

“Halakhic Man in Gaza”: A Practical Rejoinder

By: DAVID HOFFMAN

David P. Goldman’s article “Halakhic Man in Gaza” (*Hakirah*, Vol. 35, Summer 2024) offers a diagnosis of Israeli society’s deep divisions and suggests an approach to healing them based on the teachings of Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik. This approach requires aligning those divisions with the “antinomies” found in R. Soloveitchik’s philosophical works, variously referred to in the article as the dichotomy between Majestic Man and Covenantal Man, between Adam the First and Adam the Second, and between cognitive man and *homo religiosus*. The last two are both contrasted with halakhic man, who transcends both. Although the article includes some valuable insights, there are parts that I cannot let pass without comment.

Regarding Rav Soloveitchik’s philosophy, together with its antecedents in Western philosophy and culture and, *l-havdil*, in the Sources of Written and Oral Torah, I defer to Goldman, whose breadth of knowledge and depth of understanding of these matters no doubt far exceed mine. If his article only addressed an abstract philosophical question, or only urged that Torah Judaism “seize the high ground of scientific discovery from the barren materialism of the secular” in a general way, I would have little to contribute.

But Goldman’s article ties his program explicitly to the current woes of Israeli society, and in this area, it falls short. This reply focuses on the defects in Goldman’s article that stem from its failure to conform to the “facts on the ground” in Israel, so I call it a practical rejoinder.

Hakirah is neither an academic journal of sociology nor a survey of current political events, so some may question if this rejoinder belongs in it. But for Jews who are true to the principles of Torah, what happens in the Land of Israel matters. It has Jewish religious significance that events in the diaspora, even in the diaspora’s Jewish communities, do not share. And if what happens in Israel is to be analyzed using Jewish philosophy

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as an instrument, or vice versa, the analysis must be constructed on a solid foundation of facts.

In the first of the sections that follow, I discuss inconsistencies in Goldman's definition of the societal dichotomy that he wishes to relate to the philosophical dichotomies identified by R. Soloveitchik. In the second section, I show that his description of Israeli society is overly simplified, to the point where it cannot serve as a stand-in for the society as a whole. The third section states the most fundamental problem with Goldman's approach, namely, that it treats the conflict in Israeli society as primarily ideological, when in fact, it is primarily sociological. The fourth section gives a detailed description of this sociological divide and how it relates to the disturbances in Israel that preceded the outbreak of the war in Gaza. The next five sections provide five different perspectives on the divide, based on how it plays out in specific situations. The final section concludes the article, first returning to Goldman's article and summarizing the criticisms of it, and then offering some suggestions about a way forward that is consistent with the values of Torah.

The Shapeshifter

Goldman's attempt to match up the divisions in Israeli society with the concepts in Rav Soloveitchik's writings is confusing. He claims that the existential threat Israel faces stems from conflicting messianisms. But like a mythological shapeshifter, the number and identities of these contending messianisms shift without warning and sometimes with bewildering rapidity. Initially, he describes it as a two-sided conflict between the disciples of the Ratziya¹ and secular millenarians:

In its most extreme form, this division [in Israeli society] cannot be resolved, because it pits against each other two competing messianic ideologies: The secular-millenarian belief that the dissolution of all nationalities into a kind of world citizenship will eliminate the underlying causes of national conflict, and the religious-messianic belief that the apotheosis of the nation of Israel through the settlement of the nation to its Biblical borders will hasten the coming of the Messianic era. There is no possible compromise between these two forms of messianism, because they are identical in method; they disagree only on how human action can harness the will of Heaven.

¹ The Ratziya (הרצי"ה): Widely-used acronym for Rav Tzvi Yehudah Ha-Kohen Kook, son and successor of Rav Avraham Yitzhak Ha-Kohen Kook, who is similarly often referred to as the Re'aya (הראי"ה).

But only two paragraphs later, the relevant dichotomy is presented as being between “the technological elite of Tel Aviv and the Haredi leaders of Bnei Brak,” also described there as “Israel’s quietist religious minority.” Quietism and settlement are different enterprises, as Goldman eventually acknowledges:

If there is one way to force the coming of Mashiaḥ, it precludes other ways to force the coming of Mashiaḥ. The messianism of the Left cannot be reconciled with the messianism of [the Ratzia and his followers], and neither can be reconciled with the [Haredi quietist] belief that a certain density of mitzvah performance will occasion the appearance of Mashiaḥ. The messianism of the Left and the messianism [sic] of the religious fuels the seemingly irresolvable conflict in Israeli society.

Here, the dichotomy becomes temporarily a trichotomy. Yet in the final sentence, two horns of the trichotomy, two irreconcilable messianisms, fuse into one “messianism [singular] of the religious.” And as Goldman notes in an earlier paragraph, “There are many variants of messianism with great influence in Israel,” suggesting that what we have here is neither a dichotomy nor a trichotomy but a free-for-all. Towards the end of the article, Goldman returns to the vision of a bipolar conflict between Tel Aviv and Bnei Brak, with the Ratzianist alternative silently abandoned:

The discovery of scientific *hiddushim* is a religious obligation as much as learning Gemara. It is also a matter of *pikuah nefesh*, of the survival of the Jewish State. R. Soloveitchik built a bridge between the worlds of science and religion, using the language of the former to illuminate the latter. Israel’s existential crisis should inspire us to finish his work. Otherwise, the secularism of the Israeli left will lose the Jewish people, and the quietism of the Israeli ultra-Orthodox will lose the Jewish State.

Taken in isolation, this last sentence begs the response from Religious Zionism, “We are the solution. We learn Torah. We keep the *mitzvot*. We educate our children to do the same, even better than we do ourselves. Some of them have gone on to become great *talmidei hakhamim*. We serve in the IDF, often in combat units. We support our families and strengthen Israel’s economy through our many trades and professions, including, in no small measure, careers in STEM fields. And when doing so, we pay our lawful taxes. Let all the Jews in Israel become Religious Zionists, and both the material and the spiritual welfare of the Jewish State will be assured.”

Of course, this ringing declaration will not by itself suffice to resolve Israel's existential crisis. But it shows how this attempt—and by its example, any attempt—to reduce that crisis to two opposed extremes is destined to fall short. Trying to fit all these conflicting messianisms—or, to use a less loaded term, these competing goal-oriented ideologies—into the straitjacket of “the ‘tragic’ dichotomy between Majestic Man and Covenantal Man” does not seem to work.

Missing Stones

There is a more fundamental problem with Goldman's approach: He attempts to use three stones to represent the elaborate mosaic composed of many stones that is the Jewish polity of the State of Israel. (Including Israel's non-Jewish communities would add more details to the picture, best left for another day.) Goldman seeks to simplify matters by presenting the division in Israeli society “in its most extreme form,” but this is like trying to understand the politics of a country that is a multiparty democracy by comparing the views of two small parties, one from the extreme left and the other from the extreme right. They might play an outsized role in the country's political life, but viewing them in combination does not show what the much larger middle ground looks like.

For example, Goldman sometimes uses Tel Aviv and Bnei Brak as shorthand for the dichotomy in Israeli society between Majestic Man and Covenantal Man. Clearly, when he refers to Tel Aviv, he is thinking of North Tel Aviv. But what about South Tel Aviv? If you go there and ask some of the long-time Jewish residents their opinions of Israel's judicial system, you will be told that they do not approve of it. In fact, you are likely to hear very strong views about it expressed in no uncertain terms. But those views will not fit into any of the slots of Goldman's taxonomy. They are not tied in any way to Ratzianist settlement initiatives or to quietist Haredi spiritual aspirations. Many of those expressing them are not even *shomrei Shabbat* by Orthodox standards. Why, then, do they feel so strongly about judicial reform? And why did they feel personally threatened by the mass demonstrations against it? We will return to these questions soon.

Here is a different stone from the mosaic: Goldman finds his archetype of Adam the First among the denizens of upscale, urban North Tel Aviv, where people are “mainly secular, and preponderantly opposed to Israel's judicial reform.” He points out that many of them are the same sort of secular, left-wing, post-nationalists as are found among the cognitive, financial, and political elites of other world metropolises, such as

Paris, Berlin, London, New York, Los Angeles, and Tokyo. In fact, a random selection of such people taken from these seven cities (including Tel Aviv), if brought together, would find that they have more in common with one another than each does with a typical fellow citizen of his or her own country. Understandably, some such people might see a single state encompassing everyone living between the Jordan and the Mediterranean, a variation on the “bi-national state ... proposed by Martin Buber” that Goldman references, as the ideal cure for Israel’s geopolitical ills.

But many of the most vociferous opponents of the judicial reform effort come from a different geographic setting and have a different worldview. Their setting is agrarian, not urban. And their worldview is not post-nationalist but rather the opposite; they are firmly dedicated to the idea of Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people. Many of them continue to hope for a two-state solution precisely because—while they wish the Arabs who live across the Green Line well and see them as potential partners for peace—they have no interest in living among them or sharing a state with them. I refer to many members of the nonreligious kibbutzim, who represent not the materialism of Adam the First, but rather an alternative spirituality, a heretical realization of Adam the Second. In their own Marxist, atheistic way, they are just as dedicated to *yishuv Eretz Yisrael* as the Ratzia’s followers on the hilltops of Judea and Samaria.

Or take Religious Zionism, which is far more than just Ratzianism. It is telling that Goldman scrupulously avoids using the terms Religious Zionist and National Religious, without ever explaining why he does so.² As part of his historical survey of the views of Israeli Torah scholars about “land for peace,” he brings a quotation in which there is an incidental reference to the existence in 1993 of an unnamed “rabbinic seminary” coled by R. Aharon Lichtenstein and R. Yehudah Amital. This seminary is, of course, none other than Yeshivat Har Etzion, known to generations of its English-speaking *talmidim* as “the Gush.” That it has existed for over fifty-five years, during which thousands of students have passed through its doors, many of whom have gone on to hold important positions in Israeli society, that it was one of the first and most influential of the *yeshivot besder*,³ and—most importantly—that it is the intellectual wellspring of a

² He refers in one place to “Israeli religious nationalists,” but the context makes clear that he is referring only to Ratzianists.

³ The *yeshivot besder* integrate post-high-school yeshivah study with IDF service. The first two were Kerem B’Yavne (1959) and Shal’avim (1961). After the Six-Day War, three more were established, Har Etzion in Alon Shvut (in the Gush Etzion region, hence the English moniker), Hakotel near the Western Wall, and

different religious nationalist *hashkafah*, distinct from Ratzianism, which preexisted the “land for peace” debate and has long outlasted it, all add up to a square peg that does not fit into any of the round holes Goldman has available to him. In fact, the institutional spectrum of Religious Zionism spans the whole range from Yeshivat Har Hamor⁴ to the Shalom Hartman Institute.⁵ Religious Zionism presents a richer and more diverse picture that Goldman’s framework allows for.

These are three of the “stones” missing from Goldman’s mosaic, and there are many more.

Contempt and Anger

The deepest flaw in Goldman’s article, as it relates to events in Israel, is a fundamental misunderstanding about the internal Israeli conflict that boiled over in 2023. In fairness to him, it is a widespread misunderstanding, particularly outside of Israel, but this makes it all the more important to correct it. **The conflict is not primarily ideological but sociological.** And it is mainly fueled not by high-flown ideas about ethics in the public sphere or deep concerns about the sort of country one’s children will inherit—though both of these are certainly important—but rather by more elemental, primal feelings: contempt and anger. Contempt that is expressed not just in words but also in actions that reflect a thoughtless, dismissive, complete failure of empathy. And anger, sometimes rising to fury, at being treated in this way and with this attitude.

Nir in Kiryat Arba. There are now over sixty *yeshivot besder*, representing a variety of *hashkafot* within the broad range of Religious Zionism.

⁴ Yeshivat Har Hamor, founded in 1997 by R. Yisrael Tzvi Thau, is the leader of a group of institutions sharing a common Ratzianist *hashkafah* known as *Kav*. This group rivals a similar one led by Merkaz Harav, the yeshiva of the Re’aya and the Ratzia, from which Har Hamor split off. As compared to Merkaz Harav’s *hashkafah*, *Kav* is more quietist (expressed in Religious Zionist nomenclature as being “more *mamlakhti*”) and puts greater emphasis on ideological conformity (in its case, to the positions of R. Thau). In both its Merkaz Harav and Har Hamor branches, Ratzianism is more halakhically stringent than other Religious Zionist traditions, so its detractors sometimes refer to it as “*Haredi-Leumi*,” while its adherents generally prefer the term “*Torani*.”

⁵ Shalom Hartman Institute, founded in 1976 by Prof. David Hartman, is the umbrella institution for several research and educational initiatives. Although officially nondenominational and pluralistic, many of its students and faculty are from the National Religious population, and it maintains separate boys’ and girls’ high schools that are part of the State-Religious school system and that describe themselves as “experimental Orthodox” and “Orthodox feminist,” respectively.

The *Branje* and the Basket

In September 2016, US Presidential candidate Hillary Clinton famously referred to part of the Right in the US as a “basket of deplorables.” Similarly, the conflict in Israel is a fight between, on the one hand, an elite that is largely monolithic, and on the other hand, a basket of diverse types that the members of this elite consider deplorable. A partial list of those in this basket includes the following:

- Settlers in Judea and Samaria.
- Haredim.
- Religious Zionists (except for a few “tame” ones, such as the occasional Supreme Court justice or public intellectual).
- Non-Ashkenazim.
- Residents of the *periferia*, that is, socioeconomically-challenged areas that are remote, in terms of travel time, from the major urban centers.
- Individuals with low educational attainments or who follow blue-collar trades.
- Unreformed Revisionists, that is, supporters of the Right from families associated with the pre-State Revisionist movement led by Ze’ev Jabotinsky and Menachem Begin.

Examples *par excellence* of the last category are Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the Justice Minister serving under him, Yariv Levin, who led the effort to enact judicial reforms.

Note that the categories listed above are neither mutually exclusive nor, for the most part, binary yes-or-no choices. It is possible to check several boxes, for example as a *Haredi Sefardi* Jew who lives over the Green Line. A clean-shaven Religious Zionist with a small knitted *kippah* will be more acceptable than one with a soup-bowl-sized *kippah*, long *peyot*, and a full beard. The more boxes you check and the more “darkly” you check them, so to speak, the more deplorable you will be considered. (Arabs and other religious minorities constitute a third major division, not discussed here.)

If you do not check any box—or perhaps only one, very lightly—then you may be eligible to be part of the elite. In other words, you are probably an Ashkenazi Jew who grew up in a good neighborhood of a major urban center, in a well-to-do suburb, or on a nonreligious kibbutz associated with the Left. You are secular or, at worst, mildly traditional. You are not suspected of harboring rightwing sympathies, especially if your family tree

includes Revisionists. You are, according to your stage of life, well educated: If you are a recent high-school graduate, your school is known as a superior one; if you are older, you have one or more degrees from Israel's top-tier universities. And your IDF service was most likely done in a selective, high-status occupation, such as Air Force pilot, cyberwarfare specialist, or commando in one of the special force units that handle top secret, high-risk missions. Such IDF service is a kind of *noblesse oblige* that helps confirm your suitability to belong, while also being more available to you as an option if you already belong, a matter we will return to.

At the heart of this elite is the *branje*, a word with the original meaning of “guild.” The *branje* consists of those elite members who are unusually wealthy (known in Hebrew as *ba-taikunim*, that is, “the tycoons”), unusually successful in their professions, unusually well-connected or, in some cases, all three. Needless to say, being a Supreme Court justice or holding another high position in the legal system counts as being “unusually successful in one’s profession.” Membership in the *branje* is to a certain extent hereditary, though it is possible for an outsider to gain admission or for an insider to fall out. The *branje* has no written bylaws, membership list, elected officers, or formal meetings, and its members will deny that it even exists. But members of the *branje* are expected to look out for one another’s interests, as well as for the common interests of the *branje* and the elite. **And members of the *branje* have been at the forefront of the struggle against the judicial reform and, more generally, against the coalition of deplorables that took office in late 2022, as leaders, promoters, and financiers.**⁶

Voices from the Past

This conflict between the elite and the deplorables did not pop up out of nowhere on the day the judicial reform was proposed. It is a wound that has been festering in the body politic of the Jewish State almost since its inception.

In the Fall of 1982, about five years after the first non-elite government in the country’s history took office—headed by Menachem Begin, an unreformed Revisionist—Amos Oz, a prominent Israeli author and left-wing intellectual, spent two months going about the country and listening to what people from various backgrounds, different from his own,

⁶ Besides the factors discussed in this article, judicial reform and the Netanyahu-led coalition are often seen as threatening to entrenched *economic* privilege. However, an adequate exploration of this aspect of the problem would require a separate article.

had to say. He then worked his notes of these meetings into a book, which he called *In the Land of Israel*.⁷ The third chapter, entitled “The Insult and the Fury,” recounts his visit to Beit Shemesh. Beit Shemesh today is a large metropolitan area with a diverse population and good transportation to both Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, but at the time Oz was writing, almost all that expansion lay in the future. The Beit Shemesh he visited was typical of what were then called “development towns” and are now included in the *periferia*.

What is most troubling about the chapter is how much of it is still relevant, over forty years later. Not all, by any means, perhaps not even half, but far too much. Oz reports that over the course of the five hours he spent in Beit Shemesh, he was served food and drink, listened to respectfully, and generally treated as an honored guest. But he was also given an earful, a very small sample of which follows. In the original Hebrew, the pronoun “you” is plural in all cases. All emphasis here is mine.

You still haven’t figured out what hit you [when Begin became Prime Minister], have you? *It’s your arrogance that’s hit you.* As if you’d inherited this country from your father. What, the State of Israel comes from the papa of the [Labor] Alignment? Not from the Bible? Not from our sweat? Not from our backbreaking work? Not from our blood?

But to this day, the real power is not in Begin’s hands. You’ve got the Histadrut [Labor Federation], and you’ve got the newspapers and the big money, and you’ve also got the radio and the TV. *You’re still running the country.*

Your whole problem is that you don’t realize that Begin is prime minister. For you, he’s garbage, not prime minister.... You guys have been running crazy for five years now [since he first took office], and to hell with the country. Is that the way an opposition is supposed to act? Is it? To rat on us to the world? And throw dirt? To support the enemy? *And ruin the army?*

You want the hatred between us to end? First of all, come and apologize properly.... We’re not out for revenge. You’re Jews, too. But one thing: *come without that arrogance of yours.*

Your biggest fault, maybe the worst, is that you never gave Begin a chance. *Right away [when he took office], you started screaming.*

Substitute “Netanyahu” for “Begin” and “illegally blocking major highways” and “harassing government ministers and Knesset members”

⁷ Hebrew title “1982 פה ושם בארץ ישראל בסתו”. © 1983 by Amos Oz and Am Oved Publishers Ltd. English translation © 1983 by Amos Oz. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

for “running crazy” and “screaming,” and this comes reasonably close to describing what Israel was subjected to between the end of 2022, when the current government took office, and October 7, 2023.

Quick, Call a Babysitter

Lest the reader think that the good people of Beit Shemesh in 1982 must have been exaggerating, or that things must have improved in the forty-one years since then, consider the following excerpt from an interview of Einat Wilf on the podcast *Call Me Back*, hosted by Dan Senior, from early 2024.⁸ Wilf is an Israeli author and public intellectual and a former Member of Knesset. A full list of her accomplishments can be found in the show notes accompanying the podcast and in various places on the Web. Readers who look it over can draw their own conclusions about whether she falls within the *branje*, only within the elite, or neither. However, I believe that the views she expresses here fairly represent the central tendency of both groups. (Emphasis in the original.)

Wilf: [Judicial reform] was always just a proxy issue. The intensity of feeling around it was *not* about how to nominate judges.... [It] had to do with who governs Israel and who gets to govern Israel. Those who were in the streets, calling for democracy and defending the Israeli Supreme Court, were actually there for a far deeper reason, which I think has borne itself out, that an extreme right-wing government just cannot govern the State of Israel, *period*. And that those people are just not legitimate. They might have official democratic legitimacy. They might have the numbers. They might have won the elections. But they don't have deep legitimacy.

Later on, Wilf describes how, while visiting the UK, she was introduced to the idea that the Conservative party is “the natural party of government” there.

Wilf: Israel has a natural party of government, as well, Mapai, basically Old Labor.... They are the ones that have a sense of responsibility, of the fragility of the entire project [i.e., the State], and the Likud, even when they are in power, they are the natural party of opposition, they behave as if they have no responsibility.

⁸ Episode 201, “The Sobering of the Israeli Left—with Einat Wilf,” March 15, 2024. *Call Me Back* is available on a number of podcast services, including Apple, Spotify, Audible, and others. All quotations are from the six-minute interval beginning at 15:00. As with any excerpt, quotations shown outside their original context may be subject to misinterpretation. Readers who can do so are encouraged to listen to all six minutes or, better still, to the full podcast episode.

Senor: Well, they would argue that they are the outsiders because they’re not represented in the media, academic institutions, popular culture, so even when they’re in the government, culturally and intellectually they still feel like a minority.

Wilf: *Precisely.* And they always channel that... Historically, Israel has only twice had pure right-wing governments: the second Begin government in 1981 ... and this government.

Senor: Was the second Begin government viewed as more hardline, right-wing, than the first?

Wilf: Well, the first Begin government had Dash in it, which was this new centrist party that was created. So, you actually only have two [purely] right-wing governments in Israeli history, and they were both a colossal disaster. And in many ways, even when Likud was in power, you always had what I call a Labor babysitter, someone from the natural party of governance who came to babysit those who could not be trusted to govern.⁹ ... [Demonstrators during the judicial reform effort] were basically saying, “With all due respect, you, this right-wing government, this coalition of extreme right-wingers and settlers and Haredim who don’t have [children who serve in the IDF], you do *not* get to govern the Jewish State because you don’t actually ‘get’ what it means to govern it.” And I think they were right.

Any comment by me would be superfluous.

The Travails of South Tel Aviv

During 2006–2012, Israel experienced a massive influx of migrants from Eritrea, Sudan, and other African countries. These unfortunate people were brought by smugglers through the Sinai Peninsula to Israel’s south-western border, which was then relatively open, and entered the country without permission. Such individuals are referred to by the authorities and the press as “infiltrators,” a term covering both asylum-seekers and economic migrants. As public awareness of the problem rose, the government acted to seal off the border with Egypt, and the number of new detected infiltrators fell from 10,435 in 2012 to 118 in 2013.¹⁰ However, removing those already present proved a much more challenging task, primarily due to decisions taken by the Supreme Court of Israel sitting in

⁹ Examples of such “Labor babysitters” named later in their discussion include Yair Lapid, Tzipi Livni, and Moshe Kahlon.

¹⁰ Report of the Knesset Research and Information Center, “Presence of Infiltrators in the Neighborhoods of South Tel Aviv” (Heb.), June 7, 2016, Table A. (Hereafter, “Knesset Report.”)

its capacity as High Court of Justice (*Beit-Mishpat Gavohab l-Tzedek*), hereafter referred to by its Hebrew acronym, *Bagatz*. By early 2016, the total number of known infiltrators in Israel had reached about 64,000.¹¹ Many of them settled in five South Tel Aviv neighborhoods, where unscrupulous landlords rented to them illegally subdivided apartments, housing five or more times the number of people they would normally be expected to shelter.

This inundation of new arrivals reduced what had been somewhat respectable working-class neighborhoods to a wretched state of urban decay, squalor, and menace, which is described in a report by the State Comptroller.¹² Behind the bloodless, dispassionate language that official government reports must be written in, one can sense the authors' frustration at its inadequacy to express just how bad things are.

מציאות החיים בחמש שכונות דרום תל-אביב, שבהן גרים חלק ניכר מהזרים בישראל, מורכבת ומרובת קשיים. תמונת המצב עגום. כפי שיובא להלן, תושבי השכונות מביעים תחושה קשה של היעדר ביטחון אישי עקב מגורי הזרים. אין ספק כי איכות חייהם של התושבים המקומיים נפגעה בצורה ניכרת ביותר, ושכונות מגוריהם שינו את פניהן ללא היכר.

Life in the five neighborhoods of South Tel Aviv where a significant fraction of the foreigners in Israel live is complex and fraught with difficulties. It is a dire situation. As described below, residents of these neighborhoods have expressed severe concerns about lack of personal safety due to the foreigners' presence. Undoubtedly, the local residents' quality of life has been impaired in a most substantial way, and the character of their neighborhoods has changed beyond all recognition.

Although the new arrivals and their behaviors were the immediate cause of this distressing transformation, the ultimate cause was that the government was blocked at every turn by *Bagatz* in its efforts to move the infiltrators somewhere else—anywhere else—inside or outside the country. Petitions on behalf of the infiltrators and against the government were regularly filed by self-styled human rights organizations. And *Bagatz* took the position that unless and until found eligible for removal under the immigration laws, the infiltrators had full civil rights, including the right to live where they wished, and they could not be moved about against their will to suit the convenience of the government or the public. Finding infiltrators eligible for removal is a lengthy process, since almost all claim

¹¹ Knesset Report, p. 2.

¹² State Comptroller's Report 64-*gimel*, May 13, 2014, Ch. 1 (Heb.), quoted in Knesset Report, p. 10.

to be asylum-seekers, though many are actually economic migrants, so for the near and medium term, at least, there was nothing that could be done.

I will not presume to judge if the position taken by *Bagatz* was correct or not, legally or morally. It is only described here as background for the following explanation of the feelings of the neighborhoods’ long-term Jewish residents and why judicial reform was important to them.

These long-term residents saw themselves as victims of a judicial system staffed by members of the elite who neither knew nor cared about the havoc their dedication to principle was wreaking in a place far from where they lived, on people they had no connection to. They felt they had dedicated their lives to building the State of Israel, fought in its wars, paid its high taxes, asked for nothing more in retirement than to sit on their own balconies with a cup of tea in peace, and now found their hometown turned into a hellscape by strangers. That by itself is a challenge that, perhaps, they could have risen to. But being told that these strangers—neither Jews nor fellow citizens nor even, in many cases, even legally present in the country—are their equals before the law, that all their years of hard work and self-sacrifice to build decent lives count for nothing when laid upon the scales of Justice, and that therefore they have no recourse, reduced them to a state of helpless fury which found an outlet in the demand for judicial reform.

The Aircraft Technicians’ Letter

In June 2023, Israel was rocked by the news that a group of Israel Air Force reservists had formally declared that if the part of the judicial reform that was then before the Knesset passed into law, they would no longer perform the extra, voluntary reserve service expected of them, beyond what they could legally be required to do. Among the signatories of this Pilots’ Letter, as it became known, were 235 combat pilots, for whom missing the flights required for professional drill made during these “volunteer” days of reserve service would, within a fairly short time, render them unfit to fly in combat until the drill flights were made up. In effect, the security of the Jewish State was being tied to a demand to abandon or modify the judicial reform effort.

Here again, it is not my intention to discuss the Pilots’ Letter at length nor to judge the rightness or wisdom of any person’s decision to sign it or not. It is brought only as background for what follows.

The Pilots’ Letter was the culmination of a series of warnings publicized by reserve pilots, beginning soon after the planned judicial reform plan was announced at the beginning of 2023, threatening that they would refuse to serve if the effort to enact it was not halted. In late March 2023,

a group of aircraft technicians published a letter to the Commander of the Air Force, most of which is phrased as a reply to the pilots. The full text of the Aircraft Technicians' Letter is given in Appendix A, and fluent readers of Modern Hebrew are encouraged to review it.¹³ What follows is an abridged and lightly paraphrased version.

Dearest pilots,

To service your planes, we work night and day, crazy hours, Shabbat and Yom Tov. We fire up the engines, fuel the plane, ensure access panels are tightly closed, and do a dozen other dirty, disagreeable tasks. In the cold of winter, as you are getting into your cockpit wearing flight gloves, our bare hands are cracked and frozen from touching the plane's metal surfaces. All so you can fly your mission and return in safety.

We have always done our work maintaining and arming the planes with pride, knowing we are the best soldiers we can be, even if we were never given a chance to take the admissions tests for the pilots' course. We have always seen ourselves as first-class, working together for the Jewish people and the State of Israel. But now that we see that our vote is worth less than your vote, we feel like second-class citizens. Lifting our hands in salute to you now takes a real effort.

Well, guess what, dearest pilots? We aren't doing any of this for you. We're doing it for the Jewish People and the security of the State of Israel, for both of which we have love that is *unconditional*.

Unlike you, we will not refuse to serve [if the reforms are set aside], nor mutiny, nor call for a military coup. We will continue serving with our honor intact, and we will not allow any sort of political controversy to intrude upon our "Holy of Holies," the Israel Defense Force.

But we call upon you to immediately withdraw your threat to refuse service and to apologize. Only in this way can you return to us a remnant of our dignity and restore our motivation.

And above all, please don't tell us about how you're defending democracy, not after using your military position to throw our vote in the garbage. The IDF must remain above all forms of political controversy.

The letter then ends with a paragraph addressed to the Commander of the Air Force, calling upon him to support their demand for a collective apology from the pilots and to dismiss from service any pilot who had

¹³ Source: <https://x.com/shaykallach/status/1640992559160782848>.

previously threatened not to serve and now refused to recant. (Unsurprisingly, the Air Force Commander did not do so.)

Two things to note about the Aircraft Technicians’ Letter: First, notice how much of it echoes the quotations above from *In the Land of Israel*, especially in the demand for respect, for being treated as equals, not as second-class citizens. Second, note the following line, not emphasized at all, mentioned in passing as something that everyone knows about.

We are the best soldiers we can be, even if we were never given a chance to take the admissions tests for the pilots’ course.

One of the less-savory facts that the judicial reform controversy has brought to light is how opportunities to participate in the screenings for high-status military professions have been limited primarily to children of the elite for many years and continue to be so. It is no accident that combat pilots, specifically, were able to leverage their military position for political advantage in a way aligned with the preferences of the elite.

There is not space for the many other examples of this type that could have been brought, but I will provide one more. It is adapted from the reminiscence of “Gili,” a real person, told to a columnist of the Hebrew mass-market weekly newspaper *Makor Rishon*, who included it in one of the columns he wrote during the first half of 2023. Unfortunately, I have not succeeded in locating the original column, so I may have unintentionally added or changed minor details, but in all its essential elements it is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, a true story. Like the stories of Rabbi Naḥman of Breslov, it is a simple story with deep significance.

The Tale of Two Electronics Nerds

Once upon a time—back in the days when you could use your home computer to send emails and read the headlines, but if you wanted a new app for your computer or a movie to watch at home, you needed to go to a store—in a town somewhere in the *periferia* of the State of Israel, there were two high-school boys who were best friends. I’ll call them Gili and Asaf.

One reason they were such good friends is that they were both electronics nerds. When all the other boys in their class were on the soccer field, kicking the ball around, or hanging out at the neighborhood kiosk, talking about sports and music and whether it was better to be in Infantry or Armor or Artillery or Logistics (which meant being a truck driver) when drafted into the IDF right after high school—because those were where almost everyone they knew was placed—Gili and Asaf were in one of their houses, building circuits. They got to be rather good at it, but both

would have agreed that Asaf was better. Gili was pretty good, but Asaf was *really* good.

Then one day during their last year of high school, Gili got a letter, the likes of which nobody he knew had ever received. It was from IDF Personnel, inviting him to report for the screening for candidates to serve in a certain special unit. I cannot tell you much about it because everything to do with it was top secret then, and still is today, but it was for very smart people, and it had something to do with electronics. To keep things short, I will call the unit Panda.

Gili was very excited about the letter, but he was also rather puzzled, and a little disappointed, that his friend Asaf hadn't received one as well. He reported as ordered and did well on the screening tests. And in due course, after completing basic training, Gili was assigned to Panda, and he spent his IDF service sitting in front of a workstation, doing very secret things with electronics that are vitally important to the safety and security of Israel and her people.

Meanwhile, Asaf didn't get a letter that was in any way unusual. He was duly drafted into the IDF, and after completing basic training, he was assigned to Logistics, where they trained him to be, you guessed it, a truck driver.

Gili did very well in Panda, so he stayed in the IDF after completing his compulsory service. And you can imagine how pleased he was when, after about twelve or fifteen years, he was chosen to be Panda's commanding officer.

Meanwhile, Asaf finished his IDF service. He thought about trying to go back to school and get some kind of degree or certificate in electronics. But it just didn't work out, so he got a job as a truck driver, since he knew how to do that very well. And he scrimped and saved until, after a few years, he was able to buy his own truck, and he went into business for himself.

When Gili became the commanding officer of Panda, he was a bit surprised to discover that he actually had no say at all in who was assigned to him. That was decided by IDF Personnel. And he wondered a good deal about how they decided it. Finally, his curiosity got the better of him, and he found a friend of a friend who was able to tell him.

It seems that IDF Personnel chose the high-school students they sent screening invitations to from just four schools, all located in the greater Tel Aviv metropolitan area, and all attended mainly by children from elite families. This answered a question that had long been bothering Gili: Why hadn't his friend Asaf gotten a letter? Well, it was because he didn't go to one of those four schools. But it raised two bigger questions. First, why

had *he* gotten a letter, even though he didn't go to any of them? And second, who said that only students from those four schools were good enough for Panda? Wasn't he living proof that it wasn't so, that you could do very well in Panda, even if you came from a no-name school in the *periferia*? And might not his old friend Asaf have done just as well or better, if he had been given the chance?

Gili tried to discreetly suggest to IDF Personnel that, aside from simple fairness, it would be in the best interest of the country and the IDF if they were to cast their net wider, but he was told firmly to mind his own business. His business was to command Panda. IDF Personnel's business was to decide who was sent there.

Meanwhile, Asaf, by scrimping and saving, was able to buy himself a second truck that he could hire someone else to drive, which means he was doing a bit better. He was able to get married and purchase a modest apartment in the town where he and Gili grew up.

After a few years of commanding Panda, Gili decided that he had had enough of the IDF. The skills he had learned there made him very much in demand, so he was able to get a good job at a fine salary. After a few years, he and a couple of other ex-Panda guys got together for lunch and, after tossing some ideas around, decided to start their own company. With the skills they had gained in Panda and in jobs after Panda, the contacts they had made along the way, their very sharp brains, many long hours of very hard work—and, to be fair, a couple of lucky breaks that they got along the way—they built up their company until it was acquired in an all-cash transaction by a big international firm for many millions of dollars. And today Gili is a very rich man.

When he had some time on his hands, after selling the company, Gili came back to a question he had often wondered about. Why had he gotten the letter inviting him to the screening for candidates to serve in Panda? And after a long time and a lot of investigating, he found the answer.

It seems his mother had had a coworker at her job who was married. The coworker's husband had a sister-in-law. And the sister-in-law was a close friend of someone in IDF Personnel, who just happened to know the person in charge of screening for Panda. His mother told her coworker all about her son with a passion for electronics. The coworker was so impressed that she mentioned it to her husband, just when his brother and sister-in-law happened to be visiting. The sister-in-law heard it and thought, “Interesting.” She told her friend in IDF Personnel this story she had overheard about a kid from the *periferia* who was really good at electronics. The friend in IDF Personnel thought this was worth mentioning to the one in charge of screening for Panda. And just like in *Had Gadya*, the screener told the friend, who told the sister-in-law, who told

the husband, who told the coworker, who told Gili's mother, "Send us the details."

Gili and Asaf are older now. They still keep in touch every few months. They're both married with wonderful children. I don't know where Gili's children go to school, but Asaf's kids go to the same school that he and Gili attended when they were younger. And after school, his boys kick the ball around on the soccer field or hang out at the neighborhood kiosk talking about sports and music and whether it's better to be in Infantry or Armor or Artillery or Logistics when they join the IDF because those are where almost everyone from their town is placed.

That would be the end of the story of the two electronics nerds, except for one thing. When all this fuss about the judicial reform started, and when all the (you should pardon the expression) crud began coming out about how the elite takes care of its own, with an occasional crumb thrown to someone like Gili, Gili decided that this was not a story he could keep to himself any longer, even though he is now a very rich man. So he found a columnist for *Makor Rishon* who thought it was interesting and important enough to put in the paper. And that's why I am able to tell it to you.

Remember, this is not a story that happened in the 1950s or 60s or 70s. It happened in the twenty-first century. And such things can still happen today.

Conclusion

This is a small selection, not of the examples that could be brought, but of the topics from which examples could be drawn, illustrating why Goldman's proposal, however worthy a project it may be, will not suffice on its own to solve the crisis in Israeli society.

Telling "enquiring young minds among the Israeli secular" that "the mechanistic, materialistic view of the world has failed, and that the crisis of science and philosophy has opened the door to a new philosophical understanding of religion," as Goldman recommends, sounds like a good idea. Taking up R. Soloveitchik's challenge, "Out of the sources of Halakhah, a new world view awaits formulation," and launching a serious joint effort of our greatest minds to formulate it, as he urges us to do, may well be a worthwhile endeavor.

But saying that either one is necessary or sufficient to resolve the great division in Israeli society goes too far, for the three reasons I have explained: (1) In Goldman's formulation, the boundaries of the division are not clearly defined, as he shifts the "religious" horn of his dichotomy between Ratzianism, Haredi quietism, both together, or something else. (2)

Goldman’s formulation focuses on only three elements of Israeli society: the post-national technological elite of (North) Tel Aviv and its outposts, the Haredi quietists of Bnei Brak and similar communities, and the hardcore Ratzianists among the settlers in Judea and Samaria, together with their compatriots in cities and towns on the pre-1967 side of the Green Line. His sharp focus on these three elements obscures the fact that many other parts of Israeli society have played their own unique roles in the conflict. (3) Most importantly, while an analysis drawing its inspiration from philosophy could potentially be used to find a way of resolving an ideological conflict, it is not fit to purpose for a sociological conflict, in which different “tribes” wrestle with one another as they try to reach a stable *modus vivendi*. As I have endeavored to show, this is the type of conflict that exists in Israel today.

Thus, to claim, as Goldman does (my emphasis), that, “Absent *this* solution, Israeli society will continue to tear itself apart,” is a heavier lift than the arguments that he brings can support. So where do we go from here?

To fully answer this question would require at least another whole article, more likely a series of articles, or of books. And they would need to be written by people with more learning and wisdom than I have. Here are a few preliminary reflections:

“It is not possible for one man to hold another man down in the ditch without staying down there with him.” – Booker T. Washington¹⁴

It would be extremely foolish to think that the State of Israel is guaranteed to be around fifty years from now, no matter what. And it would be even more imprudent—in fact, heretical—to rule out the possibility that before so many years have passed, *Mashiah tzikeinu* will have come to bring all the People of Israel, and all the peoples of the world, to unity through *tikkun olam b-malkebut Sha-kai*.

But for the sake of discussion, let us assume that in fifty years both the world and the State will be more or less as they are today. In this case, it seems highly likely, given current demographic trends, that by then Israel will have become more religious, more respectful of *talmud Torah*, more chauvinistic about its Jewishness, more tolerant of that little vein of Jewish Supremacy that members of the elite find loathsome, and less inclined to ask, “But what will the nations of the world think?” than it is today. Thus, it becomes the task of today’s elite to teach the so-called

¹⁴ Source: <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2019/12/08/hold/>

deplorable of today, and especially those of tomorrow, how to be and do these things *responsibly*. Not to babysit them, but to mentor them.


This requires the elite to come to terms with three facts: (1) They will not be able to keep dominating those they consider deplorable forever, and they will inflict severe damage on themselves if they try. (2) This means that in another decade or two or three, those people will be firmly in charge, *and they will still be who they are today*. Their essential nature, their most deeply held values, will not change. (3) Even if the first two statements are true, *the State of Israel is still worth keeping*. They must resist the temptation to “burn down the clubhouse,” as an Israeli saying has it, to say that if the Jewish State cannot be exactly as they wish, it is better not to have a state at all.

If Einat Wilf and her friends feel that the parts of Israeli society represented in the current coalition cannot be trusted to govern without the presence of a Labor babysitter, then it is their job to help them become capable of doing so, without trying to change them into someone other than who they are. (I disagree with their premise, but I do not expect them to alter it.) And the first step in that process is to abandon arrogance, as the people of Beit Shemesh told Amos Oz in 1982. No student can learn much from a teacher who thinks the student is worthless—and lets him know it—on account of the color of his skin or his religious beliefs or the place where he lives. They must replace contempt with true empathy, uncontaminated by condescension. They should also rid themselves of contempt for their own protection, as they will be the objects of contempt when they are no longer on top if they do not banish it from the public discourse first. And for the good of their souls, abandoning it is the right thing to do in any case.

And as the elite of today must abandon contempt, those they view with contempt must abandon anger. “Do not make yourself quick to anger; anger is the attribute of a fool,” said the wisest of men (*Kobelet* 7:9, my translation). No matter how galling the conduct of the elite’s members may be, and no matter how empowering the anger feels, it is ultimately self-destructive. And for the good of our souls, abandoning it is the right thing to do in any case.

A glimmer of hope can be seen in the assurances now being given to the Haredi community that if their young men who are not serious Talmud students enlist in the IDF, where their services are urgently needed, they will be provided with frameworks that ensure they leave the army as committed to the Haredi way of life as they were when they entered it. If these assurances are serious, they cannot just mean *glatt*-kosher food, plenty of time to *daven*, and regular *shi’urei Torah*. They must also mean strict separation of the sexes and other arrangements that will go against

the grain of elite values. When, as inevitably will happen, meddlesome individuals and organizations petition *Bagatz* to annul these arrangements, will the judges be prepared to put the future of Israeli society and of Israel herself above their own *uber*-elite value system? If we and the State last long enough, and *Mashiah* has not yet come to restore our judges as of old, one day we will find out.

And when we have done all else that we can, let us not forget to pray to our Father in Heaven, beseeching His Grace and Mercy upon our one Jewish State. In Israel’s Declaration of Independence, the founders of the State affirmed that they were putting their trust in the Rock of Israel. We should do no less. 

Appendix A – The Aircraft Technicians' Letter

ד ניסן תשפ"ג 28/03/2023

לכבוד,

**אלוף תומר בר - מפקד חיל האוויר,
רב אלוף הרצי הלוי - ראש המטה הכללי,
אלוף במיל' יואב גלנט - שר הביטחון.**

שלום רב,
החלטנו לכתוב מרחשי לבנו,

טייסים אהובים שלנו,
כדי להשמיש לכם את כלי הטיס, עובדים אנו יומם וליל, בשעות לא שעות, בשבתות וחגים. מתניעים, מתדלקים, מסירים פינים, סוגרים פאנלים ועוד שלל עבודות שחורות.

כשאתם עולים למטוס בחורף קר עם כפפות הטיסה, הידיים שלנו נפצעות וקופאות למוות מן הברזל הקר של המטוס, רק כדי שאתם תוכלו להמריא ולנחות בשלום.

כל השנים נשאנו בגאון את תחזוקת וחמוש המטוסים, וידענו להיות החיילים הכי טובים שאנחנו יכולים להיות, גם אם לא עברנו כמוכם את המיונים לקורס טיס. אבל הרגשנו תמיד סוג א', ביחד, למען עם ישראל ומדינת ישראל.

היום, אחרי שהבהרתם לנו שהקול שלנו איננו שווה לקול שלכם, אנחנו כבר מרגישים סוג ב'. אנו חשים קושי נפשי אמיתי לחגור אתכם אל כסא המפלט אם חלילה תצטרכו לנטוש. ליד שעולה להצדיע לכם לפני שאתם יוצאים מהדתיק ומסייעים לעמדת ההמראה, כבר אין כח להתרומם.

ונגלה לכם סוד, טייסים אהובים שלנו,
כל פעם שהכנו לכם את המטוס, זה לא היה באמת בשבילכם. זה היה עבור עם ישראל, לשם בטחונה של מדינת ישראל. כי הרגשנו ביחד, חשבנו שאנחנו עם אחד. ידענו שאנו משרתים את האומה, ללא תנאי וללא סיג, ושאו אהובים אותה אהבה שאינה תלויה בדבר.

ולכן לא ננגח סרבנות כמוכם, לא נמרד ולא נקרא להפיכה צבאית. נשמור על אצילות הנפש הדרושה, ולא ניתן למחלוקות הפוליטית להכנס לקודש הקודשים שלנו, לצבא ההגנה לישראל.

אבל אנחנו קוראים לכם לחזור בכס באופן מידי, לבקש את סליחתנו, להציל את טיפת הכבוד האבוד שעוד נותרה בנו ולהשיב לנו את המוטיבציה האדירה שהייתה נטועה בתוכנו. ובבקשה, אל תסבירו לנו שבסרבנות אתם מצילים את הדמוקרטיה ומגינים על שלמות העם והמדינה, כי במעשה שלכם, שרפתם לנו את הקול. את הצבא על כל חייליו וחילותיו יש לשמור בכל מחיר מחוץ לכל יכוח ומחלוקת.

ולך מפקד החיל היקר שלנו,
אנו קוראים להיות האמון על בקשת הסליחה, וליצור מנגנון הרתעה וענישה מתאימים בהקדם, כדי לוודא שדברים כאלו לא יקרו מסיבות פוליטיות שוב.
ומי שלא רוצה לחזור בו מן הסרבנות ולבקש סליחתנו, אנו דורשים במפגיע כי ילקחו לו כנפי הטיסה - אין הוא ראוי לשרת יחד איתנו, חיילי המערך הטכני של חיל האוויר, את מדינת ישראל.

Aircraft Technicians' Letter Signatures

רס"ב עטיה גבראל	רניג בני ביטון	סמ"ר דוד הלוי
רס"מ שלומי בן דוד	רס"ר גל קלך	רס"ל ירון דוידוב
רס"מ אלון	רס"ר נאור צורדקר	רס"ר אבי אדרי
אנטושבינסקי	רס"ל אלעד אהרוני	רחנפלד
רס"ל דוד אטיאס.	רס"ל שירלי חייק	רס"ב יואב אילוז
סמלת שלומית	רס"ר רוני	רס"ל דוד מור
רפפורט	מקובצקי	רס"ל נתן דוד
סמ"ר איביב נווה	רס"ב שלום איבני	רס"ל דוד גלם
רס"ל יונתן גז	רס"ב עמרם בן זקן	רס"ם ציון שמואל
רס"ר אושרית	רס"ב בני פרנקל	רס"ר מרדכי אביר
בוחבט	סמ"ר עמית	סמ"ר בר ראובן
רס"ל בר יעל	מה-פית	רס"ל לירן מזוקר
רס"מ לודריק אבי	סמ"ר רוני ואקנין	רס"ל יונימן
רס"מ ציון שמואל	סמ"ר דוד הלויס	חודייטוב
רס"ר עמית ראשד	סמ"ר אבידן גאלי	רס"ר רמי גולני
סמ"ר דניאל אדמוני	רס"ל אושר לוי	רס"מ חיים כהן
רס"מ עידן ששונקר	רס"ב עזרא	חן חסן-רס"ל
רניג עופר עמר	הוסיאסקי	
	סמ"ר בובר סמואל	