probably also exaggerated. Israelis still desire peace, and even current polls suggest that they are still willing to make sacrifices for peace. Indeed, even Ariel Sharon has spoken of the eventual need for “painful compromises.” The dreams of the “Peace Camp” are just as alive as those of the residents of Yesha. But, they too are sobering and realizing that they must also lower expectations and focus on more immediate, short-term goals. The ultimate fulfillment of the dreams of peace, like those of Greater *Eretz Yisrael*, will have to wait for the Messianic Era.

This understanding forms the reason for my optimism. Strangely enough, as I have stated, our current emergency presents us with an opportunity of historic proportions. If we rise to the challenge and take advantage of it, we may be able to solve some of our most intractable problems, and improve our position for generations to come.

Israeli society stands today at an important crossroads. Stark reality has forced all of us to confront the limitations of our previous conceptions of how we should conduct national affairs. Realizing that we are once again thrust into a struggle for our national survival, many Israelis across the political spectrum are questioning some long-held beliefs. Many who previously held diametrically opposed positions have now found common ground.

This can be seen most dramatically by examining the bizarre composition of the current National Unity government, which brings together the Labor Party under the leadership of the elder statesman of the Peace Camp, Shimon Peres, and the Likud Party, led by Ariel Sharon, who has long been labeled a militant war-monger. The government also includes far-right politicians like Rehavam Ze’evi, who until recently advocated the forceful “transfer” of Arabs to countries outside Israel’s border together with left-leaning politicians and Israel’s first ever Arab minister.<sup>3</sup> It is too early to tell whether this government will succeed in extracting us from the quagmire, or be crushed into failure under the weight of its own internal

contradictions. There are early indicators of both outcomes, and only time will tell. But in any case, the mere existence of this government provides the prospect for nurturing the new consensus, Israel’s societal renovation.

This may allow us to recognize the objectives of the Left as well as those of the Right, to strive for “*Shalom*” and for “*Eretz Yisrael*” simultaneously. For too long, Israel assumed that she could have only one of these essential Jewish aspirations, at the necessary expense of the other. Paradoxically, the very realization that neither can be achieved easily may allow us to maintain both as ultimate goals.

This new consensus, like the crisis that spurred it, will not only be about politics and security. It should certainly include a return to Nationalism and Zionism, but it should not be a resurrection of the old Zionism or a return to the glorification of military power. The new, more mature Israeli nationalism should be a “neo-Zionism” that should emphasize genuine Jewish values and a recognition of our place in history alongside more general humanistic values, which are also present in Judaism. This may be the time to finally try to grapple with the problem of how to be a country that is “Jewish” and also “democratic”.

For those of us in the Religious Zionist community, here in Israel as well as abroad, this moment is one of supreme responsibility. We have an awe-inspiring challenge, to meet the challenge of the moment before the opportunity passes. There are at least three separate ways in which we can accomplish this.

As we have explained above, secular Zionism seems to have run its course and largely expired several years ago. But the post-Zionism that sought to replace it was never really accepted by most Israelis, and is facing a counter-reaction. The current opportunity for a return to Zionism tempered by humanism and humility, and fortified with Jewish values, is an opportunity for Religious Zionism to reemerge as the unifying force it was meant to be.

Decades ago, Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook wrote about the need to merge the national and spiritual aspects of the Jewish People. He compared our national existence to that of an individual human being, who has both a physical body and a spiritual soul, and explained that the *Geulah* (redemption) of the Jewish People will come through uniting the two in common purpose. He saw great significance in secular Zionism, which resurrected the “body” of the Jewish People. The *teshuvah* of the Jewish People, he explained, would come about when the resurrected national entity would recognize its spiritual purpose, and dedicate itself to fulfilling the Biblical mission of being a holy nation. In other words, if the secular public would learn about its Jewish roots from the Orthodox world, and if Orthodoxy would participate in the national rebirth, the redemption would then be able to reach its completion.<sup>4</sup> This vision has yet to be realized, but the emergence of the new consensus offers us an opportunity to try to advance this agenda and further the goals of Torah and *Mitzvot*.<sup>5</sup>

In America as well, a renewed Jewish Nationalism and a more mature Zionism can do wonders for the Jewish People. Clearly, the single greatest challenge facing American Jewry is the danger of assimilation. The early successes of the Birthright program demonstrate that today’s unaffiliated Jewish youth are thirsting for Jewish identity, and that connecting with the State of Israel is the best way of fortifying that identity. In this arena as well, internalizing the lessons of Israel’s crisis and tapping in to the nationalist feelings emerging in Israel can do a lot to bring marginally affiliated Jews back to their people.

Finally, if I can be bold enough to suggest it, “*davka achshav*”, this may now be the time to consider pushing *aliyah* as a long-term goal and priority for America’s Orthodox community. The hardships and difficulties of *aliyah* are formidable (as this author can personally attest!), and there are

many valid reasons why it may not be practical for many individuals and families at any given time.

Nevertheless, if the community were to openly acknowledge the advantages of *aliyah*, for the individual as well as for the Jewish People, and the responsibility of all Jews to attempt to set their long-term goals in this direction, we could greatly increase the ties between the American community and the State of Israel. We could also greatly enhance our understanding of the significance of what it means to be part of *Am Yisrael*. **JA**

#### Notes:

1. This term refers to the work of the 19<sup>th</sup> century German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who developed a theory that explained that all societal and historic development can be viewed as a series of reactions to earlier developments. The first stage of each cycle — the existing concept — is called the *thesis*. Contradictions or weaknesses in the thesis will inevitably generate a reaction in which an opposing concept, the *antithesis* becomes dominant. Finally, the conflict and interaction between the two produce a new element, the *synthesis*.

2. For an analysis of this trend in Israeli society and the risks it poses to Israel’s security, see Daniel Pipes, “The Fatigue Factor”, in *Jewish Action*, Winter 2000. An extraordinarily comprehensive account of the development and ascendancy of post-Zionism can be found in Yoram Hazony’s recent book, *The Jewish State: The Struggle for Israel’s Soul*, New York: Basic Books, 2000.

3. It is true that the primary impetus behind the formation of the National Unity government was political expediency. Due to the strange circumstances of the last election (in which the prime minister was replaced, but not the Knesset), such a union served the purposes of both major parties and their leaders. However, these ulterior motives do not take away from the fact that we now do have a broad-based government, and that in forming such a government, both Sharon and Peres showed statesmanship and concern for the national interest.

4. This theme is found in many of Rav Kook’s complex writings. For a good example, see his eulogy of Theodor Herzl, “*Hamisped Biyerushalayim*” *Sinai*, Elul 5720. See also “*Limhalach Haideot B’yisrael*” in the volume *Orot*, Jerusalem: Mosad HaRav Kook, pp. 102-118.

5. Here it is also worth noting another

phenomenon in current Israeli life, which has also attracted much attention, but remains incomprehensible to many of those not directly involved in it: the “Shas Revolution”, in which hundreds of thousands of non-observant Sephardim have cast their votes and shown support for the religious political party led by HaRav Ovadia Yosef. The unprecedented 17 seats won by Shas in the last Knesset election are another indication of a major component of the Israeli public thirsting for a return to Jewish tradition, symbols and values.