



Coping with the Failure of a Prophecy

The Israeli Disengagement from the Gaza Strip

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Introduction

[1] In August 2005, the Israeli government decided to withdraw its forces unilaterally from the Gaza Strip, to demolish the bloc of settlements, named Gush Katif, and to evacuate its residents, as well as those of four outlying settlements in Samaria. The decision was taken by Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, the declared patron of Israeli settlements in the areas occupied by Israel in 1967. Thus, the disengagement came as a surprise and shock to the evacuees and to all other settlers and their supporters, for it contradicted previous strategies and ideologies of Israeli governments and of the settlers to hold on to the occupied territories (though refraining from annexing them) and to settle them.

[2] Jewish settlement of the occupied territories had been initiated and driven by believers in the innovative religious doctrine of Gush Emunim, which regards the occupation of Judea, Samaria, and the Gaza Strip as a divine omen for the Coming of the Messiah, if Jews now took the opportunity and resettled the heartland of their ancient homeland. Since the doctrine has been discussed in several studies (e.g. Weissbrod; Aran), a summary of the main points can suffice. The belief in the national renaissance in their homeland and in the spiritual salvation of the Jewish people by the eventual Coming of the Messiah has been a central theme in Jewish religion since the Second Temple period. Mainstream Judaism deferred the Coming to a distant future, dependent on the spiritual-ethical purification of Jews. Gush Emunim doctrine, based on the teachings of Rabbi A. I. H. Kook and on their interpretation by his son, Rabbi Z. Y. H. Kook, reverses the order of events necessary for salvation. National renaissance, regarded as the settlement of the entire Holy Land, namely the territories occupied in the 1967 War (including Gush Katif), is the necessary and sufficient condition for the imminent Coming of the Messiah and of salvation. This commandment, a political act, is made supreme above all others. That is what motivated the first wave of settlers, but certainly not all of them. Israeli governments added strategic-political considerations to this religious doctrine and encouraged settlement of these areas by generous grants, propaganda campaigns, and preferential financial allocations. Field research by Billig (27-30) as well as by Schnell and Mishal (12) shows that the majority of Gush Katif residents were not devotees of Gush Emunim doctrine, though a highly motivated minority was. Under their influence, the other settlers, who had been traditional (moderately religious) and were living in closely knit small communities, gradually adopted a fully religious lifestyle and the major principle of Gush Emunim faith that settlement of the Land was a religious duty, even if not the supreme one. According to Schnell and Mishal, these settlers saw themselves as realizing the promise of God to give the Holy Land to Abraham (11-15).

[3] The decision of the government to demolish Gush Katif and evacuate its residents was seen by the faithful as a willful voluntary act, not taken under any political or military duress and, as such, an act counter to the prophecy of salvation or as counter to the promise of God. To their dismay, the majority of the general public supported this decision: according to two independent survey institutes (Peace Index Project; Teleseker), 60 percent of respondents supported disengagement throughout January-April 2005, the support dropping to between 57 and 52 percent in August of that year. Moreover, after the disengagement, Prime Minister Sharon split from the Likud Party and founded the new party Kadima, whose main platform was a further consolidation in Judea and Samaria, namely an evacuation of additional isolated settlements in order to legitimize the annexation of large blocs of settlements. That

would establish clearly demarcated borders for Israel as a state with a firm Jewish majority. But it would also put the seal on any further expansion of the Israeli presence in the West Bank and put to naught the prophecy of the Bible. (Kadima received 24.16 percent of the votes in the elections of 28 March 2006, was the largest party, and headed the government, despite the stroke suffered by its charismatic leader Sharon and his replacement by his deputy Ehud Olmert.)

[4] Roughly 20 percent of Gush Katif residents left voluntarily prior to the date set for evacuation in return for the compensation guaranteed by the government. (No official data are available on either the exact number of persons forcefully evacuated, nor on those who left voluntarily. The percentage quoted is a rough estimate computed from unofficial reports on the difference between the original population in each settlement and the number of evacuees in various temporary accommodation sites.) Alarmed by this, Gush Emunim faithful in Judea and Samaria realized that part of these residents were not strongly motivated by their Messianic doctrine and cared more about the loss of their homes and livelihood. Consequently, they mobilized rabbis and youngsters from the West Bank, particularly “hilltop youths” (see below), to come to Gush Katif and reinforce the determination of the settlers to resist evacuation, or “deportation” as they named it to evoke the holocaust. Indeed, they succeeded: the larger part of residents stayed in place, encouraged by their leaders and rabbis to believe that their steadfastness and prayers would cause the government to reconsider. Even while soldiers and policemen were carrying out the evacuation, the staunch believers in their religious mission and their reinforcements from settlements in the West Bank were still convinced that their ongoing prayers would bring about a miracle to undo the entire process. The best known instances are those of Rabbi Eliyahu pronouncing, “It [evacuation] will not be,” and of ecstatic girls in Neve Dkalim praying for a miracle to prevent the evacuation; yet no miracle occurred and the soldiers carried the praying outdoors and loaded them onto waiting buses.

[5] In one respect, this is a case of a failed prophecy, similar to those pioneered by Festinger and studied by other researchers. Festinger generalized from his research that, in order to reduce the cognitive dissonance produced by the failed prophecy, the faith of the believers would not be undermined even when the prophecy had been specific and concerned with the real world, i.e., a date had been set for a real event to occur, or a specific person had been named to bring about the event. They would excuse the failure by an erroneously calculated date, or reinterpret their belief system to fit reality, then underpin their continued belief by proselytizing (3-20). Not all cases studied subsequently corroborate this hypothesis. Some groups dispersed when their prophecy had failed (e.g. Burrige: 73-80; Van Fossen; McMinn; Luebbers). In other cases studied, the coping methods for retaining the faith have been further elaborated. They range from complete denial of reality (Burrige: 49-55; Berger: 24-25; Dein; Friedman) to accepting the blame for the failure, such as admitting shortcomings in faith or ritual, or admitting that man cannot comprehend divine intentions and must accept the failure humbly (Pargament, et al.). On several counts, the Israeli case may provide additional insights regarding a failed prophecy. First, because of its political aspect, the failure of the prophecy in the Israeli case allows for a greater variety of responses. Ostensibly, the prophecy has failed only indirectly: the believers have been prevented by a political act (government action) from fulfilling the conditions (the political act of settlement) of realizing the prophecy. Renewed political action might reverse the process. Second, the failure need not be seen as final and can be interpreted as a local setback in Gush Katif only, though the threat of consolidation is looming and would put a complete stop to any further Israeli expansion into the Holy Land. This threat seemed to have vanished after the Second Lebanon War of 2006, especially after the disproportionate number of casualties among settler reserve soldiers and officers and the reluctance to hurt them further by depriving them of their ideology and homes. But several months later, the topic was coming up again, though without setting any timetable. This allows for the extra coping methods of damage control – preventing any further evacuations – or damage repair – reversing the process and resettling Gush Katif. Third, the Gush Katif evacuees are part of a larger group of settlers in Judea and Samaria who are still in place and can support them. Fourth, and conversely, the failure of prophecy experienced by the evacuees is compounded by the loss of their homes, their livelihood, and their lifestyle, rendering the shock more severe. At the same time, the pressure to hold on to the belief in the prophecy may possibly be weaker in this case than in others because the Gush Emunim faithful are part of the larger Jewish religious community. They never ceded from Judaism, but merely elevated the commandment to settle the Holy Land to supersede all other commandments. Therefore, they can merely renounce their adherence to their specific interpretation of Judaism and return to the general Jewish religious fold.

[6] The analysis of coping methods below excludes those settlers who left voluntarily prior to the forced evacuation, for they had probably come to live in Gush Katif for non-religious/political reasons, so that no prophecy had failed them. It is based on the writings of political and rabbinical leaders of the settlers, on interviews they gave to like-minded sympathetic correspondents of the national religious camp (supporters of the settlement movement, also represented by two political parties), as well as on articles in national religious newspapers (*Ha-tsofe*, *Makor Rishon*, *Besheva*) and in the organ of the settlers,

Nekuda. Other sources were field research conducted prior to the evacuation and blogs by evacuees proper on websites owned or run by the national religious camp. The latter were preferred to personal interviews because of their complete anonymity and spontaneity, excluding any bias that an interview by an outsider might have produced.

Coping Methods

Denial

[7] Prior to the evacuation, there had been instances of complete denial of reality. Residents of Gush Katif had believed that evacuation would not take place, despite government pronouncements and preparations for its execution. Therefore, they had refused to negotiate terms of restitution; some had believed in a miracle that would prevent evacuation at the last moment. The two instances described above were widely publicized and documented on Israeli television. The belief in a miracle is also confirmed in blogs by evacuees (e.g. Hablogia 2006f; Holot Nodedim 2005d). Having been evicted and their homes demolished, the event could obviously no longer be denied, but some continued to deny its finality. The spiritual dilemma, running from absolute certainty in divine intervention, via a loss of faith, to the belief in an almost immediate reversal of events, is succinctly reported by one contributor to a book on the soul-searching of the faithful (Meir and Rahav-Meir: 205-30). The belief that settlers would return to Gush Katif directly is expressed in articles (Elizur; Schreiber; Gefen) and in website blogs (e.g. Holot Nodedim 2005e). Evacuees of Homesh (a settlement in Samaria) put their belief into practice and have since attempted to reoccupy their settlement on several occasions.

Prophecy Delayed or Territorially Restricted

[8] Others of the faithful trivialized the loss of Gush Katif and claimed that settlement of Judea and Samaria, the heartland of the Promised Land, and its expansion sufficed for the prophecy to be fulfilled. An appeal published by the council of Kdumim, in Samaria (Makor Rishon), invited evacuees to move to their settlement so that together they could double their efforts to expand into the heartland of the Holy Land instead. But since consolidation was still on the government agenda and the disengagement had enjoyed considerable public support (see para. 3 above), a reversal of Israeli policy was seen as imperative. To this end, several strategies have been proposed:

[9] *Intensifying the struggle against future consolidation.* In addition to articles calling for stronger action (i.e. Arnon), 72 percent of respondents in a poll conducted by Market Research supported stronger action against further evacuations (Horev). The violent struggle in January 2006 over the evacuation of Amona, an illegal outpost, testifies to this strategy. The latter has been adopted principally by young people, though with the support of militant elders.

[10] *Take-over of the government by becoming the majority.* Some believed that the sheer force of demography would achieve this. The fertility rate of religious women in Israel is twice as high as that of secular women (Ben Ezra). Having many more children, the national religious, most of whom support settlement in Judea and Samaria, would automatically become the majority of the Israeli Jewish population, would eventually take over the government by democratic means, and bring about the fulfillment of the prophecy (Orbach; Eitam; Ben Simon). Proselytizing would speed up the process of becoming the majority. The message had to be spread by the Gush Emunim faithful to the non-believing population by teaching and personal example (Nachteiler; Polonski). Rabbi Mishal Cohen of the settler faithful acted on this, setting up a Yeshiva (religious college) in Tel-Aviv, the stronghold of Israeli secularity, in order to spread his faith. The politically minded faithful intended to put proselytizing to practical ends as well. Zvulun Orlev and Benny Eilon, leaders of the united Mafdal-Ihud Leumi party, stated repeatedly that they intended to strengthen religious teaching in the educational system in order to reach out to the population at large. This, in turn, might increase the electoral attraction of their party. Proselytizing is supported in numerous articles in the national religious press (Dershan-Leitner; Goldstein; Unger; Shorek; Falk).

Self-Accusation

[11] Another way of coping with the apparent failure of the prophecy has been to stress that it was not the prophecy that had failed, but rather its believers. They had not lived up to the requirements for its realization and were therefore to blame for its postponement. They had to mend their ways to make the divine promise possible. Several "sins of omission" have been pointed out.

[12] *Lack of an alternative political program.* Unlike the other failed prophecies studied, the Israeli one

requires political action, as well as faith and/or ritual. Some prominent settlers and supporters claimed that their political action should have been guided by a detailed political program to counter the disengagement plan of the government. Bambi Sheleg, author and journalist of the national religious camp, regarded this as a grave error to be rectified. So did Meir Uziel, participant in a conference on the subject of the disengagement held at the religious Hemdat Ha-darom College on 13 February 2006 and titled "Reckoning and the Soul." Atniel Schneller, until recently head of the Yesha (Judea, Samaria, Gaza) council, went a step further and submitted a detailed plan, supported by maps, of fulfilling the prophecy in an area more restricted than the entire Holy Land, which would be politically feasible and could convince the non-believers (Caspit; Rapaport 2005c).

[13] *Improper role of rabbis.* An entire session of the above conference dealt with the status of rabbis following the disengagement. Avi Levy, head of the Hemdat Ha-darom College, as well as most participants in the session accused the settlers and other faithful of excessive dependence on the pronouncements of rabbis prior to and during disengagement. The rabbis were either too moderate and prevented effective opposition to the evacuation, or were too extreme in raising expectations of a miracle, causing despair or even loss of faith. Participants agreed that the role of rabbis should be spiritual rather than political, just because there was no single religious authority in Judaism and rabbis could each interpret the law and reality according to his own lights. Spiritual pluralism was a blessing, but political pluralism within a single camp could lead to confusion and defeated its own purpose.

[14] *Pride and exclusiveness.* The establishment of communities outside the Green Line (the 1967 boundaries of Israel) had inevitably separated the settlers geographically from the rest of Israeli society. However, separation had turned into exclusiveness and pride. Settlers had emphasized their courage and self-sacrifice, as well as the perfection of their communal life in contrast to the hedonism and the lack of social-moral commitment of Israeli society. This elitism had alienated the latter, rather than causing them to emulate the settlers, or, at least, to give them their full support. Regret over the exclusiveness of ideological settlers and over their unwarranted pride is expressed in one blog, which regards the just punishment of evacuation for this sin as a blessing in disguise because "it made us realize that we are not the best" (Katifnet 2006c). Key figures among the settlers interviewed by the press confirmed that many settlers blamed themselves for their exclusiveness. Shaul Goldstein, head of the Gush Etsion regional council, was the most outspoken. The settlers had run forward, believing that they would naturally be emulated because they were the righteous, holders of the absolute truth; they had never bothered to look behind and see whether they were being followed. The public support given to the evacuation (see para. 3 above) had jolted them out of their unseemly pride (Rapaport 2005b). Yoel Bin-Nun and Hanan Porat, two founding members of Gush Emunim, expressed similar views (Shragai; Rapaport 2006a), as did Yohanan Ben Yaacov, former secretary general of the Mafdal youth movement (Sheleg) and Atniel Schneller (Rapaport 2005c): the Holy Land could be conquered only by hosts, not by the encroachment of individuals, and no real effort had been made to recruit the hosts; a land without its people was worthless. According to some participants in the conference mentioned above, the feeling of spiritual elitism prevented settlers from addressing the rest of society in the plain language they could understand.

[15] The remedy proposed was a reintegration into Israeli society. Settlers should serve as a visible and articulate model that would eventually lead to a majority rejection of consolidation and to a support of continued settlement (Rapaport 2005b; Bar On). Unlike the ambitious tactics of proselytizing proposed above, those suggested here have been more modest. They constitute an attempt to become a legitimate part of society, whose voice and political demands should be taken into account. Persuasion would turn the political process around and help the faithful to an eventual fulfillment of the prophecy. Yet, no concrete plan of action has been suggested for accomplishing this reaching out and reintegration. An exception is a group of religious parents, who took the initiative to remove their children from their religious state school (there are separate religious and secular state schools in Israel, with different curricula and teaching stuffs) and enroll them in an integrated secular-religious school. The parents accused the religious schools of teaching social separation, the evil that must be remedied (Rapaport 2006b).

[16] *Insufficient faith.* Insufficient faith is almost the reverse of the self-accusation of pride and exclusiveness, which derives from the unquestioning faith in the prophecy and the role in it played by the settlers. In contrast, some settlers blamed themselves for insufficient faith in their pivotal role of actualizing the prophecy. Consequently, their fight against evacuation had not been strong enough to win the battle. One rabbi of Gush Katif admonished his flock for having been wanting in faith and consoled them that their present adversity would strengthen them and bring them nearer to God (Tau: 8-9). In a pamphlet distributed to all settler households in October 2005, the Yesha council blamed itself for its hesitancy in using more forceful means to prevent the evacuation and asked the forgiveness of the settlers (Yablonka 2005). The moderate rabbis as well as the Yesha Council were blamed for restraining an open revolt of settlers (Or; Grinfeld). To make up for this deficiency, more forceful measures were proposed

to prevent any further consolidation and to strengthen the belief in the prophecy. Elyakim Haezni, a veteran settler, advocated civil disobedience and violence to prevent a further consolidation, instead of reintegration and proselytizing (Rapaport 2005a). In one extreme case, violence was advocated since the evacuation foreboded the beginning of the end (Kaniel). The battle in early February 2006 over the evacuation of Amona, an illegal outpost, bears testimony to this attitude. About 3000 youngsters fortified themselves in several buildings and on their roofs, armed with clubs, stones, and other cold weapons. They fought and lost the battle against the police, which evicted them forcefully. Settlers vowed that this was the first of many such future confrontations (Rotenberg and Abramson). Participants in the Amona event testified to their fighting spirit, which would continue despite defeatists in their own camp (Holot Nodedim 2006d). Many of these were 'hilltop youths' who preach one type of the severance coping method described below.

Severance from the State

[17] Those employing this coping method shift the blame to the state which has deprived the faithful of the means (settlement) for realizing the prophecy. The solution proposed is severance, namely a denial of the legitimacy of the Israeli state and its institutions, primarily the government, the legal system, the police and the army. The argument put forward is that, by carrying out the disengagement and applying force in order to deny opponents the right to protest, the state and Israeli society have betrayed their most loyal vanguard. Elite units and the officer corps have been manned disproportionately by members of the national religious camp in general, and by settlers in particular. Settlers have also been risking their lives by living in outlying sites prone to terrorist attacks. Since this devotion and sacrifice were being repaid by depriving settlers of their homes, as well as by disregarding and humiliating them, only severance from this evil body could enable the faithful to continue their active role in realizing the prophecy. Alternatively, it would save believers from contamination by the Godless society and its state, and preserve their faith in the Divine promise. This has produced two types of severance as a coping method, a militant and a quietist one. Those adopting the former mode have joined the "hilltop youths" ideationally, if not geographically: they have not necessarily moved to the hilltops in Samaria and Judea, but have adopted the state of mind of the youths who had moved there long before the evacuation. The "hilltop youths" thus also need to be discussed.

[18] At the time, the "hilltop youths" had been considered an extreme fringe. According to a field study carried out in 2003–2004 (Borstein), a few 16-17 year old boys raised in settlements in Judea and Samaria dropped out of school because of the double bind created by the harsh religious and scholastic demands made on them in contrast to the complacency and laxity of the adults around them in general, and of their parents in particular. They left home without parental permission and settled in illegal outposts on hilltops, where they could put their religious and national values into practice. At the time, the adult settlers castigated them, considering them unable to live up to their demanding educational system. The youths wanted to implement settlement in the entire Holy Land as part of the process of salvation and as part of a spiritual unification with the soil and the land. Girls were not accepted into these brotherhoods, each with a guru and/or rabbi who supported and advised them. They were seeking a spiritual renewal and rejected those Israeli laws that they regarded as contrary to Jewish religious ones. They also rejected the state and its institutions. Some even refused to serve in the Israeli armed forces, which they saw as the army of the non-legitimate state. A rabbi, who was a resident of an outpost, confirms these findings (Yifrah 2004). According to a documentary broadcast on Channel 8 of Israeli television on 12 October 2006 and titled "The New Jews," the views of hilltop youths have become more extreme since the evacuation: to them, Israeliness has become irrelevant and only Jewishness remains. Many of the hilltop youths came to Gush Katif prior to the evacuation and inspired other youngsters to join in a violent opposition to the expulsion. Since girls were not allowed on hilltops, yet wanted to be part of this rebellion, they were prominent in demonstrations against the evacuation, especially in obstructing roads. Some were apprehended and refused to be released on bail, denying the legitimacy of the secular Israeli court to judge them. This attitude has received considerable approbation from members of the national religious camp (Meidad; Fatshino; Meir and Rahav-Meir).

[19] *Militant Severance.* After the battle in Amona, this mindset has spread and has become the basis for militant severance. As one evacuee put it, the expulsion from Gush Katif had undermined the unconditional loyalty of the faithful to the state, since a state not based on Jewish values was seen as irrelevant (Hablovia 2006d). The young people who had fought in Amona had proved their pride in their Jewishness and their love of the Land. Rebellion has also turned against the political leadership of the settlers as representing the adults and their strategy of avoiding a split within Israeli society by restraining violent confrontation with the evacuating forces. Some called for rebellion against the older conciliatory generation (Or), or warned against the rebels who might ignite an internal rift in the national religious camp (Kaniel). Opposition groups have formed, their pressure causing several members of the Yesha council to resign (Shragai 2007). There has been a growing unwillingness of national religious youths to

serve in the army altogether. Some declared they would serve only if excused from taking part in any future evacuation. Indeed, the national religious camp in general, and their youngsters in particular, felt ambivalent about military service, which they had considered a holy duty. In interviews (Sheleg 2006a), Yeshiva students were divided among those who would refuse their call-up for conscription on the pretext of continuing their religious studies (until then, an exemption claimed only by ultra-orthodox youths), those who would join reluctantly and without much motivation, and those who would continue the tradition and volunteer for elite units. This ambivalence is illustrated by the case of a national religious soldier who was prohibited from attending the ceremony at which he was to receive the award of an outstanding soldier because he had declared his refusal to shake the hand of the “evacuating” Chief-of-Staff. Instead, he was awarded a prize by a religious body that supported his act. An extreme view of severance is expressed in a blog in which the writer refuses to defend a country that is no longer her own (Hablogia 2005). This ambivalence became salient in the Second Lebanon War. Even Elyakim Haezni, the ultimate advocate of civil disobedience, considered refusal to obey the call-up of reservists sacrilege when the security of the country was at stake, as did many evacuees (Shragai 2006). At the same time, some reservist settlers were reported to refuse fighting in Lebanon because victory in the war might further consolidation, as Prime Minister Olmert had stated (Harel, A.). A pertinent case is that of Capt. Amihai Merhavia, resident of an illegal outpost. After the evacuation, he wrote a letter of protest to the Chief-of-Staff, then joined the opponents to the evacuation of an illegal outpost and was injured there. But he obeyed the call-up of reserves during the war and was killed in Lebanon. At his funeral service, his sister said that she had warned him against obeying the call-up order because the war would only serve the ruling elite, who “used us as cannon fodder for facilitating the future consolidation” (Hablogia 2006e). By 16 January 2007, a Knesset committee discussed reports about a decline in the motivation of evacuees to serve in the Israeli forces. Fringe advocates of militant severance proposed founding a separate state of Judea (Ben: Comment No. 123), or remaining under Palestinian rule rather than being evacuated (Yablonka 2006; Rapaport 2006d).

[20] *Quietist Severance.* This and the following coping method of trust in God are more likely to have been adopted by the non-Messianic religious settlers who regard the entire Holy Land as their rightful heritage, as promised by God. These believers can more easily explain the evacuation as a postponement of the divine promise, since that prophecy has no set timing, as has the Gush Emunim belief in the immediate Coming of the Messiah. Consequently, they need not fight against the state, but can merely retreat from it until it changes its secular nature. This coping method results in a simple withdrawal from any emotional or active involvement in the affairs of the secular public. As one evacuee put it: he no longer had a home, a state, a flag, a nation, or a national anthem; let the state go to hell (Ben). According to Avi Gissar, rabbi of the settlement Ofra, many settlers felt alienated from the state and from Israeli society. They were still religiously devoted to the Land, but no longer to the state, and adopted a secessionist attitude (Rapaport 2006c). Some settlers refused to celebrate the Day of Independence because they no longer considered this state their own (Harel, Y.). The tactics proposed were a consolidation into a closed society of the national religious, without contact with the secular one. Even acts of protest were excluded, both because they have proven useless and because they indicate some contact with Israeli society, though a negative one (Sheleg 2006b). One rabbi claimed that any contact with a secular Israeli people and state was contrary to God’s commandment. Judaism was a covenant between God and the Jewish people; contact with anyone who contravened the terms of the covenant was a sin (Ariel).

Trust in God

[21] Of all the coping methods described so far, this is the most passive. It proposes no mode of action, not even the enclosure in a capsule, as does the method of quietist severance. Instead, believers are to retain their faith despite their expulsion from their homes, from the Promised Land, or from their road to salvation. The title of the booklet by Rabbi Tau and its contents summarize this coping method. The booklet is an address to the Gush Katif residents just after their evacuation and intends to forestall any heretical doubts or despair due to their alleged abandonment by God: everything is of divine intention, incomprehensible to humans; the greater God’s punishment, the more glorious will be the rehabilitation if the believers keep their faith despite their present misery (Tau: 8-11, 14). Their unwavering trust in God will be a light unto the unbelievers (Tau: 17-23). The same need for steadfast faith despite adversary was reiterated by Rabbi Lior on the settler radio channel 7 (Ben Haim), by evacuees (Reichner; Holot Nodedim 2006a; Katifnet 2006b; Hablogia 2006b), and most poignantly by a young girl to her mother in an anonymous letter to the editor: the girl admired her mother for believing that the evacuation had been an intentional divine act and that human beings must not even try to understand its meaning, but simply keep up their faith (Besheva 2006b). The writer of the letter could not come to terms with this resigned attitude. Others were more adamant about the duty to retain faith in God. The evacuation was a test of faith and loss of it, or even doubts about its justice, was heresy (Ariel 2005a; Shilat; Ariel 2005b). According to Rabbi Ramon, it was a sin of heresy to challenge God by expecting a miracle; the purpose

of prayer was not to barter but to express humility and glorify God (Bart: 40-46). One writer, though, believed that retaining faith was a barter of sorts: in the long run, God would reverse history and restore the evacuated sites to their rightful owners (Rat). It was based on the belief, held by many of the above, that salvation of the Jewish people was a lengthy process whose final date was not set and whose intermediate setbacks must not undermine faith.

Loss of Faith in the Prophecy

[22] Not all settlers, and evacuees in particular, retained their faith by means of the coping methods described above. No numbers on such “deserters” are available, but their percentage among evacuees is probably small: changing one’s belief system, particularly when this involves one’s entire way of life and when one continued living in the community of the believers, as most evacuees have done, is a difficult and rare course of action. Social censure is likely to prevent an admission of loss of faith even when it has occurred. Yet, some evidence exists. Some could not cope and lost their faith. A clear line must be drawn, though, between those who lost faith in the prophecy and those who lost faith in their Jewish religion altogether. As already mentioned, in the Israeli case one can lose belief in the imminent Coming of the Messiah, or in the imminent effectuation of the Jewish people’s inheritance rights to the Land (Diaspora Jews are a case in point), yet retain the religious beliefs of mainstream Judaism. Yet the latter differs from the coping method of trust in God, which insists on an eventual fulfillment of the prophecy. Responses to evacuation without loss of all religious belief are discussed first.

Despair

[23] This reaction is most common among adult evacuees of Gush Katif who had turned from being traditional, that is mildly religious, to adopt strict religious observance. By living in closed communities characterized by strict religious behavior, they had thus adopted the belief that they were fulfilling the divine promise of re-inhabiting the Holy Land. Their eviction from the Promised Land disillusioned them of their alleged sacred mission, in which they had probably not believed deeply in the first place. The loss of their luxurious homes and economic well-being thus became their prime focus of resentment and a cause of despair, and for good reasons. According to the chairman of the evacuees committee, the majority of evacuees were still unemployed by mid-2006, and were living in temporary caravans (Kalfa); 45 percent of them were reported unemployed by the end of 2006 (Kotes-Bar). Many blogs of evacuees mourn the loss of home (Hablogia 2006a; Katifnet 2006a; Holot Nodedim 2005a; 2005b; 2005c; 2005e; 2006b; 2006d), as did letters to the editor and an article (Nekuda; Fuchs). These and other blogs (e.g. Katifnet 2006b; Holot Nodedim 2006d) show no religious doubts as such, despite their grief and longing for their lost homes. But lacking Messianic fervor or losing belief in a sacred mission, a decline in upholding the strict norms of Judaism seems to have occurred, especially of family values. Social workers have reported a number of broken families among evacuees, as well as divorce cases (Ben; Lax).

Search for an Alternative Religious Message

[24] Some evacuees have responded in this manner: the prophecy has failed because, apparently, it was a misinterpretation of God’s will. “We are confused” wrote the wife of a rabbi (Magnus). One evacuee was no longer sure of what God expected her to do: should she celebrate Independence Day, that is, consider the state sacred? (Holot Nodedim 2006c). According to one evacuee, the prophecy had been misunderstood and it beheld believers to await the true divine message (Zuri). Rabbi Lior doubted the interpretation given to the writings of Rabbi Kook, on which the ideology of Gush Emunim and the prophecy had been based, and suggested that it needed a new reading (Ben Haim). According to one blog, the true alternative to the prophecy must be sought, but was still beyond the reach of the settlers (Holot Nodedim 2006d). Rabbi Gissar believed that the most devoted were perhaps the most skeptical about the meaning of the prophecy and were searching for its correct interpretation (Rapaport 2006c). One suggestion for an alternative message was an exclusive emphasis on love of the Land rather than on the settling of it (Vishlitzki; Besheva 2006a). Coming closer to the Divine in order to understand God’s real purpose was another proposal (Magnus). Moreover, the true meaning of salvation was said to have been misunderstood; it should be seen as a lengthy process, in contrast to the imminence suggested by the original articulation of the prophecy, and thus be devoid of political undertones (Widel). The following response takes this suggestion one step further.

Adoption of Ultra-Orthodoxy

[25] In Israel, Jewish orthodoxy has taken a unique form. The orthodox establishment had opposed Zionism from the start because the latter ignored the orthodox dictum that Jews had to await the Coming of the Messiah before they could renew Jewish nationhood in Palestine (Bloch). After the holocaust had

decimated orthodox scholars in Europe, the survivors who came to Palestine and subsequently became citizens of Israel insisted that they be permitted to revive Jewish religious scholarship there by becoming a community of scholars, exempt from the major civic duty of military service. For many years, they also refused to take part in Israeli political institutions (Heilman and Friedman). The ultra-orthodox have been living in closed communities in which religious strictures have become increasingly severe and in which the pronouncements of rabbis have been regulating all aspects of daily life. This has stood in stark contrast to the worldview of the national religious camp, which has seen the State of Israel as the prime means of Jewish salvation and has been integrating in modern, secular Israeli society, though without forfeiting its religious faith and way of life. A change towards stricter religiosity has been taking place in the national religious camp, especially among settlers. By dint of their seclusion in communities outside the 1967 borders, secular influences decreased, while those of rabbis grew. The change was sparked by the Hebron Protocol of January 1997, which conceded most of the holy city of Hebron to Palestinian control. At the time, some settlers regarded this as a possible precursor of the failure of the prophecy and began reverting to stricter religiosity as an antidote: mending their ways might prevent further concessions to the Palestinians. The spread of this mode of religiosity produced an adoption of very modest dress for women, emphasized religious symbols of dress for men, and encouraged greater consultation with rabbis regarding daily life as well as political action. The movement was named "Hardal" (an acronym for "orthodox national religious"). For those who now regarded the prophecy as failed, a turn to the orthodox fold seemed an appropriate solution to their search for an alternative message, or the most appropriate severance from the state and Israeli society.

[26] Rabbi Gissar, who serves as rabbi of a very ideological settlement, stated that a new community had been founded by young settlers, one of segregation from the state and from Israeli society and identical to the Israeli ultra-orthodox, except for replacing the predominance of observing the Sabbath with the predominance of the sacredness of the Land (Rapaport 2006c). Two leaders of the "National Home," a far-right organization, supported this stance: settlers should strive to set up a society of the faithful, similar to the orthodox in all aspects except for loyalty to the Land. This society should ultimately become dominant in Israel (Meir and Rahav-Meir: 94-126). Other written sources either feared or advocated a complete merger with the orthodox community, the more extreme of whom consider the State of Israel similar to exile and its government as a foreign gentile ruler. Thus, Rabbi Levanon advocated such a complete disengagement from the state (Meir and Rahav-Meir: 15-38), as did contributors to *Nekuda* (Yifrah 2005; Meidan; Lau). Others confirmed the existence of this response by opposing it, such as Hasdai or Ben-Yaacov (Sheleg 2005).

Apostasy

[27] Of all responses, the loss of religious faith is the most painful for believers, the hardest and harshest decision to make. For any believer, it means a total upheaval in his/her worldview, the adoption of new values and, in Judaism in particular, a new way of life and even of dress. For the ultra-orthodox and for settlers, who live in tight-knit communities, apostasy also involves the loss of support from the community and, sometimes, even from the family. It would seem that, for two reasons, young people take such drastic steps more easily. First, their habits are still less ingrained and they can more easily adapt to new ways. Second, and more importantly, the young have an either-or perception of life; they are less amenable to compromise. It is therefore not surprising that the young were predominant among the hilltop youths (who had adopted an even more fervent belief in the prophecy) and that the few reports on apostates refer to young persons. Very little direct evidence for apostasy was found (probably because it is painful/shameful to confess such a step/sin). In the letter to the editor already quoted, the girl who envied the steadfastness of her mother's faith stated that she herself had begun to doubt the existence of a God who had permitted the evacuation to take place (Besheva 2006b). An evacuee confessed in her blog that she now regarded the Bible as no more than a useless piece of paper (Hablogia 2006c). A student in a religious college stated in an interview that he could no longer continue his religious studies and felt like an expatriate – disconnected from his community (Zelikowitz). Some evidence is provided by writings of rabbis who mention the apostasy of some young people, but regard the phenomenon as marginal (Lau; Vitkon). Further information comes from reports by social workers and psychologists treating the phenomenon: some young people have shaken off their religious belief and taken recourse to drugs and alcohol after absconding from their religious school (Lax; Zelikowitz). A report by the Committee of Gush Katif residents confirmed the phenomenon (Ben). A survey commissioned by the Religious Education Administration of the Ministry of Education found 25 percent of religious secondary school pupils admitting that they had lost their religious faith (Kashti). Data from a single survey, however, cannot be taken at face value; the number of pupils declaring their apostasy seems very high. But the survey may indicate a trend. Possibly, many young people of the national religious camp were experiencing a soul-searching and reported their temporary rebellion against God, who had apparently abandoned them, as a loss of faith, as many of their mentors had feared and warned against.

Conclusions

[28] In addition to confirming the postulates of the researchers mentioned above, namely denial, acceptance of the blame, trust in God who cannot be comprehended, recalculating the date of the prophecy, or reinterpreting the belief system, the Israeli case provides greater insight and a more detailed picture of the methods that can be employed to cope with a prophecy that has not come true. That is so because, unlike other cases studied, the Israeli one combines faith in a religious prophecy with determined political action necessary to make it happen. It is not a natural disaster nor a non-event that made the prophecy fail, but the counter-action of a political body, namely the Israeli government. Furthermore, devotees of the prophecy had not seceded from Judaism; they had merely shifted priorities and emphasis to the Land of Israel and its settlement. These features and the large number of the faithful explain variations within some of the coping methods used, as well as variations within the group that did not cope and abandoned the belief in the prophecy.

[29] Coping with their disappointment by believing it to have been a very temporary set-back or a localized event concerning Gush Katif only is a method made possible by the political aspect of the prophecy. Thus, more determined political action would revert the tide of events so that the prophecy could again be actualized; opposing future consolidation localized the failure; while a future political take-over by demographic growth of the faithful, aided by proselytizing, was a temporal annulment of the failure. Similarly, self-accusation takes various forms, ranging from admissions of elitism and alienation from Israeli society, via inept leadership (of rabbis and political leaders) to ineffective political action by the members due to insufficient faith in the prophecy. Again, remedies proposed for these failings were all political in nature. Coping by severance from the state is the most obviously political method of coping, and is sub-divided into militant and quietist modes. Due to the special circumstances of the Israeli case, most of those who abandoned their belief in the prophecy could remain devout Jews by returning to mainstream Jewish religion, by joining the religiously more demanding ultra-orthodox community, or by an active search for the “true” message that they had inadvertently not comprehended. Yet the Israeli case is probably not unique. A study of the Taliban after their defeat in the Afghanistan war might reveal coping methods fairly similar to the ones found in Israel, since their prophecy also combines religious faith with political action, though the latter two differ in content from those of the Israeli settlers. But, obviously, such a comparison is beyond the scope of this paper.

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* Title translated from Hebrew

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