

Among The Settlers
Will They Destroy Israel?
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THE ZEALOTS

On a late winter's day, a slight, blue-eyed boy rode a bicycle down an empty street in the militant Jewish ghetto of Hebron, in the West Bank. Clipped to the boy's hair was a green kipa, crocheted and oversized in the style of the settlers. A damp wind was blowing, and a bank of clouds hovered over the city, but the boy was jacketless. Scattered piles of rubble and garbage, flecked with broken glass, lined the road.

The buildings along what the Jews call King David Street and the Arabs call Martyrdom Street are tightly packed and decaying. The Jews live mainly on the east side of the street, and the Arabs live to the west. When I visited, much of the area was under curfew. The Jewish zone, where some Arabs live, is "sterile," a soldier told me: only Arabs who hold the proper pass are allowed to enter. The soldier, a paratrooper in the Israeli Army's Fighting Pioneer Youth Brigade, was guarding Hadassah House, a three-story building where several families of settlers live. A brigade of soldiers, coils of razor wire, and hundreds of concrete barriers stand between Hebron's fewer than eight hundred Jewish settlers and its hundred and fifty thousand Arab residents.

Across from Hadassah House is a school for Arab girls, called Córdoba, after the once-Muslim Spanish city. On one of its doors someone had drawn a blue Star of David. On another door a yellowing bumper sticker read, "Dr. Goldstein Cures the Ills of Israel." The reference is to Baruch Goldstein, a physician from Brooklyn, who, in 1994, killed twenty-nine Muslims when they were praying in the Tomb of the Patriarchs, just down the road. Across the closed door of a Palestinian shop someone had written, in English, "Arabs Are Sand Niggers."

Jewish invective is answered by Muslim insults; over another door was a hand-painted verse from the Koran, attesting to the undying perfidy of the Jews. Nearby, peeling off a wall, was a poster dedicated to a ten-month-old Jewish girl named Shalhevet Pass, who was shot through the head three years ago by a Palestinian sniper. "May God Avenge Her Blood," it read. Pass's father is in jail in Israel; last July, the police found eight bricks of explosives in the trunk of his car.

A group of yeshiva students appeared, walking in the direction of the Tomb of the Patriarchs, a two-thousand-year-old stone palace. It sits atop the cave in which, tradition holds, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their wives are buried. It is because of the tomb that Hebron is considered a holy city. The yeshiva boys wore flannel shirts and jeans. They had the wispy beards of young men who have never shaved.

Two Arab girls, their heads covered by scarves, books clutched to their chests, left the Córdoba School, and were walking toward the yeshiva boys.

"Cunts!" one of the boys yelled, in Arabic.

"Do you let your brothers fuck you?" another one yelled. I stopped one of the students and asked why he was cursing the girls. He was red-faced, and his black hair was covered with a blue knit skullcap.

"What are you, a goy?" he asked.

The girls fled down the street, and the boys disappeared. I asked the soldier guarding Hadassah House why he hadn't intervened. "They didn't hurt them," he said.

The boy on the bicycle circled toward me and asked what I was doing there. I told him that I was waiting for a woman named Anat Cohen. He said that she was his mother, and that she had just gone to the market. Then he pedaled away, toward barricades at the end of the street.

Cohen pulled up a few minutes later, in a station wagon, its windshield cracked from stone-throwing attacks. She is one of the leaders of the Hebron Jews. A short woman in her early forties, she had a taut, windburned face and muscular arms, and her fingernails were chewed and dirty. As we walked through her front door, into a stone-walled living room, I asked her how she could let her son play amid the barbed wire and soldiers and barricades, and with snipers in the hills above.

"Hebron is ours," she said. "Why shouldn't he play?"

"Because he could get killed," I said.

"There's a bullet out there for each one of us," she said. "But you can always die. At least his death here would sanctify God's name."

Cohen and other settlers say that they are obliged to fulfill God's command that Jews settle the land of Israel. But there are safer places to live than King David Street in Hebron. I asked Cohen how she reconciled her decision to settle here with an even greater imperative of Judaism, the saving of lives—in this case, those of her children.

She glared at me. "Hellenizers"—secular Jews—"will never understand," she said with contempt.

Anat Cohen is known, even among Hebron's Jews, who are some of the least placatory of all the settlers, for her ferocity. According to Army commanders, she has cursed and insulted soldiers, and assaulted Arabs. The first time we met, she told me that she was a soldier of God.

Cohen has about ten children—like certain religious Jews, she refused to specify the number, in order to confuse the evil eye. The Cohen house is cramped and dark, and there are few toys. On one wall hangs a framed photograph of Meir Kahane, the zealot rabbi from Brooklyn, who advocated the expulsion of all Arabs from Israel. Behind a stone pillar hangs a photograph of Baruch Goldstein, with the inscription "The Saint Dr. Goldstein." A candle burned in a makeshift shrine, in memory of Cohen's brother, Gilad Zar. He was the security chief of the settlements in Samaria, the territory of the northern West Bank. He was killed three years ago by terrorists.

Cohen's one-year-old son, who is named after her late brother, burst into the room, spilling Cheerios. Cohen swept him off the floor, and said, "You don't live just to keep living. That's not the point of life."

In an earlier conversation, we had talked about Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac, at God's command; only God's intervention saved Isaac. Cohen admired Abraham's dedication, unabashedly. She was, I came to see, suffering from something that could be called a Moriah complex. Mt. Moriah, in Jerusalem, is the traditional site of the binding of Isaac, and symbolizes a Jew's absolute devotion to even the most inexplicable and cruel demands of God. The First and Second Jewish

Temples rose on Mt. Moriah. So, later, did the Dome of the Rock, built on the site from which, Muslims believe, Muhammad ascended to Heaven. (In Cohen's house, there is an image of the Temple Mount in which the Dome of the Rock has been replaced by a rendering of an imagined Third Temple, which, tradition holds, will rise when the Messiah comes.) The Moriah complex is characterized by a desire to match Abraham's devotion to God, even at the price of a child's life.

Cohen brought up the story, from the Second Book of the Maccabees, of a God-loving mother of seven boys, partisans in the Jewish revolt against Hellenistic rule twenty-two hundred years ago. The boys were called before King Antiochus, who ordered them to eat swine, as a loyalty test. The sons refused.

"Do you know what the Greeks did to these boys?" Cohen asked. "They ripped out their tongues and boiled them alive."

Just before the last son was martyred, the mother gave him a message to deliver in Heaven: "Go and say to your father Abraham, 'Thou didst bind one son to the altar, but I have bound seven altars.'"

After the seventh son was killed, the mother threw herself off a roof. The Talmud says that, on her death, a voice was heard from Heaven, singing, "A happy mother of children."

One afternoon, I went to the Tomb of the Patriarchs. The detachment of Border Police that day was commanded by an Ethiopian immigrant who was wearing a knit kipa. He seemed tense; Rabbi Levinger, he said, was inside. Moshe Levinger, who is in his sixties, is Hebron's first Jewish settler, a fierce man, and a source of vexation for the Army and the police.

A flight of broad stone steps leads to the main hall of the tomb. The Muslim rulers of Hebron once banned Jews from climbing higher than the seventh step. Levinger was the first modern-day Jewish settler in Hebron, but there were Jews in Hebron before Islam was founded. In 1929, a pogrom erased the Jewish presence, when sixty-seven Jews were murdered by their Arab neighbors. The British, then in charge of Palestine, removed the Jewish survivors from Hebron, for their own safety. I entered the main prayer hall. Benches that had been placed in rows in front of an Ark were mostly empty. Elderly men prayed alone. Underneath the stone floor, in the double-chambered Cave of the Machpelah, the bones of the Jewish patriarchs and matriarchs are said to rest. According to Genesis, Abraham bought the cave as a burial place for his wife, Sarah. It was his first, fateful purchase of land in Canaan.

Rabbi Levinger approached. For many years, he has been the face of the settlement movement, which is no favor; his head is small, but his eyes are bulbous and his teeth outsized. His voice is deep, and his beard seems constructed of iron shavings. I said hello. He grunted a reply.

I told him that the police seemed uneasy about his presence in the tomb, and I asked whether they were worried that he would lash out at the Palestinians.

"The Arabs know to behave like good boys around us," he said.

Levinger first came to Hebron in 1968, after Israel seized the West Bank in the Six-Day War. He rented rooms in an Arab hotel, in order to hold a Passover Seder. Then he refused to leave. He struck a deal with the Israeli government, and moved his family and his followers to a hill just northeast of Hebron, where, with the state's

coöperation, they built the settlement called Kiryat Arba. There are now seven thousand settlers there. In 1979, his wife, Miriam, led a group of settler women in an unruly takeover of the Hadassah House building. The squatters stayed, and a community grew up around them.

In 1988, Levinger killed a Palestinian shoe-store owner in Hebron. Levinger told the police that he was defending himself from a group of stone throwers. He served thirteen weeks in an Israeli jail for the killing. He told me once, "I'm not happy when any living creature dies—an Arab, a fly, a donkey."

In the Israel he envisaged, Levinger said, Arabs would be allowed to stay only so long as they "behave themselves. Foreign residents"—Levinger's designation for Arabs—"will be allowed to stay in Israel if they follow our laws and don't demand privileges." He added that they might vote "for mayors and such" but not for Prime Minister. He did not believe that the Arabs would acquiesce to such an arrangement, and that is why he advocated "transfer"—a euphemism for mass expulsion. "Whoever hurts Jews will be expelled," he said.

I had first met Levinger last year, at his small apartment in Hebron, and I had asked him to help me understand the scriptural basis for his claim to the city, and to all of the Biblical land of Israel. He reached into a bookshelf and brought down the Torah, the five books of Moses, and opened it to Genesis.

"I will read you a verse," he said. "Now the Lord said to Abraham, get out of the country, and from the kindred, and from the father's house, to the land that I will show you, I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, and you shall be a blessing, and I will bless them that bless you, and curse them that curse you."

Levinger looked up. "Shall I read more?"

"All my ideas are formed from the Torah," he went on. "It's not complex. This land is ours. God gave it to us. We're the owners of the land."

In June, 1967, Israel launched successful preëemptive strikes against Egypt and Syria, which had been jointly planning an invasion. When Jordan, which then occupied the West Bank, entered the war on the side of the Syrians and the Egyptians, Israel defeated it as well, seizing the Old City of Jerusalem and the West Bank. Israel's victory also left it in control of the Golan Heights, Gaza, and the Sinai Peninsula (which was returned to Egypt in 1982). Thirty-seven years later, there are roughly two hundred and thirty-five thousand settlers in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. There are an additional hundred and eighty thousand Israelis living on land in eastern Jerusalem, captured in the 1967 war. Israel's Jewish population is about five million; more than a million Israeli citizens are Arab. The West Bank and the Gaza Strip are home to more than three and a half million additional Arabs, who do not hold Israeli citizenship.

Perhaps three-quarters of the Jews in the West Bank and Gaza could be considered economic settlers. Many of them moved to the West Bank for benefits unattainable inside the pre-1967 borders of Israel: space, tax breaks, and mountain air. They are reliable supporters of right-wing parties, but many of them are secular in their outlook.

The remainder of the settlers, fifty thousand or so, came to the territories for reasons of faith. Although many of the settlements are near the Green Line, the 1949 armistice line that separated Israel from the West Bank, the national-religious settlements tend to be isolated from Israel and from each other. Many of them are along Route 60, the main north-south highway that runs near the mountain spine of the West Bank. This is the heart of the land known in the Bible as Judaea and Samaria—the part of ancient Israel most thickly crowded with sites that figure in Jewish history. It is also the part of the West Bank most densely populated by Arabs.

The national-religious camp can be divided into two main groups. The Jews of the central West Bank, in settlements such as Beit El and Ofra, are Biblical literalists, but they tend to respect the authority of the elected government in Jerusalem. If the Israeli Army evacuated such settlements—and this is not happening soon—the people might resist, but it is believed that they will not shoot.

The more unremitting settlers are the Jews living in Hebron, in Kiryat Arba, and in a chain of settlements in the mountains near Nablus, the main Arab city in the northern West Bank. The zealots include those who build “illegal” frontier outposts, which are not approved by the Israeli Cabinet, although they are protected by the Army. Most international legal authorities believe that all settlements, including those built with the permission of the Israeli government, are illegal.

The seventy-five hundred Jews of Gaza represent the absurdist wing of the settlement movement. In the Israeli mind, Gaza—a strip of land shaped like a sardine can, and running from south of Tel Aviv to the Egyptian border—is synonymous with sand dunes and refugee camps, wilting heat and the fierce anti-Semitism of the Islamic terror group Hamas, whose most fervent followers are based there. Gaza is marginal to Jewish history; its biggest moment came when Samson pulled the temple of the Philistines there down on his head. The most isolated settlers are those in Gaza. They are killed regularly by terror groups (over all, a hundred and fifty settlers have been killed); their school buses are armored, a precaution that hasn't prevented their occasional demolition; and they require the presence of thousands of Israeli soldiers, who are also being killed in consequential numbers.

The most hard-core settlers are impatient messianists, who profess indifference, even scorn, for the state; a faith in vigilantism; and loathing for the Arabs. They are free of doubt, seeing themselves as taking orders from God, and are an unusually cohesive segment of Israeli society. Hard-core settlers and their supporters make up perhaps two per cent of the Israeli populace, but they nevertheless have driven Israeli policy in the occupied territories for much of the past thirty years.

The settlement movement has long been aided by Israel's parliamentary system, which gives single-issue parties an inordinate say in government decisions. The movement has also been effective at placing supporters in key government ministries. And it has been helped by the doubt that many secular Israelis feel about the Palestinians' willingness to recognize the legitimacy of a Jewish state—and by anger at Palestinian violence.

Many Israelis believe that evacuation of many settlements—even all of the settlements—would not satisfy the Palestinians. The Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat, even while negotiating with Israel in the framework of the Oslo accords of the nineteen-nineties, never prepared his people for compromise. Palestinian schools continued to teach about the evils not only of occupation but of the very idea of

Israel. Arafat refused to recognize any historical Jewish connection to Palestine, and, in the climactic negotiations at Camp David in 2000, he rejected Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak's offer of the entire Gaza Strip, nearly all of the West Bank, and a capital in east Jerusalem, and abandoned the talks. Many of Barak's critics accused the Prime Minister of mishandling the negotiations and of making miserly concessions that were impossible for Arafat to accept. But the dispositive fact of Camp David is this: Barak made an offer, and Arafat walked out without making a counter-offer. Three months later, after Ariel Sharon, then the leader of the opposition Likud Party, visited the Temple Mount, surrounded by Israeli police, the Palestinians ignited the second intifada, which continues today. Sharon capitalized on the violence in 2001, defeating the compromise-minded Barak in the election for Prime Minister.

Polls have consistently shown that the majority of Israelis want the settlers to withdraw from Gaza in particular. Sharon had told me while he was campaigning, "The settlements represent the best of Israel. To abandon them would go against Jewish history and morality." And yet, three years later, Sharon has turned against some of the settlers, and is now proposing to evacuate settlements in Gaza and the northern West Bank.

Sharon seems to have recognized—belatedly—Israel's stark demographic future: the number of Jews and Arabs between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea will be roughly equal by the end of the decade. By 2020, the Israeli demographer Sergio Della Pergola has predicted, Jews will make up less than forty-seven per cent of the population. If a self-sustaining Palestinian state—one that is territorially contiguous within the West Bank—does not emerge, the Jews of Israel will be faced with two choices: a binational state with an Arab majority, which would be the end of the idea of Zionism, or an apartheid state, in which the Arab majority would be ruled by a Jewish minority.

A de-facto apartheid already exists in the West Bank. Inside the borders of Israel proper, Arabs and Jews are judged by the same set of laws in the same courtrooms; across the Green Line, Jews live under Israeli civil law as well, but their Arab neighbors—people who live, in some cases, just yards away—fall under a different, and substantially undemocratic, set of laws, administered by the Israeli Army. The system is neither as elaborate nor as pervasive as South African apartheid, and it is, officially, temporary. It is nevertheless a form of apartheid, because two different ethnic groups living in the same territory are judged by two separate sets of laws.

Sharon is considered to be one of the most effective fighters in Israel's history (he is certainly thought to be one of the most brutal). He came to power promising to use force in order to end Palestinian violence. But he has not succeeded. What he is proposing now is a two-pronged survival strategy: the building of a security fence separating the Arabs of the West Bank from Israel; and a unilateral withdrawal from Gaza, which will remove more than a million Palestinians from Israel's direct control. "The Palestinians have created this bloody mess," the Vice-Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert, told me recently. But, he added, "We realized long ago we would have to share this land."

This is not to say that Sharon and his party, the Likud, have done much to encourage negotiations. Sharon's proposals are not anchored in any larger peace plan. At best, the proposals are half measures. The fence will not follow the Green Line; in places it will penetrate deep into the West Bank, encompassing highly populated settlement blocs. Most settlements beyond the fence will remain in place

as well, as will battalions of soldiers to protect them. In Gaza, Israel will still control the borders, the coastal waters, and the airspace, making it, in essence, a recalcitrant protectorate.

Modest though these measures seem to many Israelis (they are seen as comically parsimonious by most Palestinians), to the settlement movement they are a betrayal. The borders of Israel, in the view of Jewish religious nationalists, are drawn by God, and one does not negotiate with God. So the settlers have, golem-like, risen against one of their creators, and pledged to stop any attempt—including Sharon's provisional attempt—to disentangle Jews and Arabs. The settlers reject the idea of a demographic crisis. They still see themselves as Sharon once saw them—as the avant-garde of Zionism, heirs to the pioneers of the early twentieth century who restored the Jews to Palestine. But, should they somehow prevent the emergence of a viable Palestinian state, they may well be the vanguard of Israel's demise as a Jewish democracy.

They are, for the moment, prevailing. Earlier this month, the settlers humiliated Sharon, organizing the defeat, in a Likud Party referendum, of a plan to evacuate seventeen settlements in the Gaza Strip. Sharon has promised to pursue some version of his evacuation plan, but this pursuit might cause his coalition government to break apart.

The harshest critic of the settlers in the government is Tommy Lapid, the justice minister. He heads the Shinui Party, which argues for the separation of synagogue and state and is a member of Sharon's ruling coalition. He told me recently that the settlers have three reasons for hope: "They believe there will come a point in the critical clash between us and the Palestinians when it would come time to transfer the Palestinians to Jordan; the second thing they hope for is the great American aliyah—a million more Jews coming to Israel. The third, and by far the most stupid, thing is that they believe God will help them."

Indeed, some of the leading ideologues of the settlements, far from supporting the idea of a Jewish democracy, hope to establish a Jewish theocracy in Israel, ruled by a Sanhedrin and governed by Jewish law. Moshe Feiglin, a Likud activist who lives in a West Bank settlement and heads the Jewish Leadership bloc within the Party—he controls nearly a hundred and fifty of the Likud central committee's three thousand members—believes that the Bible, interpreted literally, should form the basis of Israel's legal system. "Why should non-Jews have a say in the policy of a Jewish state?" Feiglin said to me. "For two thousand years, Jews dreamed of a Jewish state, not a democratic state. Democracy should serve the values of the state, not destroy them." In any case, Feiglin said, "You can't teach a monkey to speak and you can't teach an Arab to be democratic. You're dealing with a culture of thieves and robbers. Muhammad, their prophet, was a robber and a killer and a liar. The Arab destroys everything he touches."

The community of Yitzhar, in the mountains near Nablus, is one of the flagship settlements of the zealots. I went there one day in search of Yehuda Liebman, an official of the Joseph Still Lives Yeshiva. Until the second intifada, the yeshiva had been situated next to the tomb that many Jews believe holds the remains of Joseph, the son of Jacob, in Nablus. During the Oslo peace process, which ended the first intifada, Yasir Arafat promised Israel that the Palestinian Authority would protect Jewish holy sites that came under its control, but the Joseph's Tomb compound was torched and vandalized by Palestinian militias a number of times, and the yeshiva moved to Yitzhar.

I was told that I could find Liebman at an outpost down a gravel road from the main settlement. The outpost, called Yitzhar Lookout, consisted of two mobile homes and a temporary synagogue. The buildings sat on a gently sloping hill. Halfway down were olive trees that belong to the neighboring Arab villages of Ein-Abus and Burin. Settlers from Yitzhar have repeatedly attacked these olive trees. When I visited, the branches of trees just below the outpost looked as though they had recently been sawed off. A Palestinian farmer named Ibrahim Muhammad Zaban had told me that he no longer brought his children to help during the olive harvest. "The settlers come and they curse at us and attack us. They beat up a man with a metal pipe." The settlers, he said, stole the olives, then burned the trees. "These trees were for my sons," he said. His children had lost their inheritance, and he had lost his livelihood. "I have to work in another man's fields now," he said.

As I looked for Liebman, I came across David Dudkevitch, a rabbi in Yitzhar. Dudkevitch, a sour-faced man in his thirties who was dressed in a black suit and a white shirt, is a person of influence among yet another type of radical settler, the "hilltop youth"—teen-agers and young men who have built makeshift settlements, sometimes out of nothing more than rusting shipping containers, on remote mountaintops. They are seen as troublemakers by the Israeli Army and the Palestinians, but some settlers consider them heroic. Many of the hilltop youth are unruly high-school dropouts who are fluent in the mystical concepts of the Kabbalah and are adept in marksmanship. They also have a reputation for marijuana use.

I asked Dudkevitch whether the youth of Yitzhar were cutting down the Arabs' olive trees.

"I'm not hearing you," he replied. I asked again. "I'm not hearing what you're saying. You don't understand me. I'm not hearing and I will continue not to hear." Then he walked away.

Liebman was outside one of the ramshackle trailers, talking on a cell phone. He is a thin and jumpy man, quick to show irritation. One of his brothers was murdered in Yitzhar six years ago by Arabs. Another brother was accused by the Shabak, the Israeli internal security agency, of being a member of a Jewish terrorist network.

I asked who was destroying the olive trees. The destruction of fruit-giving trees, even those belonging to an enemy, is considered a grave sin in Judaism. But the only subject that concerned Liebman was Joseph's Tomb.

"What is an olive tree compared to the burial place of Joseph, the son of Jacob?" he said.

To the farmer who supports his family with the tree, I said, the tree is important.

"But the farmer is an Arab," Liebman replied. "He shouldn't be here at all. All this land is Jewish land. It is meant for the Jews by God Himself."

And if the Army comes to carry off the Jews of Yitzhar?

"Let them try," he said.

In May, more than eight hundred Israeli soldiers and policemen attempted to dismantle the outpost. They were confronted by seven hundred settlers, who fought them for several hours. Forty-one settlers were arrested, before the outpost was torn down. After the police left, the settlers returned, and erected two new buildings.

One day a few months ago, Moshe Saperstein, who lives in Neveh Dekalim, the biggest Jewish settlement in Gaza, picked me up at the junction that marks the border between Gaza and Israel. The junction, called Kissufim, is an armored camp. Three dozen tanks and bulldozers were lined up in order to pass through the gates. The only civilians here are the settlers of the Gush Katif bloc, a string of settlements—Neveh Dekalim among them—along the beaches of southern Gaza, between the Palestinian city of Khan Younis and the Mediterranean.

Saperstein was born on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, and came to Israel thirty-six years ago with his wife, Rachel, who is originally from Brooklyn. As a soldier in the 1973 Yom Kippur War, he lost part of an arm and part of his vision in an Egyptian rocket attack. He is a heavyset man who smokes bad cigars and has perhaps the most profane mouth in Orthodox Judaism.

The road from the border to the settlement is under Israeli control—concrete pillboxes are planted intermittently along the way—but Palestinians regularly fire on the settlers' cars. Two years ago, Saperstein was ambushed near Kissufim; Palestinian gunfire tore off two fingers of his remaining hand. He had the presence of mind to push down on the accelerator, and struck a Palestinian gunman.

As we drove, Saperstein pointed to the spot on the road where the attack had taken place. "Here's where I tried to run over the peace-loving Muslim," he said. Sometimes, he told me, he gets the feeling that "Ahmed is trying to kill me." Saperstein refers to Arabs generically as "Ahmed."

Just before we reached the fortified entrance to the Gush Katif bloc, we passed the ramshackle Bedouin village of Muwassi. "They like to live like pigs in shit," Saperstein said. I disagreed, vehemently, and he said, "I'm sorry, that's politically incorrect. 'They have a different cultural aesthetic.' Is that what I'm supposed to say?"

The Sapersteins came to Neveh Dekalim to retire; their children are grown, and live elsewhere in Israel. The couple's ranch house, which overlooks the sea, would not look out of place in the Jewish neighborhoods of South Florida. The settlement is a community of dozens of whitewashed houses and sand-dune playgrounds, and it is the frequent target of Palestinian attacks. A fifty-foot wall of concrete slabs sits about five hundred yards from the Sapersteins' house, separating the Jews from the Arabs.

Over lunch, I asked Saperstein and Rachel, who teaches English in the settlement's girls' school, why they had chosen a remote and dangerous settlement in Gaza rather than one of the urban settlements near Jerusalem. "We like the weather," he said. "We never lived near the sea. And I'm here because of a religious commandment, believe it or not, as irrational as that may seem to you." The Sapersteins see a unilateral pullout from Gaza as theological heresy and political suicide. They moved here from Jerusalem in 1997, as a protest against the Oslo peace process. "Oslo meant the abandonment of land that was meant for the Jews," Saperstein said. "In this respect, I'm a fundamentalist. . . . Call me an extremist. I don't care."

I raised the question of whether Jewish parents who place their children within range of Palestinian rockets had their priorities in order. Exasperated, Rachel said, "If I believe in holy law, that the settlement of the land of Israel is a commandment of God, and I want my children to be raised as Jews, I have to take them where they're

going to fulfill this mitzvah. I have to take my child and physically he has to settle the land with me. I can't say I won't do things because I don't want him to suffer."

Saperstein said, "If I believed that if all the settlers disappeared tomorrow then peace and happiness would reign forever, that we could live in peace as Jews in what's left of our homeland, then I would seriously consider picking up and going somewhere else."

Rachel looked at her husband.

"I wouldn't," she said.

Saperstein is skeptical about this scenario, however. He considers the idea that peace will come to Israel only when it cedes territory to the Arabs to be a Diaspora psychosis. "We've lived for so many years in exile, we've forgotten what it is to be a powerful and ruling people," he said. "We have always depended on the kindness of strangers, wherever we were. The tsar, or some Polish landowner. We had to kiss ass because we couldn't defend ourselves. Now that we have the strength to defend ourselves, we don't know how.

"Most of this country has an exile mentality," Saperstein went on. "Most of the population here takes the attitude that the Jews are at fault. But what have we done to provoke those poor Palestinians?"

"Do we have to kill ourselves? Is that Jewish?" Rachel said. "You have to teach them: 'No more. You want to do evil, you're going to take the consequences.' This is what America did to Germany. You finish them. Bomb the hell out of them. Just bomb the hell out of them."

I asked Rachel about her youth, in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn.

"The blacks hit me, of course," she said.

"She doesn't know the difference between being hit and being hit on," Moshe said.

"They also did that," Rachel said.

"We were raised in a very Jewish area," she said. "Then the blacks came in and the Jews ran. The first blacks came in and the Jews flew out of there so fast. Everybody went to Crown Heights. I don't want to run away. I always see Jews running and running."

American-born settlers often recollect encounters with anti-Semitic roughnecks, and many of them see an explicit link between the Palestinians and the shvartses, a word I heard several times in interviews: the Jews were chased from Brooklyn, and they won't be chased again.

Saperstein, too, has a story of street anti-Semitism. "I was about ten or eleven. I looked out of our window. Some yeshiva guy was walking and these two drunk Italians started pushing him, yelling at him, slapping him. He just covered himself up. One of my parents yelled out the window, 'Police! Police!' They went away. Then my mother said, 'I wonder what he did to provoke that.'

"It was at that point I knew I had to come to the Jewish country and be proud. 'Goyim used their hands. Jews used their brains'—well, that's nothing more than a justification for weakness."

I suggested that he try to imagine himself in the place of a Palestinian. "You're a Palestinian, you're here, you have your farm, your grandparents are from here, and—"

But Moshe interrupted me. "Stop being Jewish!" he yelled. "Stop being Jewish! Only a Jew would say, 'Imagine yourself as a Palestinian.' Could you imagine a Palestinian imagining himself as a Jew?"

Neveh Dekalim is one of the settlements that Ariel Sharon has promised to shut down. What seemed to offend Saperstein most was that Arabs might one day live in his house. "I had this Ahmed in here once, doing repairs, and he said, 'Do you know why I'm doing such good work? Because one day I'm going to live here.' And I told him, 'If I'm kicked out of here, I'm going to blow this place up before I let someone like you have it.'"

THE MEANING OF ZIONISM

David Samson, who is a teacher at the Mercaz HaRav Yeshiva's high school, in Jerusalem, took me with him into the Judaeen desert one Friday morning not long ago. He is a compact, sunburned man of forty-eight, white-bearded and serene. The yeshiva is dedicated to studying the teachings of two rabbis, Avraham Yitzhak HaCohen Kook and his son, Tzvi Yehuda HaCohen Kook, who are the spiritual fathers of the settlement movement. Rabbi Samson is a former student of the second Rabbi Kook.

Samson and I left Jerusalem in his Daihatsu jeep, heading east, in the direction of the Dead Sea. He wore blue nylon hiking pants, all-terrain boots, a white kipa, and a pistol at his waist. Ten minutes past the settlement city of Ma'ale Adumim, on the steep descent into the Rift Valley, Samson turned onto a dust-covered track, and suddenly the desert enveloped us.

We drove under a shell-colored sky past albino camels standing next to the hulk of a destroyed tank, and through patches of scrub. The jeep kicked up a trail of dust that reached back a mile behind us. Past the brow of a high ridge, the entrance to a dry riverbed came into view. We left the jeep behind and hiked into a deep limestone canyon.

It is in this wilderness, Samson said, that the mind opens to visions of the Messiah. Judaism is a messianic religion, but most Jews—among those who give the Messiah any thought at all—wait patiently for His coming. To the followers of the Rabbis Kook, the Messiah is just over the next hill. "The demarcation point between this world and the next is the establishment of Israel," Rabbi Samson said. (Many Evangelical Christians, reading the same lines of the Bible, believe that the return of the Jews to the land of Israel presages the return of Christ.)

In "War and Peace," a book about the senior Rabbi Kook's beliefs, Rabbi Samson wrote:

When the day comes for Israel to radiate its full power, there will be no room for usurpers who try to push the Jewish people aside. . . . All of the masqueraders who claimed to possess a monopoly on truth, whether Christianity, Islam, Buddhism,

communism, capitalism, and all of the rest, will be exposed as empty flasks. When Judaism reaches its historical maturity with the return of the Kingdom of Israel, its holy culture will dominate the entire world psyche.

Zionism was not meant to be a messianic movement. It was the practical response of mainly irreligious men to the impossibility of Jewish life in Europe. Theodor Herzl, the father of political Zionism, saw a Jewish national home in Palestine as the answer to the rabid anti-Semitism he witnessed in the last decade of the nineteenth century, during the Dreyfus affair. The early Zionists drew on modern ideals of nationalism and liberal democracy, not on the teachings of rabbis.

Many Orthodox Jews, especially in the early days of Zionism, believed that Herzl and his comrades were heretics. The Jews would return to Zion, the Orthodox believed, only when God wanted them to.

The intellectual breakthrough of the first Rabbi Kook, who was the chief rabbi of the Jewish community in Palestine in the nineteen-twenties and thirties, was to see in Herzl not a heretic working against God but a man unknowingly guided by God. It was God who placed Zionism in the hearts of the disbelieving, just as it was God who gave the Gentiles the idea of nationalism. "God worked through the goyim to teach the Jews about the nation," Samson said. Even then, however, the Orthodox played only a small role in the founding, and building, of Israel, and secular Jews have dominated its government and Army ever since. It was the farmers of the socialist kibbutzim who came to symbolize the restored strength of the Jewish people.

In May, 1967, Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda Kook, delivering a sermon in honor of Israel's Independence Day, was seized by a vision that has become a touchstone for the settlers. "Where is our Hebron?" he cried out, according to witnesses. "Can we let it be forgotten? And where are our Shechem and our Jericho? Can we ever forsake them?" (Shechem was a Biblical city near present-day Nablus.)

Israel's sudden victory over its Arab neighbors in the Six-Day War, a month later, was attributed, by most Israelis, to the valor of its soldiers and the acumen of its generals. But many among the Orthodox saw it as a miracle—proof that the Redemption was at hand.

Although some members of Israel's Cabinet—notably, the future Likud Prime Minister Menachem Begin—believed from the start that the Biblically significant lands of the West Bank should be part of Israel, most secular Israelis thought that the territories would be given back to the Arabs in return for peace. This expectation changed after the Arab states, meeting in Khartoum in September of 1967, reaffirmed their opposition to the existence of a Jewish state of Israel, choosing continued confrontation instead.

The students of the second Rabbi Kook took advantage of the Arab rejection, and set out for the hills. (Moshe Levinger, the original Hebron settler, was one of Rabbi Kook's foremost disciples.) Within a few years, a Kookist group called Gush Emunim (the Bloc of the Faithful) was plotting the settlement of broad tracts of the Biblical heartland.

The settlement project succeeded only because secular Israelis continued to play the supporting role that Kook imagined for them. The ruling Labor Party, under the leadership of such men as Shimon Peres and Yitzhak Rabin, aided the project, seeing in the settlers a reflection of their own pioneering youth. They also discerned a

strategic value to settlement; these kipa-wearing pioneers would keep watch over the newly conquered Arabs, and they would help protect Israel's middle—at its narrowest, Israel is nine miles wide.

Still, it was not until Begin became Prime Minister, in 1977, that the settlers found a partner who matched them in zeal. The Labor Party had built settlements mainly on the territories' periphery. Begin, guided by his agriculture minister, Ariel Sharon, began placing them on the outskirts of Arab cities such as Bethlehem, Nablus, and Ramallah. Gradually, the settlers crosshatched the West Bank and Gaza Strip with towns; they built industrial parks and yeshivas and even a college. Their children became, in some ways, the new kibbutzniks; today, they are disproportionately represented in the Israeli Army's top combat units. The settlers had more in mind than state-building. They were erecting, in the words of Exodus, a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

The Messiah has yet to appear (in the words of a famously cynical Israeli pop song, "He also hasn't telephoned"), and the majority of Israelis, according to the polls, would abandon most of the settlements for some semblance of peace. Rabbi Samson's faith, though, hasn't wavered. "I have this underlying belief that the land of Israel is stronger than the government of Israel," he said. "One month after Ehud Barak decided to give the Temple Mount to the Arabs, he was in his pajamas at home. I can say as a rabbi that God will not be happy with any Israeli government that tries to give away this land."

We sat for a while on the rocks. Orange-winged starlings flew above us. "God won't allow a Palestinian state to come into creation. And, if it does, He'll destroy it. God has placed the Arabs in the way of the Jews to test our resolve."

Israel's problem today, Rabbi Samson said, is that its Army refuses to fight in the manner of the ancient Jewish generals. "The Torah doesn't see a difference between civilians and the military. Until the Jewish people realize that we are fighting a nation that has vowed to destroy us, our mission won't be completed. If we were willing to kill their civilians, this war would be over in a week.

"I don't think mercy is playing its correct role here," he went on. "If the military operated without consideration for civilian deaths, think about how many lives would have been saved! In any case, their children are born with Molotov cocktails in their hands. These are a people as unfeeling as jackals."

Like many ideologues of aggressive settlement, Rabbi Samson drew lessons directly from the Bible, without the moderating influence of two thousand years of rabbinic Judaism. In the Bible, the heroes are warriors and killers; the Talmud, compiled after the destruction of the Temple and the dispersal of the Jews, asks, "Who is a hero?" and answers, "He who controls his passions."

Some settler leaders see in the Palestinians the modern-day incarnation of the Amalekites, a mysterious Canaanite tribe that the Bible calls Israel's eternal enemy. In the Book of Exodus, the Amalekites attacked the Children of Israel on their journey to the land of Israel. For this sin, God damned the Amalekites, commanding the Jews to wage a holy war to exterminate them. This is perhaps the most widely ignored command in the Bible. The rabbis who shaped Judaism could barely bring themselves to endorse the death penalty for murder, much less endorse genocide, and they ruled that the Amalekites no longer existed. But Moshe Feiglin, the Likud activist, told me, "The Arabs engage in typical Amalek behavior. I can't prove this

genetically, but this is the behavior of Amalek." When I asked Benzi Lieberman, the chairman of the council of settlements—the umbrella group of all settlements in the West Bank and Gaza—if he thought the Amalekites existed today, he said, "The Palestinians are Amalek!" Lieberman went on, "We will destroy them. We won't kill them all. But we will destroy their ability to think as a nation. We will destroy Palestinian nationalism."

I heard similar talk from Effie Eitam, a hard-edged former general who leads the National Religious Party, a coalition partner in Sharon's government. Eitam, who is Sharon's housing minister, said, "I don't call these people animals. These are creatures who came out of the depths of darkness. It is not by chance that the State of Israel got the mission to pave the way for the rest of the world, to militarily get rid of these dark forces." Eitam told me that he believes there are innocent men among the Palestinians, but that they are collectively guilty. "We will have to kill them all," he said. "I know it's not very diplomatic. I don't mean all the Palestinians, but the ones with evil in their heads. Not only blood on their hands but evil in their heads. They are contaminating the hearts and minds of the next generation of Palestinians."

THE UNDERGROUND

In a speech delivered last December, Avi Dichter, the chief of the Shabak, warned that an Israeli withdrawal from Biblically important lands could heighten the desire of some Jewish extremists to destroy the Dome of the Rock. (The Muslim mosque and shrine that cover the site now are in the way of the imagined Third Temple.) "Jewish terrorism is liable to create a substantial threat, and to turn the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians into a confrontation between thirteen million Jews and one billion Muslims across the world," Dichter said.

There is precedent for this fear. In the nineteen-eighties, the Shabak uncovered what came to be known as the Jewish Underground. The agency arrested twenty-seven men who had planted bombs in the cars of Arab mayors on the West Bank (two mayors were seriously injured), and had been planning to destroy the Dome of the Rock. A veteran of the terrorist underground, Haggai Segal—he planted the bomb that blew off the legs of the mayor of Ramallah, in 1980—told me that although he does not believe Jewish terrorists will once again plot to destroy the Dome, terrorism will result if Sharon pursues his plan to dismantle settlements. "It's going to be very bad, certainly," he said. "Obviously, we're going to have violence."

Kfar Tappuach, a settlement near Yitzhar which is populated by followers of Meir Kahane, is home to an organization called the Jewish Legion. Its stated goals include training dogs to guard settlements in case of an Israeli Army pullout. One of its activists, Lenny Goldberg, who is originally from Queens, told me, "We've got to do this for ourselves. It's the new thing. The Israeli government doesn't want to help us, fine, so we're going to do our own self-defense. We're ready. We're ready to build a true Jewish state up here in the mountains. You remember when the Kingdom of Judaea split from the Kingdom of Israel?" he asked, referring to an event that occurred three thousand years ago. "It's like that. We're ready to go our own way. We're like Judaea, man."

I asked if it was realistic to expect that several thousand settlers could hold off millions of Arabs, as well as the Israeli Army. "Realism? Forget realism," he said. "We're the nation that dwells alone. We can take care of our own Jewish state." Besides, he said, the dogs were very well trained.

The director of the dog-training program is a Kahanist with dirty-blond hair who calls himself Yekutiel Ben-Ya'acov. When he lived in New York, he ran the local branch of Kach, the Kahanist political party, and was known as Mike Guzofsky. Guzofsky arranged for me to be driven from Jerusalem to Kfar Tappuach in order to see a dog-training session. A young British Jew who gave his name as Eliyahu picked me up at a mall at the edge of Jerusalem. On the side of the car was written, in Hebrew, "The Jewish Legion." The car was not armored, and I asked him if it was wise to drive a car labelled "Jewish Legion" through Arab villages. "It's been O.K. so far," he said. As we left, he recited a special prayer for travellers.

Then he drove fast. Traffic was backed up as we approached Tappuach Junction. Soldiers were stopping vehicles with green Palestinian license plates, while cars with yellow Israeli license plates were allowed to drive through. The Arab passengers waited unhappily by the side of the road. "Look at this," Eliyahu said. "It's humiliating. We should kick them out of here for their own good. What they have to go through, it's too much."

Kfar Tappuach is a squalid place of rusted cars, yards filled with tires and rotting mattresses, and children wearing secondhand clothing. It is populated by an esoteric assortment of marginal Jews—Jewish Defense League veterans from Brooklyn, Russian pensioners, poor Yemenite farmers, Lubavitcher Hasidim, and a group of recent Peruvian converts to Judaism. The Peruvian men are in charge of perimeter security.

Guzofsky walked me through the kennel, at the northern end of the settlement. A sign in English identified the facility as the "Reuben Mattus Memorial Jewish Legion Kennel." Reuben Mattus was the founder of the Häagen-Dazs ice-cream company and reportedly a supporter of Meir Kahane. A trainer named Gershon, a Russian immigrant who came to Israel from Odessa in 1990, was leading a class of dog handlers and their charges. A young Jewish Legion volunteer who gave his name as Rachmiel wore protective padding and played the role of an Arab infiltrator. A sallow man in dusty sandals named Ezra was having difficulty keeping his German shepherd, named Tarzan, in check; Tarzan had sunk his teeth into Rachmiel's arm and wouldn't let go. Ezra began to smack the dog. "Give him a fucking treat, Ezra!" Gershon, the trainer, yelled. Ezra, who is American, did not understand the Hebrew word for "treat."

"Fuck, Ezra, a treat! A treat!" Ezra eventually understood, and waved a biscuit in front of Tarzan, who then released Rachmiel.

"We don't want the dogs to kill the Arabs, just immobilize them," Guzofsky said. He said that the dogs could smell the difference between an Arab infiltrator and a Jewish resident. "The adrenaline of the Arabs, they can detect it. The Arabs are very scared of dogs. Muslims think they're unclean."

The Jewish Legion hopes to begin training other species to help guard settlements. Geese, Guzofsky said, will serve as early-warning indicators. He also claims to have received rabbinical permission to train pigs as guard animals; the group recently purchased its first one. The pigs are useful for two reasons, he said: they have an acute sense of smell, and Muslims consider them a pariah animal. When I noted that Jews do, too, he replied, "We're not going to eat them. We're going to train them."

The session came to an end, and five of us jumped in a pickup truck to drive to Tel Aviv. I sat in the back, next to Ezra, who carried an M-16 with two clips, though he is

not in the Army. The conversation turned to the far right's struggle against Ariel Sharon's plan to withdraw settlements from Gaza.

"He should die," Ezra said. "They should slaughter the fat pig."

Guzofsky, in the front seat, said, quickly, "It's not going to be one of us who kills him. It'll be someone you never heard of. I'm telling you, he's in trouble. He's in danger. But it won't be us."

When Dror Etkes looks at the West Bank, he sees not the footprints of ancient Jewish kings and prophets but land grabs and bypass roads, as well as an infrastructure of suppression built by the Army to protect the settlers. I spent several days driving around the West Bank with Etkes, who heads the Settlement Watch program of Peace Now, a left-wing Israeli group that rose to prominence in 1982 when it led protests against Sharon's invasion of Lebanon. He was counting mobile homes and water towers, trying to track the constantly expanding settlement outposts.

On our way to Beit El and Ofra one day, we stopped at an outpost called Migron, the largest of the illegal settlements in the West Bank. Migron, which is near the site where King Saul is thought to have battled the Philistines, is home to forty-three families, who live in mobile homes, awaiting the construction of permanent houses. We drove through the front gate. One of the settlers recognized Etkes immediately, and greeted him warmly. "Dror, how's it going?"

I asked the settler about his friendliness toward an avowed enemy of his movement. "Dror? He's a great guy," the settler said. "What am I going to do? Call him a criminal?"

"He wants to shut you down," I said. The settler laughed. "Next year, we'll have permanent buildings. We'll invite him to see."

Etkes said that the settler's confidence wasn't misplaced. "The settlers have the power, and we react," he said. "The thing I hate about the settlers is their arrogance. They call themselves a kingdom of priests, but it's really a welfare state. Who paves the road to Migron? Who supplies soldiers to protect Migron? Who puts in the water and electricity?"

The story is always the same, Etkes said. "First, the settlers in the area need an antenna for cell-phone reception. Then they need a guy to guard the antenna. And then he gets lonely, so he needs a friend. And the friend needs a mikvah—a ritual bath—and the mikvah needs a plumber, and the plumber has five kids, so they need a school."

The Sharon government has been playing a double game, Etkes said: the "illegal" settlement outposts, which Sharon has told President Bush he will dismantle, are actually built with the help of the government, and guarded by its Army. In the past year, according to Etkes, dozens more outposts have gone up than come down.

"These settlements are the harshest challenge to Israeli democracy," Etkes said. "Not just in the cultural sense but in the disrespect for the law." The illegal settlements make his point. "Imagine if I put a shipping container in the middle of Rabin Square, in Tel Aviv, and said, 'This is where I now live.' Impossible. But if I did it on the West Bank, on an Arab's farmland, it would be fine." We drove on to Beit El, and then northeast. Ofra came into view. It was more orderly than other outposts: neat rows of red-roofed chalets strung along a ridge. "It's odd," Etkes said. "A group

of Jews volunteering to live inside an electrified fence in houses built in a Teutonic style.”

Etkes told me of an incident that happened fifteen years ago, during the first Palestinian intifada, when he was a twenty-year-old paratrooper. As he was walking to the dining hall of an Army base in the West Bank, he came across a group of Palestinian prisoners, sitting in the open sun. They were blindfolded, their hands were tied, and they were shoeless. Etkes, who had just returned from an operation in Jenin, saw a small group of “jobnikim,” the Army slang for rear-unit soldiers, on their knees in front of the prisoners. They were burning the soles of the prisoners’ feet with lighters.

“I ran up to them—I couldn’t believe it—I said, ‘What are you doing?’” Etkes recalled. “They didn’t try to hide it. It was the middle of the day. They were torturing them for fun. I kicked their hands away. It was an instinctive reaction. They stopped.”

Later that day, three of the soldiers approached Etkes. “They got me in a corner. They said, ‘You shouldn’t ever do that. Forget that you shouted at us—but in front of an Arab?’”

The soldiers were Sephardim, the descendants of Jews from Arab countries. Etkes has a fair complexion; his grandfather was a Jew from Germany. “I triggered some kind of reaction in them—‘Never do that in front of an Arab.’ They hated me because I was an Ashkenazi. They were going to show how tough they could be on Arabs, to make sure the Ashkenazi élite doesn’t think that they are Arabs themselves. This is the tragedy of the occupation.”

Etkes grew up in a religiously observant home in Jerusalem. He was a member of the religious youth movement, and he dreamed, like many Jewish boys, of fighting and dying—the dying, he said, was the meaningful part—for his people. But his time in the Army upset his assumptions.

“Zionism is my life,” he told me. “I’m alive because of Zionism. If my grandfather hadn’t come here from Germany in 1936—” He paused. “It’s not Zionism that I’m talking about. It’s the racist, colonialist elements in Zionism.” Etkes’s revulsion at the chauvinism of the settlers helped drive him from religion; today, he wears no kipa, and says that he does not believe in God.

Etkes, like many leftists in Israel, was ambivalent about Sharon’s Gaza plan. He sees it as a partial step, designed to avoid, rather than confront, the hardest issues facing Israel. On the other hand, he said, any pullout is a positive step. “The historical dynamic is against Sharon. This is why the settlers are panicking a little. Sharon has accepted a rationale for removing settlements. He won’t remove other settlements in the West Bank, but the settlers think that one of his successors might.”

Etkes advocates the removal of settlements from the whole of Gaza and the West Bank, including settlements that straddle the Green Line. This position has never been popular in Israel, even during the Oslo peace process. It is less popular now. Only a minority of Israelis believe that the creation of a Palestinian state from the West Bank and Gaza would bring about an end to the conflict.

I had thought that Etkes was one of the believers, but he asked, “Will a one-hundred-per-cent pullout lead to a peaceful Israel and a peaceful Palestine? Now, I’d have to say no. It wouldn’t be the end of the conflict. It might begin a long-term

historical process of reconciliation, but this doesn't mean that there wouldn't be a war. There's no way I could say that."

THE SHEIKH

In January, I went to Gaza City to see Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, a founder of Hamas. Four months earlier, Yassin had been the target of an Israeli assassination attempt. A wall near the house where I met him, in the Sabra neighborhood, featured a green-and-red painting of an Israeli bus severed in two.

The Sheikh was seated in a wheelchair at the far end of a reception room. (He had been paralyzed as a young man in a gymnastics accident.) A translator sat close to him, because the Sheikh was nearly deaf. A few days before this meeting, a female bomber named Reem Salah al-Rayashi had blown herself up at the Erez checkpoint, in north Gaza, killing four Israelis. To the Israeli guards at Erez, where Palestinians are searched and cleared before entering Israel to work, Rayashi appeared to be a frail woman with a limp. When the bomb she carried, which was attached to her waist, set off a metal detector, she told the Israeli commander of the checkpoint that it was the fault of a plate in her leg. The Israeli, a twenty-eight-year-old named Gal Shapira, believed her, and ordered that she be searched by female soldiers. As Rayashi was being led into a side room by soldiers, she detonated the bomb, killing Shapira and the other soldiers, and injuring four Palestinians. The attack was the first conducted by a female member of Hamas, a religiously conservative group that had previously limited participation in terror attacks to men. Rayashi was the mother of a three-year-old and a one-year-old. In a video made shortly before the attack, she stated, "God gave me the ability to be a mother of two children who I love so. But my wish to meet God in paradise is greater, so I decided to be a martyr for the sake of my people. I am convinced God will help and take care of my children."

I asked Yassin what Islamic sources justified the use of women in acts of murder-suicide. "The jihad against Israel is the duty of every individual Muslim," he said. "The military wing of Hamas did not use women in these operations until the need arose. It would have been difficult for a man to conduct this operation. A woman achieved it more easily. Her children will know that she is a martyr for Palestine. This is a great gift to them. There is no fear of death among the children."

Just outside the Old City walls of Jerusalem is a narrow valley called Gai Hinnom, which means "hell" in Hebrew. On a stone altar in this valley, it is said, the Canaanites sacrificed children to the god Moloch. If the extremists among the Jews suffer from a Moriah complex, then the extremists among the Palestinians are in the grip of a Moloch complex. Jewish children are among the targets of sacrifice, but some extremists sacrifice their own children as well, dispatching them on suicide missions, and using them as shields when they attack Israeli soldiers. In Gaza three years ago, I witnessed Hamas gunmen firing at Israeli jeeps from behind a screen of children throwing rocks. The Israelis, faced with the choice of retreating or returning fire, returned fire. They hit at least two children with rubber-coated steel bullets, injuring them seriously. This shoot-out took place during school hours. Almost five hundred Palestinian children under the age of eighteen have been killed by Israelis since 2000. Not all of them were shot by soldiers who were under fire. Palestinian children, even those throwing stones, are not in themselves threats to armed soldiers in tanks, and many were simply bystanders.

Although many Palestinians mourn these deaths, children are taught in school to venerate juvenile martyrs. The Gaza Strip is papered with posters celebrating dead

children. Even the Palestinian terrorist groups that are ostensibly secular—those attached to the Fatah movement of Yasir Arafat—have elevated childhood martyrdom to a sacrament. On Palestinian Authority television two years ago, Arafat was asked if he had a message for Palestinian children. He answered, “This child . . . who is grasping the stone, facing the tank; is it not the greatest message to the world when that hero becomes a martyr? We are proud of them.”

Hamas’s covenant doesn’t differentiate between settlers and other Israelis—in fact, it doesn’t mention settlers at all. It reads, “Our struggle against the Jews is very great and very serious. . . . It strives to raise the banner of Allah over every inch of Palestine. . . . The Prophet, Allah bless him and grant him salvation, has said, ‘The Day of Judgment will not come about until Muslims fight the Jews.’” I asked Yassin whether this was propaganda or policy—whether the enemy was the occupation, or Israel.

“There were some Jews who lived in Palestine before Zionism,” Yassin said. “The children of these Jews will be allowed to stay under the protection of Islam. But the rest of the Jews must be defeated, or they must leave.”

Two months after our conversation, Yassin was assassinated in an Israeli missile strike. Abdel Aziz Rantisi was appointed the new leader of Hamas in Gaza. In January, I had met with Rantisi, who was a pediatrician; I asked how he could justify harming Israeli children. He told me that Israel has forced Hamas to commit these acts. Then he said, “The Jews are worse than Hitler. I believe the Nazis did not break the bones of children with rockets. I believe Hitler wouldn’t bulldoze homes on civilians when they were screaming inside. It’s impossible to say that Hitler would do that. I believe that more than fifty per cent of the world doesn’t believe in the Holocaust, and I am one of them. The Israelis practice terror against our people and say to the world that we are terrorists. I believe that they did the same thing to Hitler. The Germans were the victims of the Jews.”

We were in his apartment, in Gaza City, which was filled with his grandchildren when I arrived. They provided him with protection. Rantisi never picked up a ringing telephone; he always had one of the children answer. (The Israeli security services have managed to kill at least one prominent terrorist with an exploding telephone.) At the end of the interview, a telephone rang on a table next to my chair. No children were available to answer it, and Rantisi asked me to pick up the receiver. I declined.

Rantisi was assassinated last month, also in a missile strike. I reviewed my notes of conversations I had had with him in the nineteen-nineties, and I came across a discussion about suffering. I had suggested that the underlying story of the Middle East might be the collision between right and right: in other words, there was justice to both the Jewish cause and the Palestinian cause. Rantisi became impatient and scornful. “Jewish suffering is nothing,” he said. “People who make others suffer cannot suffer themselves. It’s impossible. The Jews are the enemy of God, and God is the enemy of the Jews.”

THE GENERAL

On the night of April 16, 1988, Israeli commandos landed silently on a beach in Tunis. Agents of the Israeli intelligence service, the Mossad, were waiting for them. The Israelis drove to an apartment building that was the home of Khalil al-Wazir, the second-ranking official, after Yasir Arafat, in the Palestine Liberation Organization. Israel believed that al-Wazir, who was better known as Abu Jihad—the Father of Holy

War—was coordinating, from Tunis, the first Palestinian intifada, which had begun four months earlier.

The commandos found Abu Jihad in his apartment and shot him to death. As they turned to leave, Abu Jihad's daughter surprised them. One of the commandos told her, in Arabic, to go to her mother. Then they left, and were at sea in a matter of minutes.

In Israeli security circles, it is believed that the man who led the assassination team up the stairs into Abu Jihad's apartment was Moshe Ya'alon, who is now a lieutenant general and the chief of staff of the Israeli Army. He is also the overseer of the assassins who killed Yassin and Rantisi.

Ya'alon, who was born in 1950, has a mild, bookish, and unimposing manner, possessing little of the brashness one associates with Israeli generals such as Moshe Dayan or even Ehud Barak. In the course of several interviews, in his office at Army headquarters in Tel Aviv, and on West Bank Army bases, Ya'alon, who is known by his nickname, Boogie, talked about his war on terror. I asked him if he thought it had been a mistake to assassinate Abu Jihad, who, unlike Arafat, had a reputation for realism.

"I don't know," he answered. He paused, and added, "It was a mistake not to kill Arafat."

He believes this fervently; he is convinced that Arafat, like the leaders of Hamas, is unwilling to grant any legitimacy to the idea of Israel. The heart of the conflict, Ya'alon said, is this: it is not Jewish settlements that Palestinian leaders find objectionable but Jews. He doesn't regret the assassinations of the Hamas leadership. These were all men with Jewish blood on their hands, he said.

Before Ya'alon Hebraized his name, he was Moshe Smolansky. His parents raised him in a town in northern Israel that was a bastion of the Labor Party. His father was an immigrant from Ukraine, who came to Palestine in 1925; his mother was a partisan in Poland in the Second World War, and came to Palestine in 1947. Her parents and siblings were killed by the Germans.

Ya'alon was a member of the Working Youth movement. As a young soldier, he served in the Fighting Pioneer Youth Brigade, which established kibbutzim in isolated parts of Israel. By 1970, he was fighting against Arafat's Fatah. "I lost friends in those operations," he said. His life is intertwined with Arafat's. "I dealt with Arafat in Jordan, then in Lebanon, then in Tunis, then here," he said.

After the shock of the 1973 Yom Kippur War, in which Syria and Egypt launched an initially effective surprise attack, Ya'alon decided to return to the military. By the mid-nineteen-nineties, he had become the chief of military intelligence and was marked—unfairly, he said—as a man of the right.

"In August of 1995, I came to the late Mr. Rabin, saying that I do not see that the Palestinian leadership is preparing the Palestinian people for reconciliation," Ya'alon recalled. "I'm talking about education, the rhetoric. I'm talking about not eliminating the terror organizations' capability to attack us. . . . I said that the continuation of the peace process should be conditioned as an ultimatum to Chairman Arafat."

Since 2000, Ya'alon said, "checkpoints are not the reason for terrorism—terrorism is the reason for checkpoints." In the last month of calm before the intifada, "we had

just a few checkpoints on the former Green Line. Now, because of the terror, we have had to implement closures and add dozens of checkpoints around the Palestinian cities and along the roads. From Arafat's point of view, this is what he wants. To complicate the situation, to create occupation. To make us be seen as occupiers."

Ya'alon, who is usually blunt, was opaque when he discussed the settlements. His job is ostensibly apolitical (though each of his three most recent predecessors entered politics upon retirement), and he says that the question of settlements should be decided on the political level. But he suggested that the settlements, far from serving a security purpose, were a security burden. Indirectly, he also blamed the settlements—and the military presence their defense requires—for exacerbating the tension between Israelis and Palestinians. He has got into disputes with Dichter, the chief of the Shabak, as well as with his immediate superior, the minister of defense, Shaul Mofaz, about the proper response to suicide bombings. In security staff meetings, Dichter and Mofaz argued that curfews and additional checkpoints should be imposed on the West Bank. Ya'alon disagreed with the tactic, believing that blanket closures bred only bitterness. The bombers should be hunted, but the entire West Bank shouldn't be punished for a suicide bombing, he told me.

"It should be done in a more sensitive way," Ya'alon said. "Not to close and just hit, and close." He disagreed with Mofaz, a Likud member who preceded Ya'alon as chief of staff. "Unfortunately, Mofaz thinks in another way: You should use more force and more force," Ya'alon said. (Lately, however, Mofaz has publicly called for measures to ameliorate the conditions of Palestinians.)

For Ya'alon, the occupation of Gaza and the West Bank—or, in his view, the reoccupation, given that during the period of the Oslo peace process the Palestinians had a great deal of autonomy in their cities—has forced his Army to confront the moral dilemmas inherent in the suppression of a hostile civilian population.

In Israel's first, unsuccessful, attempt on the life of Sheikh Yassin, the Air Force dropped a five-hundred-pound bomb on a building in which Yassin was holding a meeting. Yassin escaped with only minor injuries. Shortly after the attack, Ya'alon told me that he had advised against it. "I wasn't sure we would be able to destroy the house," Ya'alon said. It would most likely have taken a two-thousand-pound bomb to kill Yassin, but a bomb of such power would have also destroyed parts of two adjacent buildings. "I wasn't ready to harm innocent people," he said. But, he added, "I'm not sure that our decision about Sheikh Yassin was a moral decision. It might have been immoral to our own people not to kill him."

Two days after the assassination of Sheikh Yassin, I spoke with Ya'alon again. He seemed satisfied. "You should judge this operation in moral terms. In moral terms, he deserved it," he said. "It's up to them whether they're up for death. They can stop terrorist attacks. If they stop the terror attacks, we don't do anything."

In 2002, the Army had targeted another Hamas leader in Gaza, Salah Shehadeh. "Shehadeh was responsible for the murders of dozens of Israelis, and we tried to intercept him several times, and we found that usually he was surrounded by his wife and his children," Ya'alon said. "Now, we knew that he was responsible for devastating attacks, and we avoided killing him because we didn't want to kill innocent people, even his children. At a certain point, after more than six months in which we absorbed casualties, we discussed it, the moral issue—to weigh the lives of innocent Israeli people with the lives of his family."

He continued, "We decided that we wouldn't kill him if the children were in the house, but if his wife would be in the house we'd do it." In the end, fourteen Palestinian civilians were killed along with Shehadeh, including nine children, one of them Shehadeh's. Ya'alon told me that he regrets the children's deaths, but he believes that there may come a time, after a "mega-attack"—the Israeli term for an attack of 9/11 proportions—when he won't have the moral luxury of worrying about the lives of Palestinian children. "At a certain point, the United States decided to drop nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki," he said.

"Unfortunately, this is my intelligence assessment—that there is no partner for a two-state solution. This is the reason the Palestinian leadership initiated this terror conflict." For now, Ya'alon told me that he sees a "moral asymmetry" between the Arabs and the Jews. "They want to deliberately kill our children," he said. "We don't want to kill theirs."

The Palestinian village of Beit Furik lies southeast of Nablus, adjacent to the radical Jewish settlement of Itamar and due south of the equally zealous settlement of Elon Moreh. Because of Beit Furik's proximity to the two settlements, and the roads leading to them, the movements of Arab residents are strictly controlled. An Army checkpoint just outside the village means that its residents sometimes wait hours to leave, and that sometimes they don't leave at all.

On the morning of February 26, 2002, Samar Hamdoun, a thirty-two-year-old resident of Beit Furik, went into labor. The local doctor was called, and decided that she should be taken immediately to the nearest hospital, in Nablus. Hamdoun and her husband approached the checkpoint by taxi, but the soldiers refused to let them pass.

"My husband said, 'Please, please, she's giving birth,' but the soldier started yelling and waving his hands to go back," Hamdoun said, when I saw her recently in her home, off the village's badly paved main road. She wore a black hejab, and was surrounded by relatives when we spoke, in a large but bare living room. Two photographs of Saddam Hussein were on the wall. "My husband said, 'My wife is in trouble, she's having the baby now, we have to go, we must go.' The soldier could see that I was pregnant. But they wouldn't let us pass."

The Hamdouns spent the next four hours driving a circuitous and bumpy back road to Nablus, which is, via the Army checkpoint, only fifteen minutes away. Halfway through the journey, Hamdoun lost consciousness and began to hemorrhage. When they finally arrived at the hospital in Nablus, four hours later, the baby was dead.

Hamdoun said she blames "the Jews" for the baby's death. Members of her family nodded. Her father-in-law then spoke. "We don't want anything to do with politics," he said. "We just want to be left alone."

What was Saddam Hussein doing on the wall, I asked.

"He stands up for Palestinians," he said. "He fights the Jews."

A month before I visited the Hamdoun family, a resident of Beit Furik had carried out a suicide bombing in Tel Aviv, killing four people. Some of Israel's leaders asked whether the residents of places like Beit Furik would be quite so intent upon killing Jews if the occupation disappeared. Even Defense Minister Mofaz, who takes a hard line against the Palestinians, recognized the dilemma. Ideological opposition to the

existence of Israel, even within its pre-1967 boundaries, motivates most terrorism, he told me, but he also said, "I believe that if you put people under closure and you press on them and do not ease their lives . . . it could push them to the terror organizations."

There is no question, even to its commanders, that the Israeli Army has become morally compromised in the West Bank and Gaza. Soldiers have shot unarmed civilians; they have abused Palestinians at checkpoints; and they have killed civilians, including children. There is no such thing as a clean occupation, especially of a population that uses children as weapons, and mosques and hospitals as arms depots and firing positions. But the Israeli Army is under particular stress, because it has inserted itself deep into the occupied territories in order to protect the Jewish settlers who have planted themselves among the Palestinians.

Last winter, in Hebron, I met a soldier named David Feuerstein, who was attached to the Fighting Pioneer Youth Brigade. Feuerstein was nineteen, the son of an Orthodox rabbi in New Jersey who is a prominent supporter of Hebron's Jewish community. Feuerstein was struggling with the confusions of service in Hebron. "We're here to protect the Jews from the Arabs, right?" he said, squeezing his hands together to ward off the cold. "But sometimes these Jewish kids will bother the Arabs, like old men, or girls. They'll harass them. So it's strange. We have to protect the Arabs from the Jews, even though we're here to do the opposite."

General Ya'alon told me that the Army's human-rights problem is not systemic. "We educate the soldiers not to take anything from Palestinians, money or anything else. In most cases, our young soldiers have behaved properly, but unfortunately, in this armed conflict, we have some cases that we're not proud of, and we deal with such cases very strictly. We put soldiers in prison because of misbehavior. This is one of our main challenges for the soldiers and commanders, to keep our moral values."

Critics accuse the Army of only sporadically prosecuting human-rights abusers. Dror Etkes, of Peace Now, sees a more intransigent problem. "This is not an issue of a few rotten apples," he said. "It's the crate itself that is rotten. The Army is operating deeply in the occupied territories because it has to defend the settlers. This part of the conflict is a war to defend the privileges of the settlers, and there is no way for the Army to do this elegantly. It's like the French in Algeria. No one has ever succeeded in doing this without dehumanization."

Ya'alon seemed fatalistic about the burdens placed on his Army, by his enemies and by the country's political leadership. "We are aware that the soldiers have an enormous burden daily—the checking of Palestinians," he said. "I don't like this mission. But what can we do?" The Army, he said, would protect Israelis "either in Galilee or in Judaea and Samaria"—that is, both within and beyond Israel's 1967 borders.

ISRAEL'S FUTURE

The leaders of the Jewish national-religious camp do not adhere to observable reality. They exist in the glorious Jewish past and in the messianic future but not in the reality of today, in which Jewish soldiers give their lives to protect settlements; in which Palestinians live and die at checkpoints; in which Israel is becoming a pariah among the nations; and in which Israel may one day cease to exist as a democratic Jewish state.

There remains a moral gulf between the most zealous settlers and the most extreme of the Palestinian Islamists. Small cells of settlers have shown themselves to be capable of committing atrocious acts of violence, but the main institutions of the settlement movement have not endorsed the sort of violence against Arabs that members of many Palestinian factions commit against Jews.

Still, there are similarities. Like the theologians of Hamas, the ideologues of the settlement movement have stripped their religion of all love but self-love; they have placed themselves at the center of God's drama on earth; and they interpret their holy scriptures to prove that their enemies are supernaturally evil and undeserving of even small mercies. And, like Hamas, which would build for the Palestinians a death-obsessed Islamic theocracy, the settlers, if they have their way, would build an apartheid state ruled by councils of revanchist rabbis.

Gershom Scholem, the scholar of Jewish mysticism, once warned of the great eschatological temptation posed by a born-again Jewish nation. Can Jewish history manage to reënter concrete reality, Scholem asked, without being destroyed by the messianic claim that reëntry is bound to bring up from its depths? The messianism of the settlers, like the messianism of Hamas, is the triumph of expediency: people who believe that God has given them a mission have granted themselves license to commit terrible sins.

Elyakim Haetzni, an early settler of Kiryat Arba, and an inflammatory apocalypticist, told me that when the Jews of Tel Aviv—the cultural capital of Israel, a place poisoned by the dissolute culture of the West—try to force their hill-country cousins out of the settlements, blood will be spilled.

"The situation of Hanukkah is with us," Haetzni said. Hanukkah, it should be remembered, commemorates not only the Jewish defeat of Israel's Greek overlords but the defeat of Hellenized Jews by the Maccabees. "Now the clash is very, very near," Haetzni said. "The battle is about Jewish identity. The battle is about Judaism." For now, the settlers are outnumbered, by secular Israelis as well as by religious Jews—and there are many—who venerate life more than land. But the majority has not yet found a way to bend the minority to its will.

The most farsighted among the Palestinians now understand that settlements are good for their cause. Michael Tarazi, a Palestinian-American and Harvard-trained legal adviser to the Palestinian negotiating team, told me, "Settlements are the vanguard of binationalism"—a single state that would soon have an Arab majority. "I don't care if they build more," Tarazi said. "The longer they stay out there, the more Israel will appear to the world to be essentially an apartheid state."

He went on, "The settlements mean that the egg is hopelessly scrambled. Basically, it is already one state. There are no signs saying 'Welcome to Occupied Territory.' It's one country, the same electricity grid, the same aquifers. Except that the three million Christians and Muslims in Gaza and the West Bank don't have the same rights as the five million Jews in Israel, and the Arabs in Israel are second-class citizens compared with the Jews. Now the cause is justice and equality."

By justice and equality, he meant the dissolution of Israel as a haven for Jews. "This is something very fundamental," he said. "Zionism in practice is about taking the land and getting rid of the people."

Zionism, I argued, is, in essence, the liberation movement of an oppressed people. The settlers have tried to turn it into a fundamentalist theology, but Zionism, at its core, remains a liberal idea.

"Stop scapegoating the settlers!" he said. "I think you're in denial, I really do. It's very typical. You want to find a reason why all this is happening, but you don't look at the practice of Zionism itself. . . . It's true that the national-religious Zionists are dragging Israel in the direction of theocratic fascism, but the settlement enterprise is encouraged by the government. These people are just extreme strains. They say publicly what people think privately."

Tarazi believes that the Palestinian strategy should change. "We have to look at the way the South Africans did it. The world is increasingly intolerant of the Zionist idea. We have to capture the imagination of the world. We have to make this an argument about apartheid."

Israel is faced with two options: keep the settlements, and risk either apartheid or binationalism; or separate cleanly from the Palestinians, by withdrawing settlements and raising a wall between the two sides. In 2002, Israel began to build such a barrier. Its planned route veers deep into the West Bank, in order to encircle settlements. Some Israelis argue against a fence that tracks the Green Line for practical reasons: Israel might very well have to hold high ground, on the east side of the Line. Another argument, made by Dennis Ross, who served as President Clinton's Middle East negotiator, is that a Green Line fence would reward the Palestinians for avoiding their responsibility to put an end to terror. "The message has to be 'We know you don't like where the fence is, but if you don't fulfill your security responsibilities this is where it is. It won't be permanently there unless you make it permanent,'" Ross told me. Ross may have a point, but it is one that will be lost if a fence designed to keep bomb-carrying murderers out of Israeli cities is turned, instead, into a tool for a settlers' landgrab.

The argument against unilateral withdrawal is straightforward. The Palestinians will not be satisfied with the West Bank and Gaza, and will simply demand more. Even many leftists have come to this conclusion. In Jerusalem, I spoke to Ya'acov Rotblit, an icon of the peace movement—he wrote its anthem, "A Song for Peace." He told me that he now thought that the movement had been motivated by "wishful thinking."

I asked him how far to the right he had moved. "I didn't move anywhere," he said. "I was kicked. Listen, the whole world of assumptions, of beliefs, of hopes, of thoughts about possibilities collapsed totally with this intifada." I then asked if he was sure that the Palestinians were interested only in Israel's destruction, and not simply in a better offer than Barak had been capable of making at Camp David. "We give and they take and they take more," he said. "The whole Temple Mount wouldn't have been enough."

He believed that the settlers had been misunderstood. "If these people behaved the way the world says they behaved, they would have done ethnic cleansing against the Arabs already," he said. "They are very patient people. They don't shoot back as much as anyone else in the same situation would." The settlers, he has come to believe, are not the problem. "The first day the first Jew came back here, that's the start of the problem. I was never pro-settlement," he added. "But why shouldn't a Jew live in Hebron?"

Many Israelis fear that the Palestinians would consider a unilateral Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza as a sign of weakness. When Israel withdrew its forces from southern Lebanon, four years ago, Hezbollah, Israel's foremost Lebanese foe, declared victory, and argued that the continual killing of Israelis by Palestinians would eventually destroy the Zionist spirit. But much depends on the manner of withdrawal. "There is a right way to do it, without giving them the impression that we cower before terrorism," Defense Minister Mofaz told me. There is also the possibility of going so far as to exacerbate the situation.

Ariel Sharon, after proposing what, for him, was a revolutionary idea—the pullout of settlers from Gaza—now seems bogged down, trapped between the Palestinians and the settlers. He is making moves against both. In mid-May, Sharon launched his soldiers and bulldozers in two directions. In Rafah, in the southern Gaza Strip, the Army began intensive operations that were designed, it said, to shut down weapons-smuggling tunnels between Gaza and Egypt. Dozens of Palestinians were killed, and a large number of Palestinian homes along the border were destroyed. Last week, there were more fatalities in Rafah, after the Army fired on a demonstration; at least four children were killed. And, in the northern West Bank, soldiers, with considerably more politesse, attempted to dismantle the Yitzhar Lookout.

These two operations have one thing in common: neither will solve the problem that was meant to be addressed. Sharon's actions against the Palestinians will not stop terrorism, and his actions against outposts will not stop the settlement expansion. Both operations symbolize the Sharon government's impotence, and its inability to grapple with the great issues before it.

There are Israelis who, unlike Sharon, believe that a withdrawal from Gaza and most of the West Bank could dilute the Palestinians' urge to make war. "I believe that reality is stronger than everything," Amnon Lipkin-Shahak, a former chief of staff, told me. "When they have a state and when they won't have the everyday reality of going through an Israeli checkpoint, they'll have something to lose." I asked him if he believes Palestinians would still dream of a greater Palestine, and he responded that "it is O.K. to dream." He went on, "Israelis will still dream of a greater Israel."

The Jewish settlement of Tekoa, on the edge of the Judaeen desert, northeast of Hebron, is built near the site of the ancient Jewish village of the same name. The ancient Tekoa is best known as the birthplace of a shepherd and fig gatherer named Amos, the Jewish prophet. Tekoa was then part of the southern Kingdom of Judah, the rival to the northern Kingdom of Israel. Amos first heard the voice of God in Tekoa. The prophet left his sycamore trees and his sheep and carried God's message to the northern kingdom—a place, the Bible says, of avarice and decadence and empty ritual.

When Amos arrived, he condemned the sins of foreigners but told the Israelites that God's greatest anger was reserved for them, His own people. He said that they had "sold the righteous for silver, and the poor for a pair of shoes." Amos did not believe that the Jews were worse than their neighbors, but that being chosen by God brought with it a burden: the burden of moral stringency. Ritual worship would not please God, Amos said, when the poor went hungry. "I hate, I despise your feast days, and I will not be appeased by your solemn assemblies," he told the Israelites. Amos wrote in fire, "Let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream."

Today, two hundred and fifty Jewish families, half of them Orthodox, most of modest means, live in Tekoa. It is average in size and appearance for a West Bank settlement. Among its residents is a friend of mine named Seth Mandell, an Orthodox rabbi, and his wife, Sherri, who brought their children to Israel seven years ago, from Maryland. One morning earlier this year, I met Seth at his house, on a vine-covered lane. It was a clear, cold day, and we went for a walk into a steep ravine outside the gates of the settlement. We followed a narrow path to a cave. Three years ago, Seth's son Koby and a friend skipped school for the day and came to the wadi. They were fourteen years old. Their bodies were found the next day in the cave; they had been beaten to death with rocks. No one has been caught in connection with the killings. I had visited the cave before with Seth, so we didn't speak much. The cave is low-ceilinged, dank, and dark. The remnants of memorial candles, hundreds of them, covered the wet stone.

On the way back to Seth's house, we talked about Amos, who seemed to me to embody a different message from that of the men who conceived of the settlement project. Amos was a universalist, I said. His concerns were not those of conquering land but those of spreading justice.

Seth corrected me. He recognized the universality of Amos' message, but he also remembered his audience. "We can reinterpret Amos into universal meaning, but Amos, just like Jesus, was talking to Jews," he said.

But wasn't Amos demanding universal moral behavior?

"Of course," Seth replied, "but he was also telling Jews that the reward for righteousness was the land we're on. The universalists don't see the Zionism in Amos, and the hard-right Zionists don't see the universalism."

I asked him how he kept his faith. He said, "The world is full of pain. But without God it's only pain. I can't imagine a world without God."

The rabbi of Tekoa is a man named Menachem Froman. He was once a paratrooper; now he is a teacher of the Kabbalah. Froman has formed his own peace camp, in a manner of speaking. He believes that the West Bank should become Palestine, and he has no intention of leaving once it does. He will stay in Tekoa, he said, and may become a citizen of Palestine, under the leadership of Yasir Arafat. Froman has met Arafat, and refers to him as a friend. His meetings with Arafat have caused many of Tekoa's residents to call him a fool. Seth Mandell, who is a man of moderation, does not consider Froman his rabbi.

"I'm the village idiot," Froman said, happily. "I'm the primitive rabbi, the primitive Jew. But I'm a realist. I accept reality. I'm not talking about utopia. I accept what I see. There is a Tekoa, and there is a Tuqua"—the Arab village next door. "I don't want to change reality, I want to work with reality. And the reality is that there is a Jewish village and an Arab village. Here you have men who are attached to the land, and there you have men who are attached to the land."

He went on, "If one of my children says, 'This is my father,' does it mean that I have only one child? Not necessarily. I'm the father of more than one child." God, too, has more than one child, as does the land between the river and the sea, he said. "The Jews have a right to live in freedom, the Arabs have a right to live in freedom. I have my pride, they have their pride. I have independence, they should have independence. I don't want to suffer, they don't want to suffer."

Froman is a graduate of Mercaz HaRav, the Kookist yeshiva in Jerusalem, so it was a shock to hear him talking about a two-state solution.

"I remember my father—he was from Poland—we would go out in the city, in Haifa, and he would say, 'Look, Menachem, Jews on the street, Jews on the bus, Jews everywhere! They didn't succeed!'" By "they" he meant the Germans. "I remember the first time Chaim Weizmann—the first President of Israel—came to Haifa, my father, he shouted, 'Long live the President of Israel!'"

"You know," he continued, "the Palestinians need this as well."

I asked him how he could stay in Tekoa if it became part of Palestine.

"We'll have a shtetl in the desert," he said.

Froman invests too much faith in Yasir Arafat, and he is most likely wrong to believe that Israeli Jews would live, en masse, in a Palestinian state. And Froman is naïve to believe that the Palestinians would accept them. Still, his idealism is bracing. Other graduates of the Mercaz HaRav Yeshiva, the rabbis who serve as the theologians of the settlement movement, have blinded themselves to the presence of Arabs in the land. Froman is a reminder that Orthodox Judaism is not merely a Judaism of rock and stone, and that land is not as holy as life.

Sixty years ago, for many Jews, land was life, and Palestine meant salvation. The revisionist Zionist leader Vladimir Jabotinsky, the spiritual father of the Likud, was blunt about the need for Jews to retake their ancient homeland. In 1937, speaking to the British Parliament, he said, referring to the Arabs in Palestine, "I fully understand that any minority would prefer to be a majority. It is quite understandable that the Arabs of Palestine would also prefer Palestine to be Arab state No. 4, No. 5, or No. 6—that I quite understand. But when the Arab claim is confronted with our Jewish demand to be saved, it is like the claims of appetite versus the claims of starvation."

Today, the Jews have a national home, a potent Air Force to protect it, and the patronage of the most powerful country on earth. Today, the Jewish claim to the West Bank and Gaza is one of appetite, not of starvation.