

Look at History and Understand: Israel Is a Step Away From Civil War

Opinion

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A civil war in Israel is an idea that can no longer be dismissed as fiction or as a warning for the distant future. More and more citizens see it as a possible scenario, and some are convinced that it is inevitable. Many point to Netanyahu’s government, to the judicial overhaul, and to the annexation moves it led as the direct causes of this; conversely, many see the protest, in its various aspects, as the cause.

The contribution of Netanyahu and his government to the situation is indeed great, but such a determination expresses a narrow view that focuses only on the present dimension. Such a view prevents a full understanding of the threat, of its historical roots, and of the possible ways to deal with it. To understand the whole picture, one must look at the struggle that has been taking place in Israel for more than a hundred years between three communities — the ultra-Orthodox, the Zionist, and the messianic — over the character, aims, and future of the State of Israel. And above all one must look at the sharp struggle between the Zionist community and the messianic community.

The basis for civil wars is the existence of opposing ideologies: different views of the regime, society, religious faith, and the essence of shared life. These views split the public into camps. When each camp sees the vision of the other camp as an existential threat, any compromise that enables shared existence is perceived as treason. In such a reality, the position and functioning of the leadership are of decisive importance. It can moderate the gaps between the camps or exacerbate them. In the Israeli case, the leadership itself often increases tensions out of a political interest in distinguishing itself, preserving power bases, and strengthening separate identities — which brings the danger of internal confrontation even closer.

The source of the split in Jewish society lies in the founding of the Zionist movement in the late 19th century. Its founders challenged the Jewish society in the Diaspora that sanctified passivity, as the fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe wrote in 1900: “All our hopes and expectations are that the Holy One, blessed be He, will bring us our righteous Messiah speedily in our days, amen, and our redemption will be by the Holy One, blessed be He, Himself” (“Or LaYesharim,” Warsaw).

Jewish society in the Diaspora held a fatalistic conception and believed that its fate was determined by God, and that its revival would occur only by a miracle. It largely adopted the legend of the Amora from the Land of Israel, Rabbi Yossi ben Hanina, that “there are three oaths which the Holy One, blessed be He, made Israel swear: the most important of which is ‘that Israel shall not ascend as a wall’” (Babylonian Talmud). That is, that they shall not all go up to the Land by force, in an organized manner. Some descendants of this society, many of whom

perished in the Holocaust, became the ultra-Orthodox community in the State of Israel — sanctifying the “ghetto” separatism, the rejection of the primacy of labor, the annulment of core studies, and evasion of military service.

All this while the ultra-Orthodox exert disproportionate political influence in a democratic state whose legitimacy, in their eyes, is in doubt. This built-in paradox — using democratic tools to strengthen an anti-democratic conception — is one of the deepest points of friction in Israeli society, and a source of constant tension among the other camps these days.

The Zionist movement held an opposite ideology and vision. It saw the individual and the nation as responsible for their fate. The goal of the national home, in its view, was to join the Jewish people to the family of nations according to the principles of the Enlightenment, and to embark on a path of renewal of modern nationality. The foundations of Zionism are “Eretz Israel... a Jewish majority, an Arab minority, and equal rights for all” (Menachem Begin, 1972). In the Declaration of Independence the Zionists pledged that “The State of Israel... will devote itself to developing the land for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on the foundations of liberty, justice, and peace...; it will uphold complete equality of social and political rights for all its citizens regardless of religion, race, or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education, and culture; it will safeguard the holy places of all the religions, and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.” This commitment was not an empty declaration but a clear social contract, and from a historical perspective one can see how much the components of this contract have been eroded in recent decades under political, demographic, and messianic pressures.

To this basic split a further community was added, which grew at the beginning of the 20th century on the basis of the teachings of Rabbi Abraham Isaac HaCohen Kook (the Ra’ayah), who saw the Balfour Declaration as the beginning of redemption, and of his son, Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook (the RaTziah), who distorted and radicalized his father’s teaching into territorial messianic nationalism. They read history differently from the Zionists: the Holy One, blessed be He, decided upon the redemption of the people of Israel and “pulled the strings” of world politics for that purpose. The building of the state was done by the “donkey of the Messiah” (the secular). Since then, God stood alongside Israel (the few) against the Arabs (the many) and won for them. The land was liberated, and Jerusalem was unified.

To complete the process of redemption, all the territories of the land must be settled, sovereignty must be declared over all of Eretz Israel, the Temple must be built, Torah must be studied, and the leadership of the state and its democratic regime must be replaced. All of these are necessary conditions for “the return of the Divine Presence to Zion, the establishment of the kingdom of the House of David, and the building of the Temple” (Hanan Porat in the introduction to the book “Against All Odds,” 2008). This approach frames the Zionist enterprise as part of a divine plan, and hence also the intransigence regarding territorial compromise and the nature of the regime.

The beginning of the struggle was on the eve of the convening of the First World Zionist Congress, which was supposed to take place on August 25, 1897, in Munich. Then opposition to the convening arose from religious, Orthodox, and Reform circles. The “General Association of

Rabbis in Germany” convened in Berlin and published in several newspapers a resolution condemning Zionism and calling to stay away from it. In the rabbis’ proclamations it was emphasized that “the aspiration of those called Zionists to establish a Jewish national state in Eretz Israel contradicts the messianic purposes of Judaism; the Jewish religion requires faithful service to the state in which Jews live.”

The protesting rabbis succeeded in removing the Congress from Munich, but thanks to the insistence of Herzl and the delegates it was held in Basel. Herzl published in the “Die Welt” organ a letter from the Preparatory Committee to the heads of the Jewish community in Munich, which said, among other things: “It seems to us that the Israelites who do not see themselves as national Jews but as belonging to another nation, ought to leave us in peace with the feelings of our people. We do not speak in their name, but in our own name alone; we respect their nationality; let them, please, respect ours” (Shlomo Avineri, “Herzl,” 2007).

The Congress ended with the historic resolution: “Zionism strives to establish for the Jewish people a home in Eretz Israel secured under public law.” This resolution set in motion the establishment of supra-communal institutions and the pioneering and national Second Aliyah, steps that became a practical turning point in realizing the Zionist vision, despite internal opposition.

The failure of Zionism’s attempt to move the masses of Jews to immigrate to Palestine in the 1920s and 1930s, and the awakening of the national movement of the Arabs of the land, led, with the outbreak of the Arab Revolt in 1936, to the establishment of the Peel Commission, which in 1937 published its plan to partition the land between the two peoples. Here too, the voices of nationalist messianic refusal to any partition were heard: “The Jewish people will never accept any attempt to reduce the historical borders of Eretz Israel, as promised to the people of Israel by the Almighty,” thus was decided at the Mizrahi conference in 1937.

Even when the need became clear to establish a state in part of the land in order to save the Jews of Europe from the Nazis’ clutches, Rabbi Moshe Charlap rejected this and ruled: “It is clear that Israel is forbidden to give up any part of the Holy Land.” The Zionist leadership headed by Chaim Weizmann and David Ben-Gurion insisted and carried the resolution of the Congress in Zurich. Ben-Gurion determined: “From the point of view of realizing Zionism, preferable is the establishment of a Jewish state immediately, even in part of Eretz Israel, to the continuation of the Mandate over the entire land.”

The ultra-Orthodox and the messianics do not bear responsibility for the cancellation of the Peel Commission’s partition proposal, which perhaps would have saved European Jewry — the British government canceled it. But they explained the Holocaust in their own way: the Satmar Rebbe, Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum, wrote in his book “VaYoel Moshe” that the violation of the prohibition “to ascend as a wall” brought about the divine punishment of the Holocaust. Rabbi Shach, in a speech at the Ponevezh Yeshiva in 1990, summed up: “The Holy One, blessed be He, conducted... a long accounting extending over hundreds of years, until it accumulated to an account of six million Jews, and thus the Holocaust occurred.” And in the messianic-nationalist community, Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook explained the Holocaust as a punishment for the fact that the people did not come up to the Land after the Balfour Declaration, which heralded the

beginning of redemption: “The people of God clung so much to the impurity of the lands of the nations, to the point that it is compelled to be cut off and decreed from it in bloodshed” (“Eretz HaTzvi”).

No one tried to reconcile the contradiction between the Ra’ayah’s depiction (he died in 1935) of the Balfour Declaration as the beginning of redemption and the Holocaust that took place 25 years later. Blaming the victims is a deep component in the worldview of the messianic-nationalist camp, and it casts a heavy shadow over any possibility of a political compromise even today, due to the fear that returning the territories will engender divine punishment.

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The attitude of the three communities to the UN partition resolution in 1947 was different: the fear of the price that opposition to the establishment of a Jewish state after 2,000 years would exact tipped the scales for most hawks. “A people that longs for life chooses independence and compromises on territory,” Zalman Shazar, later the President of the State, determined in 1947. Most of the Zionist-religious leadership, headed by the leaders of Mizrachi and HaPoel HaMizrachi, voted for partition for practical reasons. Rabbi Yehuda Leib Maimon, one of the leaders of Mizrachi, was among the prominent supporters of the resolution. He emphasized that the establishment of a state is a stage in redemption, signed the Declaration of Independence, and was the first Minister of Religious Affairs.

The ultra-Orthodox public was divided at that time: part of it saw the state as a somewhat positive stage, and part of it saw it as a negative stage. The Satmar Hasidic movement espoused absolute anti-Zionism. The Lithuanian public refused to see the state as a redemptive process because it was expected to have secular rule, and the Sephardi public was somewhat more favorable. Here it is important to note the status-quo letter that Ben-Gurion, then the Chairman of the Jewish Agency, sent to Agudat Israel in June 1947. The latter did not officially participate in the Zionist institutions and demanded guarantees that a future Jewish state would respect the principles of Halakha in central matters — so that it would be possible to present a unified Jewish front before the UN Special Committee, and to prevent a deep rift between the secular public and the religious and ultra-Orthodox public. The party’s leader, Yitzhak Meir Levin, signed the Declaration of Independence and was the first Minister of Welfare, but the agreement regarding the status quo created a precedent of a state compromise with a sector that refuses to accept the foundations of the democratic regime, which includes separation between religion and politics, a precedent that continues to echo to this day.

For three decades the secular-traditional majority of Gahal-Likud and the Alignment-Labor preserved the integrity of Jewish society in Israel, even if ethnic rifts threatened it and gave birth to the “Black Panthers” and later to the ultra-Orthodox Shas party. The NRP (Mafdal) under Yosef Burg (1970–1986) was moderate and different from its successors; Burg warned against the messianics in his camp: “They raise the banner of the integrity of the Land and forgot the integrity of the state, forgot the integrity of the Torah, forgot the integrity of the camp. If by way of the idea of the integrity of the Land one can arrive in thought to [Meir] Kahane, that is a great guilt.”

Until 1974 the messianics saw the achievements of Zionism as the beginning of redemption. The withdrawal from Quneitra in the agreement with Syria in 1974 was perceived as a violation of the divine command prohibiting “voluntary concession of territories.” From this was born the “Gush Emunim” movement, and in 1981 it was succeeded by the Yesha Council, which radicalized its position. From 1974 onward the messianic community declared war on the Zionist community — which was blind to the threat and even saw it as an expression of democracy and pluralism.

The Messianic community, small but determined, received a tailwind from Menachem Begin’s victory in the 1977 elections, which rested, among other things, on the fanning of ethnic tensions. Although he was aware of their doctrine — “You have one weakness — you have developed within yourselves a complex of messianism” — Begin, like them, dreamed of establishing a thousand Elon Morehs. Nonetheless, contrary to their vision, he signed the peace agreement with Egypt and the autonomy agreement in the territories. On the other hand, he enabled Ariel Sharon to establish 88 new settlements within eight years in the West Bank.

The Oslo Accords of Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres threatened the vision of the messianic, and they acted with Benjamin Netanyahu to topple them by violating the law and revoking the legitimacy of the elected institutions and of the majority’s decision, because in their view it does not stand the test of the Torah. Netanyahu’s return to the premiership in 2009 strengthened the alliance between the ultra-Orthodox, the messianic, and Likud. In his 15 years of rule, Netanyahu, who today fears for his political and personal future against the background of the trial being conducted against him, deepened the split. This reached a peak in the judicial overhaul and in refusal of any political process, while the messianic accompanied these steps with cynical exploitation of the public purse, with Jewish terrorism, with violation of international law, and with harm to the security systems.

Only in recent years has there been an awakening of the Zionist public, while the political opposition proves barren and enamored of the status quo and of “getting under the stretcher” of the rival. The warning of the High Priest Hanania after the conquest of the Temple by the extremists on the eve of its destruction by Titus remains relevant today to the apathetic public ensconced at home: “They rob you and you submit... they beat you and you are silent! Was it not you who caused their great number (of the extremists) by the silence you kept when they first joined together? ... Will you never rise up? ... Perhaps you have lost your most precious natural feeling, the longing for freedom?” (from “The Jewish March of Folly,” by Amotz Asa-El).

Therefore, Israel is a step away from civil war. The messianic community and the ultra-Orthodox community see the current reality — a full-on right-wing government, the political captivity of Netanyahu and Likud, Trump’s support, the military victories against Iran, Hezbollah, the Houthis, and Gaza — as the best opportunity to realize their vision. The messianic will do everything in their historical “window of opportunity” to succeed, and at any price: harming innocents, violating international law and Israeli law, harming activists of the Zionist camp, abandoning the hostages, and more. Otherwise, their failure will be interpreted, according to their belief, as a total failure. The ultra-Orthodox, for their part, will try to entrench their separatism and their far-reaching benefits irreversibly. Conversely, the Zionists fear that with the

completion of the judicial overhaul and the annexation of the territories, Israel will become a state they will not want to live in.

Therefore, the closer we get to elections, these tensions are increasingly amplified by government ministers, through annexation moves, the toppling of the rule of law, and the continuation of the futile war in Gaza, alongside refusal on the diplomatic level. The great threat stems from the attempt to appropriate the nation and religion — which are the first and last common denominator of all the Jewish communities in Israel — and to deny them, as it were, to the secular Zionist camp, by the prime minister and his camp, with statements like “the left has forgotten what it means to be Jews,” which cast secular Zionists out of the camp and bring Israel closer to a boiling point and a possible slide into violent confrontation.

On one side, which has already used murderous violence against peace activists and a sitting prime minister, a process of arming is taking place under the policy of distributing weapons to civilians of Minister Ben-Gvir and the regional defense forces in the settlements, while the other side is careful to distance itself from any such sign and emphasizes the lawful and non-violent civil struggle. Only a different leadership, in the coalition and in the opposition, courageous and committed to the integrity of the house and to the Zionist vision in whose light the state was established, will be able to dissuade the camps from the final move which, if it is realized, will horribly replicate the destruction of the Kingdom of Israel, the Kingdom of Judah, and the Hasmonean Kingdom, as it is described originally and boldly in the book “The Jewish March of Folly.”