

DID AMERICAN ORTHODOX JEWS

MODERN ORTHODOXY AND THE FAILURE OF NERVE?

BY EMANUEL FELDMAN

Where was Modern Orthodox Jewry in the United States during the recent withdrawal/expulsion trauma in Israel? Here is a group that always identified itself emotionally and ideologically with Religious Zionism, was inspired by the pioneers who settled the Land and castigated those who did not understand the devotion of the settlers to Eretz Yisrael. It is thus perplexing that when the chips were down, the settlements threatened with closing and their residents with forced expulsion, not only did this American Orthodox community not growl angrily; it did not even offer a protesting meow.

The flag-bearers of Modern Orthodoxy and Religious Zionism—the Rabbinical Council of America, representing one thousand Orthodox rabbis, and the Orthodox Union, representing hundreds of Orthodox synagogues—took no sides. In their separate pre-withdrawal statements they offered boilerplate clichés that urged Israel to

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behave with sensitivity and honor toward the pioneers who originally settled those parts of Eretz Yisrael if the evacuation occurs—a fine sentiment, as far as it goes. But not a single word was spoken about the morality of uprooting fellow Jews from their homes and liveli-



A rabbi removes a sefer Torah from a shul in the settlement of Bedolach. Thirty-eight shuls in Gush Katif were dismantled during the disengagement. Photo: www.sassontiram.com

hoods, or about destroying communities and schools and *yeshivot* and cemeteries. The other national Orthodox organizations followed suit and were similarly ambivalent, or remained silent. Only

the National Council of Young Israel and the RCA's Israel Region unambiguously denounced the withdrawal and its implications. And here and there were heard strong anti-withdrawal statements from individual Orthodox rabbis and synagogues, and from several ad hoc groups.

That American Modern Orthodox Jews chose not to get involved in a debate about military strategy—will withdrawal enhance or dilute Israel's security?—is understandable. What is difficult to understand is their unwillingness to address the fundamental ideology of Religious Zionism concerning the surrender of parts of the Holy Land to their enemies. And it completely defies understanding that there was official silence in the face of the impending human tragedy about to befall the very communities with whom they were spiritual partners—a silence that was interpreted by Israeli authorities as acquiescence.

What is exquisitely ironic is that the very organizations that were silent about the obvious consequences of the expulsions have now set up special funds to assist the Gaza refugees—who became refugees because of the very forced expulsions about which these organizations were silent.

What happened? An unwillingness

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FORSAKE THEIR ISRAELI BROTHERS?

A REJOINDER

BY YOSEF BLAU



Rabbi Emanuel Feldman is angry with the Religious Zionist/Modern Orthodox community in America and with what he characterizes as its “failure of nerve.” He finds it difficult to understand its “unwillingness to address the fundamental ideology of Religious Zionism concerning the surrender of parts of the Holy Land to [its] enemies.” It is clear to him that the disengagement triggered a struggle for the soul of Israel and an assault on the very roots of Religious Zionism.

Let me begin my response by placing it in the context of the relationship of American Jewry to Israel. Studies indicate that young American Jews have minimal interest in Israel. The traditional non-Orthodox Zionist youth movements have almost disappeared from the American scene. The Reform movement, which in its Pittsburgh Platform of 1885 had been staunchly anti-Zionist, reversed its stance after a long process of change. Now, while the movement is officially supportive of Israel, its membership is not that committed to the State; for example, few Reform Jews have ever visited Israel. (Paradoxically, because of its larger membership and greater organizational

skills, the Reform movement presently has the most representatives in the American delegation to the World Zionist Congress.)

But whereas the majority of American Jews have little or no connection to Israel, the exception is Orthodox, where commitment to Israel is strong. Each year thousands of yeshivah

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high school graduates attend yeshivah or seminary in Israel. While the number of those making *aliyah* from North America is relatively small, North American *olim* tend to be Orthodox. True, the *Chareidi* world rejects the symbols of Israel; it does not display the Israeli flag and, at best, ignores Yom Ha'atzmaut. Nevertheless, *Chareidim*, for the most part, are very supportive of Israel and of the settlements.

Yet, despite the American Orthodox community's commitment to Israel, for many, appreciation of Israel is

balanced by a feeling of being “at home” in America. The sentiment is that Israel is a wonderful place to learn Torah, but America is a country where one can live a fully observant life while maintaining a more comfortable lifestyle. Thus, while many young American Orthodox Jews spend a year or two studying in Israel, they usually return to the United States to further their Jewish or secular education or both, get married and settle permanently in the States.

The Religious Zionist/Modern Orthodox community is the only segment of the Orthodox world that views the emergence of the State of Israel as having profound religious significance. Its perspective contrasts with that of many non-Orthodox Jews, who either view Israel in purely secular terms or who want to transform it into a carbon copy of the American model, with full recognition of Reform and Conservative rabbis. At the same time, the Religious Zionist/Modern Orthodox perspective differs from that of some segments of the Right who accept the return to Israel but see no significance in having a state, and view the Israeli government as if it were no different than the American or Polish government.

What is the essential ideology of Religious Zionism? There is a funda-

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of Diaspora Jews to confront the democratically elected government of Israel, even when its actions are of question-



"Not a single word was spoken about the morality of destroying communities and schools." Photo: www.sassontiram.com

able morality? A fear of offending the American government, which was pressuring Israel unmercifully? Was too much naive trust placed in official assurances that those evicted from their homes would be lovingly taken care of (assurances that have been buried under the rubble of business-as-usual bureaucracy)?

These might be acceptable considerations in normal times with normal issues. But what was apparently not grasped was that before our very eyes a struggle for the soul of Israel was taking

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place, an assault on the very roots of Religious Zionism, a moment which the secular Left in Israel saw as a golden opportunity to break the back of the entire culture of *yishuv Ha'arezt*. (Israel's *Haaretz* newspaper during this period was filled with classic anti-Religious Zionist—bordering on anti-Jewish—incitement.) Hovering above all this was the impending human disaster: the physical upheaval of nearly 10,000 Jewish pioneers—men, women and children who were told they would be

taken care of and were then taken from their homes with only their clothes on their backs, and housed in cramped quarters in dormitories, hostels, *kibbutzim* and hotel rooms, and who, several months after the expulsion, know not what the morrow will bring.

Granted, the situation is complex, and one eschews simplistic answers or condemnations. However, the unmistakable impression is that in circumstances where courage and vision were required, autopilot platitudes were all that were heard.

One might have expected ambivalence from extreme right-wing Orthodox Jews, for whom any kind of Zionism is a dirty word, and who always distanced themselves from Israeli affairs. One might have expected this of Conservative and Reform Jewry, whose support of Israel in general is lukewarm and who take their cues from the majority culture which, following the American media, was fully supportive of the withdrawal. And one was not surprised that the Presidents Conference, with its secular orientation and its ties to the American government, fully supported the withdrawal.

American Orthodoxy's reactions were in stark contrast to the attitude of the Orthodox in Israel across the board—from knitted yarmulke to *shtrimele*—for whom the withdrawal and especially the expulsion touched a raw nerve. To be sure, there were different motivations behind their strong objections: The *Chareidi* Jews saw it as further proof of the duplicity of secular Zionism, while the knitted yarmulkes, beyond their strategic objections, saw it as a betrayal of their goals of *yishuv Ha'arezt*. But they were as one in opposing the forced expulsions. A quarter million Israelis of all stripes at the Western Wall, and a quarter million more in Tel Aviv, voiced their anguish quite clearly. By contrast, several

planned protests in New York City drew less than twenty thousand Jews.

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America—the very people who religiously pray each Shabbat for the Jewish State as the “first flowering of our Redemption,” and for whom this prayer is the litmus-test of Jewish loyalty, and who were ideological soul mates of the expelled refugees—blinked and then averted their eyes when an existential threat to the very core of their own Religious Zionism loomed before them. It is not hyperbole to say that while the ideological earth was trembling beneath their feet, and an earthquake sundering the ground on which they stood, they



A resident of Shirat Hayam tears his shirt—the traditional sign of mourning—before being evacuated from his home in August 2005.

Photo: www.sassontiram.com

were able only to offer pious sanctimony.

Inevitably what comes to mind—one hopes prematurely—are the words of T.S. Eliot, slightly altered:

This is the way the [Religious Zionist] world ends

Not with a bang but a whimper. JA

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mental distinction between Religious Zionism in Israel and that in America. Since the early seventies, the dominant philosophy among Religious Zionists in Israel has been that of Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook, z"l, as interpreted by his son, Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda Kook, z"l. The former's thought encompasses an absolute commitment to *Eretz Yisrael Hashheleimah*, with a strong Messianic component. To Rav Tzvi Yehuda, the State's religious value is contingent on its being a vehicle to reach this Messianic goal. Prior to the Six-Day War, Religious Zionists in Israel were primarily political moderates concerned with promoting issues such as *kashrut* in the armed forces, public *shemirat Shabbat* and social welfare in the broad society. They were part of every coalition led by the Labor Party, differing with party members only on religious issues, and supported agreements with the Arab states that included territorial compromises. In the aftermath of the Six-Day War, however, the movement shifted to the right of the political spectrum and began focusing its energies on settling the Biblical lands captured by Israel during the war.

Religious Zionism/Modern Orthodoxy in America, on the other hand, was influenced by Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, z"l, who saw the State as a source of security for Jews but not as a harbinger of the Messianic age. In his view, the Jewish people are more important than the Land. Territorial compromise is halachically acceptable if it promotes security. Furthermore, all security decisions are to be determined by the government of Israel. This last point is one of the reasons the OU did not publicly protest the disengagement, although it did work behind the scenes to ensure that its concerns were articulated.

Rabbi Feldman is disturbed that

that the "American Orthodox community ... did not even offer a protesting meow. The flag-bearers of Modern Orthodoxy and Religious Zionism ... took no sides." Historically, American Religious Zionists have always publicly supported the Israeli government—whether or not they agree with its policies—both for pragmatic reasons and as a matter of principle. Many American Religious Zionists maintain that only those who actually live in Israel and whose own futures are at stake have the right to determine the country's policies.

Furthermore, for the most part, American Religious Zionists believe that



In the aftermath of the Six-Day War, the Religious Zionist movement shifted to the right of the political spectrum and began focusing its energies on settling the Biblical lands captured by Israel during the war. Photo: Ilan Bruner, courtesy of the Israel Government Press Office

it is critical that the American government view American Jewry as being loyal to the State of Israel. The statement of the OU, issued a few weeks prior to the disengagement, reiterates

this approach:

... It has always been the Orthodox Union's belief that any discussion of Israeli government policy or initiative from Jewish communities outside the country be handled sensitively and in a manner that does not weaken Israel's position or standing in the global community.

Once one segment of American Jewry demonstrates against the Israeli government, others would respond in kind. Before we advocate American Jews demonstrating against the Israeli government's policies, consider which policies most American Jews would like to change. If American Jews were, in effect, to vote on Israeli policies, since the large majority does not share our perspective, Orthodoxy in Israel would invariably suffer.

Rabbi Feldman is disturbed that not a "single word was spoken about the morality of uprooting fellow Jews from their homes..." But not all American Religious Zionists share Rabbi Feldman's certainties. Concern about the demographic reality, moral qualms about ruling over more than a million impoverished Palestinians as well as the advantages of having a defined boundary are all legitimate arguments for disengagement that Rabbi Feldman does not acknowledge. Moreover, while American Religious Zionists identify with and admire the religious settlers, they did not endorse calls for religious soldiers to ignore orders. Additionally, American Religious Zionists found it strange that rabbis were offering guarantees that God will not allow the disengagement to happen.

Rabbi Feldman also finds it ironic that the very organizations that were silent about the expulsions are now assisting the Gaza refugees. But it is absurd to claim that only those who fully supported the refugees' political cause have the right to assist them. There are no ideological cri-

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teria for who is permitted to help a Jew in need. Ironically, in Israel, a complaint frequently heard—that is the exact opposite of Rabbi Feldman’s—accuses the non-religious supporters of the disengagement of not providing enough

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assistance to those forced to live in hotel rooms. One does not have to oppose the government’s decision in order to care about the pain and anguish of the families who were uprooted. Moreover, those who guaranteed that there would be no disengagement and told residents to make no preparations for the future bear much responsibility for the settlers’ present unfortunate plight.

Rabbi Feldman contrasts the inaction of the American Religious Zionists with what he describes as the united opposition of Orthodox Jewry in Israel, including *Chareidim*. This claim is specious. The *Chareidi* parties that joined the coalition, thereby making the disengagement possible, more than balance the large number of *Chareidim* who participated in the mass prayer rally at the Kotel.

Rabbi Feldman is correct: There is a struggle for the soul of Israel taking place. However, the struggle is not primarily about land but about the Jewish character of the State. Many secular Israelis define themselves as Israelis, not as Jews. They resent being restricted to religious marriage ceremonies and detest the limitations imposed upon them by the public observance of Shabbat and Jewish holidays. Many of them associate religion with a political agenda that they reject and a rabbinate that they do not respect.

It is important to note that the secularization of Israeli society does not only impact Jews in Israel, it impacts all

of world Jewry. Jews who live in countries with small Jewish communities depend on Israel for obtaining qualified religious functionaries. Moreover, commitment to Israel is an important part of their Jewish identity.

Even in those countries with strong Jewish communities such as the United States, Israel plays a role in strengthening religious commitment. As alluded to earlier, many American Orthodox youth solidify their religious commitment during their year or years of study in Israel. And even non-Orthodox Jews rely on Israel for deepening their connection to Judaism. A recent study of the members of Young Judea, a non-denominational Jewish youth group, found that those who had attended a year-long program in Israel were not only more supportive of Israel but were also more observant, more inclined to send their children to day school and less likely to intermarry. Perspective is needed. The future of world Jewry depends on broader issues than whether or not Israel should have retained Gaza. It depends, in large measure, on preserving Israel’s Jewish character. The split between Orthodox and non-Orthodox has been widened by starkly contrasting reactions to the disengagement. While it is natural after a terrible disappointment to lash out against those who did not react with the same passion, unfortunately such a response will only succeed in dividing and weakening the Jewish people. **JA**