

The Next Elections Will Be Decisive in the Battle Between the Zionist and Messianic Camps

Shaul Arieli

Col. (Res.) Dr. Arieli is head of the "T-Politography" Research Group for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

June 12, 2025

As time passes, the intensity of the war between Zionist society and messianic society in Israel becomes clearer. This did not begin with the judicial overhaul, but rather with the establishment of Gush Emunim in 1974, when the messianists decided to dismount from the secular-Zionist donkey and lead Israel toward realizing their vision: the re-establishment of the Kingdom of David. The war has revolved around almost every issue, from the hostage deal and ending the war to the nature of the regime and political culture.

Until 1974, the messianists saw the achievements of Zionism — the Balfour Declaration, the Mandate document, the Partition Resolution, the victories in the War of Independence, Operation Kadesh, the Six-Day War and Yom Kippur War — as the beginning of the redemption of the people of Israel within the framework of the divine plan. Therefore, Rabbi Abraham Isaac HaCohen Kook (the Rayah) justified cooperation with the pioneers and members of the Zionist immigrations who challenged the conception of passive waiting for the coming of the Messiah, arguing, "Even if they are lawless, they are redeeming."

The withdrawal from Quneitra within the framework of the disengagement agreement signed in 1974 with Syria was, according to messianic belief, a violation of the divine commandment, similar to what the Chief Rabbis wrote in response to the Peel Report in 1937: "From a purely religious perspective... any knowing concession [of territories] constitutes intentional desecration of the sanctity of the Land and the covenant between the pieces."

From the perspective of messianic believers, the teaching of the Kook rabbis (the Rayah and his son the Raziyah, Rabbi Zvi Yehuda HaCohen Kook), this was the moment, in 1974, when it became necessary to replace the Zionist leadership that had violated the divine promise: "For the Lord has given into our hands all the land, and also all the

inhabitants of the land have melted away before us" (Joshua 2:24). The replacement sat well with the Hegelian dialectic that the Rayah adopted: "Initially the power is revealed in the form of chaos, and finally it will be taken from the hands of the wicked (the Zionists) and given into the hands of the righteous and heroes like lions." The fact that today messianic society has dozens of Knesset members and ministers, who completely control the Prime Minister and Israel's policy, is from their perspective evidence of the fulfillment of the "prophecy."

Taking the reins was expressed practically in the establishment of the "Gush Emunim" movement, "with the aim of instilling a new-old message in existing vessels and patterns, in order to reawaken complete Zionist realization... while recognizing that the source of the vision is in Israel's heritage and the roots of Judaism," as written in the movement's founding document, and to this was added the clear messianic goal: "The complete redemption of the people of Israel and the entire world."

In 1981, the Yesha Council inherited Gush Emunim and radicalized the movement's approach: "The Council views any proposal aimed at handing over parts of the Land of Israel to foreign sovereignty as a denial of the destiny of the Jewish people, the goals of the Zionist enterprise, and an illegal act," was written in its founding document. In other words, the elected institutions of Israeli democracy have no legitimacy to return territories, not even in exchange for other values such as peace.

From 1974 onward, messianic society declared war on Zionist society, which did not recognize the threat against it, and even saw the struggle as part of the democracy and pluralism required within it. Despite countless warnings — from Yeshayahu Leibowitz, through Yitzhak Rabin and Menachem Begin to Yosef Burg — years were needed for it to identify that this was not a struggle over the complete Land of Israel, but over the identity, character and regime of the State of Israel. This became clear in the battles against the peace agreement with Egypt, against the Oslo Accords and against the disengagement, and reached its peak in the judicial overhaul and the current war.

Zionist society and messianic society have contradictory visions that affect all areas of our lives. The Zionist vision is based on clear democratic principles alongside a Jewish majority: equality of rights, protection of minority rights, membership in the family of

nations, separation of religion and state, and a system of checks and balances. The messianic vision is based on theocratic principles, as stated by Hanan Porat: "The establishment of a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, the return of the Divine Presence to Zion, the establishment of the Kingdom of the House of David and the building of the Temple," Jewish sovereignty over all the territories of the Land of Israel and denial of rights to the Palestinians.

Zionist society saw the Jewish people's need for a "safe haven" as the motive for establishing the state. As Herzl wrote in "The Jewish State": "Let sovereignty be granted us over a portion of the globe adequate to our righteous needs, we will take care of the rest ourselves." In contrast, messianic society saw the divine commandment to realize the biblical promise as the motive for establishing the state. Menachem Felix, one of the leaders of Gush Emunim, declared in 1979: "We settled... because we were commanded to inherit the land that God Almighty gave to our forefathers" (High Court case Elon Moreh).

Zionist society saw international legitimacy as the political-legal foundation for establishing the state, as David Ben-Gurion declared on May 14, 1948: "By virtue of our natural and historic right and on the basis of the resolution of the United Nations General Assembly," while maintaining the values of equality and freedom for all citizens of the state. Messianic society, on the other hand, believes, as Bezalel Smotrich tweeted (in November 2017), "It's important to remember that it's not the UN decision that is the source of our right to the land, but the Bible and God's promise."

We must remember that we are dealing with many years in which the messianic camp has been steadily gaining strength and influence on Israeli policy and society. This is not about identity, but about the character and regime of the State of Israel. The struggle between those who signed the peace agreement with Egypt, signed the Oslo Accords and those who opposed the disengagement, and reached its climax in the current war.

Zionist society and messianic society have contradictory visions that influence all spheres of our lives. The Zionist vision is based on basic democratic principles alongside a Jewish majority: equality of rights, protection of minority rights, membership in the family of nations, separation of religion and state and a system of

checks and balances. The messianic vision is based on theocratic principles, in the words of Hanan Porat: "Establishing a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, returning the Divine Presence to Zion, establishing the kingdom of the House of David and building the Temple," Jewish sovereignty over all the areas of the Land of Israel and denying rights to Palestinians.

Zionist society viewed the Jewish people's need for a "secure refuge" as the motivation for establishing the state. As Herzl wrote in "The Jewish State": "Let sovereignty be granted to us over some portion of the earth's surface sufficient for our legitimate national needs; we will attend to the rest ourselves." By contrast, messianic society viewed the divine commandment to fulfill the biblical promise as the motivation for establishing the state. Menachem Felix, one of the leaders of Gush Emunim, declared in 1979: "We settled... because we were commanded to inherit the land that the Almighty gave to our forefathers" (High Court case Elon Moreh).

Zionist society viewed international legitimacy as the political-legal foundation for establishing the state, as David Ben-Gurion declared on May 14, 1948: "By virtue of our natural and historic right and based on the resolution of the United Nations General Assembly," while preserving the values of equality and freedom for all citizens of the state. Messianic society, conversely, believes, as Bezalel Smotrich tweeted (in November 2017), "It's important to remember that the UN decision is not the source of our right to the land, but rather the Bible and God's promise."

Zionist society views democracy as a supreme value. It believes in the rule of law, separation of powers, and the right of every citizen to influence the state's course. Democracy is not just a procedure, but an idea based on a value system that has developed over hundreds of years. Messianic society views democracy as a tool. As Benny Katzover said in 2012: "Israeli democracy has completed its function, and it must disintegrate and bow before Judaism." In other words, the democratic regime is merely a temporary platform for realizing the messianic vision.

Zionist society sought to determine Israel's borders with consideration for the state's future. Ben-Gurion and Yitzhak Ben-Zvi wrote in 1918: "If we seek to determine the borders of today's Land of Israel... we cannot take full account of the ideal borders." Therefore, Zionist leadership always preferred to keep the State of Israel democratic

with a Jewish majority, at the expense of parts of the territories of the Land of Israel. Messianic society views borders as the heart of the matter. The Raziyah declared: "This land is ours... and it belongs in all its biblical borders to Israeli rule." Any concession on territory is perceived as desecration of the holy, and he ruled that concession is a transgression of "yehareg ve'al ya'avor" (be killed rather than transgress).

Zionist society is committed, according to the Declaration of Independence, to "complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex." Messianic society distinguishes between Jews and gentiles. According to its approach, only the Jewish people have the right to self-determination in the Land of Israel. More severe than this is the doctrine of Rabbi Kahane — whose follower, Itamar Ben-Gvir, serves as a minister in the Israeli government — which calls for revoking the voting rights of Arab Israelis and removing them from the public sphere.

Despite warnings, years were needed for Zionist society to recognize that the struggle was not about the complete Land of Israel but about the identity and regime of the state

For years, other warnings were needed for Zionist society to recognize that the struggle was not about the complete Land of Israel but about the identity and regime of the state.

Zionist society believes in the importance of international legitimacy and international law. It sees Israel as part of the family of nations. Messianic society rejects the legitimacy of international law, as stated by Rabbi Shlomo Goren: "No national or international law has the power to change our status or our rights."

Zionist society believes in open Judaism, which sees human beings as the source of authority for managing their lives and defines Judaism as their national identity, and bases culture on the history of the Jewish people throughout the generations; a history that includes connection and mutual enrichment with all of humanity. In contrast, according to the messianic conception, Judaism grants God the source of authority for managing the lives of believers whose identity is religious, grants primacy to past generations, and bases its culture on biblical and Talmudic sources.

Zionist society views the October 7 massacre as a failure of conflict management policy and the strategy of separation between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority that Benjamin Netanyahu and Naftali Bennett led. Messianic society views it as part of the divine plan regarding Israelis who "bring disasters upon the people of Israel and thwart the divine plan" (Prof. Yoel Elitzur, on the "Srugim" website, 13.10.23). Similar to their view of the Holocaust — as divine punishment for the Jewish people who chose not to immigrate to the Land after the Balfour Declaration, which heralded the beginning of redemption — Smotrich explained (in an interview on "Kan 11") why the massacre occurred: "Maybe we needed to receive this terrible and painful blow to remember for one second who we are and what we are."

Zionist society views "Iron Swords" as a war that was forced upon us, whose purpose is to return the hostages and create military conditions to achieve a political goal. Messianic society views the war, first, as revenge against the "Amalekite" Hamas. Revenge against gentiles, according to Kahane and his successors, is "the purpose of the State of Israel," and "whoever refrains from taking revenge on Israel's enemies, in effect waives God's revenge."

Zionist society recognizes the importance of international legitimacy and law. It sees Israel as part of the family of nations. Messianic society rejects the legitimacy of international law, as Rabbi Shlomo Goren stated: "No national or international law has the power to change our status, our rights."

Zionist society believes in open Judaism, which sees humans as the source of authority for managing their lives and defines Judaism as their national identity, basing culture on the history of the Jewish people throughout generations; a history that includes connection and mutual enrichment with all humanity. In contrast, according to messianic understanding, Judaism grants God the source of authority for managing believers' lives whose identity is religious, grants precedence to past generations, and bases its culture on biblical and Talmudic sources.

Zionist society views the October 7 massacre as a failure of conflict management policy and the separation strategy between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority that Benjamin Netanyahu and Naftali Bennett pursued. Messianic society views it as part of the divine plan regarding Israelis who "bring disasters upon the people of Israel and

frustrate the divine plan" (Prof. Yoel Elitzur, on "Srugim" website, 13.10.23). Similar to their interpretation of the Holocaust — as divine punishment for the Jewish people who chose not to immigrate to Israel after the Balfour Declaration that announced the beginning of redemption — Smotrich explained (in a "Kan 11" interview) why the massacre occurred: "Perhaps we needed to receive this terrible and painful blow to remember for one second who we are and what we are."

Zionist society views "Iron Swords" as a war forced upon us, whose goal is returning the hostages and creating military conditions to achieve political objectives. Messianic society sees the war primarily as revenge against "Amalekite" Hamas. Revenge against gentiles, according to Kahane and his heirs, is "the purpose of the State of Israel," and "anyone who refrains from revenge against Israel's enemies effectively waives God's revenge."

Second, according to their doctrine, the war is intended to conquer Gaza and capture it permanently under Israeli control, similar to the conditions Smotrich presented to the Prime Minister for maintaining the coalition. As Minister Orit Strook stated: "The State of Israel is in a process of repentance for the sin of disengagement... and I believe that the sin of disengagement, in its entirety, will ultimately be corrected... Unfortunately, returning to the Gaza Strip will involve many casualties... but there's no doubt that ultimately we're talking about part of the Land of Israel, and the day will come when we return to it" (Channel 7, March 2023).

Third, the war is intended to expel Palestinians from Gaza as part of a "voluntary migration" plan, as Smotrich described at a Land of Israel lobby conference: "There's a huge logistical operation here. To get everyone out of Gaza, we'll need to remove 5,000 per day, seven days a week, for a year."

Therefore, this is a struggle between the camp seeking to strive for political arrangements that will ensure the Zionist vision, and the camp that maintains that "the sword will devour forever" and "a people dwelling alone." A struggle between the camp that wants to guarantee the rights of all citizens of the state, and the camp that sees democracy as an obstacle on the path to realizing the messianic vision that promises Jewish supremacy in the Land of Israel. One camp fights for the democratic political framework, the other struggles to change it to a tyrannical ethocracy.

The decisive question is: Will the State of Israel remain a Jewish democracy, or will it become a messianic ethnocracy? As Leibowitz prophesied: "The messianic doctrine of the Raziyah will cause a transition 'from humanity through nationalism to bestiality,' and will transform the 'people of God' into 'people of the land.'"

The answer will determine not only Israel's future, but the future of the Zionist project. Anyone who sees themselves as part of Zionist society must not vote in the upcoming elections "strategically" or "statist." One must vote for those who clearly commit to the vision of a democratic state that maintains full equality of rights for all its citizens and membership in the family of nations. The alternative is clear: a leprous state, poor, embroiled in endless war and leading a discriminatory regime that officially practices apartheid and permanently captures territories for settlement purposes, similar to what we've experienced in recent years. In such a situation, as Smotrich tweeted, in response to accusations of apartheid practices in the territories: "The State of Israel... I'm proud that we're correcting the historical injustice... A place where there are many Jews should return to Jewish control, and I who believe in the eternity of Israel, will fight to restore the Crown to its former glory" (Channel 7, March 2023).

Third, the war is intended for the expulsion of Palestinians from Gaza within the framework of a "voluntary emigration" program, as Smotrich described at a Land of Israel caucus conference: "There's a massive logistical operation here. To remove everyone from Gaza we'll need to extract 5,000 per day, seven days a week, for a year."

Therefore, this is a battle between the camp seeking to pursue political arrangements that will secure the Zionist vision, versus the camp asserting that "forever shall the sword devour" and "a people that dwells alone." A struggle between the camp wanting to ensure the rights of all state citizens, versus the camp viewing democracy as an obstacle to realizing the messianic vision promising Jewish supremacy in the Land of Israel. One camp fights for the democratic political framework, the other battles to transform it into a tyrannical ethnocracy.

The crucial question is whether the State of Israel will remain a Jewish democracy or become a messianic ethnocracy. As Leibowitz foresaw: "The messianic teaching of the Raziyah will cause a transition 'from humanity through nationalism to animalism,' and will turn the 'people of God' into 'people of the earth.'"

The answer will determine not just Israel's future, but the future of the Zionist project. It is forbidden for anyone who sees themselves as part of Zionist society to vote in the next elections "strategically" or in a "statist" manner. One must vote for those who clearly commit to the vision of a democratic state maintaining complete equality of rights for all its citizens and membership in the family of nations. The alternative is clear: a pariah state, poor, mired in infinite warfare and leading a discriminatory regime that officially practices apartheid. This struggle is not about territories or politics — it is about the identity, character and regime of the State of Israel.