

# Eretz Acheret

About Israel and Judaism



From morality to ideology and back  
By Yehudah Mirsky | 21/01/2010

*The ideologies that supplanted the old world swallowed up morality, and have since themselves expired. With their decline, the moral values that the ideologies coveted or implemented in their early days disappeared. We are left with a moral void*

*“We do not yet have the time for an in-depth spiritual life. The only thing that justifies the life of our generation, which gives it meaning and value, is the very effort to build. Beyond that, we are as feeble and meager as saplings that have not yet taken root. [...] But there are days yet ahead of us, a time when many Jews will be living in this land, and our cultural distress will give them no peace. And what today is judged as contempt, whether due to strenuous work or complacency, will for those who follow us become a great sense of distress.”*

*Berl Katznelson, 1934*

The crisis currently fragmenting the Israeli political system has a number of reasons – but is perhaps chiefly – a moral crisis, one that represents yet another facet of the moral crisis that the Jewish people is facing in the modern age. From the perspective of Jewish tradition, morality is not restricted only to the demands of Jewish law or to the lean, intellectualized system that we call “ethics,” but rather encompasses the totality of a person's relations with other people, with God and with himself. Jewish morality, as Rabbi Kook said, is the practical expression of our inner life, of the duties of our heart, of the soul. But the Jewish-Israeli soul has been pounded and crushed in the past few hundred years, and the place of morality is scarred. In the crucible of modernity, the values and spiritual-moral procedures of the Jewish heritage developed into ideologies or were assimilated into them. Now that the ideologies have dissolved, we are left bereft.

The Zionist story began with the rise of modern anti-Semitism and the crumbling of the pattern of community life in Europe from the nineteenth century on. Europe is a huge continent, and the lives of the Jews under the Czar, the House of Hapsburg and

the regimes to the west differed from one another; the lives of the Jews in the East and in Muslim countries were also very different. Nevertheless and despite the enormous disparity between the various communities, there is no escaping the conclusion that Jewish life everywhere changed radically from the beginning of the nineteenth century to its end.

The harbingers of the decline were already evident in the eighteenth century with the appearance of new religious and spiritual authorities – maskilim, Hassidic rabbis and scholars of the school of thought of the Vilna Gaon – who competed with the traditional rabbis and undermined their authority. It comes then as no surprise that the members of the first waves of immigration to the land of Israel emerged from among these three groups.

Jewish life and the hundreds of years of halachic tradition dissipated within just a few decades – a speed that to this day awakens amazement and calls for further investigation. The pincers in which the Jews found themselves pushed them outside the traditional frameworks in large numbers. The responsibility for this belongs on the one hand to the Christian hostility towards Jewish identity and on the granting of social and economic possibilities only in return for abandoning one's Jewish identity and the community; and on the other, it also belongs to the rabbis and community leaders.

The willingness of the rabbis and leaders to hand the children of the poorer members of society over to the Czar's army explains why so many Jews fled the community the first moment they could, as soon as the doors were opened. The mass flight from the strictures of Jewish law represented – and in fact still represents – a harsh denunciation of and an existential challenge to the world of the Torah.

The visionaries among the rabbinical leadership initiated new and creative models in order to safeguard tradition. Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin established his yeshiva and created a new learning structure, which exalted the study of Torah as the supreme act of Jewish devotion. In the mid-nineteenth century, Rabbi Israel Salanter realized that the Jewish crisis was essentially a moral one. His vision of moral and educational renewal was given partial expression in the yeshiva world.

### **The challenge of personal devotion**

However, abandoning the Jewish code of law did not express a profound abandonment of morality. In the modern age, a number of value-based-spiritual systems developed among European Jewry, and all drew on the various layers of Jewish tradition. Orientations revolving around concern for the physical, economic and social needs of the masses of the Jewish people and the desire to integrate into the surrounding societies were expressed in the formation of new organizations and especially in the founding of workers', Zionist and non-Zionist movements.

Orthodoxy, on the other hand, emphasized the most outstandingly spiritual aspects of Jewish heritage, halacha and Torah-based literature, at the center of which lay the worship of God. This in no way implies that Orthodoxy took no interest in the

commandments that govern how people should behave in their relations with one another. Just the opposite is true. However, this moral obligation did not express itself in ideas or in a striving to bring about a systemic and structural change in the Jewish community or in a desire to take responsibility for society and its institutions as a whole.

Zionism tried to solve the problem of the Jews and Judaism – to guarantee the physical survival of the Jewish people and to create a new values framework to give renewed meaning to its existence and the acts required to maintain its existence. Moreover, Zionism and the labor movement challenged Orthodoxy on the crucial dimension of personal devotion – the Zionists that immigrated to the land of Israel had to contend with the physical difficulties involved in immigration and settlement, and the Jewish revolutionaries risked their lives in Czarist Russia and under Western governments in their preference for the life of struggle to a comfortable bourgeois life. They demonstrated loyalty to their values and a willingness to sacrifice, and these represented an alternative and genuine competition to the world of the Torah. This devotion was a source of strength and conviction.

The modern political-social field, in which the pre-modern order was replaced by a competing field, called for a political regrouping. Thus, the political collectives as we know them came into being, and they coalesced around shared values and interests, in all the various versions and dynamic processes. The positions were translated into ideologies – Zionism, socialism, religiosity – of all the various stripes and wondrous combinations: socialist, liberal and revisionist Zionists; all the various movements of religious Zionism; the Bund (a Jewish labor non-Zionist movement in Lithuania, Poland and Russia), and the Jewish radicalism in Western countries; all the various versions of the ultra-Orthodox world. All these are what the eminent sociologist Karl Mannheim called “total ideologies,” philosophies that promoted and led social-political activity with clear intent, and above all, a burning passion.

The Holocaust more or less put an end to the internal Jewish debate over whether or not to support the Zionist project: but it did not do away with the wide range of values and ideologies in the Jewish people, which demonstrated impressive perseverance after the Holocaust and during the struggle for the life of the fledgling Jewish state against its enemies. Universal morality, the commitment to the continued existence of the Jewish people, the bond to all that was sacred and God by means of observance of the commandments – all were inevitable dimensions of the relation to the human and textual sources of Jewish existence.

The Jewish ideological movements that were formed in the land of Israel – the Histadrut Labor Federation and the labor movements, the kibbutz movements, Mizrachi, Herut, Beitar, Agudath Israel – shaped the face of the nation, controlled its central institutions, the media, the youth movements and entire sections of its civic society. They set the boundaries of the expanses of the Jews and Arabs of Israel.

Not only did the ideologies organize life, they also sought to constrain the unbridled selfishness that is an inseparable part of the human condition, as it is of the Jewish condition. Indeed, the system is human, meaning that one can find in it corruption, lack of consideration, injustices and simply an abundance of stupidity. Nevertheless, the values that lie at the foundation of the ideologies represented a binding moral

commitment of one kind or another. Jewish existence as a whole and specifically the Zionist movement demand and require a fair amount of sacrifice on the part of all those that claim to identify with it at any level beyond a mere declaration. The modesty that characterized the lifestyles of the state's leaders, both on the right and the left, emanated not only, and perhaps not at all from the meager means at their disposal, but rather from the ethos of self-sacrifice and of the value of the welfare of the people, around which they constructed their public lives.

As we all know, the ideologies of the past are long gone, the parties that championed them have become shadows of their former selves and their slogans mere echoes. There are a number of reasons for this, some unique to Israeli history and others related to global processes:

Socialism has exhausted its essential effectiveness. The construction of a functioning and egalitarian economic system to a large extent, over time, led to stagnation and negative economic growth. The economic policies of the Likud and Labor governments that arose from the ashes of the Mapai establishment aspired to imitate American capitalism, without recognizing the large disparities and social deterioration that it would lead to. American society had learned from its long and bitter experience that capitalism requires a system of laws that protect the rights of workers and consumers, as well as the environment.

The vision of the Greater Land of Israel that sustained both the Likud and religious Zionism ran aground on the reality of geography and demographics; the best intentions of the leaders, their impressive activities and idealistic devotion are incapable of inspiring Israeli society as a whole.

The secular left has been shown to be no less messianic than the Gush Emmunim settlement movement, and no less one-dimensional, as it blames everything that ails society on the "occupation," which is of course the exclusive responsibility of the religious sector. The left is still unwilling to admit its responsibility for a considerable part of the situation, among other things, because it has proved unable to come up with a set of Jewish values to serve as a genuine alternative for current Israeli society.

### **The post-ideological crisis**

The ideologies that swallowed morality have drawn their last breath, and with them have disappeared the moral values that the ideologies coveted or implemented in their early days. We are left with an empty void, which has quickly enough filled with the narrow, chilling selfishness that we are witness to morning, noon and night.

Two significant new trends have appeared on the Israeli scene since the collapse of the ideologies, and both are indicative of the post ideological crisis: the Russian immigration and Shas.

The Russian immigrants were forcibly and cruelly torn from the Jewish people for seventy years. They came to Israel imbued with a rich cultural life, one that the pioneers of the early twentieth century could understand and appreciate. However,

this cultural baggage was foreign to the pioneers' later successors. This wave of immigration aspired, and rightly so, to improve its economic lot within Israeli society, which had shed the values of solidarity, and found itself facing an omnipotent monopolistic rabbinic establishment that had become so complacent and self-satisfied that it lost the ability to communicate on an equal footing, without abusing its power, with the immigrants and the rest of Israeli society.

The Jews who immigrated from Eastern countries in the early days of the state could make neither head nor tail of the entire complex of Zionist ideologies, and were oppressed by them too. Only after a few decades did they find an ideological-partisan expression for themselves – even if only to a partial extent – in the Shas party. While Shas did a great deal for the electorate that voted for it, as a party it is a reflection of the group-power-play discourse that overtook Israel. Shas is a product of the post-ideological period in Israel, and like most of the parties today, it does not have any pretensions of seeking to lead the country, and seeks only to get its hands on as much of its resources and as many of its institutions as it can for its own narrow sectorial aims.

But ultimately, the problem does not lie in one ideology or another, but rather in the ideological mindset itself. Any all-embracing, total ideology, even if founded on the best of intentions, is ultimately a form of idolatry. And like all forms of idolatry, at the end of the day it implodes under the weight of its own pretensions and is unable to supply the total, all-embracing meaning that it promised.

A total ideological mindset is derived from an abstract ideal and from an attempt to apply it to reality within some type of straitjacket. Ideological thinking acts on a sublime conceptual level that represents a source of inspiration and serves to encourage great achievements, some even larger than life. But the strength and destructive power that it embodies lie in the very fact that it ignores the vicissitudes of life, even the most basic day-to-day needs that make up the fabric of our lives. All too often, this type of mindset sacrifices people on the altar of the abstract. Zionism, which was a kind of ideological mindset, started to be depicted in the public mind as a demanding, even cruel ideology. Consequently, it comes as no surprise that over time people began to reject it, whether this rejection is expressed as post-Zionism or as a behavioral obsession with “not being taken advantage of.”

The ideological systems in Israel stem from a view of the world as consisting of dichotic opposites: religious versus secular, eastern Israelis versus western Israelis, left versus right, and so on. This type of thinking ignores the fact that individual and group identities in Israel and the world are dynamic and in a constant state of flux.

One cannot expect the political or economic institutions to perfectly supply existential meaning. One of the saddest and most important lessons of the twentieth century teaches us that this kind of expectation is a blood-soaked path on the way to both political and spiritual crisis. But we ought to refresh our memories regarding a number of basic concepts that will guide our collective lives here, despite all the deeply rooted – and genuine – disagreements between us.

**Thinking bottom up**

We need a mindset that is interested in moving from theory to practice in a wide variety of Israeli and human identities – thinking from the bottom up, to examine ourselves in the light of reality, with an effort by individuals and groups to rebuild themselves morally. To that end, we must try to create a language for a public discourse involving incisive arguments about our economic and political path out of a basic desire on the part of each and every one of us to share our fate with all the citizens of the state.

There is no single group in Israeli society – and no single individual – who can shirk responsibility for the situation in which we find ourselves. However, similarly, there is no single group in Israeli society that does not contain within it forces of creativity, giving, consideration and renewal that we can all learn from.

Classic Jewish morality took shape out of a constant dialogue between the laws of halacha, the values of morality and the spirit and daily challenges of reality. Jewish moral thought at its best is characterized by attention to detail and the building of meaningful systems based on a continuous regard for details and a personal responsibility to uphold them. Part of the vision of the monumental leaders of Zionism, people such as Rabbi Kook, Bialik, A.D. Gordon and Berl Katznelson, was that the encounter with life in the land of Israel would bring about a renewal of tradition, albeit in new ways that would engender the creation of a new system of halacha, one sustained by the classic sources and that integrates the vision of values with the discipline of practice. We have already reached that great spiritual distress that Katznelson warned us of more than seventy years ago, of a society voided of its values. And so, the time has come to continue on the path of those early Zionist thinkers, from the place where it was cut short. The foundation for a new halachic system needs to be laid, one that conducts a dialogue not only with the classic sources, but also with day-to-day reality. And the truth shall spring from the earth.