

SHORTLY AFTER MY ARRIVAL in the settlement of Tekoah, about 10 miles south of Jerusalem, in July 1983, I had the dubious privilege of reading the chapter of Amos Oz's *In the Land of Israel*, which describes Oz's visit to Tekoah a few years earlier. I was appalled by what I read. Were my new neighbors indeed the apocalyptic, morally insensitive, Bible-quoting chauvinists interviewed by Israel's most famous novelist? I didn't need to stay in Tekoah very long to discover the unpleasant truth: Oz transmuted not only the conversations but even the "factual" descriptions — physical characteristics, social, and religious background. Harriet Menachem is petite, soft-spoken, and decidedly non-Orthodox (no hair covering), quite the opposite of the apocalyptic Orthodox (kerchiefed hair) firebrand described by Oz. Dr. Amiel Ungar, rather than the Bible-toting true believer portrayed in the book, is the consummate political scientist, thoroughly at home in the Bible to be sure, but equally certain to quote anyone from Tocqueville to Mao Tse Tung, with detours through Machievelli, Harry Truman, or Jane Fonda. Apparently the reality didn't fit the stereotype neatly enough — welcome to the land of post-Zionism, where reality takes a backseat to ideology.

When I first moved across the green line in 1981 to live in the settlement of Michmas (north of Jerusalem), demonization of "the settlers" had not yet moved into high gear. The main motivation for moving out of Jerusalem, for me as for most of my new neighbors, had to do with quality of life — meaning more than a larger house and a garden for a fraction of the price. We wanted to continue the Zionist enterprise on several levels. First, the return to biblical sites in our ancestral homeland was an integral part of the rejuvenation of the Jewish people. And, second, for those of us who chose to move from Jerusalem to a smaller community, part of the attraction was continuing the classic Zionist ideal of social experimentation. The "communal settlement" was a new kind of community, designed to foster the social cohesiveness characteristic of the *kibbutzim* and *moshavim*, but without the increasingly irrelevant burden of the collectivist economic base.

Finally, moving to Tekoah presented an op-

portunity to counter the growing rift between the religious and (so-called) secular communities in Israel by creating a model of coexistence in the form of a small, closely knit community in which religious and secular Jews were equal partners. The bond of our shared commitment to Jewish peoplehood and settlement of the land served as the common social base that could support the differences in lifestyle and religious outlook.

By the time my wife, Ruth, and I established ourselves in our new community, the vilification of settlers was under way. No matter that our settlement, like all others in Judea and Samaria (and unlike many inside the green line), had not displaced a single Arab from his home or land. No matter that we tried to cultivate — and with a measure of success — neighborly relations with adjacent Arab villages (established, incidentally, during the 1970s by nomadic Beduin tribes). The classic bastions of Zionism had shifted course, abandoning their traditional commitment to the land and focusing on statehood and democracy. In the battle of the new liberal democratic Zionists — and later the post-Zionists — against their classic Zionist forebears, the new bearded, knitted-kippah-wearing proponents of traditional Zionist ideals were a highly visible target.


I, like my neighbors, find it stimulating, frustrating, and oftentimes painful to live in the center of the storm. Like many of my neighbors, I have been interviewed on television and thus given an excellent firsthand opportunity to see how news can be manipulated and even manufactured. While all too much of our energies are expended on maintaining sanity and balance in a world gone haywire, there is a certain liberation in knowing — not thinking, knowing — how little the world knows or understands about the issues that the media trumpet daily. We have learned to read between and underneath the lines of media reports. Safely beyond the pale of world consensus and Israeli media consensus — Israeli public consensus is much more complicated and dynamic — we are free to view and think for ourselves. Nor do we all come to the same conclusions. Beyond our common convictions that we have returned to our homeland and that Arab failure to rec-

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ognize and legitimize this is the root cause of the dispute, you will find many opinions regarding the kind of ultimate political settlement that would be achievable, just, and lasting. Having suffered most — in ways that most of us foresaw — from previous “experiments for peace,” we are generally less willing than others to gamble our security or our homes on high-risk gambles whose long-term benefits are far more doubtful than their short-term dangers.

The battle over settlements has exposed the fault lines in classical Zionism. From its inception, Zionism vacillated among its political, social, cultural, and religious foundations. The founding of the state did not, in reality, resolve the long-standing debates among different visions: a political solution to the problem of antisemitism (Herzl), a cultural center to rejuvenate Jewish thought and culture (Ahad Ha’am), an ideal platform for social experimentation (socialist and communist Zionism), a religious-messianic ingathering to repair the ills afflicting Jewish religion (Rabbi Abraham

Isaac Kook). Under domestic and international political pressure, most politicians, as well as many intellectuals, sought the least common denominator: the political state, with its security needs, as the only consensus position. This signals not only a retreat from dreams that were organically connected with the Zionist vision, but also an increasingly bankrupt position in the international arena.

As an academician and a teacher, I dwell a good part of the time in what George Steiner has termed “our homeland, the text.” My professional and much of my religious life is devoted to making sacred texts not just intellectually comprehensible but spiritually meaningful. Using literary tools I have learned from world literature and philosophy, I try to show how Jewish religious texts can be a homeland, in which Jewish personalities can dwell and develop. As a Jewish thinker, I firmly believe that healthy thinking and growth in our intellectual homeland require grounding physically and emotionally in our geographic homeland as well. 

Eyes Wide Open: The Settlements from a (Different) Jewish Perspective

Ishay Rosen-Zvi

WHEN I THINK ABOUT Israel’s settlements, two memories come to mind. During a Bnai Akiva (the religious Zionist youth movement) outing to the settlements in the Gaza Strip, I saw a sharp contrast between the overcrowded, miserable neighborhoods of Gaza — set among dozens of roadblocks and army bases — and the blooming lawns and red-roofed houses of the Jewish settlements. But I do not recall any surprise, protest, or even a question from anyone in the youth group (myself included). It was natural for us; we are the masters of the land. It was always thus; we never knew any other reality.

A second memory is from several years later, early 1990s, when I was doing my army service in Samaria, in the context of studying at a Hesder yeshiva. I remember entering Palestinian houses, I remember the Palestinians’ fear, their humiliation, the roadblocks on the highway. One particular image remains etched in my memory: the endless line of Palestinian vehicles, at 5:00 A.M., waiting for the all-powerful Israeli officer to decide who would have the right to use the road, and who would be

turned back. Everything they had — their property, their time, their dignity — was under our control. And zooming by in their cars, with no one obstructing their way, were the settlers.

Here were two adjacent populations, yet so very different: one of citizens with full rights and privileges, and another living under occupation, with neither citizenship nor rights, completely at the mercy of the all-mighty soldier, me. Let us not deceive ourselves: to maintain two populations on the same territory, under two totally separate systems of law, requires the use of massive force. It is this force that I encountered, day after day, at the roadblocks in Samaria. But by then the realization had begun to take hold of me that this was not acceptable; that such blatant and open discrimination between people could not be just and I could not be a part of it.

My American (Jewish) experience also began in connection with the settlements. On my very first Shabbat in the United States, I attended a synagogue that was, coincidentally, making an appeal for one of the settlements.