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Prophetic Disappointment and Ideological Change among Israeli Settlers' Rabbis: The Case of Rabbis Yehuda Amital and Shmuel Tal

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Abstract: In this article, I examine the role of prophetic disappointment in creating ideological change. I discuss the response of two Orthodox rabbis, Rabbi Yehuda Amital (1924–2010) and Rabbi Shmuel Tal (b. 1962), to the crisis of faith they encountered regarding the role of Zionism in the messianic drama. This research describes the process of religious switching they have gone through due to failure of prophetic faith. This work argues that their transformation was an attempt to cope with the tension that results from cognitive dissonance in two different instances while blaming a third party for misunderstanding the true will of God. Their religious switching was an act of theodicy, justifying God's justice, while renouncing their previous held beliefs.

Keywords: Israeli settlers; rabbis; prophetic disappointment; ideological change; cognitive dissonance; Yehuda Amital; Shmuel Tal

1. Introduction

In this article, I examine the role of prophetic disappointment in creating ideological change. I discuss the response of two Orthodox rabbis to the crisis of faith they encountered during their lifetime regarding the role of Zionism in the messianic drama, and I evaluate the changes they made in their teachings and actions in response to their new situations. To date, research into prophetic failure has centered on movements and individuals that remained loyal to their original beliefs even after disconfirmation. This article casts a spotlight on those who prefer to exit and to admit a mistake; however, one should not view their exit as acts of disloyalty to the old beliefs.

The rabbis included in our examination are Yehuda Amital (1924–2010) and Shmuel Tal (b. 1962). Rabbi Amital was the head of Har Etzion Yeshiva in Gush Etzion in the West Bank. He was initially a loyal supporter of Gush Emunim (the Bloc of the Faithful), a hawkish movement that advocates the annexation of the West Bank and Gaza to Israel and the establishment of settlements. However, the death of several of his students in Israel's wars led him to change his mind; he became a political moderate, an advocate of the principle of "land for peace", and a supporter of the Oslo Accords. Shmuel Tal is the head of Torat Chayim Yeshiva, which was originally situated in the Gaza Strip. After Israel evacuated all its settlements in Gaza as part of the Disengagement Plan (2005), the yeshiva was relocated inside the Green Line. The personal experience of being evicted from his home transformed Rabbi Tal from a hardline Zionist nationalist to a non-Zionist.

This article begins with a discussion of theories concerning prophetic failure and religious switching. We will then discuss the approaches of the two above-mentioned rabbis, providing a basis for comparison and conclusions. The discussion will bring together the theoretical analysis to understand the reactions of the rabbis mentioned below and to evaluate their transformation.

2. Prophetic Failure

The subject of prophetic failure is critical to an understanding of the development of any messianic faith. The most quoted study in this field is *When Prophecy Fails* (Festinger et al. 1956; Stone 2000), which focused on Mrs. Keech's small UFO cult that believed in an imminent apocalypse, and later developed a cognitive mechanism to explain why this event did not occur. The study yielded two conclusions: firstly, beliefs that are clearly falsified will be held even more intensely after falsification; secondly, groups encountered with disconfirmation will increase active proselytization. Festinger was among the first to use the term "cognitive dissonance" to refer to the distress caused when two contradictory ideas, or cognitions, are held simultaneously. In the case of a messianic or millennial individual or group, cognitive dissonance is said to occur when a fervently-held belief appears to be contradicted by empirical evidence. Cognitive dissonance theory argues that believers will be highly motivated to resolve the tension between contradictory ideas. Since then, cognitive dissonance theory has become very dominant (Hood 2011).

Cognitive dissonance occurs in situations that embody a confrontation between two cognitions—beliefs and reality. In many cases, those trapped in a condition of cognitive dissonance prefer to remain loyal to their beliefs despite the contradictions. Still, what can be the breaking point? Under what conditions will even the most committed no longer be able to remain loyal to faith and seek instead to resolve their cognitive dissonance? These questions will stand at the heart of this article.

The analysis of this phenomenon can be enriched by drawing on another psychological theory concerning consumers' behavior in the markets. In his book *Exit, Voice and Loyalty*, Albert Hirschman (1970) argues that when consumers are unhappy with merchandise, they can either stop buying the firm's products (the exit option) or express their dissatisfaction directly to management (the voice option). Hirschman noted that in the case of religious institutions, the exit option is virtually impossible. Accordingly, thus the only way to protest is by voicing a complaint. He stressed that the very act of voicing a protest is an expression of loyalty to the firm/institution. As consumer research has shown, there are cases in which protest can be channeled in a way that does not affect loyalty. However, even the most committed have a breaking point. This article examines the boundaries between voicing a protest and exiting.

Cognitive dissonance theory explains the psychological hardship the rabbis have gone through. This theory argues that when the most fervent believers are faced with contradictory proof for their beliefs, they can remain loyal to their original faith. This was indeed the case with many rabbis from similar religious Zionist circles who faced situations not unlike those examined in this article. Nevertheless, Amital and Tal were able to reinterpret the will of God is a different way than most other religious Zionist rabbis. The contradictions between their two closely held cognitions—Israeli territorial concessions and the belief that this same territory holds messianic importance—proved too hard to bear, and the rabbis ultimately decided to retreat from their original ideology.

This article presents a situation where the rabbis confronted by doubt decided to change their politics, an extremely uncommon feat among Orthodox rabbis on fundamental issues regarding Zionism and messianism. Thus, this paper is significant because it focuses on the exception, which can help define the borders of the believers' community, and the type of change that can be considered legitimate. This article emphasizes cognitive tension and the way in which the mechanism of religious switching is narrated. These conclusions will not only allow us to better understand the religious Zionists' ability to change, but will also apply to the understanding of all other religions.

3. Messianic Religious Zionism

Very soon after its emergence, religious Zionism developed a philosophy that views the secular Zionist movement as advancing an unfolding messianic process. These approaches are identified in particular with the religious philosophy of Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Hacohen Kook (1865–1935). Many Orthodox Jews at this time found it difficult to

identify with the emerging Zionist movement and to act within classic Zionist definitions because Zionist rhetoric was about the normalization of the Jewish people by making it a nation like all the others. These definitions, religious Zionist leaders argued, are inconsistent with Jewish religious tradition, which emphasizes a distinction between Israel and all other nations; it proclaims that the Land of Israel has a unique theological and eschatological function. Accordingly, many religious Zionists added a religious purpose to the Zionist idea.

These thinkers used traditional rabbinical techniques to justify supporting Zionist political activity. While ostensibly adopting the general Zionist definitions, this approach also instilled it with specific religious meaning. While Zionist activity calls for action in the material realm, its innermost core aspires to spirituality, and this constituted the "real" foundation for the Zionist movement's operations and aims, even if the movement itself was not aware of this (Schwartz 2002, pp. 156–92). According to this argument, the long-awaited messianic era was about to arrive and would be realized once secular Zionism chose the "true path" to worship God completely. Zionism would then advance to its second phase, which will include the revival of the biblical Davidic monarchy, the reinstitution of sacrifices on the Temple Mount, and the reestablishment of the Sanhedrin (Inbari 2007).

Although this position was present within religious Zionist circles from the late nineteenth century, it occupied only a marginal position. Thus, while the vision of transforming the State of Israel into a theocratic regime was advocated for by certain religious Zionist thinkers during the period immediately preceding the establishment of the State of Israel (1948), it was soon abandoned (Cohen 1998, pp. 48–55). This situation changed with the Israeli victory in the Six Day War (1967) in which Israel captured additional areas of its Biblical homeland. These dramatic events led to the strengthening of religious Zionism's activist wing, dominated mainly by the younger generation of the National Religious Party (Garb 2005; Don Yihya 1980). Additionally, it created a certain enthusiasm that would ultimately fuel the establishment of the Gush Emunim settlement movement, which soon after became the dominant stream within religious Zionism (Aran 1988).

The Six Day War (June 1967) created a new reality in the Middle East. In the course of the war, Israel occupied East Jerusalem, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights, and the Sinai Peninsula. These areas, containing some of the holiest places to Judaism, were not annexed to Israel, and have become occupied territories administered by Israel pending their return in the framework of a peace agreement. Immediately after the war, Israel did not wholly initiate Jewish settlement in the occupied areas, with the exception of East Jerusalem, which was formally annexed to the State of Israel. From the outset, however, this principle was not strictly applied, and soon after the war a number of Jewish settlements were established in the occupied territory (Gorenberg 2006, pp. 263–75).

In 1973, Egypt and Syria launched a surprise attack on Israel. Although Israel would eventually push back the attacking armies, the Israeli public was shocked and outraged at both the large number of fatalities Israel suffered and by the military's poor performance, at least at the beginning of the war. Eventually Israel won the war after the Arab armies surrendered. Immediately following the war, U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger undertook intensive diplomatic activity to bring a ceasefire between the sides that would eventually include Israeli territorial retreats. It was against the backdrop of these two events—the trauma of the war and the expectation of imminent territorial pullback—that the Gush Emunim ("Block of the Faithful") movement was founded on February 1974. Led by young religious Zionist activists, Gush Emunim was supported by both Orthodox bourgeois urban circles and secular supporters of the Whole Land of Israel movement (Schwartz 2009). Gush Emunim sought to prevent territorial concessions and to push for the application of Israeli sovereignty to Judea, Samaria, and the Gaza Strip, by establishing settlements in the occupied territories. As a result of its activities, the number of Israeli citizens living in settlements has grown steadily. As of 2020, the settlements' population was

estimated at 400,000, and some 40 percent of the Judea and Samaria territory was included in the settlements' municipal areas of jurisdiction (Zertal and Eldar 2007; Levingston 2020).

At the time of its establishment, Gush Emunim did not project a messianic vision. However, immediately following its inception, Gush Emunim was joined by a group of Mercaz Harav Yeshiva's graduates under the spiritual leadership of Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Hacohen Kook, who soon assumed leadership roles in the movement. The members of this group held a religious perspective which motivated them to political action. They believed that the return of the Jews to the Land of Israel under the auspices of the secular Zionist movement reflected the first stage in God's will to redeem His people. Accordingly, the spectacular Israeli victory in the Six Day War of 1967 was perceived as a manifestation of the Divine plan, and as a preliminary stage in the process of redemption (Hellinger 2008).

The students of Merkaz Harav Yeshiva view themselves as disciples of the philosophy of Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Hacohen Kook (Schwartz 2009, pp. 156–92). They integrate the senior Kook's philosophy into Israeli reality, emphasizing two key concepts: the land of Israel is holy, and so is the State of Israel. According to the junior Kook, the Land of Israel—comprised of land within the 1948 borders, the territories acquired in 1967, and even Transjordan—is one unit, a complete organic entity infused with its own will and holiness. This entity is connected and united with the entire Jewish people—present, past, and future—so that the people and the land are in a complete oneness. Therefore, no one has a right to give away part of the land (Ravitzky 1993, pp. 122–44). Since the unity of the Whole Land came as a result of the actions of the Zionist movement, it could therefore be understood as a tool chosen by God to advance redemption. As such, the Israeli state, though secular, should be sanctified as it is part of the messianic process (Ravitzky 1993, pp. 136–41).

According to the Merkaz Harav philosophy, the sanctity of the Whole Land of Israel and the sanctity of the State of Israel are expected to complement and complete one another. However, this has not always been reflected in Israeli reality. After the peace process between Israel and Egypt (1978) and the resulting Israeli withdrawal from Sinai (1982) that set the precedent of evacuating Jewish settlements, many Gush Emunim supporters were forced to confront the increasing erosion of their basic beliefs regarding the character and destiny of the State of Israel. The Israeli withdrawal from Sinai, together with the subsequent Madrid talks (1991) and Oslo process (1993) which led to an Israeli withdrawal from parts of the West Bank, provoked a theological crisis for followers of Merkaz Harav's philosophy. The Disengagement Plan (2005) brought this crisis into new heights. The fundamental religious dilemma this presented is of a profound character: How can a state that uproots settlements and hands over parts of the Biblical Land of Israel to Arab rule be considered "absolutely sacred" as it had been? What sublime religious meaning can be attributed to the actions of a secular state that threatens to destroy, by its own hands, the chance of realizing the messianic hope? Could it be that viewing the Jewish state as a fulfillment of the divine will was a mistake? These theological dilemmas constitute the background for the discussion over the responses of Rabbis Amital and Tal.

4. Rabbi Yehuda Amital

Rabbi Yehuda Amital (1924–2010) served as head of Har Etzion Yeshiva in Gush Etzion until 2008. Amital was the founder of the yeshiva, which he ran jointly with Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein. He is considered an important and respected rabbinical figure in the religious Zionist world, and his political views are regarded as moderate. Although he considers himself a loyal disciple of Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Kook, the spiritual mentor of messianic religious Zionism, Amital interpreted Kook's writings differently than from that Kook's son, Zvi Yehuda, and his students. However, this was not always the case. During his lifetime, Amital had undergone a profound theological change. He initially was a strong supporter of the approach that views Zionist revival as part of a messianic process (the consensus among religious Zionist rabbis), but over the years he retreated from the messianic interpretation of reality. Following this change, he presented an alternative

program based on the demand for morality and justice as the manifestation of the Jewish way of life (Brill 2006). This theo-political transition took place during the 1990s and is arguably closely connected to the political process of the Oslo accords (1993–5), in which Israel and the PLO signed a peace treaty based on the 'Land for Peace' formula (Maya 2004, pp. 55–56).

Rabbi Yehuda Amital (Klein) was born in 1924 in Transylvania, Hungary. During the Second World War, he was taken to a forced labor camp while his relatives and other members of his community were sent to death camps. Despite being raised in a Hungarian town, he was taught by a Lithuanian rabbi and was exposed to the teachings of Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Hacohen Kook who otherwise was unknown in these territories. In many of his lecture, Amital has discussed how the small booklet *Mishnat Harav* by Rabbi Kook gave him spiritual power during the war, and accordingly he considers himself a disciple of Kook. In 1945, after the war ended, Amital immigrated to Palestine and continued his religious studies. Har Etzion Yeshiva in Gush Etzion was established a year after the Six Day War (1967) and was headed by Amital. The Yeshiva was the first settlement established in the occupied territories. At that time, his messianic views were well known in religious Zionist circles, which led Hanan Porat and Yoel Bin-Nun—who would later be among the founders of Gush Emunim—to ask Amital to head the yeshiva. In 1988, Amital created the Meimad movement, which advocated a moderate religious position on political issues. Meimad participated in the general elections for the Knesset (which take place according to a multi-party proportional representation system), but failed to pass the electoral threshold. In 1996, Amital took upon himself the official position as minister without portfolio following the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin by a Jewish assailant. Shimon Peres, who replaced Rabin as prime minister, urged Amital to join the government, which was responsible for continuing the political process with the PLO in hope to reach a peace agreement. After the Labor party lost the 1996 election and the Likud came to power, Amital once again returned to head his yeshiva (Maya 2004, pp. VII–VIII).

Amital profoundly changed his political views. *The Ascent from the Abyss* (1974) is a collection of sermons Amital gave during and after the Yom Kippur War (1973) addressing the crisis of faith sparked by the war. The collection also includes his sermons from the 16 years preceding the war, as early as 1958, supporting a religious approach that identifies the Jewish revival in the State of Israel as a manifestation of a messianic process.

In his book, Amital sought to present a paradoxical view that although Israel military failed to properly prepare for the Yom Kippur War, the course of redemption remains unchanged. "It is confidence in the perception of the key events of this period as a single process leading toward the arrival of the Just Redeemer that led to the combination here of comments made in different periods," Amital declared in the introduction to the collection (Amital 1974, p. 9).

Amital argues that people are obliged to seek to interpret events. Although mortals cannot comprehend God's considerations, they must attempt to understand the religious meaning of the war. The question is even sharper, he adds, in view of "our certain belief" that this generation is living in a period of the "beginning of redemption." Given this certainty of historical processes, he argued, the outcomes of the war manifest that this is indeed part of a messianic process.

Amital draws on diverse arguments from the world of Jewish mysticism in order to explain why the war should be seen as progress rather than collapse of a messianic process:

1. The war took place against the backdrop of the "resurrection of the kingdom of Israel," which in the future will completely change the relationship between Israel and other nations. Since Jewish nationhood in the State of Israel is a step toward ultimate redemption, said the Rabbi, this process provokes a profound sense of anxiety among other nations of the world in a paradoxical and subconscious manner. The redemption of Israel will cause profound changes in the relations between Israel and said nations, and accordingly, Amital argues, what we are actually witnessing is the death throes of the Gentiles as an independent entity. This is the essential point of the

war—the Gentiles are fighting for their very existence as Gentiles, as the impure. Evil is struggling for its right to exist, since it knows that when the ultimate redemption comes, there will be no place for Satan and the spirit of impurity.

2.   Another example for the messianic dimension of the war is the fact that all the nations of the world participated in it. Amital argues that worldwide support for the Arabs reflects the mystical aspect of the war. "The cultural and moral collapse of Western Christian culture, the talk of the fellowship of nations and international solidarity, all emerges as empty and meaningless."

3.   Israel's relative successes in the war, and the surprising fact that they did not suffer a resounding defeat, is proof of divine intervention and miracles. (Amital 1974, pp. 21–24)

Accordingly, the rabbi reckons that since the beginning of the Return to Zion (and Amital uses this religious term, which has a messianic meaning, in order to describe Zionist activity) there has been no retreat from the course leading to complete redemption. There may indeed be temporary setbacks, but there is no going backwards. All paths, paved or unpaved, lead to the redemption of Israel (Amital 1974, p. 31).

Eventually, after a gradual process, Amital would completely abandon his messianic perspectives. According to Moshe Maya, a graduate of Har Etzion Yeshiva and a scholar of Amital's philosophy, the rabbi stopped using messianic rhetoric in 1993 in the context of the description of Zionist reality (Maya 2004, pp. 55–56). From this point on, a new period in his religious approach emerged.

In 1993, Amital published an article in the settlers' journal *Nekuda* expressing openly public and unequivocal support for the Oslo Accords. Entitled "There is Hope for the Zionist Settlement in Judea, Samaria, and the Gaza Strip," Amital declared that his support for the political process was due not to his support for the vision of peace embodied in the Oslo Accords, but rather to his grave concern at the possibility of war. In this article, he attacked the centrality of the commandment of settling in the Land of Israel among religious Zionist circles. He criticized the assumption that it is forbidden to relinquish Israeli sovereignty over even part of the Land and placed the value of the supremacy of human life in opposition to the value of the Land of Israel (Amital 1993).

As Elyashiv Reichner has noted, several of Amital's students at the yeshiva died in wars. Their death shook the rabbi profoundly and led him to prioritize efforts to secure peace over the forceful retention of the Whole Land of Israel. Reichner also said that the Sabra and Shatila massacre (1982), where Christian pro-Israeli militia murdered more than 3000 Palestinians in Southern Lebanon, reminded the rabbi of Holocaust events, and served as another milestone in his retreat from territorial messianism (Reichner 2008, pp. 163–74). At the point where the personal cost began to rise, the cognitive dissonance became sharper: is keeping the Occupied Territories in return for a human toll and declining morality a price worth paying? This question began to haunt Amital in the 1980s and eventually led him to establish the Meimad movement, which sought to promote his new dovish worldview. In the 1990s, the resolution to the tension was clearly articulated.

In 1994, Amital even admitted that he had previously been wrong and that Israel is not part of a messianic reality. The rabbi used a parable to illustrate his error. He told his students how author of the *Tanya*, Rabbi Shlomo Zalman of Liadi (the "Ba'al HaTanya") (the founder of the Chabad Hasidic movement) studied Torah with his grandson (the "Tzemach Tzedek") in a three-room apartment, where the third, innermost room, could be reached only through the middle room. The Tanya and the Tzemach Tzedek studied in two separate rooms, while in the third room a baby lay in a cradle. Suddenly the baby began to cry. The Tzemach Tzedek failed to hear the cries. The Tanya, who was in the furthest room, stopped his studies and went to relieve the baby. After he finished doing so, he told his grandson, "When someone is learning Torah and fails to hear the crying of a Jewish baby, something is wrong with his studies."

This parable, which Amital often quoted, is understood as a criticism of religious Zionism, which is so concerned with the settlement enterprise that it failed notice the needs

of Israeli society and the importance of building a society founded on morality and justice. In his talk with his students, however, Amital used the parable to make a further point. "I believe," he told them, "that whenever a yeshiva head only teaches Torah to others, and does not study it himself, something is wrong with his studies." Here, he was suggesting that something had been faulty in his own ways. He continued:

> I have made an error, just as many have made errors. At the time I participated in the demonstrations against the [territorial] concessions when Kissinger came to Israel. Later I regretted this. After the Six Day War, Kissinger wanted us to make concessions to the Egyptians and retreat as far as Bir Jafjafa. If we had taken his advice, maybe the Yom Kippur War would not have erupted. I'm not saying that I had not made mistakes. But a Jew who has lived through the Holocaust; a Jew who has lived through five wars—the War of Liberation (1948), the Sinai Campaign (1956), the Six Day War (1967), the Yom Kippur War (1973), and the Lebanon War (1982), not to mention the War of Attrition (1967–1970)—I am allowed to be concerned about a further war. (Amital 2006)

In addition to this pragmatic argument, Amital addressed the messianic question, explicitly stating that it is wrong to examine Israeli reality through the prism of messianism. He explained:

> Friends, it is possible that all those who spoke of "the first shoots of our redemption" were mistaken. It is possible that the students of the Gaon of Vilna were mistaken; it is possible that the students of the Ba'al Shem Tov were mistaken; it is possible that the students of Rabbi Akiva Eger were mistaken when they spoke of the "first shoots of our redemption" as the books state. It is possible that Rabbi Kook was mistaken; it is possible that Rabbi Harlap was mistaken. Even Rabbi Akiva, the great Tannaite, made mistakes. (Amital 2006)

By making these comments, Amital deconstructed the historiography of the messianic strand within religious Zionism (Kasher 1962) which argues that there is a single historical thread beginning in the early days of the modern era with the messianic expectations among the students of the Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of the Hasidic movement (Altshuler 2006); continuing with the emigration to Palestine of a handful of the disciples of the Gaon of Vilna, one of the greatest Jewish scholars of the eighteenth century, who were motivated by messianic activism (Morgenstern 2006); and growing stronger with the teachings of Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Kalischer, who is considered one of the "harbingers of Zionism" and a student of Rabbi Akiva Eger (Myers 2011). Amital even dared to argue that that the entire stream that developed based on the ideology of Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Hacohen Kook may have been based on an erroneous foundation. Mentioning Rabbi Akiva makes it an extreme example—Maimonides, in his book Mishneh Torah (in the chapter Laws of Kings and their Wars, 11), recounts that Rabbi Akiva, the greatest of the Mishnaic sages, falsely crowned Bar Kochva as the messiah-king (Hartman 1978–1979). Bar Kochva, or Ben Kuziva, was the military commander who led the Jewish revolt against the Roman Empire during the reign of the Emperor Hadrian (132–135 AD); the rebellion was violently suppressed and hundreds of thousands of Jews were killed, including Bar Kochva himself. Rabbi Akiva declared Bar Kochva messiah in recognition of his intention to establish independent Jewish life; the establishment of a Jewish kingdom is part of the process of the resurrection of Israel, and this led to Rabbi Akiva's error (Amital 1995). Amital's point is that if Maimonides can argue that Rabbi Akiva made an error, it is possible that Rabbi Kook (senior) made an error; and at this juncture Amital says that he himself is unsure and may have made an error.

Therefore, Amital described the current period as one of "partial redemption." (Amital 1997). In order to expedite complete redemption and the establishment of the idyllic kingdom of Israel, Amital concludes, Israel must do everything possible to establish a more just society based on worthy public values. "We must pay strict attention to moral values in our private and collective lives. Narrowing social gaps, attending to the weak

in society, fighting poverty, and also treating the strangers who live among us fairly—all these will draw us closer to the day for which we long." (Amital 1997).

In conclusion, the path taken by Rabbi Yehuda Amital highlights the profound transformation in his religious beliefs that led him to reject the messianic identification of Zionist action. This reversal occurred during the early stages of the Oslo process. As a result, the rabbi became a prominent advocate of the agreement, in order to prevent bloodshed against the changing reality of the Middle East.

The cognitive dissonance that Amital faced was between holding the Territories as part of a belief in the messianic process and the human price that these beliefs required. Most religious Zionist rabbis argue that holding the territories is a supreme value that must be maintained at all costs. Thus, Amital's retreat from messianism constitutes the exception.

Amital's change was by admitting he had made a mistake, and this allowed him to move away from messianic mysticism. While arguing that Israeli reality does not reflect a messianic reality, Israelis should take into account political considerations. In order to aspire to an ideal society, Israel should take care of the weaker members of society, including the Arab population that lives in the Holy Land.

5. Rabbi Shmuel Tal

The response reflecting messianic retreat and a disconnection from the prophetic ideology of religious Zionism, alongside a rapprochement with the Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) world, was founded in the approach of Rabbi Shmuel Tal, leader of the Torat Chayim Yeshiva. This yeshiva was originally situated in the Gaza Strip; following the Disengagement Plan (2005), where Israel pulled out from all of its settlements in the Gaza Strip, it relocated inside Israel. Rabbi Tal was, therefore, affected in an immediate and personal way by the withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, as was the institution he headed.

Shmuel Tal's background includes education at Netiv Meir Yeshiva, Western Wall Yeshiva, and Mercaz Harav Yeshiva, the mainstream of messianic religious Zionist education.

Rabbi Tal has undergone a profound theological transformation due to the Disengagement. Initially, he was an enthusiastic supporter of the approach that views Zionist revival through the prism of a messianic process, but Tal withdrew from the messianic interpretation of reality. Following this change, he presented an alternative religious program based on the demand for disengagement from cooperation with secular Zionism.

Tal claimed that he was offering a new approach for the adherents of religious Zionism, based on a rejection of the affinity to the state and the aspiration to build a spiritual world based on the Torah and in accordance with the teachings of the leading rabbis of the Haredi community. As if to underscore this shift of allegiance, Tal's yeshiva decided not to celebrate Independence Day in order to emphasize its disconnection from Zionist culture.

Tal emphasizes that an undeniable process has taken place whereby Jews have returned to the Land of Israel and are engaging in Torah study on an unprecedented scale. Thanks must be given to God for this reality, which should not be negated. However, he refuses to celebrate Independence Day, since "dominion has become apostasy."

Tal argues that religious Zionism sought to adopt the positive elements of the state while rejecting its negative aspects. However, he came to realize that the national leadership in the broadest sense of the term (including the media, academia, culture, and courts and government) are all challenging the dominion of God. Joy at the existence of the state is incompatible with the criminal leadership of that state. Accordingly, a decision must be made: "Is God the King, or, Heaven forbid, does dominion rest with the regime that denies Him and fights against all He holds sacred and dear?" The faithful cannot be partners in the establishment of a system that fights against God to its last breath. The state is effectively controlled by the "*erev rav*" (Unsigned 2007). The meaning of this statement is that the rulers of the state are people who claim to be part of the Jewish people, but actually have their origins among the descendants of the Egyptian sorcerers who joined the Jewish people during Exodus. These mystical beliefs are rooted in Kabbalistic literature and have been employed by anti-Zionist Hasidic movements, such as Satmar (Inbari 2016, pp. 173–202).

The rabbi expanded on why he refuses to celebrate Israel's Independence Day, explaining that since the State of Israel challenges the Kingdom of God, its Independence Day cannot be counted as a day that represents the revelation of God's powers –there cannot be two kings who share the same crown.

According to the rabbi, there was never an oppressor who made Jews fall from faith as badly as "the first Prime Minister and his fellow colleagues" (Editorial 2016). In that statement he excluded himself from the mainstream of religious Zionism, which sees the State of Israel as an essential stage toward messianic redemption and praises its leaders with the Hallel blessing. Now Tal argued that David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first Prime Minister, and his first government were one of the Jews' worst enemies.

Shmuel Tal emphasizes that his disconnection is from secular leadership and culture, but not from the Jewish people as a whole; his yeshiva continues to be active in efforts to encourage secular Jews to "return" to the fold of the faithful. He believes that the secular leadership is utterly incompatible with a commitment to the Kingdom of God, so therefore, he prefers disengagement. "We must stop leaning on those who beat us; we must stop praying for their well-begin and maintaining them," he declared in the interview.

Tal compared Israeli media outlets, such as Channel Two television and the newspaper *Yediot Acharonot*, to the Arab satellite station Al-Jazeera and the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Manar* and claimed that Israeli universities are identical to the Palestinian Bir Zeit University. He argued that those who consider themselves part of the state must use its newspaper and its university; it then becomes impossible to distinguish between different streams, all of which become part of a single entity: "Then they are influenced, and consume their culture and their worldview. They lack the tools to distinguish between good and evil. Confusion is rife, and this confusion wins many victims among the national-religious youth."

Tal rejects the possibility of working from within to change the secular system; for him, those who do so merely become part of this very system. Accordingly, he decided to affiliate to the Haredi camp. During the period preceding the Disengagement, Tal met with ultra-Orthodox leaders, including Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky, a leading authority of the ultra-Orthodox society in Israel, who advised him on how to act to highlight his disassociation from the religious Zionist public. The Haredi leadership moved into the vacuum that followed the Disengagement and managed to co-opt Tal's yeshiva (Unsigned 2007).

It is important to emphasize that before the Disengagement, Tal had made a confidential agreement to relocate his Yeshiva to Yad Binyamin, thus acting differently from the mainstream of the settlers, who preferred not to be in contact with the government before the eviction. Thus, it emerges that his retreat from Zionism did not stop him from negotiating with the State to relocate the Yeshiva, with generous compensation. This is a Haredi-like response that obeys the wishes of the government while still making financial arrangements with the state. Furthermore, while he made a relocation agreement with the government, he nevertheless encouraged his students to oppose the eviction actively, and according to Anat Roth, his students' protest was militant (Roth 2014, p. 398).

What led the rabbi to change his ideology toward the State of Israel? He argued that when a great misery befalls the Jews, it is time to engage in self-examination. If God brings troubles on Israel, one should not ignore this and continue as usual. The destruction of Gush Katif was divine retribution that forced a new outlook. The rabbi said that seeing all the State's mechanisms united to evict ten thousand Jews from their homes, to destroy a flourishing piece of land in an ugly and wicked way, with corruption and lies, with cruelty deprived of basic humanity, forced him to change. "It was not a specific trick or corruption that stood by itself. It has allowed me to reach a conclusion, with God's help, that nurtured for several years already, that this kingdom is based on contradiction to God's rule." (Editorial 2016) This quote clarifies that Tal's process of leaving Zionism began prior to the eviction of Gush Katif but reached its logical conclusion with the Disengagement.

Analyzing the path taken by Rabbi Shmuel Tal highlights the profound transformation in his religious beliefs that led him to reject the messianic identification of Zionist action. This example reflects a tendency to retreat into a religious enclave, much like the Haredi

society, as well as a pattern of increasing religious extremism. For Tal, the retreat into the enclave is a withdrawal into mental passivity; the disconnection from Zionism is accompanied by a general disassociation from political activism. Tal decided to renounce the prophetic vision of religious Zionism, to admit a mistake in the collaboration with the secular state, and to turn into a non-Zionist.

Whereas most of the rabbis of messianic religious Zionism remained loyal to the State of Israel even after the Disengagement and the territorial retreat did not break their commitment to Zionism, Tal could not remain in the same political and theological place after the forceful eviction of his home and Yeshiva. His transition to non-Zionism was an expression of his inability to maintain the cognitive dissonance while remaining a loyal Zionist.

6. Discussion

The religious leaders presented in this article are examples of individuals who confessed a theological mistake and changed their ideology. Both Amital and Tal reached similar conclusions that the prophetic vision of messianic religious Zionism that connects Israeli territorial expansion with messianic advancement is not valid anymore for them, but each as a result took a different, almost opposite political path.

It is unusual for religious leaders to make sharp turns in their beliefs, particularly when these are prophetic; as such, most religious Zionist rabbis have not changed their political/theological views on the role of the State of Israeli in the messianic drama as a result of Israeli territorial compromises (Inbari 2012, pp. 107–32). Hellinger et al. (2018) called the attitude of the rabbinical elite of religious Zionism a "theological-normative balance", allowing them to absorb territorial retreats that threaten to shake the foundation of their beliefs without making changes to their views, and without resorting to violence.

Dramatic ideological changes can create profound tolls on leaders who find themselves standing against their own communities. There is much in common to the two examples. Both rabbis were faced with extreme situations and were forced to confront a crisis on a personal level. Amital had to confront the death of his students in Israel's wars and Tal was forced to experience the uprooting of his home and yeshiva against his will. They changed their opinions after the events touched them personally even though these thoughts were incubating even beforehand, highlighting the crucial role of personal experience in such theological and ideological transformations.

However, while the changes these rabbis underwent seem at first glance to be profound and radical, a closer examination reveals that they were actually relatively mild. None of them renounced God, none converted to a different religion, and both remained Orthodox Jews. The change they underwent was confined mainly to the political level. They argued that their transformation was merely a reinterpretation of God's will, and that their previous position had been the product of a human error.

Neither did they part ways with their original communities. Up to his death, Amital remained the head of a yeshiva in a West Bank community. After Tal was uprooted from Gaza, he reopened his yeshiva at a different location and continued to constitute an important voice within religious Zionist discourse.

To return to our case studies, in a situation where a leader's students die in wars or his home is demolished, he may face a complex cognitive situation. One reaction might be to question the very existence of God; another is to doubt the nature of His divine judgment. According to the consumer model mentioned earlier, the exit option would be manifested in the complete renouncement of God. The case studies presented in this article do not include an instance of such a reaction, but this response can be found, and a famous example is noted below.

Psychological research has shown that questioning divine judgment, expressing anger toward God, or considering exit are all viewed as unacceptable among people with a high level of faith. A close, positive, and resilient bond with God can for some be associated

with assertiveness toward Him; however, this possibility is open only after assertion has been clearly distinguished from exit responses (Exline et al. 2012, 2014).

To return to the cognitive dissonance model, the difficult situation on the ground and troubling questions over God's justice can create sharp cognitive tension. Accordingly, it may be easier to reinterpret God's will than to level accusations at Him. At this point, the voice option can come to play; rather than accusing God of injustice, it may be easier to accuse a third party of human error. Thus, the blame can be shifted from God to religious institutions and leaders who misunderstood God's true will. For example, according to this new model, new interpretations may argue that God prefers peace to the Whole Land of Israel or that God does not favor Zionism.

I must emphasize that those who voiced a change still remained within their religious communities and advocated for reform from within, not from the outside. Their position was still one of loyalty to their base religious community. With this in mind, their call for change should be interpreted as a form of theodicy—the justification of God's actions. The reinterpretation came in order to offer a new theological meaning to a radical situation. It is an expression of loyalty to God and to the community.

By way of comparison, it is interesting to refer to Elie Wiesel's response to the Holocaust as presented in his novel *Night*, and to Rabbi Yissachar Shlomo Teichtel's (1885–1945) response in his book *Em HaBanim Semekha*. Teichtel was born in Hungary, and studied at the prestigious Pressburg Yeshiva, and later became the av beit din and Chief Rabbi of Pishtian in west Slovakia. The rabbi was a supporter of the radical line of Hungarian Orthodoxy and believed in the importance of religious strictness and opposition to Zionism (Keren-Kratz 2020; Silber 1992). In 1942, due to increasingly severe anti-Semitic persecution, Teichtel fled from Slovakia and arrived in Budapest as a refugee. He began writing his treatise *Em HaBanim Semekha* (Happy Mother of Children) while he was still in Slovakia, before the deportations to Auschwitz, and without understanding the full scale of the Nazi persecutions. The impact of his situation as a refugee left a mark on the subsequent development of the manuscript, which he finished in 1943. In 1944, he heard a rumor that the deportations from Slovakia had ended, and he decided to return. He was apprehended by the Nazis during his journey and died on the way to Auschwitz (Hershkovitz 2009). He wrote most of his book in an attic in Budapest. In the book, he discussed the changing times and criticized Hungarian Orthodoxy for taking the wrong side on the question of supporting Zionism. The book was published just a year before the extermination of Hungarian Jewry and included a powerful lamentation on the decision made by Orthodox leaders to instruct their followers to stay in Europe and not to escape. The rabbi confessed that he had once held the same views but stressed that he had now changed his mind.

Teichtel's response was like those of Tal and Amital. He remained in the fold of Jewish Orthodoxy while voicing sharp criticism and switching from ultra-Orthodoxy to religious Zionism. Eli Wiesel's response was different. According to the novel *Night*, Wiesel has grown up in a Belz Hasidic family in Hungary prior to the Holocaust. After the Nazi invasion of Hungary, he was deported to Auschwitz, where he lost his entire family and barely managed to survive. His trials and tribulations as a young man going through the Holocaust led him to declared that, for him, God died in the death camps: "Behind me, I heard the same man asking: *Where is God now?* And I heard a voice within me answer him: *. . . Here He is—He is hanging here on these gallows.*" (Weisel 1969).

Wiesel's response to the cognitive dissonance created by the question regarding God's justice was secularizing exit. After he was liberated, he did not return to the fold of Hasidic Judaism, and although he kept a traditional way of life and developed a career as a scholar of Hasidic Judaism, he put the blame on God. This contrasts with the response to the Holocaust among some Hasidim, as witnessed in the Satmar movement, who blamed Zionism for the disaster (an example of rationalization by blaming human action) (Ravitzky 1993, pp. 40–78).

Wiesel's exit response was not seen in the case of the rabbis examined in this paper. They preferred to voice their complaint while remaining within the fold of Orthodox

Judaism. Their theodicy was a type of rationalization that can take the form of blaming a third party (Dawson 2011). This also sets the boundaries of Orthodox Judaism: One can blame oneself for misunderstanding the true will of God, or blame one's community for following an erroneous way. It is also possible to switch from one Orthodox movement to another. However, blaming God for being cruel is off-limits and unacceptable.

The transformation seen in the cases presented above may be understood as attempts to cope with the tension that results from prophetic disconfirmation. Festinger's model of cognitive dissonance discussed a situation where, after disconfirmation, some believers remain loyal to the old faith. So far, most of the research on prophetic movements focused on this response. However, some believers can decide to depart from a failed prophecy. Even if believers divert from their original faith, thus making a religious switch, and renounce a prophetic belief, this may still be seen as an act of loyalty, just like those who decide to stay, in cases when they change their opinions while remaining part of a broader movement. Thus, their departure should be categorized not as a sharp "exit", but as a "voice." Theirs is the criticism of the insider. Remaining loyal to a broader movement, in this case Orthodox Judaism, allowed the rabbis to adjust and continue with even greater strength.

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