



# Privatizing religion: The transformation of Israel's Religious- Zionist community

BY YAIR ETTINGER



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## The Author

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## Introduction

A short time after the 1967 Six-Day War, the head of the famous Merkaz Harav Kook *yeshiva* (Jewish higher institution of learning) in Jerusalem, Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook, published a manifesto dramatically titled “Thou Shall Not Fear!” (*Lo Taguru!*).<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Kook wrote that the state of Israel should not only keep the territories it captured during the war but also strive to capture more land, as promised to the Jewish people according to his reading of the Bible. The document planted the seeds of the messianic settlement movement, subsequently led by Rabbi Kook’s students and followers in “Gush Emunim” (“Bloc of the Faithful”). It also helped ensconce the segment of the Israeli public known as “Religious Zionists” firmly on the right wing of Israeli politics. Whether or not he foresaw its consequence, Rabbi Kook’s manifesto birthed a novel convergence between Jewish observance and hawkish national ideology that is still radically reshaping Israel’s political and religious landscape.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, today, while Israelis who define themselves as Religious Zionists are more homogeneous than in the past in their hawkish views on the Arab-Israeli conflict, the community is becoming more religiously diverse. People who identify to some degree with the Religious Zionist camp—a notion that reflects a religious, Orthodox (usually Modern Orthodox) identity as well as a nationalist approach—can be, in practice and by their own definition, religious liberals, strict Orthodox, different shades of *masorti* (Jews who observe some traditions), or even, in a seeming contradiction, secular (*hiloni*). In fact, there is a religious war brewing between conservatives and liberals among Religious-Zionists at various levels, much of which have no direct link to right- or left-wing politics. This ar-

ticle seeks to outline growing schisms within the Religious Zionist community, as the hegemonic authority of its conservative rabbis is being undercut by a new set of religious narratives promoted by a number grassroots religious and lay political leaders: alternative religious groups, liberal rabbis, feminist activists, and politicians such as Naftali Bennett, the head of the national-religious Jewish Home party since 2012.

Among the many schisms, I will highlight three prominent issues on which such internal battles are most visible: the level of deference paid to the rabbinate, the participation of women in the military, and political representation in Israel’s parliament, the Knesset.

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1. Hagit Rosenbaum, “Fighting and Uniting” [Hebrew], *Besheva*, March 8 2012, <http://www.inn.co.il/Besheva/Article.aspx/11546>.  
 2. For an in-depth review of the origins of the Religious Zionist philosophy, see Yehudah Mirsky, *Rav Kook: Mystic in a Time of Revolution*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014).

## The Religious Zionist tribe

The adherents of Religious Zionism, also known as the national-religious, make up one of the groupings in Israeli society that President Reuven Rivlin identified in a speech in June 2015 as one of the country’s “four tribes.”<sup>3</sup> Together, these tribes include the secular majority and three demographically growing minority groups: Arab citizens of Israel, ultra-Orthodox (*Haredim*) Jews, and national-religious Jews. Each group has a separate identity and separate narrative which clashes with each of the others amid the intensity of everyday Israeli life.

National-religious identity is, of course, complex and layered, yet while risking over-simplification, one can summarize thus: national-religious Jews are Orthodox Jews who are committed to observing the Jewish law, or *Halakha*, yet there are significant practical and theological differences related to how the two groups view the intersection of the world of Torah and the outside world. Unlike the *Haredim*, the Religious Zionists see a noble, intrinsic religious value in Zionism—Jewish nationalism—and in the creation of the State of Israel and its geographic expansion in 1967. Indeed the settlement movement, born in part of the national-religious movement, led hundreds of thousands of Israelis to settle in the territories captured by Israel in 1967 (many of them, including *Haredim*, were looking not for ideology but for cheap real estate close to Israel’s heartland).

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3. “President Reuven Rivlin Address to the 15th Annual Herzliya Conference,” *The Office of the President of Israel*, June 7, 2015, [http://www.president.gov.il/English/ThePresident/Speeches/Pages/news\\_070615\\_01.aspx](http://www.president.gov.il/English/ThePresident/Speeches/Pages/news_070615_01.aspx).

## Bennett, the Jewish Home, and religious privatization

The Jewish Home is widely considered to be the party of the national-religious, though not all Religious Zionists vote for it or for its predecessor, the National Religious Party (Mafdal). At the helm of the party is Naf-tali Bennett, whose ascent was a remarkable event in Religious Zionist circles. In style, he is a radical departure: unlike the staid clerically-controlled politicians of yesteryear, he stands out as a young and brash former high tech entrepreneur and special forces officer, a role model for religious youth. He is active on social media, where he tweets and shares “secular” content including video clips from popular Israeli reality TV shows.

More fundamentally, Bennett’s ascent in politics signaled that the rules had fundamentally changed regarding the pre-eminence of the rabbinical clergy. “We will consult with rabbis, but we make the decisions in the political arena,” he declared in an interview shortly after taking office. The rabbis, who had been used to controlling the National Religious Party for decades, were now beginning to realize that their monopoly had ended.

Bennett has also now become one of the most prominent politicians among the broader Israeli public. Four years after he was elected chairman, the Jewish Home earned a whopping 12 Knesset seats (out of 120) in the 2013 election, a huge increase from the three seats it won in 2009. In the 2015 election, the party still earned eight seats, despite the last-minute defection of much of their voter base to the center-right Likud party of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (in order to forestall a possible victory of the center-left Zionist Union). Today, he serves as a senior

cabinet member, a key coalition player, and a contender to be the next prime minister of Israel.

In the years leading up to Bennett’s takeover of the Jewish Home, historical processes that began before he took the stage had already been converging. The first process was the growing presence of women and men from national-religious backgrounds in Israel’s elite institutions, including the civil service, government, academia, news media, business, military, and judiciary. This presence created the foundations for his support base, and saw the political and demographic strengthening of Religious Zionist influence in society, as traditional constraints on the community were waning.

As a demonstration of the consequences of this process, in early 2015, the Israel Democracy Institute published a surprising study which found that 22 percent of Israeli Jews saw themselves as part of the national-religious bloc.<sup>4</sup> This result differed starkly from the official count of Israel’s Central Bureau of Statistics which indicated that 9.9 percent of Israeli Jews define themselves as religious (though non-*Haredi*).<sup>5</sup> The researchers explained that based on the “discourse and thinking of the Israeli Jewish public today, the national-religious camp is a socio-political category whose affiliation is not based purely on religion.”

This finding may explain the dual-natured perception many Israelis have of Bennett, as a man who wishes to speak in two tongues simultaneously—sectoral and asectoral. Bennett brought new faces to the Jewish Home: Ayelet Shaked, a secular computer engineer from Tel Aviv who is now a senior cabinet member and minister of justice, and Yinon Magal, a *masorti* Jew (who was since forced out of

4. Tamar Hermann et al., “The National Religious Sector in Israel 2014,” *The Israel Democracy Institute*, 2015, <https://en.idi.org.il/publications/8726>.

5. Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, “The Social Survey 2013,” (Jerusalem: Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 2013), [http://www.cbs.gov.il/publications15/seker\\_hevrat13\\_1594/pdf/t13.pdf](http://www.cbs.gov.il/publications15/seker_hevrat13_1594/pdf/t13.pdf).



politics following allegations of sexual harassment). Bennett succeeded in shifting the party's makeup by introducing a resolution that allowed him to increase the representation of non-religious members and thereby widen the political parameters available to the national-religious.

The second historical process is succumbing of the old, mostly homogeneous establishment that once represented the national-religious tribe to strong forces from the private sector. The well-established *yeshivot* (religious colleges), which used to set the national-religious camp's ideology, have weakened, and beneath them have sprung a host of innovative communal institutions, including independent synagogues and younger rabbis. (These changes were not limited to the Orthodox community; in education, private schools have replaced the state schools.) In addition, many religious people now do not feel compelled to vote for the National Religious Party (the conservative faction in the Jewish Home) and find themselves supporting other parties—especially the right and center, with religious politicians from the Likud and Yesh Atid standing in as alternatives to Bennett and the Jewish Home.

This process has also gained traction beyond the borders of Israel. Even though the ideological and sociological overlap is not complete, there is a similarity between Religious Zionists in Israel and Modern Orthodoxy in the United Kingdom and the United States. These communities engage in both religious and ideological debates, covering a range of deep questions on how to navigate the dichotomy between openness and separation. Their questions concern levels of compliance with the rabbis and the authority and sway of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel over Jewish life in Israel and abroad. They focus on the status of women in religious rituals and in leadership roles in religious communities, on religious minorities in various political groups, including gays and lesbians, and the nature of rela-

tions with secular Jews, Christians, Muslims, and others. While the liberal Orthodox camp seeks to deepen integration into the general culture, conservatives are erecting walls against what they perceive to be dangerous cultural intrusions.

With these differences within Religious Zionist circles playing out, the ideological cohesion of the national-religious tribe appears to be on the wane. It could be argued that this tribe of which President Rivlin spoke is actually two tribes in the making, which differentiate themselves from each other on religious grounds. The liberal side calls for more cooperation with secular Israelis, while the conservative approach is leaning towards ultra-Orthodoxy on a variety of issues, including increasing government subsidies for men who study in *yeshivot*, exemption from army recruitment for young *Haredim*, and a general widening the authority of the religious establishment in Israel. Perhaps a more accurate alternative is to describe the tribe as undergoing a process of ideological privatization, in which a larger number of groups play home to many independent individuals. As a politician who is hoping to gather as much support as possible, Bennett is the last one to take sides in, or even admit in public to the existence of such a split.

## New disputes

Ideological disagreements have always existed within Israel's religious sector, and have traditionally centered on the question of settlements. Ever since the 1970s and 1980s, the religious community has been absorbed in external friction with the state and the other "tribes" regarding the potential evacuation of the settlements as a result of negotiations with Egypt and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), as well as the unilateral "disengagement" from the Gaza Strip in 2005. The community was forced to set boundaries regarding the lengths to which it was willing to go to resist settlement evacuation, and to answer such practical questions as how a soldier might legally disobey orders to take part in evacuating settlements.

Against this backdrop, several new religious parties in opposition to the National Religious Party came to the fore, from the far right and the center left.

Unlike previous Jewish Home and National Religious Party leaders, Bennett acts as an uncompromising hardliner when it comes to settlements, so that his opposition from his right flank is quite marginal. There remain occasional political disputes, such as the recent one surrounding the illegal settlement outpost of Amona. Interestingly, given the fact that Israel has not been engaged in substantial negotiations with the Palestinians for over a decade and Israel is no longer present in the Gaza Strip, much of the energy that used to be directed towards the settlements have now shifted to focusing on religious and identity questions.

For example, one of the main questions facing policymakers today concerns the power of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, the governmental cler-

ical system which has a monopoly regulating all aspects of Israeli Jewish life, including marriage and divorce proceedings of Israel's Jewish citizens, recognition of the Jewishness of converts and immigrants, kosher certification for food, and more. For decades, the Chief Rabbinate was generally embraced by and even identified with the Religious Zionist camp, but *Haredi* and religiously hardline influence has grown recent years. In the past decade the rabbinate's public legitimacy even among national-religious has slowly eroded due to its restrictive policies and to numerous corruption scandals.

The Jewish Home continues to stand behind the rabbinate, and Bennett toes the line. By contrast, the liberal wing of Israel's religious Jewish community opposes the *Haredi* hegemony over various issues, including women's status within the religious community, and consequently is becoming more aggressive in its messaging against the rabbinate. One prominent speaker in this camp is Knesset Member Elazar Stern, an Orthodox Jew in the centrist Yesh Atid party who stated recently in the Knesset that he held "contempt for the Chief Rabbi," Rav Yitzhak Yosef,<sup>6</sup> for his harsh views and actions in a *halakhic* dispute in which he is involved.<sup>7</sup> Some MKs in this liberal Orthodox camp, including representatives from centrist parties like Kulanu and Yesh Atid, have joined forces with Orthodox nonparliamentary nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in a concerted legal effort to weaken the rabbinate. One such example in which Orthodox NGOs were involved is the recent Supreme Court recognition of Orthodox conversions performed privately outside of the rabbinate.

6. "MK makes 'rude and insolent' remarks about Chief Rabbi," *Arutz Sheva*, December 14, 2016, <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/221724>.

7. Rabbi Yosef was calling a hearing in the Supreme Rabbinical Court, in order to review a ruling he considered as too indulgent. See Jeremy Sharon, "Supreme Rabbinical Court Poised to Re-open Agunah Case," *The Jerusalem Post*, November 19, 2016, <http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Supreme-Rabbinical-Court-poised-to-re-open-agunah-case-473096>.

Two prominent rabbis who are involved in the private Orthodox conversions are Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, a well-known rabbi in Israel and the United States, and Rabbi Davis Stav, head of the Tzohar organization of mainstream Orthodox rabbis, which tries to make orthodoxy more inviting to secular Jews. In 2015, Rabbi Stav called on American Jews to boycott Israel's chief rabbis if the rabbinate were to carry out its threat to oust Rabbi Riskin from his office as chief rabbi of the West Bank settlement of Efrat. It was clear that Riskin's liberal attitudes on conversion and women's issues have put him in conflict with the Israeli Orthodox establishment.

Another dispute revolves around religious women serving in the army, as opposed to the national civilian service, where they have traditionally volunteered in schools and hospitals. In recent years, the number of religious women who choose the military path over national service has more than doubled. This trend is contrary to the rulings of most of the Orthodox rabbis and the policy of most religious secondary schools for girls. This "uprising" of young religious women, stemming from below, has only recently won the backing of Bennett, who as Minister of Education has supported religious organizations that promote the recruitment of religious women. And yet, it remains a contentious issue.

In December, shortly after the Israel Defense Forces published the new record number of religious women in its ranks (2,159 in 2015, compared to 935 in 2010),<sup>8</sup> Chief Rabbi Yitzhak Yosef declared,<sup>9</sup> "It is the ruling of all the great rabbis of the generations, including Israel's chief rabbis, the position of the Chief Rabbinate . . . that girls must not enlist in the army. . . . [T]here are female pilots, all sorts of stuff. Is that the way of the Torah?! That is not the way of the Torah."

A further dispute concerns political representation of the different camps within the Religious Zion-

ist community. The 2015 election witnessed the creation of a new party, Yahad, founded by former Shas Haredi party chairman Eli Yishai, who represented a large group of ultra-Orthodox rabbis who opposed Shas. But Yahad reflected another political drama, within the Religious Zionist sector, as many dozens of Zionist rabbis switched from Naftali Bennett to Eli Yishai. Yahad was the first right-wing-ultra-Orthodox party, and the first to attempt to unite the two religious Israeli tribes: ultra-Orthodox and national-religious. Yahad failed to enter the Knesset by a tiny margin of only a few thousand votes. Behind this party, which promises to run again, stood a long line of rabbis that had previously been Jewish Home patrons but had jumped ship because of their disappointment and aversion to Bennett. As rabbis had previously established an opposition party against the National Religious Party in order to harden the line against settlement withdrawal, Yahad was clearly founded to serve as a conservative religious opposition against Bennett and the Jewish Home. The old conservative narrative designed to fortify the settlements was replaced by a new conservative narrative designed to protect the "religious character" of the state and the Chief Rabbinate.

On the eve of the elections, Rabbi Shlomo Aviner, one of Religious Zionism's most prominent rabbis, abandoned Bennett to join Yahad. His move came with a pamphlet that read: "Please God, save the Jewish Home from its machinations, rescue it from the clever strategy of presenting an incomplete picture to rabbis. . . . God will save the dear and beloved Jewish Home from the evil wind blowing in it, which opens the gate for Conservatives, Reform and Christians."<sup>10</sup>

Rabbi Aviner called Bennett "half religious" and compared him to the biblical Joash, King of Judea, who was so arrogant that he thought he was God and ultimately led the people of Israel to destruc-

8. Yair Ettinger, "A Quiet Coup: Young Religious Women Are Flocking to the Israeli Army," *Haaretz*, November 25, 2015, <http://www.haaretz.com/peace/1.677390>.

9. JTA, "Sephardic Chief Rabbi: Women Can Do Laundry in the IDF, Not Serve in Combat," *The Jerusalem Post*, December 12, 2016, <http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Sephardic-Chief-Rabbi-Women-can-do-the-laundry-in-the-army-not-serve-in-combat-475125>.

10. Shlomo Aviner, "Haver Ani," (self-published), 3.

tion. He wrote that “it is possible to be friends and not agree; we can be friends and dispute each other. There is only one thing that God-fearing Jews cannot afford: appealing against rabbis on matters of Jewish law.”<sup>11</sup>

The political rifts are only a taste of what is to come. Orthodoxy, a dominant group in Judaism for the past 200 years, is in turmoil. The subject of the struggle concerns religious life and religious law, as well as the lives of communities and of individuals. Increasingly, women are being ordained as Orthodox rabbis,<sup>12</sup> leading prayers in Orthodox synagogues. Increasingly, LGBT Jews are receiving recognition in their traditionally Orthodox communities. Deep changes are afoot, and they will not pass without a struggle.

This being a Jewish affair, there is always another side to the story. The current drive of religious Jews to ascend to the site of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem and rebuild it<sup>13</sup> should be viewed as an opposite reflection of the very same trend of rabbinical withdrawal. Indeed, the activists' aspirations were never part of the Religious Zionists' mainstream agenda, and their actions were forbidden by most rabbis on religious grounds, but in the last decade some rabbis have joined this new radical movement, and this too is a sign of the times.

The threat to rabbinical conservatism, it would seem, no longer emanates from secularization, as was the case for the past 200 years. In recent years Jewish Orthodoxy is threatened from within.

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11. Ibid., 4.

12. Yair Ettlinger, “Newly-minted Female Orthodox Rabbis to Be Called Rabba,” *Haaretz*, June 12, 2015, <http://www.haaretz.com/jewish/news/.premium-1.660857>.

13. Tomer Persico, “The Temple Mount and the End of Zionism,” *Haaretz*, November 29, 2014, <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.628929>.

## Implications

In many ways, members of the Religious Zionist community are now a rising elite in Israeli society, having largely usurped that role from the secular sector. As Religious Zionists have sought to expand their political clout, they have faced challenges in interacting with others at home and abroad in their new positions of power. Their initial responses to these challenges give a glimpse into how they may shape Israeli politics and policies in the future.

One implication of the Religious Zionists' increased political standing can be observed in the role of the Jewish Home in the Likud-led governing coalition, consisting of every right-wing party in the Knesset. The Jewish Home has acted more and more as an opposition within the coalition since the 2013 election. Although the Likud boasts nearly four times the mandate compared to the Jewish Home, which is no longer even the largest junior coalition member, the party under Bennett's leadership now frequently pushes Netanyahu to the right on settlements and security issues.

A primary example of this phenomenon is the Settlement Regulation Bill (to legalize outposts in the West Bank) that the coalition recently passed, pending Supreme Court appeals, and which was Bennett's initiative. As long as the right holds onto power and the Jewish Home represents the country's most right-wing party, we may very well see the Jewish Home continue to increase its leverage over its more moderate-right Likud senior coalition partner.

Will this have an effect on Israel's policy in the future? It was no coincidence that former U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry indirectly referenced Ben-

nett three times in his speech about Israel's policy in the Middle East shortly before leaving office: "[O]ne prominent minister who heads a pro-settler party declared just after the U.S. election [that]... 'the era of the two-state solution is over.'"<sup>14</sup> Now Bennett is lobbying in the Knesset for Israel to annex the large settlement of Ma'aleh Adumim, near Jerusalem, as a first step toward annexing other areas.

Another political implication concerns the Religious Zionist camp's perspective of cooperation with the secular majority "tribe" of Israeli society. Like ultra-Orthodox groups, the conservative wing of the national-religious faction tends to view secular Israelis with condescension, much as secular Israelis viewed them when they were a less influential group. For this reason, they exhort their children to live in religiously homogeneous neighborhoods and settlements, and to vote for all-religious parties that are guided by senior rabbis. By contrast, those in the liberal wing of the national-religious tribe consider secular Israelis as strategic partners with many common interests. If the divide between these two Religious Zionist factions expands, it could threaten to tear apart the tribe and risk losing its central position in the Israeli electoral sphere altogether.

A third implication of the expansion and internal changes in the national-religious sector may be Israel's relations with the Jewish Diaspora, including the mostly non-Orthodox community in the United States. Traditionally, the Orthodox leadership in Israel has discouraged such interaction lest it legitimize heterodox forms of Jewish observance. Despite admonishments from influential rabbis and some of his colleagues, Bennett nonetheless met with Conservative and Reform Jewish lead-

14. "Full Text of John Kerry's Speech on Middle East Peace," *Times of Israel*, December 28, 2016, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/full-text-of-john-kerrys-speech-on-middle-east-peace-december-28-2016/>.

ers in the United States after becoming minister of Diaspora affairs in 2015, and voted in favor of the “Kotel Bill” setting up an egalitarian prayer space for non-Orthodox Jews at Jerusalem’s Western Wall.<sup>15</sup> He would, however, later remain passive in the face of *Haredi* attempts to block the implementation of this bill once it became a national controversy. An additional dispute which may affect Israel’s relationship with Modern Orthodox Jews in the United States and Europe is over the monopoly of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel over conversion, which in recent years began to question the authority of senior Modern Orthodox rabbis in the United States to convert to Judaism (another issue on which Bennett has been reticent to take a stance). His inconsistency seems to reveal that the split in the national-religious bloc is not yet complete, and that domestic political calculations trump sensitivity towards Diaspora concerns.

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15. See Yair Ettinger, “The other Western Wall conflict,” *Markaz* (blog), *Brookings Institution*, November 7, 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2016/11/07/the-other-western-wall-conflict/>.

## Conclusion: The Bennett era

**A**t a time of blurring boundaries, all four “tribes” of Israeli society are more flexible ideologically than it may seem. This article has focused on the ideological and religious mobility and religious privatization within the national-religious community.

In light of these trends, most hardline rabbis have sought to deepen the segregation between observant and secular Jews, as well as between Jews and non-Jews. In many respects, however, and contrary to common opinion in Israel, the rabbis themselves are the victims of these trends. This is the end of an era of rabbinic authority as we know it. Grassroots movements inside the Religious Zionist community are reshaping the public sphere as they introduce new values and practices into religious life.

As a shrewd politician following these processes and being quick to take advantage of the blurring boundaries of religion, Naftali Bennett aspires to head the national camp waving a flag of non-sectarian patriotism, embracing a wider Jewish public. With the national flag held high, Bennett keeps another religious one, at his side, but its message is general and diluted. This reflects a significant change from past Religious Zionist parties, for whom religion was a primary focus, and the rabbis the eternal guiding light.

These processes are expected to continue with or without him. Bennett is not an ideologue but a politician who is trying to maneuver amid these trends. Through a series of political conflicts, Bennett ultimately chose not to confront the conservatives, and yet, within his tribe, Bennett channels legitimacy for change. Bennett himself represents a hardline hawkish nationalism with soft religion and the declining authority of the rabbis. The Bennett era is a time of privatization of the major rabbinical monopolies.





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