



THE FIRST WORD

BY MOTTI BAR OR

On the day after, let's talk

The crisis over the disengagement is a opportunity to reconsider the identity of the Jewish state

It is difficult to separate the political debate over peace and security from the issue of Jewish identity in the State of Israel. Indeed, the debate seems to be a foil for the identity crisis that is unfolding along with seemingly unrelated current events.

Most of the residents of Judea, Samaria and Gaza (Yesha) were raised on the principles of religious Zionism. For this group, liberating Jerusalem and the territories of Greater Israel during the Six Day War was an event fraught with Historical significance.

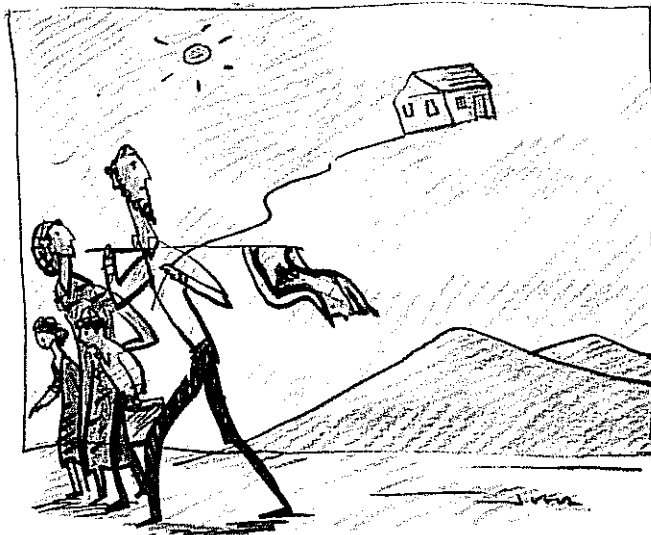
The years between this war and the Yom Kippur War formed a period of identity "incubation" for them. Over those years, a relatively large number of national religious Jews from the West who wanted to take part in this special period in Jewish history made aliya.

Religious identity, which had been characterized by a dissonance between a Jewish state and a secular government until 1967, found a new direction and hope. Many in the religious-Zionist camp are second generation Holocaust survivors – their souls were stirred by the reversal of fortunes between their parents, who endured Hitler's terrible slavery, and their own children's mission as soldiers in the IDF and members of a free Jewish majority living in their land. Though this is a typical Israeli experience, it carries an exceedingly great historic, religious and psychological weight for the national religious public.

The post-Yom Kippur War crisis in the secular establishment made the pride of the religious public stand out further, propelling it into leadership roles and even granting it a certain monopoly over classic Zionist values. The vacuum created by the Yom Kippur War was filled by energetic, modern Jews, who forged a traditional Zionist path – settling conquered/liberated areas.

Since its 1970s heyday, the national-religious public has matured and been bolstered by its own powerful ideological education system. Youth movements, led by Bnei Akiva, have a pioneering love of the land, criticism of Western materialism, spirit of giving and an overall positive energy towards the historical significance of the times.

Even in typically secular fields such as film and television, there has been a growing trend over the last few years towards religious creativity, exemplified by the movies *Hahesder* and *Ushpizim*, both of which won the Israeli "Oscar" equivalent.



Naturally, this sector is also highly identified with the army – in the latest IDF officers' training course, most cadets were graduates of religious schools, including 13 of the 20 who graduated with distinction.

For many religious people today, the settlers in Yesha are considered the epitome of Jewish Israeli living. They built organized communities, centered around mutual responsibility and Jewish observance – closed but complete, a kind of shtetl designed for a renewed Israel. And over the past few years of war, these people have paid a heavy price – especially in Gush Katif, which has absorbed countless bombardments.

The upcoming disengagement has clearly plunged this community into crisis on a physical level – it is very difficult to leave the house one built, the field one plowed. But the potential crisis here is much greater. Will the betrayal of Arik Sharon, their childhood hero, mean the end of their faith in secular leadership? Will it throw some into a theological crisis? The shattering of the religious dream, based on a messianic vision, is liable to affect the basis of the relationship between the believer and his God, the God who led the Jewish history as it expanded into the settlement. Rabbi Haim Druckman's fiery words at Yamit are remembered: "God will not let us give back Sinai." But Sinai was returned – what does that say about God? What does that say, consciously or unconsciously, about the soul of the faithful who grew up in this atmosphere?

The national religious community must deal with all these issues, and its leadership must dig out from underneath the rubble. Why has the size of the country become so important compared to other more dominant, Jewish values? How did this

public, which believed in Jewish unity, become so disconnected from the rest of the nation? And perhaps the most difficult problem – how to rehabilitate the soul that has awakened from its dream to a much more complicated reality?

Nonetheless, I believe this community is strong, and that its members will redirect their constructive energies. It will follow a kind of existential intuition that says, "We will take our vision to new places."

Until today, the religious Jew has lived with either a consciousness of *galut* or redemption – black or white. Perhaps there is room to moderate this vision into a new paradigm of Jewish life during this special period of Jewish history, in which

the challenges lie between exile and salvation. Perhaps this is the real meaning of the halachic understanding that reality, with its complexities, is as sacred as the vision one believes in.

The shaping of a physically smaller Israel through disengagement necessitates a new dialogue. It presents an opportunity for a pluralistic discussion on the mission statement of the modern Jewish state.

The difficult debate over borders has perhaps led us to lose our solidarity with the pain of others, in this case, those in Gush Katif who are leaving their homes. It is a sign of Jewish greatness to embrace during an argument. In the Talmud, the Halacha is according to Beit Hillel, not because they were wiser than Beit Shamai, but because they knew how to respect and include their opponent in the midst of major disputes.

After building such solidarity, we need to discuss "the day after." What culture are we creating? What measure of social solidarity should characterize the Jewish state? Can Isaiah's profound verse, "Zion shall be redeemed with judgement and those that return to her with righteousness," be the basis of a new discussion between Left and Right, secular and religious? Can we create a dialogue that was impossible before, when the land was the focus of the discussion?

The summer of 2005 will be one of the most difficult we have ever faced as a nation. Nevertheless, it contains the seeds of a new dialogue that will be fascinating, and signifies the beginning of a new kind of peace in our midst.

The writer is the founder and director of Kolot (www.kolot.info), a beit midrash for secular leaders committed to Jewish text study and social justice in Israel.