From Hitnachalut to Hitnatkut
The Impact of Gush Emunim
and the Settlement Movement on
Israeli Politics and Society

INTRODUCTION

The impact of Gush Emunim on Israeli society, thirty years after its establishment in 1974, can not be underestimated. The literature appertaining to the movement, its history, ideology, settlement activities, and political effectiveness, has been wide-ranging.¹ While the movement as such ceased to exist in the 1980s, it gave birth to a large number of settlement, political, and ideological organizations which continue to implement the basic ideology laid out by the movements founders, focusing, above all else, on the Greater Land of Israel ideology and spearheaded through its West Bank and Gaza settlement policy. The impact of the settlement policy has been clearly evident in all attempts to draw the boundaries of a two state solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict in the period since the Oslo Agreements in 1993 and 1995, while the political influence of its supporters as part of the governmental and institutional framework has been a major factor underlying Israeli governmental coalitions during the past twenty years.

And yet, somewhat paradoxically, the current move towards unilateral Israeli disengagement from the Gaza Strip, the evacuation of all Israeli settlements in this region, and the growing consensus within Israeli society that a two state solution to the conflict will eventually—sooner or later—become a reality, would suggest that the Gush Emunim ideology has failed to take root in the hearts of the Israeli public, over and beyond the specific adherents of the Greater Israel ideology. The fact that disengagement is being implemented by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon who, in the past, was the settlers’ major political ally and who, more than any other Israeli politician, helped create much of the settlement network and
infrastructure, has posed a great dilemma for the second- and third-genera-
tion Gush Emunim adherents and lobbyists. The fact that politicians of a
government now freely use the semantics of Palestinian state-
hood and “painful compromises” to be made for the sake of peace, would
equally suggest that the impact of Gush Emunim has been less successful
than is normally supposed.

Gush Emunim was established in 1974, some months after the end of
the Yom Kippur War. Its major impact on Israeli society was its dual
role as the practical spearhead of the West Bank settlement movement on
the one hand, and as the ideological mouthpiece for the philosophy of a
Greater Israel on the other. As a formal organization, Gush Emunim ceased
to exist in the 1980s, but as an ideological umbrella for the West Bank set-
tler movement and its many associated and affiliated organizations—both
governmental and non-governmental—it has provided the underlying
raison d’être for the right wing non-withdrawal positions throughout the
thirty years since the inception of the movement.

This article does not seek to regurgitate the political history of Gush
Emunim and the settlement movement. This has been covered in much
of the previous literature, which has focused on the movement’s ideol-
ogy, social contextualization, modes of political activity, and extremist
behavior.² It does seek, however, to revisit Gush Emunim and the various
sub movements and organizations that it has spawned during the thirty
years since its inception, and to examine its impact on Israeli society as a
whole. In particular, the article seeks to readdress the nature of the settler
movement as a whole against the backdrop of the Gaza disengagement
plan—the hitnatkut (disengagement)—which, for many analysts, would
indicate a failure of the settlement ideologists in attaining their ultimate
objectives, namely the retention of physical control over the whole of the
Greater Land of Israel. It readdresses the effectiveness of the dual mode
of political behavior previously described as constituting a combination
of “fundamentalism and pragmatism,” the ability to maintain an extra-
parliamentary protest posture on the one hand while, at one and the same
time, attaining legitimacy through cooptation as part of the political and
institutional framework of the State and Government, with access to public
sector resources as a means of advancing their political and ideological
objectives.

This article further examines the way in which the movements ide-
ology has given rise to a settlement movement, consisting of well over
250,000 settlers throughout the West Bank and Gaza (not including East
Jerusalem) which has become a major factor in all attempts by successive
Israeli governments to move towards the implementation of a peace agreement. It also discusses the way in which the movement’s ideology is disseminated through religious charismatic leaders and by means of an ever expanding network of schools, synagogues, and institutes of higher Jewish learning (yeshivot and seminars). The impact of this socialization is reflected in the relative success of the movement to create a second- and third-generation activist leadership, a feat which has not been matched by the leaders of the parallel left wing movements and, in particular, the Peace Now Movement.³

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE MOVEMENT

Gush Emunim was formally founded in early 1974 as a movement of religious Zionists favoring the long-term retention of the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and the Golan Heights by Israel and their ultimate inclusion within the sovereign territory of the State. They rejected any form of territorial withdrawal from these regions, viewing the Israel-Syria disengagement agreements on the Golan Heights in the immediate aftermath of the 1973 Yom Kippur war as a dangerous precedent for further territorial withdrawals in the West Bank and Gaza. Their territorial irredentism was based on a religious ideology which viewed the whole of the Land of Israel, as described in the biblical texts, as having been promised to the Jewish people by God and, once conquered (or, in their terms, “liberated”) in the “miraculous” events of the Six Day War in June 1967, not to be relinquished voluntarily to any form of non-Jewish (Arab) rule even through the democratic decisions of an elected government. Fearful that the Israeli government was demonstrating weakness following the near disastrous events of the Yom Kippur War, Gush Emunim set as its objective the creation of a political movement which would ensure that none of the land now controlled by Israel would be relinquished. To that end, they proposed the establishment of Jewish settlements throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip as a practical means through which land would come under long term Israeli civilian control. Arguing that all settlement-colonization activity in pre-State Palestine had been influential in determining the ultimate borders of the State of Israel, it was necessary to undertake similar activities within the West Bank and Gaza Strip. In particular, they rejected the principles underlying the Allon Plan, the settlement plan which had been put into operation by the Israeli governments immediately after the 1967 War, and which limited the establishment of settlements to the Jordan valley and an area around
Jerusalem, leaving the remainder of the West Bank region—including the ancient Biblical sites in the mountainous interior of the region—empty of Jewish/Israeli residents, to eventually be relinquished and handed over to Jordanian administration as an autonomous Palestinian region.  

Gush Emunim set out to thwart any government policies aimed at future territorial compromise. They established illegal outposts at Sebastia and Ophrah, against the wishes of the Rabin government of the time. They were initially aided by the then “hard line” defense minister, Shimon Peres, who afforded the first squatter outposts the protection of army camps in the area. Following the election of Israel’s first right wing government in 1977, one of Prime Minister Begin’s first actions was to visit the Camp Kaddum outpost and to declare that there would be many more Elon Moreh during the life of his government. The Likud government went about assisting in the construction of eleven further Gush Emunim settlements during their first year in office and helping create the administrative and organizational structure for the future establishment of additional settlements.

Gush Emunim never became a formal movement with membership and official leadership roles. Movement activists, who identified with the basic Land of Israel ideology became involved in a wide range of private, public and quasi governmental institutions aimed at furthering the cause of West Bank and Gaza settlement. Over time, Gush Emunim adopted a dual mode of political behavior as a means of achieving its objectives. On the one hand, it maintained an extra-parliamentary mode of protest whenever it felt that its ultimate objectives were threatened. At the same time, the movement leaders and daughter institutions underwent a process of governmental cooptation and institutionalization, working from within government to advance their political aims. The latter has taken place through a diverse network of political parties, splinter factions, settlement movements, planning agencies, and local governmental and municipal positions, from which it has been possible to advance the political objectives of settlement with the use of public sector resources. The Greater Land of Israel ideology has also been successfully disseminated to future generations of adherents through a network of public sector schools and educational institutions.

IDEOLOGICAL TENETS

There are a number of basic ideological tenets underlying the Gush Emunim activities. Different messages are disseminated to different audiences in an attempt to attract wider support and sympathy for their political positions,
even if they do not expect all of these supporters to join them in the West Bank settlements. A number of key themes can be identified:

A) The “Failure” of the Zionist Project
In general, Gush Emunim activity has been practiced through the act of establishing settlements. This is perceived by them as constituting the “positive” and “Zionist” way of protesting any government decisions which would weaken overall territorial control, decisions which they see as negating the essence of the Zionist project. From its earliest days, it portrayed itself as the contemporary manifestation of pioneering Zionism. Arguing that the left wing had forsaken its original idealism (which had brought about the establishment of the State) they perceived themselves as the carriers of the mantle, as evidenced in the establishment of settlements in difficult and peripheral locations. The decision by an Israeli government to withdraw from territories and to voluntarily evacuate settlements is perceived by the settler population as the ultimate manifestation of the failure of Zionism to preserve its ideals, even when faced with a hostile world and a perceived loss of “values” from within. The notion that political Zionism is a pragmatic, rather than irredentist, movement is rejected. The necessity of territorial compromise in the past was, in the eyes of the settlers, grounded in different political and demographic realities, which changed as a result of the Six Day War. The settlers use the semantics of the earliest Zionist leaders (such as Herzl) to demonstrate what they see as the need to continue the struggle as part of a futuristic dream, even when the contextual realities of the political world would dictate otherwise. There would not, they argue, have been a State of Israel in the first place had the early Zionist leaders paid attention only to the realities of the period, rather than believing in an objective which appeared unattainable at the time. Territorial withdrawal and settlement evacuation is therefore portrayed as constituting a betrayal of Zionism.

B) Religious Law as Binding
For Gush Emunim, the basic notion of “Greater Israel” as constituting the “promised land” is essentially a religious one. For the national religious community, territorial withdrawal and settlement evacuation is in direct contradiction to the law of the Torah, which takes precedence over any form of human decision making process, however democratic that process may be. As such, the West Bank Rabbis Forum (Yesha [Rabbis]) has become the most important ideological forum, to which the political leadership have become increasingly subservient. The Yesha Rabbis have issued
public statements that governmental decisions which negate the Greater Land of Israel ideology are in contradiction to Torah law and are therefore “immoral” and not to be observed. As the national religious population has become increasingly fundamentalist in matters of religious observance and ritual in the past two decades, so too the Rabbis have greater influence over the political activities and decisions of the settlers themselves.

The focus on the religious dimension of the political struggle has created problems vis-à-vis the secular right wing inside Israel. The latter use a combination of historical (Biblical) and securitization discourse to justify their demand to retain control of the Occupied Territories, but do not see the retention of the land as constituting a Divine imperative which is above the law of the State and democratic procedures. The Greater Land of Israel Movement, founded shortly after the 1967 War and some seven years prior to the formation of Gush Emunim, was largely (albeit not exclusively) a secular movement, but remained focused on the ideological and political message rather than the settlement activities. Following its inception, Gush Emunim leaders continually attempted to join forces with the secular right wing, and this was most notable in the formation of joint religious-secular right wing parties, such as Hatechiya and Tzomet (see below). But the ideological core of Gush Emunim and the settler movement remained rooted within a rigid religious understanding of events which, in turn, was reflected in the increasing orthodoxy of the movement, away from the traditional moderation of Religious Zionism to a brand of Zionist ultra-orthodoxy, which became known in Israel as the “Chardal.” Its followers increasingly took their orders from the Rabbis, instead of the political leaders. The National Religious Party (NRP) had always attempted to make a distinction between these two forms of leadership, consulting with the Rabbis but making their decisions amongst the political elites. With time, a growing number of the NRP rank and file, including some of their Knesset members, took directives directly from the Religious leaders, most notably Rabbis Mordechai Eliyahu and Avraham Shapira, both of whom had served as State Chief Rabbis during the 1980s.

For Gush Emunim, secular support for their cause was attributed to both pragmatic and mystical factors. At the pragmatic level, it was seen as being part of a hard line securitization discourse which emphasized the need to retain territories in the face of enemies as a means of ensuring a strong border and defensive strategy for the State. At the mystical level, Gush Emunim attributed the support of the secular elements in terms of the Rabbi Kook ideology, inasmuch as he had argued that all of the secular Zionist pioneers had demonstrated an inner (often unconscious)
spark of holiness by virtue of the fact that they were building up the Land of Israel which would eventually bring about redemption. It was for this reason that the Gush Emunim leaders had no qualms with portraying themselves as the contemporary continuers of the Zionist pioneering which had taken place at the beginning of the twentieth century, an act which they perceived as inherently a religious act speeding the process of ultimate Redemption.

c) Peace and Securitization

The settler movement appeals to the broader Israeli public by arguing that the notion of “land for peace” is based on false notions of peace. The post-Oslo experience, in which the granting of autonomy to large parts of the West Bank and Gaza and the return of Arafat to the region, was accompanied by increased terror, suicide bombings, and violence is, they argue, an indication that the Palestinians do not really want peace. Territorial compromise and withdrawal will, they argue, only bring further demands on the part of the Palestinians and will make the life of most Israelis less, rather than more, secure. Given the realities of the second Intifada period, coupled with the impact of the securitization discourse amongst the Israeli public, this is a powerful argument which appeals to the basic survival instincts of much of the non-settler population and which explains the opposition amongst many non-settlers to territorial withdrawal and disengagement.

Unlike the religious narratives which lie at the heart of the Gush Emunim raison d’être but which appeal to only a relatively small percentage of the Israeli population, it is the securitization and defense discourses which appeal to much larger groups amongst society at large. It is the securitization discourse which invariably determines the outcome of elections and around which centrist Israel can be influenced and swayed. Gush Emunim leaders have invariably appealed to the securitization discourse, especially during times of terror incidents, to attract this support. The argument that giving up land to foreign rule is a religious prohibition, regardless of greater or lesser security, is largely internalized since it is not a saleable product. The fact that in the post-Oslo period, terrorism continued, and even increased, enabled the settler leadership to focus on this dimension of the political discourse and to forge coalitions with both the right wing and centrist populations, for whom security and defense constitute the major issue on the national social and political agendas.
d) Democracy and Legitimacy

One of the major factors underlying the Gush Emunim-settler movement activities, has been the issue of democracy *vis-à-vis* the religious beliefs of the settlers themselves. The settling of the Land has always been seen as constituting an inherent religious belief for the Gush Emunim settler groups. When, as has often happened during the past thirty years, this conflicts with the decisions of the democratically elected government of the State of Israel, the latter are often portrayed as being contrary to their religious beliefs and as being immoral and undemocratic decisions. When pressed, many of the settlers will argue that the Laws of the Torah (as construed by them in terms of nationalist ideology) occupy greater prominence than the laws of democracy and, as such, are to be preferred in taking decisions. This has always been problematic for the mainstream settler movement who desire, on the one hand, to be seen as an integral part of modern Israeli society (as contrasted with the ultra-orthodox groups who do not serve in the army and who do not take part in many of the normal activities of the modern State) while, at one and the same time, are not prepared to forego their religious beliefs in favor of governmental decisions, and are thus seen by the wider population as being no more than a fundamentalist group disguised in the education and clothes of modernity.

The settlers argue that the governmental decision to unilaterally disengage from the Gaza Strip is essentially non-democratic. They argue that a government, and in particular its leader, who were elected on a right wing platform and who have traditionally been opposed to any major territorial concessions, does not have the right to undertake actions which are in direct contrast to their manifesto. At the least, the settlers argue, there should be new elections or a national referendum which would determine the democratic will of the majority of the Israeli people. The use of this argument is somewhat ironical, given the fact that the settlers and Gush Emunim argue that the law of God is above the law of man and that the rule of the majority cannot take decisions which, in their view, negate Divine rules—such as the settling of the whole of the Land of Israel. Notwithstanding, the use of the democraticization discourse (like the securitization discourse discussed in the previous paragraph) is one which appeals to a much wider public than the settler population itself, and questions the very legitimacy of the decisions taken by the Israeli government.
MODES OF OPERATION

The next section of the paper examines four modes of behavior which have operated in tandem during the past thirty years and which, taken together, explain the impact of the movement and its ideology on the Israeli body politic—Gush Emunim as a) protest movement; b) political movement; c) settlement movement; and d) movement of ideological socialization.

A. Grass Roots: Gush Emunim as Protest Movement

Gush Emunim and its ideological inheritors have always been at the forefront of all opposition to peace processes which have entailed any form of territorial withdrawal resulting in non-Jewish control/sovereignty over parts of the Land of Israel. The settlers and their supporters have always been the most effective demonstrators against the various peace initiatives, organizing large demonstrations in the major cities, posting their slogans and billboards throughout the country at the most visible intersections and public places, and generally creating a lobby amongst right wing politicians aimed at preventing the implementation of the proposed peace accords. Compared to all other modes of protest in Israel during the past thirty years, the settler movement has always been the most vociferous and active, with the ability to mobilize tens of thousands of supporters in acts of public protest whenever necessary. At the same time, the inherent belief in their ultimate objectives has spilled over into acts of violence and extremism which have become associated with right wing protest in Israel, questioning the extent to which they accept the game rules of protest within a parliamentary democracy.

While Gush Emunim have supported right wing governments, they have protested equally against both right and left wing governments whenever their interests have been threatened. It is precisely in periods of right wing administrations where they have been most successful at using their institutional legitimacy (in some cases being part of the government itself) together with their street protest as dual means of opposing government policies aimed at any form of territorial compromise, settlement freeze, or related activities. Thus, the settler movement demonstrated equally against the Begin evacuation of Yamit (Northern Sinai), the Netanyahu signing of the Wye Accords, and the Sharon disengagement plan in Gaza, as it did against the Rabin government and the Oslo Accords and the Barak government in its attempt to reach a territorial solution to the conflict at Camp David in 2000. Ironically, it has been the governments who they have supported—the Begin and Sharon Administrations—which have, at
one and the same time assisted them in constructing settlements, while also implementing the major settlement withdrawals and evacuations to have taken place to date.

The activism and enthusiasm of the settler movement and their national religious supporters is unequaled amongst all other political movements in Israel, on both the left and right of the political spectrum. In the first place, they are spurred on by an essentially religious ideology which they perceive as constituting the one and only truth as ordained to them by God. Secondly, the settlers are the most affected by any peace proposal which would necessitate territorial withdrawal and settlement evacuation. For them, it is not an abstract piece of territory but the region within which they reside and have constructed their houses. They are fighting against their own evacuation from their homes, some of which have been inhabited for nearly thirty years.

In terms of the more peaceful protests, the settler movement undertook a campaign to paint the country orange in the lead up to Gaza Disengagement in 2005. Orange ribbons were tied to cars and houses, while opponents of the disengagement plan consciously wore orange clothes, carried orange bags, and used the color at demonstrations and on billboards. As a counter protest, supporters of the Disengagement Plan distributed blue and white ribbons, creating the imagery that Disengagement served the interests of the State (blue and white constituting the State colors). In response, many settlers sported orange and blue ribbons together on their cars, arguing that true supporters of the State opposed evacuation of settlements from the Gaza Strip.

But much of the right wing protest associated with Gush Emunim and the settler movement has moved beyond what is normally conceived of as constituting legitimate protest. What began as extra-parliamentary protest has, for many of the younger and more radical groups, given way to illegalism and acts of violence. This is reflected in acts of both physical and verbal violence. The latter, in particular, has become increasingly apparent in the post-Oslo period, not least the use of holocaust imagery, the labeling of government officials and supporters of the peace process as “traitors,” the call for “transfer” of Arab-Palestinian inhabitants out of Israel, and the implicit acceptance by many that the political assassination of a prime minister is an act which could, under certain circumstances, repeat itself. The national religious community has always been quick to argue that the use of violence is limited to a small radical minority, most of whom are to be found in the right wing Kach movement or, more recently, as part of the “Hilltop youth” who have adopted even more radical stances than the Gush Emunim founder generation.
In the mid-1980s, the discovery and arrest of the Jewish underground was the first indication of the extremism to which some members of the settler movement were prepared to go. Plans to plant bombs on Palestinian buses and to blow up the Al Aqsa Mosque were central to the activities of this group who were subsequently sentenced to terms of imprisonment. The murder of Emil Greenzweig at a Peace Now Demonstration in 1983, the mass murder of Muslim worshippers in a Hebron Mosque by Hebron resident Baruch Goldstein in 2004, and the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in September 2005 were further indications of the political extremism of the right wing supporters. In each case, the settler movement was at pains to emphasize that these were exceptions rather than the rule and the incidents of violence did not represent members of the overall settler movement who, despite their right wing views on the conflict, were law abiding citizens who were opposed to any form of violence, particularly against the Jewish citizens of the State.

However, in the lead up to the disengagement from Gaza in 2005, the acts of extremism extended beyond the activities of small groups, to encompass an ever expanding protest population. Their activities, including the blocking of major traffic arteries, their takeover of abandoned buildings, and the general disruption of public life throughout the country went well beyond what had previously been accepted as constituting civil disobedience. Some policy makers went as far as comparing the activities of the more radical groups as akin to Jewish terrorism which should be dealt with in the same firm way as Arab terrorism.

Perhaps the most extreme form of imagery used by the settlers has been the use of holocaust imagery to depict the process of planned settlement evacuation. In the lead up to the implementation of the Gaza Disengagement Plan in 2005, the process has been framed in terms of “forced expulsion,” “transfer of Jews,” and “ethnic cleansing,” reminiscent of terminologies which have been associated with the Nazi period. At the same time, the use of holocaust imagery, such as the wearing of orange stars, or the writing of their identity numbers on their arms, has been rejected by that same public which it set out to win over, not least the use of orange stars by the settlers to depict their status as future “deportees.” This is a discourse which is indicative of a degree of desperation on the part of the settlers following the government decisions to evacuate the settlements. This discourse has served to distance potential supporters and has had a negative effect on their campaign. At the same time, it is also indicative of the protest extremism which has often characterized the right wing in general, and the settler movement in particular.
A number of grass roots protest movements, organizations, and NGOs have been set up to support different aspects of the settler cause. Most notable amongst these have been the Women in Green, Zo Artzenu, Batzedeek movements, the Gamla Movement, and Professors for a Strong Israel.¹³ As in the case of the many pro-peace left wing NGOs, many of these movements receive external assistance and funding from supporters in North America and Western Europe. They have all come out strongly against any form of territorial compromise and have been at the forefront of the campaign against the Gaza Disengagement. Many of these movements have adopted the more extreme semantics and slogans of protest,¹⁴ distancing themselves from the mainstream leadership of the settler movement who continually try to adopt a mode of operation which will be acceptable to the population at large.

b. INSTITUTIONALIZATION:
GUSH EMUNIM AS POLITICAL MOVEMENT

While Gush Emunim never became a formal movement with a membership and organizational structure as such, the movement’s leaders and ideologues spawned an impressive network of formal institutions within the public sector. This ranged from settlement organizations, to political parties, and to ad hoc membership of right wing political and educational institutions. In particular, settlers and other Gush Emunim supporters have become active in two main areas of public sector activity—as members of the Knesset in a variety of like minded political parties, and as elected and paid officials in the local government and municipal administrations which have been created to manage the settlement network.

The main political party associated with the Gush Emunim ideology has been the National Religious (Mafdal) party (the NRP). Prior to 1967, Mafdal was seen as the party of compromise between secular and orthodox Israel and took part in almost all government coalitions.¹⁵ Following 1967 however, the party underwent a clear turn to the right in terms of national politics, becoming self transformed into the party which supported and promoted the retention of the Occupied Territories and the establishment of settlements throughout this region. All of the earliest leaders of Gush Emunim identified with the NRP and, because of the exuberance of their commitment to the “Land of Israel” cause, were successful in partially taking over the party hierarchy from the “old guard” leadership who were perceived as lacking in “ideological commitment” to the challenges of the day. The earliest governmental supporters of Gush Emunim were the NRP “young guard” headed by Zevulun Hammer and Yehuda Ben
Meir. They promoted the cause of the fledgling settler movement within the Labor governments of the mid-1970’s, and later led the way for the establishment of Israel’s first right wing Likud government, by opting to form a coalition government with Menachem Begin following his victory at the 1977 elections.

From the mid-1970s until the present period, the NRP has moved ever further to the right, becoming one of the major supporters of the settlement movement. Senior figures in the settler movement, such as Hanan Porat of Gush Etzion, Shaul Yahalom of Samaria, and Zvi Handel of Gush Katif, as well as leading right wing Rabbis, such as Haim Druckman (the head of the Bnei Akiva yeshivot) and Yitzhak Levi, have all been Knesset members of the NRP at some point during this period. At certain points, when the right wing members of the party felt that the party as a whole was not sufficiently committed to the right wing settler cause, they broke away and formed their own more nationalistic parties. This, in turn, caused a splitting of the traditional NRP vote, reducing their overall size and influence within the respective governmental coalitions. Prior to the elections of 2003, the party—in an effort at self rejuvenation—chose a new right wing leader, Etti Eitam, in an attempt to win back the alienated right wing religious voters. Not only were they unsuccessful but, following the hesitancy of the party to leave the Sharon government in the wake of his decision to withdraw from Gaza, Eitam and Levi again left the party to form a coalition with the more extreme right wing Knesset faction, the National Union (Ha’Ichud Ha’Leumi).

Other leading settler activists have been members of the Knesset for right wing parties, ranging from the Likud itself, to parties such as Techiyah in the 1980s, Tzomet in the 1990s, and the National Union (post-2000). These parties adopted an extremist right wing position in support of widespread settlement throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip, were opposed to any form of peace agreement which would necessitate territorial compromise or withdrawal and, unlike the NRP, were composed of a combination of religious and secular politicians. For many, the religious-secular combination was itself an important ideological statement, in the sense that the public should not perceive West Bank settlement as being limited solely to the religious camp. Moreover, because these parties, unlike the NRP, were created around a single policy issue—the territories and the Israel-Palestine conflict—they drew supporters from a variety of social and economic backgrounds. For its part, the NRP had to continually negotiate its way between those who believed that the party should focus on the territorial issues and move to the right, and others who argued that the role
of the party was to provide a bridge between secular and religious Israel (particularly during a period of religious and orthodox polarization) and that it should portray a more moderate, middle of the road, position on the territorial issues.

Given the fact that, even at its peak, the settler population never numbered more than 0.5 percent of the total Israeli population, its representation in the Knesset, through different political parties, far exceeded its proportionality. In the Sharon Administration (2002–2006) ten members of the Knesset resided in West Bank and Gaza settlements,¹⁸ providing the settler movement with a foothold which no other protest movement in Israel’s history had previously succeeded in attaining in the formal corridors of government.

Another form of political institutionalization has been the local government framework which has been created to administer to the interests of the West Bank and Gaza settlements. All told, there are 24 Jewish municipalities in the WBGS, of which three are full-fledged cities (Maaleh Adumim, Betar Illit, and Ariel); 14 are independent standing local councils; and seven are Regional Councils.¹⁹ Local government authorities are responsible for a diverse range of public sector and service provisions activities. Their budgets are a combination of local taxes (arnona) and central government transfers. The local government authorities are responsible for the organization of education and welfare services within their jurisdictional areas, an activity which provides many public sector resources and employment opportunities. At this very practical level of daily life activities, many of the settler activists find employment within local government, while the elected mayors are also from amongst the resident population. This constitutes an enabling influence for the settlers who are permitted to legally use public sector resources to consolidate and further promote expansion of the existing settlement network in line with their political and ideological ambitions.

Various settler leaders have also been appointed on an ad hoc basis to senior civil service appointments by government ministers who are close to their political views. This enables them to actively promote public sector activities which are within their areas of responsibility and which necessitate the allocation of scarce resources in such areas as the construction of classrooms, kindergarten facilities by the Education Ministry, local road paving and infrastructural development by the Ministries of Construction and Housing, and Infrastructure, and the allocation of additional public sector positions in a wide range of utility and service provision (Interior Ministry). The fact that the publication of the national budget figures by
the Central Bureau of Statistics only focuses on particular activities, nation wide, but does not provide any regional breakdown of the budget, has made it difficult to assess exactly how much of the various ministry budgets have been poured into the settlement network in the WBGS, although it is assumed that this runs into many billions of dollars.²⁰

A number of additional quasi public bodies, set up with specific political objectives, provide further indications of the sophisticated organizational system which has formed around the settler movement ideology. The Yesha Council²¹ and the Yesha Rabbis are two ad hoc bodies which fall somewhere between the extra-parliamentary protest movements and the formal political institutions of the State. The Yesha Council is an umbrella organization representing all of the West Bank (and Gaza) municipalities and local government authorities. Its objective is to promote the settlements and to lobby on their behalf inside government, the political parties, and the government ministries. The council is composed of all of the local government mayors in the WBGS and it also employs its own administrative staff, some of which are seconded from the local government authorities themselves.²² The Yesha Rabbis council is composed of some of the leading WBGS community rabbis and has, over time, become the supreme authority for many of the settlers in determining what form of opposition and political activity is legitimate in the face of government decisions aimed at territorial withdrawal and settlement evacuation. Many of the settlers take their lead from the Religious and Rabbinical authorities rather than the Political Authority (such as the Yesha Council). The Yesha Council itself often consults with the leading West Bank Rabbis before it adopts a specific political position, and the latter played a leading role in the period prior to Gaza disengagement (see below).

On the one hand, both the Yesha Council and the Yesha Rabbis Forum are informal, non-governmental, institutions. At one and the same time, they are composed of activists and functionaries who occupy public sector positions (local council Mayors, State funded Rabbis) and, as such, are making use of their public sector time to promote political objectives and causes. They have direct access to leading political figures—up to the level of prime minister and state president—and they command a political authority which determines the actions and protest activities of the settlers themselves. As such, they promote the protest activities of the settler move- ment (they are mostly active when they are in opposition to government policies) while using the time and resources available to them as public sector civil servants and functionaries.
c. Activation: Gush Emunim as Settlement Movement

Gush Emunim has always focused on the practical and tangible dimensions of achieving its political objectives. Despite their religious worldview which focuses on the Land of Israel, the State of Israel, and even the army of Israel, as constituting “holiness” and part of the process of eventual Messianic redemption of the Jewish people, the Gush Emunim ideology argues that redemption can only be brought about through practical actions.23

The practical action which has been undertaken since the inception of the movement and has become the flag head of all Greater Israel ideologists, has been the establishment of settlements throughout the disputed territories, as a means of ensuring that the “miraculously liberated” territories of the Six Day War will never be relinquished again to non-Jewish rule. Settling the territories is, in their worldview, part of the process through which redemption will be advanced, while the relinquishing of these territories constitutes a setback in the redemption process.

From their earliest publications,24 Gush Emunim presented themselves as the “true” continuers and interpreters of the Zionist enterprise which began in the late nineteenth century, and which brought land under control of the Jewish collective, and eventual sovereignty of the State, by incremental land purchase and land settlement. Their continued attempts to establish new settlement outposts, even against the wishes of the Israeli government of the time, was self portrayed as being equivalent to the heroic and pioneering activities of the Zionist movement to create settlements in the face of the anti-settlement and anti-immigration policies of the British Mandate during the pre-State period. Gush Emunim perceived themselves in the same romantic terms of the early Zionist pioneers, arguing that they were now taking on the mantle of pioneering and state building as part of a continuous ideological process.

The notion of “hitnachalut” as the term which has come to define the West Bank and Gaza settlements was equally perceived by Gush Emunim as a positive, rather than negative, term. Hitnachalut was the term used in the Bible to describe Joshua’s conquest of the Land following the return from Egyptian exile. Unlike the rest of Israeli society, which distinguishes between the self ascribed positive notion of “hityashvut” (settlement) as contrasted with the negative notion of “hitnachalut” (squatting) the settlers themselves view this latter term as denoting the tradition of continuity between the biblical narrative of a Promised Land and its translation into new tangible realities expressed through contemporary political notions of Zionism, statehood, and sovereignty. Thus, while the distinction between
“hitnachalut” and “hityashvut” was often used by left wing and centrist political leaders as a means of denigrating the West Bank settlement activities, for Gush Emunim the term “hitnachalut” was imbued with historical and religious significance, drawing a direct link between the Joshuan period of conquest and their own settlement activities.

The settlement activities spearheaded by Gush Emunim back in the 1970s, mostly through the aegis of the (then) new settler movement established for this purpose, Amanah, has resulted—directly and indirectly—in the settling of well over 250,000 residents in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. This has taken place in a wide range of urban and exurban communities and townships, most of which have experienced growth as a result of relatively high rates of natural increase amongst the mostly religious inhabitants of these communities. Settlement growth has been accompanied by the development of the social and physical infrastructure, the creation of schools, municipalities, and institutes of higher education, as well as the construction of roads, industrial parks, and commercial centers. This network of “suburban colonization” displays strong western landscape characteristics and contrasts strongly with the neighboring Palestinian villages and towns which remain relatively undeveloped in what has become a dual, parallel, settlement landscape sharing a single geographical space but with little, if any, meaningful social or economic interactions between the two populations.

For many, settlement has come to signify the ultimate means of goal implementation. It is held out against the protest movements of the left as an indication of “constructive” and tangible protest activity, as contrasted with the lackluster demonstrations and intellectualized talking shops of the left. The removal or evacuation of settlements is portrayed as essentially an “anti-Zionist” action which runs against the state building process as a whole. Settlement is also portrayed by many of the settlers as constituting an essential element in the security and defense policy of the State, arguing that the existence of the settlements in relatively peripheral locations removes the immediate threat of terrorism and katyusha missiles away from the metropolitan center of the country.

The use of both the “pioneering” and “defense” imageries is designed to create a settlement discourse which is acceptable to the wider Israeli public, especially those (the vast majority) who are not won over by the recourse to religious justifications for settlement expansion in these areas. Much of the centrist and right wing Israeli public can identify with the notion of settlement pioneers and/or settlements contributing to the defense policy of the State, values with which they identify, while they
are equally turned off by a political position based on notions of religion, redemption, and Divine promises. But there is a strong counter argument to the “pioneering” and “defensive” discourses, which have made them less relevant during the past decade, especially during a period when the notion of territorial compromise has become more prominent and acceptable as part of the public discourse and in which settlement is increasingly seen as constituting an obstacle to peace by a growing proportion of the Israeli public. Suburban, western style, communities are not seen as constituting any form of pioneering in comparison with the difficult conditions experienced by the pre-State settlers in peripheral regions. Western style villas, state funded mortgages, commuting to white collar employment in Tel-Aviv and Jerusalem are seen by many as a means through which the State has been exploited, and middle class lifestyles subsidized, at the expense of many other social and welfare needs of the State and the peripheral regions in the Negev and the Galilee. Equally, West Bank and Gaza settlements which have to be defended by extra troops and reservists, to which it has now become dangerous to travel on the open roads for fear of terrorist attacks and suicide bombers, and which have been enclosed by fortress style fences and fortifications, are seen as constituting a security burden on the State, rather than contributing in any way to the defensive posture or safety of the country’s inhabitants.

But settlements have played a role in the ongoing discourse concerning the eventual demarcation of borders and lines of physical separation between Israel and a future Palestinian State. The attempt to annex parts of the West Bank in those areas where the major settlement blocs are located, especially in areas in close proximity to the Green Line boundary between Israel and the West Bank, has indicated the powerful impact of settlements in creating new geographical and political realities which then become difficult to reverse at a later stage, and under changed political conditions. This has been translated into a partial reality following the physical construction of the Separation Fence (2004–2005) which has effectively annexed parts of the West Bank to Israel under the guise of securitization considerations. Equally, the evacuation of settlements in the Gaza Strip and the fact that many settlements have remained on the “wrong” side of the separation fence (which would indicate that they are candidates for future evacuation) are also indicative of the fact that the creation of geographical facts on the ground are powerful political pawns, but pawns which can be disposed of and removed if and when the political conditions are ripe.
d. Socialization: Gush Emunim as Education Movement

Gush Emunim has succeeded in creating a new generation of ideologically motivated activists, many of whom have taken on leadership positions in the settler movement. Part of this success is due to the mechanisms of message dissemination and ideological socialization which the national religious community has at their disposal, and over which they maintain rigid control, limiting access only to those who would preach the “correct” message. The fact that the national religious community maintains its own separate educational framework, enables it to maintain a powerful role of social gate keeping in terms of what messages are disseminated and who has the authority to disseminate the message. Schools, yeshivot, and synagogues are all subject to these gate-keeping constraints, with access limited to Rabbis or educators whose interpretation of political events correspond with the ideology of the settler movement. The religious high school system affiliated with the Bnei Akiva national religious youth movement is the major source for social reproduction and recruitment of the future generations of right wing activists and settlers. Many of the students at these high schools are themselves residents of the settlements, while most others are from families who are closely affiliated with the settler movement and its irredentist ideology. Many of these schools will bus their students to right wing demonstrations and justify this on the grounds that this is part of the process through which their students participate in legitimate democratic activities on the one hand, while strengthening their attachment to the Land of Israel on the other. With the possible exception of some ultra-orthodox groups, no other political sector in Israel has such direct access to future generations of committed youth, who will fill the role of activists and, eventually, a new generation of leaders.

Socialization also takes place through the special army units, known as Hesder, which were set up in the 1970s to accommodate the demand of religious Zionist youth to serve and study together as consolidated units. These soldiers were seen, by the army hierarchy, as constituting highly motivated units, spurred on by the religious nationalist beliefs that they were taught in their schools and yeshivot. Unlike the ultra-orthodox community, they see army service as constituting no less than a religious obligation and were prepared to take part in some of the toughest combat units. From the 1990s on, many of these “hesder” soldiers also began to reach high level command positions for the first time in Israel’s military history. But the Hesder soldiers were strongly influenced by their religious mentors who, in many cases, took precedence over their army commanders.
For as long as the objectives of both religious leaders and army commanders were the same, this was not a problem. But when army orders began to conflict with the religious teachings, most notably in the case of army involvement in the evacuation of settlements as part of the Gaza Disengagement Plan (see below), many of the soldiers opted to obey their religious mentors and, as a result, refused to carry out the military orders of their superior officers.²⁹

In reality, the separate educational network and army units created a society within a society, which drew its strength from religious mentors and settler activists. It was precisely this sort of activity which Ben-Gurion had set out to prevent when, following the establishment of the State, he had forcefully disbanded the separate and elitist Palmach army units and, with the exception of the religious population, had integrated the educational and school systems into a single national framework. At the time, neither the ultra orthodox nor the religious Zionist sectors of society were seen as constituting a major challenge to the hegemony of the new Israeli secular Sabra society. But fifty years down the road both of these sectors had undergone internal strengthening—both demographically and ideologically—and now constituted sub-ideologies within Israeli society, each with its own strong and separate educational, political, and institutional frameworks. The ability of each to reproduce itself through the agency of strong internal educational and socialization control was, at the turn of the millennium, one of the major challenges facing the country in its attempt to maintain a minimum of State hegemony and control amongst its Jewish population.

The religious nationalist message is also disseminated through many of the country’s synagogues. The weekly Friday evening sermon is often devoted to a religious analysis of contemporary political events as interpreted through the texts of the weekly Torah portion. Increasingly, this has become a means of emphasizing the exclusive Divine promise of the land to the Jewish people, the supremacy of Torah law over the rule of the majority, and supreme sanctity of the Land above all else. Orthodox Rabbis, perceived as constituting the authentic interpreters of the Jewish law, preach a right wing political message through their analysis of the Torah texts.³⁰

In most synagogues, weekly news sheets with Torah lessons are distributed, representing a wide range of religious and political organizations but with a common right wing theme to their religio-political messages. In some synagogues, the distribution of alternative sheets associated with the Netivot Shalom or Memad religious peace movements, has been
prevented as it does not, in the eyes of the synagogue leaders, represent a true or authentic understanding of religio-political events.

The use of the public media is another important means of message dissemination. The right wing have consistently argued that the public media is part of a left wing conspiracy aimed at putting over a single (pro-peace, pro-Oslo) message, with little room or space for any dissenting views. In order to combat these trends, the settler movement has established their own radio channel (Arutz 7) and set up their own newspaper, Mekor Rishon. The former was the subject of much public debate, not least because the government ruled it illegal since it had not received a formal license to broadcast. This, in turn, was interpreted by the right wing as yet another attempt to prevent them from disseminating their message to the broader public. One of the most prominent Arutz 7 broadcasters was Adir Zik, a former employee of the State television, who continually argued against what he termed the “tishkoret” displayed by the public media. With the exception of the left wing Haaretz newspaper, the rest of the Israeli printed media adopted centrist and centrist right positions in the wake of the second intifada, while the Jerusalem Post underwent a complete transformation from what had previously been a centrist newspaper to one of the most right wing media outlets in Israel. While the ideological media of the left wing, such as the Peace radio station of Abie Nathan or the newspapers such as Al Hamishmar and Davar, had all closed down due to a lack of interest and support, the right wing Hatzofe newspaper continued to preach to its national religious audience, while both Mekor Rishon and Arutz 7 found a ready audience for its specific political message. Internally, the settler movement continues to produce its own political and ideological magazine, Nekudah, which has been published monthly since the late 1970s and which reflects the major ideological trends within the settler community.

FACING UP TO HITNATKUT

The decision by the Israeli government to unilaterally disengage from the Gaza Strip in the summer of 2005 and to evacuate all of the Jewish settlements in this region caused the major crisis which has been faced by the settler movement to date. While, at the political level, the Gaza disengagement is simply one more stage in the process of political withdrawal aimed at an eventual two state solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict which commenced with the Oslo Agreements of 1993 and 1995, at a practical level it
is the first implementation of a plan aimed at military withdrawal and the evacuation/removal of settlements, some of which have been in place for nearly thirty years.\(^3\)

Hitnatkut (disengagement) from Gaza caused a major crisis amongst the settlers, at both the ideological and practical levels. Ideologically, hitnatkut symbolized the opposite of everything that Gush Emunim had set out to achieve, namely the extension of Jewish control throughout the entire “Land of Israel” territory through the agency of practical actions such as settlement. The withdrawal of Israeli troops and the forced evacuation of the settlements was, for them, the antithesis of what they had come to perceive as constituting the “true” [sic] path of contemporary Zionism, spurred on by a deep religious belief that they were carrying out the authentic will of Divine command in the Holy Land.

Practically, the settler movement and their supporters used every means at their disposal to thwart the implementation of hitnatkut. This ranged from attempts to overturn the decision within the government, through civil protests in the form of demonstrations, the wearing of orange clothes and ribbons to signify their opposition to the plan, to violent actions such as the blocking of major roadways in the center of the country, the establishment of illegal outposts, and the positioning of fake terrorist devices at key locations such as bus stations. The younger, more radical, elements (the “hilltop youth”) took the struggle beyond the accepted confines of legality and were seen as constituting a new, ideologically infused, generation of political activists, over whom the mainstream settler leadership had no control. The mainstream settler movement was divided over these activities. On the one hand, they supported all forms of opposition to the hitnatkut plan while, at one and the same time, they were worried that the more extreme activities of the protestors had the opposite effect in turning sympathetic Israelis against them. The settler movement was conscious of the fact that they had to be seen as part of wider society and not as a radical, extreme, group that acted beyond the pale of acceptable behavior.

The settler movement argued that the decision to disengage from Gaza was non-democratic and immoral. They took their lead from the Yesha Rabbis Council that provided the religious justifications for opposing the government in every way possible. Many of them also supported the decision by religious soldiers to refuse to carry out any military orders as part of the settlement evacuation process. This was seen, by society at large, as challenging the authority and unity of the army which continued to be perceived as “above” the political debate—this despite the fact that the initial refusal to carry out orders or to serve under certain political
situations had been implemented by left wing soldiers who had previously refused to undertake their military service in the Occupied Territories. But while this former refusal had been limited to a relatively small number of left wing ideologically infused soldiers, the refusal to carry out evacuation related orders took on the dimensions of a mass movement and became transformed into a public debate, even drawing support from some religious and political leaders.33

The implementation of disengagement raised major ideological questions concerning the success of Gush Emunim ideology in the long term. Having set out to ensure future control and sovereignty over the entire “Land of Israel” territory which had been miraculously “liberated” in the 1967 War, the settlers were forced to give up control over large parts of these areas. The collapse of the “Greater land of Israel” dream did not start with Gaza Disengagement—it commenced with the implementation of the Oslo Agreements and the transfer of local control and autonomy in many areas to the Palestinian Authority. But the Gaza Disengagement (and the evacuation of some settlements in the northern sections of the West Bank) was the only the second time that settlers were forced to leave their homes (Yamit in the early 1980s being the first time). At the same time, the complexity of settlement evacuation, together with the fact that all previous attempts (in the mid-1990s) to draw up a border separating Israel from a future Palestinian State was forced to take into account the realities of widespread settlement dispersion throughout the WBGS, meant that the settlement movement had influenced the future territorial and border configurations of any potential peace agreement.34 This was also reflected in the unilateral construction of the Separation Fence/ Wall by the Sharon Government in 2003–2005, aimed at preventing the movement of suicide bombers into Israel but, in reality, creating an interim political border/boundary, deviating in some areas from the Green Line and annexing parts of the West Bank, so that a large number of settlements would be included within the Israeli territory.35 In this sense, the notion that “we are the Zionist pioneers and settlers of today, determining boundaries in the same way that the kibbutzim and moshavim of the pre-State era accomplished,” was—at the time of writing—being implemented on the ground.

The disengagement from Gaza stands in comparison with the previous round of settlement evacuation which had taken place in the Yamit region of Northern Sinai as part of the implementation of the Camp David Agreements signed between Israel and Egypt. Then, too, it had been a right wing government (Menachem Begin) that had been responsible for the settlement evacuation, much in the same way that it was Begin’s right
wing general, Ariel Sharon, who was now responsible for the evacuation of the Gaza settlements. Then too, it had been Gush Emunim activists who had been in the forefront of the Movement to Prevent the Withdrawal from Sinai, although the Yamit settlements were not as closely identified with the movement’s religious ideology as were the Gush Katif settlements in Gaza.

The religious nationalist settlers played a major role in the opposition to withdrawal from the Yamit settlements, but did not assume the overall leadership as was the case in Gaza in the summer of 2005. But while the withdrawal from Sinai was part of a peace agreement signed and implemented with Israel’s major and most threatening enemy, the unilateral disengagement from the Gaza Strip was not part of any agreement and even took place while acts of terror and the firing of Katyusha rockets into Israeli communities continued to take place. At the most, Yamit residents had lived in the area for a decade, while many of the Gaza residents had lived in the region for thirty years, with second—and even third—generation settlers amongst the ranks. Some Gaza settlers had come to the region following the evacuation of the Yamit region and, as such, had to face evacuation for the second time in twenty years. Both the settlers and the army spent many hours studying the implications of the Yamit settlement evacuations for what was to happen in the Gaza Strip, agreeing in principle that the acts of violence which had occurred in Yamit were almost certain to repeat themselves in Gush Katif, at a much greater intensity, if only because of the greater ideological and religious factor in the latter withdrawal. It was also assumed that should a further stage of settlement evacuations take place at some point in the future in the West Bank, then the level of opposition would be even greater than that displayed in the summer of 2005.

The settlers of the Gaza Strip were offered a range of financial compensation packages, along with the construction of new homes and new settlements inside the Green Line. Many refused, up until the last moment, to sign on to these agreements as they saw this as constituting compliance with the disengagement plans, while others—imbued with a deep religious and messianic belief—continued to live in a state of denial that disengagement would actually take place. They believed that, at the last moment, something would happen to prevent the plan from being implemented, much in the same way that the Rabin plans had been averted following his assassination, or that the Barak administration had fallen from power following his attempts to reach a solution to the conflict at Camp David and Taba. Some of the settlers interpreted this political turn of events as
constituting no less than Divine intervention and remained convinced, until the last moment, that this too would happen in the case of Gaza.

In the run up to the disengagement from Gaza, the settlers were careful not to be seen as holding out for compensation, as had been the case with many of the Yamit settlers. Although it was argued that the financial and relocation packages offered to the settlers were insufficient, this did not become a major bargaining point as had been the case with some settlers twenty years previously. Intense social pressure was exerted within the communities on those residents who indicated their intention to accept the compensation package and to relocate prior to the final date. Life became very difficult for these people, and many refrained from taking up the compensation option. This form of social pressure was particularly strong within the religious settlements. Notwithstanding, what began as a trickle gradually took on greater dimensions as more and more settlers, especially in the northern part of the Gaza Strip and in the Northern Samaria settlements, accepted the compensation packages and moved out prior to the date of forced evacuation. A new micro-settlement bloc was constructed on the Nitzana sands, north of Ashqelon, while a number of other failed agricultural communities in Israel signed agreements to allocate land for the construction of housing and thus to benefit from an influx of highly motivated, well educated evacuees who could bring about a potential renaissance of their community.

Notwithstanding, the forced evacuation of the Gaza Strip and Northern West Bank settlements represented the most serious ideological and political challenge faced by the settler movement since its inception in the early 1970s. Some of the settler leaders bitterly noted that the failure to command the support of the vast majority of the country’s Jewish population was due to the fact that while they had “succeeded in settling the heart of the Land, they had failed to settle in the hearts of the people” drawing on the term with which they are most associated, namely “lehithnachel” (to “settle,” to “squat,” to “take root”) as a means of making this comparison.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS:
GUSH EMUNIM AND CONTEMPORARY ZIONISM

The past decade in Israel has witnessed a struggle over the ideological discourse which best represents the changing nature of Israeli society—at one and the same time an increasingly global and secular population (the North
Tel Aviv model) faced by an increasingly insular, nationalistic, and orthodox population (the Jerusalem model). What was initially seen as a radical positioning of the left of center, described as the post-Zionist model, has become transformed into a new paradigm for understanding societal change. The novelty of this paradigm, as contrasted with all previous paradigms, was that it situated itself outside the Zionist project altogether, as contrasted to the previous left of center critique which represented the liberal Zionism of the Israeli Labor Party and the academic elites. In later developments and modifications of the post-Zionist paradigm, an alternative model, relating to the right of center, nationalist based societal forces, at the heart of which lies Gush Emunim and a territorial based ideology, emerged, labeled the neo-Zionist model. In his analysis of these two dialectic forces, sociologist Uri Ram argues that the struggle for ideological hegemony in Israel is focused on these two extreme [sic] positions, the one (post-Zionism) arguing in favor of a “state of all of its citizens” model, while the latter (neo-Zionism) posits a narrowly focused nation state with clearly defined Jewish demographic and territorial hegemony, with an irredentist ideology.

Despite the public and intellectual debate which has surrounded the post-Zionism discourse, it is the neo-Zionism of Gush Emunim with its strong nationalist orientation which would appear to have had a far greater impact on the emerging social and political agenda of Israeli society. While the post-Zionist discourse is limited to relatively small groups of intellectual elites, the neo-Zionist discourse has become transformed into a political reality which strongly influences the course of conflict resolution and the determination of future State boundaries and territorial configurations. The paradox, that the right wing efforts to retain control over the “Land of Israel” territories is precisely the situation which has brought about the post-Zionist realities, namely demographic parity between Arabs and Jews, thus creating the conditions of bi-nationalism and power sharing instead of two states and respective Israeli and Palestinian sovereignty, is lost on the self acclaimed Neo-Zionist patriots of the right. They are quite content to live in a situation of Jewish (Israeli) control, wherein some are more equal than others. Their mystical, messianic, belief that the political events of the past century are part of a Divine Plan enables them to deny the contemporary demographic and political realities, even attributing negative events (such as the Gaza Disengagement) as no more than a setback or hiccup on the path to eventual redemption and Jewish sovereignty throughout the entire region.

However, if neo-Zionism is to be seen as a form of post-Zionism of the right wing, it is strongly rejected by the settler movement and the inheritors
of the Gush Emunim ideology. Unlike the post-Zionist model, they do not see themselves as redefining the State beyond Zionism, but rather strengthening their own self-perceived notions of what Zionism is and should be. This model calls for a more exclusive, more nationalistic, more religious, and more irredentist form of Zionism, one for which notions of pragmatism and compromise are less acceptable than they have been to the political leaders and governments of previous periods. They perceive themselves as ideologically pure, as contrasted with the post-Zionists who they perceive as “beyond the pale” and, in some cases, no less than traitors to the cause of “true” [sic] Zionism.

During and after the Yamit crisis there had been a debate inside Gush Emunim, concerning the contemporary meaning of the State of Israel, as some of the Land of Israel adherents argued that the State was failing to carry out what the settlers perceived as the key mission of “kibbutz ha’aretz” (conquest of the land). Rabbi Shlomo Aviner, who was one of the most devoted followers of Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda Kook, and who, by the time of the Gaza withdrawal, had become one of the leading ideologues of the settler movement, had written after the withdrawal from Yamit that it symbolized “the destruction of small Zionism,” and that the historical task of Gush Emunim was to build another kind of Zionism—a “great” one, in the spirit of the Torah. While some of the religious settler leaders perceived the Gaza Disengagement as constituting the “end of Zionism” as they had come to know it over the past 35 years, others like Aviner refused to see it in this way. His opposition to the hitnatkut was accompanied by calls for the settlers to see what still, in his view, constituted the “half full cup” of the Zionist enterprise, not to refuse orders from their army commanders (because the army was still, in his view, an essentially holy dimension of the Jewish State) and to be prepared to take on the new challenges facing the State following the implementation of Disengagement. He called on the national religious adherents of the Zionist enterprise not to disengage from the State, but to remember that the process of ultimate redemption was akin to birthpangs, the moments of pain and failure immediately preceding achievement of the ultimate goal. He reminded those who would listen to him that the situation of the State of Israel in 2005 was a major step forward from the situation sixty years previously, following the Holocaust and before the establishment of the State, and that the momentary setback of the hitnatkut should not be interpreted as a failure of Zionism.

In conclusion, the Gush Emunim ideology has come a long way since the inception of the movement in 1974. At the time, attempts to settle at Sebastia and Ophra were seen as being nothing more than a protest on the
part of a relatively small group of national religious youth led by Hanan Porat and Moshe Levinger. Within certain political constraints, the government and the political elite were prepared to suffer these protests, given the fact that they operated within the discourse of Zionism and pioneering, and because they were not initially seen as constituting a threat to the political hegemonies of the elites who had governed the country during the previous thirty years, and to which these religious protest groups had no real access. But the structural changes experienced by the Israeli body politic since the Six Day War in 1967, and even more so since the rise to power of the first Likud government in 1977 and the greater distribution of power amongst a more diverse set of groups, has transformed the Gush Emunim ideology into a powerful political player, one which will continue (disengagement or no disengagement) to influence Israeli society during the coming decade.

Notes


2. Ibid.


4. The Allon Plan, named after Deputy Prime Minister of the time and former Palmach chief, Yigal Allon, was based on a concept of creating “defensible
borders” on the one hand, while preventing settlement from taking place in the densely populated Palestinian areas on the other hand. The latter would, in Allon’s view, eventually become part of a Palestinian autonomous region, administered by Jordan, and linked to the latter through a territorial corridor running from Ramallah to Jericho. See: Yigal Allon, “The case for defensible borders,” *Foreign Affairs*, 55 (1976) 38–53.

5. The prototype for this squatter settlement activity had taken place immediately after the Yom Kippur War in the abandoned town of Kuneitra on the Golan Heights, with the settlers eventually agreeing to be relocated to Keshet, a new settlement established for them.

6. This was in line with an “Emergency” Settlement plan presented to the new government by Gush Emunim, shortly after their rise to power. This was followed by a more comprehensive settlement blueprint prepared by the Gush Emunim settlement activists, aimed at settling two million Jews throughout the West Bank and Gaza by the year 2000. See: David Newman, *The Role of Gush Emunim and the Yishuv Keillati in the West Bank, 1974–1980* (PhD diss., University of Durham, UK, 1981).

7. The term “chardal” stands for Chareidi Leumi, a combination of Chareidi (ultra orthodox) and Leumi (the national religious).

8. Had there been a referendum on the Gaza Disengagement issue, the settlers argue, they would have abided by the majority decision. Given the fact that the Sharon government decided not to hold a referendum on this topic—despite public polls which showed 70 percent support for the plan—the settlers used this as a means of furthering their anti-democracy thesis.

9. In some religious Zionist schools, registration forms were sent out on orange sheets of paper as a sign of support for the settlers.


12. The Religious Zionist movement underwent a short period of internal soul searching after the Rabin assassination, eventually arguing that this represented a few extreme elements, rather than the main core of the settler movement. This argument was to repeat itself time after time following each incident of violence. See: Aviezer Ravitzky, “Let us Search our Path: Religious Zionism after the Assassination,” in Yoram Peri (ed), *The Assassination of Yitzhak Rabin* (Stanford, CT, 2000) 140–162.

13. Women in Green took their name in opposition to the left wing Women’s peace movement, Women in Black, while the Batzelek (Justice) movement took their name in opposition to the well known Israeli left wing human rights movement, Batzelem.
14. For the rhetoric of some of the extreme right wing protest groups, see: websites: Women in Green: www.womeningreen.org; Professors for a Strong Israel: www.professors.org.il; Gamla: www.gamla.org.il


16. Yehuda Ben Meir underwent a political transformation in the 1980s, becoming a member of the moderate religious Meimad party, advocating territorial compromise in return for a peace agreement. Meimad, together with Religious Zionist pro-peace movements such as Oz Veshalom (1970s) and Netivot Shalom (1980s) were unsuccessful in making any ideological or political impact on their targeted religious constituencies. See: Tamar Hermann & David Newman, “The Dove and the Skullcap: Secular ad Religious divergence in the Israeli peace camp,” in Charles Liebman (ed), Religious and Secular: Conflict and Accommodation between Jews in Israel (Jerusalem, 1990) 151–172.

17. Hanan Porat and Haim Druckman broke away from the NRP to form the Matzad party in the 1980s, while NRP members openly supported other right wing parties at later elections, thus splitting the traditional NRP vote.


19. Following the evacuation of Gaza settlements, this number would be reduced by one. See: http://www.moin.gov.il/. The Regional Councils are municipalities which provide services to scattered small rural and urban communities over a wide region. Inside Israel, the regional Councils have territorial contiguity among all their affiliated settlements, while in the West Bank they provide services to communities which are located within the municipal confines but which do not include the Palestinian and Arab communities within the same territory. See: David Newman, Israel’s Regional Councils: Local Government Reform in the Rural Sector (Jerusalem, 1995) [Hebrew].

20. A series of articles in theHa‘aretz newspaper in 2003 attempted to put a figure on the amount of public sector resources which were poured into the West Bank and Gaza Strip. See: “36 Years and still counting,” Ha‘aretz, 26.09.2003.

21. See: www.moetzetyesha.co.il/

22. The issue of who funds many of the West Bank political lobbies and settlement activities was laid bare in the Sasson report in March 2005. The report, drawn up by Attorney Talia Sasson, argued that public sector resources were being used illegally by the settler movement, through a host of local and central governmental agencies and ministers who supported the right wing political cause.

23. This contrasts with the Hareidi, or ultra-religious and, in some cases anti-Zionist, worldview which sees Messianic redemption as something which will
materialise instantaneously, but which can not be “forced” along through practical means.


25. The establishment of Amanah in 1978 as the settlement branch of Gush Emunim accorded it the same legal and formal status as all other settlement movements of the time, enabling the allocation of governmental funding through a statutory body for the purpose of establishing settlements in the West Bank and Gaza.


29. The refusal of some Hesder soldiers to carry out orders as part of the Gaza disengagement process resulted in public statements to the effect that the place of these special units would have to be reassessed and perhaps shut down altogether.

30. Some ultra-orthodox leaders have described this as the replacement of the Jewish religion with a new “Land of Israel religion.”

31. Loosely translated as “lying media” and a play on the word “tikshoret” (media).

33. During the speedy implementation of the Gaza settlement evacuation, the role of the religious leaders was unclear. While some Rabbis implicitly urged on the settlers and other disengagement opponents to physically refuse the soldiers’ attempts to remove them, others had a calming influence. Notable amongst the calming voices were some of the founding leaders of Gush Emunim, such as Rabbis Druckman and Aviner, along with Hanan Porat. Overall, the residents of the evacuated settlements left their houses under protest, but without violence. The same could not be said for large groups of young radical protestors who had arrived in the Gaza region from elsewhere during the period leading up to the disengagement, who refused to listen to the settlement leaders’ pleas for non-violent opposition. Overall however, the settlement evacuation was implemented much faster than anticipated, nor did it meet with any major violence or use of weapons. The settlers and the security forces went out of their way to emphasize the fact that they were part of the same society and same future before carrying out the government’s orders and removing all residents from their houses.

34. See note 27 above.

35. See note 28 above.

36. This was opposed by the Green and the environmental movements who argued that this would destroy what little was left of Israel’s untouched coastline and sand dunes. But the withdrawal and disengagement argument was much stronger in determining the eventual use of this land for the construction of alternative settlements for the evacuees.


39. Much of this debate was carried on in the pages of Nekudah, the monthly political and ideological forum of the settler movement which has been published continually since the late 1970s.

40. At the time of the Gaza Disengagement, Shlomo Aviner was the Rabbi of one of the leading Gush Emunim communities in the West Bank, Bet El, and also the head of the Ateret Kohanim yeshiva in the Muslim quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem. His weekly public lectures in Jerusalem and his radio commentaries and chat shows were one of the key means of ideological socialization amongst the settler community as a whole. His public lectures, many of which deal with the political issues of settlement and the Arab-Israel conflict, are collected on the following web site: http://www.kimizion.org/shiur/
41. In a play on words, the settler community argued that instead of disengaging (hitnatkut) from the State, their purpose was to “join together” (hitchabrut) with the State. Thus, an alternative title to this paper, from a settler point of view, would be “From hityashvut to hitchabrut.”