What leads to an ideological change? What are the social conditions that can advance such change? During the 1970s, large groups within Israeli society have gone through significant transformations, and this was extremely evident among religious Zionism, a mass movement that advocates a middle ground between secular Zionism and Orthodox religiosity. Ideological change is simply a fact of social and political life: when national circumstances change, ideologies adjust as well. The changes that shook Israeli society came as a result of two wars: the Six-Day War (1967) and the Yom Kippur War (1973).

In 1977, the Likud headed by Menachem Begin formed a right-center government, and since then, the political hegemony in Israel is leaning right, where the Orthodox parties are the Likud’s natural allies. But this has not always been the case; the Mafdal, the National Religious Party, was a natural ally to the socialist-leaning Mapai (Labor) party until 1977.

The transitions from the center to the right are the heart of Avi Sagi and Dov Schwartz’s new book, *Religious Zionism and the Six-Day War: From Realism and Messianism*. In this relatively short volume, the authors, distinguished scholars from Bar-Ilan University, focus on the formative years of the 1970s to show the dramatic transitions that rattled religious Zionism and pushed it, as a bloc, from a careful, realistic, compromising, and middle of the road community to an aggressive, messianic, right-wing movement. In this transformation, the community shifted itself from its marginal spot in the Israeli society to a leading sector, the carriers of the settlement enterprise, one the main blocks of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Sagi and Schwartz place the Six-Day War as a turning point. The results of that blitz war, where Israel conquered Judea, Samaria, the Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights, and the Sinai Peninsula, along with the holy sites in Jerusalem, infused messianic tension within the young guard of the movement and brought forward enthusiastic activists who were able to push aside the old leadership and the old ways. The young guard was engaged in forming settlements in the occupied territories, attaching messianic significance to their actions. They viewed themselves as participating in God’s plan and the entire movement joined them in support.

The old timers of religious Zionism, figures like Moshe Hayyim Shapira (1906-2002) and Yosef Burg (1909-99), were focused mostly on preserving the religious heritage of Israel like kashrut, Shabbat, and other religious matters. Their views on security and international relations were moderate; they actually did not support Israel going to war in 1967 and were afraid of its results. They were known as men of compromise, and they were terrified by the excessive nationalism that developed after the war in their own communities. They renounced the messianic framing of contemporary events and refused to identify the results of 1967 as having miraculous or messianic significance.

The young guard, headed by figures like Hanan Porat (1943-2011) and Moshe Levinger (1935-2015), had a different vision altogether. Their style was charismatic, and they were absorbed by the philosophy of Merkaz Harav yeshiva in Jerusalem, headed by Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook...
(1891-1982). Merkaz Harav was established in 1924 by Rabbi Avraham Itzhak Kook, the father of Zvi Yeheuda. Kook senior developed an intensive theology that came to explain the success of secular Zionism in relation to messianic advancement. His son and his students in the yeshiva viewed Israel’s stunning victory in the Six-Day War as a holistic, cosmic, and a messianic fulfilment, moving the State of Israel forward in the Divine’s plan of redemption. From their perspective, the victory exposed God’s plans. Since, in their eyes, history should be viewed as related to theology, the best to explain history were the rabbis, and in particular Rabbi Zvi Yeheuda Kook and his students. This process brought forward rabbinic authority and sanctified Rabbis Kook, father and son, to the level of prophets. According to Sagi and Schwartz, the 1967 war created a clear distinction between the two guards: while the old guard was realistic and cautious in political matters, the young guard was theologically motivated and refused to consent to an actual, partial, and conflicting reality. They also brought a new type of leadership: the rabbi-politician model.

The picture of Israeli paratroopers standing by the Western Wall, gazing at the Temple Mount like dreamers, is one of the iconic images of the Six-Day War. For the young guard of religious Zionism, the image meant more than an icon. For them, it was proof that the prophecy of redemption was being fulfilled. In the second chapter of the book, Sagi and Schwartz use the phrase “sacred history,” an assumption that history has a purpose and it is distinctly religious.

The Zionist relationship with God is complex. The secular pioneer’s ethos of activism was intended to break the long political passivity that signified the Jews of exile. Immigrating to Palestine and establishing a state was also viewed as a statement that Jews were no longer waiting for God to perform His miracles of redemption. The old guard joined Zionism in establishing a secular state. However, from the Six-Day War, God has returned to history in the imagination of the young guard. Until 1967, religious Zionist thinkers drew a distinction between dream and reality, between messianic hopes for redemption in an unforeseen future and concrete politics. When Gush Emunim (Bloc of the Faithful) was established in 1974 to engage in building settlements, the young settlers were not afraid to confront the law because they knew that history was on their side, that they were God’s soldiers. They shifted their loyalty from the (secular) state to the (holy) land: “the Kingdom of God will not be built by the state but by settling the land,” explain Sagi and Schwartz (p. 59).

Another important transformation in the consciousness of religious Zionism was with the development of ultra-Orthodox norms of modesty, analyzed in the third chapter of the volume. This Victorian type of discourse made its appearance in the mid-1970s. Until that time, sexuality was a minor matter, and religious Zionists followed the norms of the general public. The psychological explanation Sagi and Schwartz offer is intriguing, and this is probably the most innovative section of their book. In 1978, Israel signed a peace deal with Egypt, and in 1982 the Sinai Peninsula was returned to Egypt’s hands. The peace treaty got the support of most Israelis; however, religious Zionism was the most vocal sector against it. Losing the battle, and the territorial retreats it entailed, shook the confidence of the young guard: “The role of the Land of Israel as the foundation of redemption gradually receded, and redemption shifted to the physical domain” (p. 77). They turned the body and sexuality into the central battleground of redemption and messianism. The change took place first within the Bnai Akiva youth movement and over time expanded to other places, creating Haredi-style gender-segregated domains.

After reading this powerful book, I still have some questions. All of the transitions described in the book took place from 1974 onward. If the Six-Day War (1967) is the crucial point of reference, why did it take so long for these to take shape? In my own research, I referred to the Yom Kippur War (1973) as the threshold because its aftermath threatened to destroy the achievements of the Six-Day War. In my analysis, the rise of the young guard was not due to the success of the 1967 war, but to the fear of territorial retreats as the result of the failure of the 1973 war, which triggered the Land for Peace negotiations. I wish Sagi and Schwartz had discussed this at more length.

My other question is why the authors did not mention the philosopher Yeshayahu Leibowitz in their narrative. With the rise of the young guard, the image of Leibowitz grew as well, as their antithesis. Leibowitz was a religious Zionist philosopher, a professor of biology and philosophy at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. After the Six-Day War, he became an Israeli icon, a prophet of doom, a contradiction to everything the young guard believed in. He was one of the first to warn against the holding of the Occupied Territories, and he opposed the rise of the significance of the Western Wall in Israel after the war, referring to it as the “discotel” (a combination of “disco” and “Kotel”). The young guard was easily able to step over the old-timers’ leadership, but it was much harder for them to step over Leibowitz, who became their
Religious Zionism and the Six-Day War is a much-welcomed contribution to the study of Israeli society and history. It details how a change occurred in the ideology of religious Zionism that pushed it to political activism motivated by right-wing and messianic belief, moving it into the front lines of the leadership in modern and contemporary Israel. Although the rise of Gush Emunim has been already the subject of much previous research, the strength of the book lies in its detailed analysis of this transformation, and the “before and after” comparison.

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