

Israel

Deserving the Land

Two Prominent Rabbis Debate the Theological Significance of the Withdrawal

By Myles Brody

If a poll were taken amongst religious Israelis about the theological significance of the proposed Gaza withdrawal, many would give an unambiguous answer. Ceding Israeli territory to any foreign power, especially to our enemies, constitutes a sin for which God will punish us. Yet in a recent treatise, Rabbi Amnon Bazak of Yeshivat Har Etzion conversely argues that the very possibility of withdrawal is the punishment for our sins.

Writing in Har Etzion's weekly newsletter to its army students, *Daf Keshet*, Rav Bazak contends that by turning settlements into its "flagship issue," the *Dati Leumi* (Religious Zionist) community merely "fights the symptoms" of a larger spiritual disease. Our leaders, moreover, "distort our religion and *halachah*" by ignoring Israel's moral

On July 25, 2004, some 150,000 Israelis lined up in a human chain from the Kotel in Jerusalem to Gush Katif in the Gaza Strip—more than 50 miles—in protest against Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's disengagement plan. Sharon's disengagement plan calls for an Israeli withdrawal from all twenty-one settlements in Gaza and from four in the northern West Bank. Photo: www.sassontiram.com



and religious condition. Needless to say, his startling thesis, which the yeshivah's web site disseminated and the Israeli media subsequently reported, drew quick responses, including one from a senior Har Etzion colleague, Rabbi Yaacov Medan.¹

Unlike many arguments over Israel's political future, which result in name-calling and polemics, Rav Bazak and Rav Medan write with both conviction and respect. Both are recognized *talmidei chachamim*, accomplished teachers of Tanach and Gemara and prolific writers. Rav Bazak coedits the popular *Shabbat*

Our connection to Israel is contingent on our spiritual state.

BeShabato, a weekly *parashah* bulletin sponsored by the Zomet Institute, while Rav Medan received awards from the Avi Chai Foundation and the Movement of Toleration for drafting a model Israeli constitution with a prominent irreligious law professor. Army veterans and neighbors in the same settlement, both *rabbanim* come from distinguished families within the Religious Zionist community. Neither can be dismissed as a “knee-jerk liberal” or a “right-wing fundamentalist,” and their wisdom as well as their civility demand respect.²

The historical context of post-1967 Zionism provides a greater appreciation for this debate.³ Many Israelis believe

that in the aftermath of the Six-Day War, a cultural battle slowly but surely materialized in Israel. Before 1967, Israel faced existential dangers from all of its neighbors, and a pragmatic alliance bonded religious and secular Zionists to work together to secure Israel's borders. After the miraculous victory, however, two very different attitudes about Israel's future emerged.

Secular Zionists, led by representatives of the left-wing political parties, began to call for the “normalization” of Israel. With Israel's continued existence seemingly assured, the historic mission of secular Zionism neared its fulfillment. Israel would begin to thrive in the cultural, economic and geopolitical realms, with its citizens striving to achieve their individual visions of the good life. Eventually there would be peace with their Arab neighbors, and the state of Herzl would secure for itself a place amongst the nations of the world.

Following the ideology of Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda Kook, ז”ל, and his students in Yeshivat Merkaz HaRav Kook, however, the majority of Religious Zionists saw Israel's miraculous victory as confirmation that the creation of the State signaled the “first flowering of the Redemption.” With an undivided Jerusalem as well as Judea and Samaria, the dwelling places of our forefathers, and even with Gaza now in Jewish hands, the Redemption was clearly moving forward. Developing this Divinely blessed state, unique amongst the nations, necessitated active settlement of Greater Israel.

Most Israelis, including partisans of



A resident of Neve Dekalim with his child. Neve Dekalim, located in the Gaza Strip, is one of the settlements to be dismantled in Sharon's disengagement plan. Photo: Abayov—www.sassontiram.com

this vision, deem this perceived linear progression toward a “clash of Zionist civilizations” as an over-simplification of the historical reality. Scores of secular Zionists, for example, supported settlement of the lands captured in the Six-Day War, and many never dreamed of a utopian embracement by the world. Alternatively, some Religious Zionists advocated relinquishing parts of Yesha for peace, while others perceived the State's flourishing as a gift from God, without drawing Messianic conclusions. The National Religious Party, moreover, joined almost every government coalition, forming alliances with its secular counterparts to achieve common goals.

Nonetheless, many religious ideologues now contend that the Oslo

Accords and the concurrent (and sometimes related) phenomenon of post-Zionism prove that the secular and religious partnership lies on the brink of its ultimate terminus. The post-67 secularist vision, they believe, led to concessions of land to the Palestinians, efforts to destroy “myths” surrounding the Zionist founders and an increasingly vocal attempt to remove religion

Messianic arrogance has led us astray in our relationship with Hashem.

from the public and political spheres. For these ideologues, which include prominent Religious Zionist rabbis and politicians, only an invigorated Religious Zionism can save the State after the demise of secular Zionism. Particularly after the demise of Oslo, we must continue settling Yesha and prevent the sins of “land for peace” from shedding more Jewish blood.

Rav Bazak argues that precisely because of the nation's religious and cultural crisis, political aggressiveness comprises a counterproductive remedy. Tanach, he postulates, asserts that *Bnei Yisrael's* ability to settle the land depends fundamentally on its spiritual worthiness. The tragedy that befell *Bnei Yisrael* after the sin of the spies, which led to a decree forbidding the nation from entering Eretz Yisrael for forty years, highlights this point. Embarrassed by their previous rejection of God's Land, *mapilim* (zealots)

ignore Moshe's warning and try to conquer the Land on their own initiative, only to be immediately killed. Both the zealots and the spies suffer the same fate for rebelling against the word of God—the spies for disobeying His command to settle the Land, and the *mapilim* for violating the ban (Devarim 1:26, 43). “We may deduce from this,” Rav Bazak concludes, “that there is no absolute value in an advance into Eretz Yisrael—rather the absolute value lies in listening to the voice of God.” Contradicting the word of God invalidates a seemingly virtuous act, even settling Eretz Yisrael.

Yet how can we know whether God currently desires us to continue to settle the land or to retreat? Without a prophetic voice, Rav Bazak contends, we can only look to previous prophets for a guiding light. As a first glance at Tanach shows, the First Temple era prophets dedicated themselves to convincing the people that their moral and spiritual decadence was leading them to exile. Unlike the many false prophets who claimed that God would never allow the destruction of His Temple,⁴ Yirmiyahu and Yechezkel bemoaned the fact that sacrifices were worthless in the face of continued corruption. As the latter exclaimed:

Do you think that you can eat blood and believe in foreign gods and spill blood and still inherit the Land? You have depended on your swords, committed abominations and defiled yourselves with your friend's wife, and you still expect to inherit the Land? (33: 25-26)

The solution to avoiding this fate, Yirmiyahu declares, is only repentance.

Only if you truly improve your ways and your deeds, if you make sure to carry out justice between each man and his fellow, if you cease oppressing the stranger, the orphan and the widow, and stop spilling innocent blood here in this place, and if you stop pursuing other gods to deprave yourself, then I will settle you in the Land that I gave to your forefathers for evermore (7:5-7).

The Jewish people might possess title over the Promised Land, but to

exercise this right, we must fulfill our obligations of social justice and worship of Hashem.

This prophetic legacy, Rav Bazak continues, begs the question of how Yirmiyahu and Yechezkel would evaluate our generation. Examining the entire spectrum of Israeli society, Rav Bazak's evaluation is gloomy.

At a time when within Israeli society women are murdered by their husbands, and the elderly are killed by drug dealers; a time when sexually explicit advertisements are displayed throughout the streets for all to see; when naked secularism is advocated throughout the media; can we really think that there is no connection between these phenomena and our ability to continue to hold on to all of Eretz Yisrael?

The religious community, moreover, exhibits no immunity from these and other ills. In recent years, no Religious Zionist convention passes without panels discussing the growing dropout rate of our youth, marital problems in our community and the lassitude for Talmud study in our *yeshivot*. In short, Rav Bazak concludes, we have problems of prophetic proportions, and by ignoring them, we risk repeating the mistakes of history.

Rav Medan agrees that our connection to Israel is contingent on our spiritual state, but he thinks that the contemporary reality does not approach catastrophic proportions. While despicable elements exist in Israeli society, the positive aspects of the nation outnumber them. “For every old lady that is, to our shame, killed by a drug addict, there are thousands of elderly women helped by thousands of young volunteers, both mitzvah observant and secular,” he says. Nonetheless, Rav Medan asserts that the political claim of “our inalienable rights to Eretz Yisrael” represents an embarrassing fallacy, and that we must tackle the nation's spiritual shortcomings.

However, as we shall now see, he challenges Rav Bazak's diagnosis of the country's problems and therefore emphatically disputes his far-ranging treatment.

Messianic illusions, Rav Bazak contends, blind us from recognizing that a Gaza withdrawal is symptomatic of a spiritual and moral malignancy that imperils our right to dwell in Eretz Yisrael. Like the *Chareidim*, who only see the State in shades of black, the Religious Zionist community “colors everything connected to the spiritual crisis in shades of pink.” Overconfident in our forthcoming Redemption, we misinterpret our political crisis as “necessary corrections” toward the *Geulah* instead of Divine warnings.

A special prayer against the Gaza withdrawal composed before the Likud referendum highlights the arrogance of this rosy perspective. In light of the complex political dilemmas and beleaguering spiritual challenges, an appropriate prayer would beg God for general blessings of

grace, peace and security. Instead the prayer attempted to declare to God, as it were, the proper way to steer events. Such prayers, Rav Bazak denounces, “do not demonstrate a strength born of faith, but rather a reckless self-confidence in the correctness of one’s path.” Messianic arrogance, therefore, has led us astray in our relationship with Hashem.

Equally significant, this brazen nationalism divides the Religious Zionist community from the rest of the country. Our community, Rav Bazak bemoans, lost its voice on other fundamental domestic issues by turning the incredibly complex and contentious issue of land settlements into its flagship mission. “Religious Zionism,” he laments, *...has not taken to the street regarding any other major issue—not regarding the many desecrations of the Shabbat which are increasing in our times; not regarding the heights of promiscuity prevalent in the various media; not regarding the*

movement of Israeli society away from Jewish values and ethics; not regarding the economic crises and social divisions; nor with regard to the issues surrounding new immigrants and foreign workers.

Moreover, in identifying Torah with a particular political position, we alienate from Judaism the significant portion of the country that disagrees, or even despises, that political platform. We thus lose our ability to sway the country on issues of religious and ethical importance that are essential to merit living in Eretz Yisrael. To alleviate this spiritual malaise, therefore, we should greatly reduce our involvement (as an organized community) in the issues of settlement and security, and instead focus on a social platform of “ethics, righteousness and generosity.” By continuing an exclusive crusade for settlements, we doom ourselves to losing the war of the spirit, the only battle that will determine our fate in the Holy Land.

Also included in Sharon’s disengagement plan is the Jewish settlement of Netzarim, in the Gaza Strip. Netzarim, an isolated settlement, cut off even from the settlement cluster of Gush Katif, has become a hotspot for frequent terror attacks. Photo: Abayov—www.sassontiram.com

Rav Medan takes issue with Rav Bazak’s assessment of the Religious Zionist community’s reputation and further argues that his proposed solution will cause irreparable harm to Israel’s social fabric. The community’s settlement advocacy, he contends, has not “burned bridges” to the larger Israeli society. Moreover, necessary reparations could be made through a change in tone and method without compromising our ideals. We have, he asserts, not only an indefinite responsibility “to do everything possible to settle and inherit the Land,” but also an “obligation to the Land” that compels us to defend it from outside invaders. If we lose the Land, God forbid, then we must indeed see it as a punishment for our sins. But until that time, we sinfully err in voluntarily surrendering any territory, especially to murderers that threaten all of Israel.

More significantly, Rav Medan argues that a Zionism based on settling the Land has the best chance of creating a Jewish cultural renaissance amongst the Israeli public. No one can doubt that a feeble religious-historical affiliation to Torah and *mitzvot* in general, and the Land of Israel in particular, exists in broader Israeli society. The pragmatic notion of the State as a refuge for all Jews, moreover, no longer inspires Israelis. With Israel’s social fabric in danger, only a return to the traditional Zionist ethos of settling a “desolate land and [making] her bloom and flourish by the toil of our hands” can strengthen the Israeli consensus and restore our idealistic vision of the State. Various right-wing campaigns have successfully employed this strategy, and it is our only hope for maintaining a common ideal with the secular community and keeping it connected to the tradition of our forefathers.

The debate thus ultimately concludes with a central socio-religious question: Can the historical Zionist ethos of land and development rein-

spire Israeli society, or must we blaze a new trail? For Rav Bazak, the ideal of settling the Land fails as a unifying social mission within the broader Israeli society. Forty percent of the right-wing Likud party membership chose to uproot years of labor and development in Gaza, and a national referendum would produce an even greater amount of support. Religious Zionism has an alternate path—one of social justice and religious morality—to reconnect and reinspire our Israeli brethren. Rav Medan, in turn, maintains that this radical ideological transformation destroys our last possibility

Religion does not dictate military and political strategy.

of restoring Israel’s idealistic foundation.

The primacy of ethical theology and the nominal role of security and territorial considerations, however, represent the most novel elements of this debate. Rav Medan firmly believes that a Gaza withdrawal endangers the nation, but he focuses on the spiritual import of settling the Land. Rav Bazak, of course, does not dismiss safety measures, nor does he advocate carelessly relinquishing territory. He does not take a political stance on unilateral withdrawal, contending that religion does not dictate military and political strategy. Israel’s spiritual state, however, is a central theological issue that the community of Religious Zionists must address. For if we are true followers of Zion’s prophets, and not mere nationalists, then we must remember that our claim

to God’s Chosen Land depends on the fulfillment of our moral and religious missive.

The implications of this debate extend to Israel’s supporters around the world. No matter whose theological analysis of the Gaza withdrawal one finds most compelling, both Rav Medan and Rav Bazak assert that the nation’s continued existence relies on its spiritual and moral condition. Diaspora Jews, therefore, cannot exclusively search the web for information about security issues. Unemployment reports, arrests for prostitution and new spiritual movements are issues that are just as important as security fences and nuclear weapons. Donors should direct their charity not only toward metal detectors, but also to soup kitchens and job-training programs. Israel activists must remember that the religious ethics displayed on every Israeli street corner will determine the fate of Hebron, Beit El and Har Habayit. **JA**

Notes

1. Rav Bazak’s original Hebrew article and links to Rav Medan’s rebuttal and Rav Bazak’s response can be found on the Har Etzion web site at <http://www.etzion.org.il/dk/5764/967mamar2.htm>. The first two articles, which were mailed to Mizrachi Canada members, were translated into English by Jerry Tepperman and Bat Sheva Yeres. I thank them for their permission to use the translations.

2. The civility of this debate is sadly contrasted with the condemnations and threats leveled against religious kibbutznik Yonatan Bassi. After being appointed head of the Disengagement Authority, a fellow religious kibbutz leader condemned him as a “Kapo,” and he received numerous death threats.

3. For a more thorough analysis of these ideological trends see Rabbi Yaakov Filber, et al., “Is Religious Zionism in Crisis?” *Jewish Action* (fall 1999): 10, accessible online at <http://www.ou.org/publications/ja/5760fall/religious%20zionism.pdf>.

4. See, for example, Yirmiyahu 7:4.

