

# Hopeful Signs In Healing The Wounds

Gary Rosenblatt - Editor and Publisher

For all the pain and anguish involved in the evacuation of the Jewish communities from Gaza this past week, there were signs of hope for a wounded society, underscored by the remarkable but little-noted bonding ceremonies between the settlers and the very soldiers who came to remove them from their homes.

In a number of settlements, poignant ad hoc rituals were carried out involving army officials and settler rabbis and leaders. In Atzmona, for example, a final Mincha service was held in the shul, with army officers and members of the community present. The Torahs were taken from the ark, tehillim (or, Psalms) were recited, and the entire group sang "Hatikvah," the Israeli national anthem, and "Ani Ma'amin," the prayer expressing the belief in the coming of the Messiah that was sung by Jews on their way to the Nazi gas chambers. Then, according to witnesses, the army officials and settlers embraced in tears as the settlers left with dignity.

Similar scenes were carried out in at least five other settlements, according to Moti Bar-Or, the director of Kolot, an Israeli organization that promotes Torah study among leading secularists, and was appointed by the army several months ago to act as a bridge between army officials and settler leaders.

Bar-Or described the disengagement of Gaza as one of the stirring high points for the Israel Defense Forces in its history, a remarkable example of self-control, discipline and empathy. "There was incredible sensitivity on the part of the army," he said, from the planning by top officials to the training and actions of those who took part, showing true caring toward the settlers.

Bar-Or, who was in Gaza last week and witnessed the evacuations, said that 95 percent of the settlers behaved admirably, and he criticized the Israeli media for presenting a skewed version of the events by emphasizing the isolated scenes of confrontation between the army and young protesters from outside of Gaza.

Those outsiders were religious young people, many of them from West Bank settlements, who were operating on "adrenaline, energy and youth," he said, and ignored the pleas from rabbinic leaders in Gaza who sought to dissuade them from their protests.

These young people represent a serious problem for Israel, fervent in their messianic faith and alienated from mainstream religious Zionism to the point that they sought to harm Israeli soldiers.

Bar-Or said many of the Gaza rabbis were so convinced God would not allow the Jewish settlements to be evacuated that they were unable to prepare for the event, practically or ideologically. But in the end, he said, they showed

understanding and dignity, insisting that their followers give up all of their weapons to the army in advance of the disengagement and go peacefully. Such behavior came as a great surprise to army officials who had anticipated more strenuous resistance.

When one of the leading rabbis was asked what meaning he took in God's allowing the settlements to be emptied, he answered: "We have to change our paradigm," according to Bar-Or, indicating a willingness, at least among some leaders of the religious Zionist movement, to reconsider their belief in the supremacy of inhabiting the land of Israel.

Others, though, no doubt will come away from this experience embittered by the government and feeling increasingly alienated from the majority culture.

For Bar-Or and the 120 Kolot fellows — primarily successful professionals from the secular culture — who spent the last several months as mediators between army officials and Gaza settlers in five communities, the experience was an influential lesson in appreciating "the other" on a human and caring level. The Kolot fellows spent one day a week in Gaza in study and dialogue with the leaders there, discussing Jewish values, the role of the land in Israeli society, and issues of social justice.

"Our fellows went through a major change," Bar-Or said. "Not politically," he noted, "but in coming to view these settlers not as zealots, but as human beings going through a great deal of pain."

The settlers, he said, thought of the Kolot fellows as representing "Tel Aviv," the symbol of left-wing politics and assimilationist culture. But in fact, he added, the fellows represent a new alternative: young professionals who express both Jewish and pluralistic values.

"I wish our people represented 'Tel Aviv' but they don't," Bar-Or said. "It's a shame, but most 'Tel Aviv' types didn't care about the disengagement process" in terms of showing empathy to the settlers.

That raises serious questions about what kind of society Israel is moving toward. Must it be either-or, religious or secular, or can it evolve into a pluralistic culture that not only tolerates but appreciates both Jewish and secular values?

The country's future depends on the answers. For now, though, amid the questions and the tears, we can take pride in an army that shows compassion, in a large majority of settlers who bent to the will of the government, and in a society where both sides in a tense conflict can recognize each other as brothers.

*Moti Bar Or is the founder and director of Kolot ([www.Kolot.info](http://www.Kolot.info)) a beit midrash for secular leaders committed to Jewish text study and social justice in Israel.*