

Opinion | Israel's Next Election Will Decide the Battle Between the Zionist and Messianic Camps

The decisive question is whether the State of Israel will remain a Jewish democracy, or turn into a messianic ethnocracy

Shaul Arieli Jul 10, 2025  [Follow](#)

The ferocity of the war between Israel's Zionist and messianic communities is becoming ever clearer. This began with the establishment of the Gush Emunim settlement movement in 1974, when the messianists induced Israel to fulfill their vision: reestablishing the Kingdom of David.

Until 1974, the messianists viewed Zionism's achievements – the Balfour Declaration, the Mandate for Palestine, the UN Partition Plan, the War of Independence, the Sinai Campaign, the Six-Day War and the Yom Kippur War – as the beginning of the Redemption. That's why Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook justified cooperation with the secular Zionist pioneers.

According to the messianists, the withdrawal from Quneitra as part of the 1974 Disengagement Agreement with Syria violated a divine command, a conceding of part of the Land of Israel.

To the messianists, the Zionist leadership now had to be replaced for violating the divine promise: "Truly the Lord hath delivered into our hands all the land" (Joshua 2:24). For people espousing this outlook today, the messianists' dozens of lawmakers and cabinet ministers, who control the

prime minister and policy, reflect the fulfillment of this "prophecy."

According to Gush Emunim's founding document, "the source of the vision is the tradition of Israel and its Jewish roots." Then came the clear messianic goal: "The complete redemption of the Jewish people and the entire world."

In 1981, the Yesha Council of settlements inherited the role of Gush Emunim, and the movement became even more extreme. Yesha's founding document states: "The council sees any proposal for handing over parts of the Land of Israel ... as a denial of the Jewish people's mission and ... an illegal act." That is, Israeli democracy's elected institutions have no legitimacy to return territory, not even for peace.

In 1974, the messianists declared war on the Zionists, who didn't recognize the threat and even saw the struggle as part of the commitment to democracy and pluralism. Despite the warnings – from public intellectual Yeshayahu Leibowitz and political leaders like Yitzhak Rabin, Menachem Begin and Yosef Burg – it took the Zionists many years to realize that this wasn't just a struggle over the Land of Israel but over identity and the nature of the government.

This became clearer in the battles against the peace agreement with Egypt, the Oslo Accords and the Gaza pullout. These efforts peaked in the recent attempts to undermine the judiciary, and during the current war.

The Zionists and messianists have contradictory visions that affect all aspects of our lives. The Zionist dream is based on democratic principles and a Jewish majority: equal rights, minority-rights protections, membership in the community of nations, separation of religion and state, and checks and balances.

The messianic dream is based on theocratic principles, as espoused by settler leader Hanan Porat (1943–2011): "establishing a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, returning the presence of God to Zion." This included Jewish sovereignty over the whole Land of Israel and revoking the rights of the Palestinians.

In founding the state, the Zionists saw the Jewish people's need for a safe haven. As Theodor Herzl wrote in "The Jewish State," "Let the sovereignty be granted us over a portion of the globe large enough to satisfy the rightful requirements of a nation."

But the messianists saw the command to fulfill the biblical promise as the motive for establishing the state. Menachem Felix, a leader of Gush Emunim, declared in 1979, quoting the medieval scholar Nachmanides: "We have settled [the land] ... because we were commanded to inherit the land."

Any concession of territory is sacrilege

The Zionists viewed international legitimization as the basis for establishing the state, "by virtue of our natural and historic right and on the strength of the resolution of the UN General Assembly," as David Ben-Gurion proclaimed on May 14, 1948. The new state would ensure equality and liberty for all.

The messianists' view is reflected in a post by Bezalel Smotrich in November 2017: "The UN resolution isn't the source of our right to this country, but rather the Bible and the promise of the Blessed Be He."

The Zionists see democracy as the supreme value. They believe in the rule of law and the separation of powers. The messianists view democracy as a tool, as expressed by settler leader Benny Katzover in 2012: "Israel's democracy has

fulfilled its mission and must now break up and bow to Judaism."

The Zionists took into account the country's future when trying to determine Israel's borders. Zionist leaders have always preferred a democratic Israel with a Jewish majority at the expense of conceding parts of the country.

The messianists see borders as the crux of the problem. Any concession of territory is sacrilege, and one should sacrifice one's life to prevent this, ruled Kook's son, Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook.

The Zionists are committed to the Declaration of Independence and the "complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex." The messianists believe that only the Jewish people have the right to self-determination in the Land of Israel. Even more severe is the doctrine of Rabbi Meir Kahane, whose disciple, Itamar Ben-Gvir, is in the cabinet. This outlook calls for annulling Arab Israelis' voting rights and excluding them from the public space.

The Zionists recognize the value of international legitimization; they consider Israel part of the family of nations. The messianists deny the legitimacy of international law.

The Zionists believe in an open Judaism where each person manages his or her life; Judaism is an identity based on the history of the Jewish people over the generations. This includes cross-fertilization with the rest of humanity. According to the messianists, Judaism's source of authority is God, who manages the lives of his believers. This view bases its culture on the Bible and the Talmud.

The Zionists see October 7 as a failure to "manage the crisis," which was the policy of Benjamin Netanyahu and Naftali Bennett and sowed divisions between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority. The messianists view the massacre as part of a divine plan.

This is similar to their view of the Holocaust, which they see as the divine punishment of Jews who did not go to the Land of Israel after the Balfour Declaration. In a TV interview, Smotrich said about October 7: "Maybe we needed to absorb that terrible and painful blow to remember for a second who and what we are."

The Zionists believe that the war in Gaza was imposed on us, with the goal to return the hostages and create conditions for diplomacy. Above all, the messianists see the conflict as a war against the biblical Amalek. Revenge on the gentiles, according to Kahane and his heirs, is Israel's goal.

This camp also views the war as a tool for holding Gaza forever. Cabinet member Orit Strock said in a TV interview in March 2023: "Israel is in a process of repentance over the sin of its disengagement from Gaza. ... I believe that this will ultimately be reversed."

Finally, this camp sees the war as a chance to expel Palestinians from Gaza as part of "voluntary emigration." "To remove all of them from Gaza we will need to expel 5,000 people a day, seven days a week, for a whole year," Smotrich has said.

Thus, this is a struggle between a camp that strives for diplomatic agreements that will ensure the Zionist vision and a camp that espouses an eternal war. It's a struggle between a camp seeking to ensure the rights of all the country's citizens and a camp viewing democracy as an

obstacle on the road to Jewish supremacy. One camp is fighting for democracy, while the other is trying to make the country an oppressive ethnocracy.

The decisive question is whether the State of Israel will remain a Jewish democracy, or turn into a messianic ethnocracy.

Decades ago, Leibowitz predicted that the Kook doctrine would end in "bestiality." The answer will determine the future of the Zionist project.

One must vote for parties that commit to a democratic state upholding full equality, with the country belonging to the family of nations. The alternative is clear: a discriminatory regime and a pariah state, poor and mired in endless wars. The battle isn't over territory or politics, it's over Israel's identity and regime.

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