The emergence of Gush Emunim as a social and political force is one of the most significant phenomena in contemporary Israeli life.

It is surprising, therefore, that few serious attempts have been made to study the genesis of the movement, its ideology and the impact it has had upon Jewish life in Israel and abroad. To date almost none exist in English, save for those that have been primarily polemic. The two volumes under consideration are recent Hebrew-language studies, neither of which totally avoids the same trap.

Mi Lashem Elay: Gush Emunim by Danny Rubenstein is a journalistic work which follows the chronology of the movement from its roots in the modern religious community of the fifties and early sixties through the winter of 1982. The style is lively and one gets the impression that he is viewing the events being described from the perspective of a first-hand witness. There is little question about the author’s cynicism and distaste for the positions that the movement has assumed.

By contrast Gush Emunim by Tzvi Raanan is an attempt to study the subject within the context of Zionism and religious thought in Israel. Its focus is less on events than on ideas—particularly as they influence social movements over time. Raanan appears especially concerned with the internal dilemmas that face Judaism as it responds to the demands of a contemporary nation-state. His emphasis is ideological and theoretical rather than historical and political. As a result, his work is more difficult to follow but far more interesting and of lasting value.
Aside from its influence upon one aspect or another of public policy there can be little doubt that Gush Emunim has impacted upon the intellectual and ideological climate in Israel. In many regards it has forced a re-evaluation of troubling questions that have evaded prior assessment. In others it has pushed toward the resolution of concerns that have lived in uneasy—if pragmatic—tension since the creation of the State. The result is not always a happy one.

Albeit for somewhat different reasons, both Zionism and Judaism in Israel have undergone similar processes since the creation of the State. The former was Israel’s great state-building ideology that served as an intellectual framework for the massive job of creating a Jewish revival in the Middle East. Yet with the creation of the State Zionism faced a serious choice. Its mission fulfilled, should it seek some other charge or should it simply recede and allow new socio-intellectual forms to emerge?

In some respects it did both of these. The Zionist cause was first redirected from the business of founding a state to the job of convincing world Jewry that it ought to live there. The new task was considerably more difficult than was the original one. While large numbers of Jews from the Arab World arrived in the fledgeling state soon after its creation, one could hardly argue that they were persuaded to come or that their decision was in any way related to Zionist theory. They were generally involuntary immigrants who had abandoned communities that were centuries old. Indeed, those of means, the merchant and professional classes who did have a choice, generally did not migrate to Israel. Many of them and their children now reside in affluent communities throughout the New York metropolitan area, Canada, Paris and London.

The Jews of the West were largely disinterested in the possibility of Aliyah and in many instances did not fully impute legitimacy to the new Zionist mandate. They saw no real conflict between living in the Diaspora yet maintaining Zionist allegiance. They accepted the new State as the fulfillment of the Zionist cause, to be sure. Their support, however, was all that they needed to retain credentials as an active Zionist.

If Zionist ardor receded abroad its diminution was more than matched within Israel itself. Following classically Weberian logic, Israel moved from its charismatic beginnings toward a set of rational-bureaucratic structures in the name of “normalcy,” a deeply-held vision in many Zionist circles in any event. Increasingly,
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Israeli society and particularly its ideological base, became routinized. The exciting social experiment lost some of its luster as a variety of influences—post-Holocaust, Western, American, etc.—were superimposed upon the earlier institutions, which were as much populist/socialist as they were Zionist.¹

The same routinization has also characterized the religious establishment in Israel. Indeed some might argue that conciliation rather than charisma has marked the religious Zionist movement from its inception. Nonetheless, there can be little doubt that for the first decades of the State's existence, the National Religious Party (N.R.P.)—which became the formal spokesperson for religious Zionism—directed its efforts toward gaining control over various elements of domestic policy. In return, the Party joined in a variety of Labor Coalitions and remained largely docile in areas of foreign affairs, security and economics.

Religious leaders often appeared to view their position as little more than a transplantation of the European original to a more inviting environment. That the State was something altogether new and required equally new responses appeared to have little impact. Further, as the religious establishment placed itself more firmly within the political system it lent itself to a variety of charges ranging from indifference to spiritual needs, to outright graft and corruption.

For many it appeared that the various religious institutions and their leaders were more interested in status and patronage than they were in ministering to the spiritual and theological needs of the nation. Suffice it to say that their very traditional brand of European observance held little attraction for the broad majority of Israelis. Though religious Zionism also had its charismatic beginnings, as in the work of Rabbi Abraham Kook, it too suffered from a bureaucratic routinization.

II

It is in this context that Gush Emunim has made its most important impact. In the face of a general desire for the comforts of urban life the movement has unabashedly espoused a return to the pioneering spirit in the name of a religious imperative. In a society in which traditional Zionist sentiment was considered quaint and decidedly on the wane, Gush Emunim has hearkened to an earlier age of self-sacrifice and self-fulfillment through the reclamation of the land. That the land is disputed, of course, makes the project all the more exciting.
So too in the religious realm, the movement has responded to the alleged lack of spiritual appeal within the major institutions. Its call is a nationalist one which offers activism and personal concern instead of organizational politics. Further, unlike most other religious groups in Israel, the Gush has made no real demand regarding ritual observance or traditional belief. It looks to the thinking of its spiritual mentors, Rabbis Kook, father and son, in arguing that all who participate in the great Zionist enterprise are fulfilling God’s will. There is essentially one mitsa of concern, “hitnahalut”.

While both Rubinstein and Raanan appear to sense the ideological-religious context within which Gush Emunim emerged, Raanan delves the issue more fully. In addition, space is devoted in both volumes on the development of the youth of the NRP during the period of increased routinization. Apparently there were two variables at play.

In the first instance, for those who took the religious-Zionist credo seriously, it was clear that the Jewish national renewal did not end with the creation of the State. At best the State was but a means to a far broader and more glorious end: the final Redemption and the Messianic Era. Precisely what these last two concepts imply and how they will come about is, of course, difficult to detail and it is this element which lends almost a sense of nihilism to the entire enterprise.

Furthermore religious-Zionist youth of the fifties and sixties were imbued with a love for the land that their European-born parents could never duplicate. Their allegiance was not forged in an environment of political compromise toward religious or organizational goals, nor did they have to concern themselves with the vicissitudes of the Parliamentary influence. Their loyalty and commitment were unbridled and pure. Their emergence in the form of a nationalist settlement movement based on religious principles should come as no surprise.

It is with this that Raanan and Rubinstein part ground. The former chooses to plot the social makeup of a movement in a chapter describing the typical Gush activist. He follows with analyses of various aspects of its ideology: Messianism, right to the land, the place of the Arab, etc.

A most illuminating section treats the perceptions of the movement regarding democratic processes and modern thought. Raanan points to the many ambiguities that exist when such an organization operates within a democratic framework and shows broad support for many of its institutions, e.g. the Army, the security forces, the educational system, etc. Thus despite its extra-
legal actions one must conclude that in many ways Gush Emunim cannot be identified as a radical movement. Indeed it prefers to see its members within the mainstream of Zionist activism, the “halutzim of the eighties.”

So too in its relation to Western thought. It is interesting to ponder the existence of fairly well-educated members who continue to make use of Western technology, yet reject the technology of Western thought in making political and diplomatic decisions. It is unusual for this particular element of a society to base its thinking on Biblical writ and Talmudic lore.

III

Yet several issues of concern to this reader have not been confronted by either author. The first is precisely the issue of Messianism as a practical element of state policy and international diplomacy. Precisely what is meant when Israel is described as “the first flower of our Redemption?” Does that imply that other considerations are unimportant, that actions which appear incorrect or which isolate Israel from the international community need not be of concern for their justification will come in the new world order that is upon us? Conversely, is the phrase but a meaningless bit of ritual that may serve theological or ideological purpose but is not meant to be taken seriously in terms of the context and detail of day-to-day affairs? Surely neither extreme is fully acceptable.

Further, and related to the first issue, precisely what is the position of religious authority in Israel when confronting matters of state? Gush Emunim has attempted to force religious leaders into a position they have largely avoided in the past. Aside from traditional questions of rite and ritual, it has demanded of its mentors that they apply classical Jewish sources—from Biblical verse to modern commentary—to contemporary questions. For example, what is the status of the conquered territories and under what circumstances may they or may they not be returned? Similarly what is the position of the Arab resident therein and how should he be treated by a legitimate Jewish authority?

It may be noted that the attempt to confront such contemporary questions through the use of classical sources has not always vindicated the positions taken by Gush Emunim or by the Begin Government for that matter. Religious leaders have questioned the wisdom and propriety of the annexation of the Golan Heights, for example, and the challenge has been grounded in religious writ. More recently, Talmudic scholars—some of them resident in
Judea—have suggested that territorial compromise in return for genuine peace might be acceptable. Similarly, a group of Hesder Yeshiva/war veterans have banded together with others of like mind under the title “Netivot Shalom” (Pathways to Peace). Here they have raised serious questions about the war in Lebanon and its aftermath, especially regarding the responsibilities of a Jewish invasionary force as it becomes an occupying power.

It is ironic—sometimes just short of humorous—that the movement and its supporters both in Israel and elsewhere, will then question the legitimacy of those who render such opinions. Who are they, what is their expertise and why don’t they keep to their Talmudic lectures and ritual concerns? Of course were they to rule otherwise, they would be hailed as courageous scholars, applying ancient sources to contemporary needs. You can’t have it both ways!

Finally, what of those who have come to the territories more recently and for motives that have little to do with either Zionism or religious principle? The Lihud Government plans to populate Judea and Samaria with 100,000 Jews in the next few years. This has been undertaken through subsidies, low-cost mortgages and massive development. Its advertising has been directed toward new immigrants as well as young Israelis who have traditionally had difficulty finding affordable housing.

There are many within Gush Emunim who bemoan this tendency while others welcome it with arms wide. Among the former, the suspicion is raised that the newcomers lack a pioneering zeal and Zionist motivation. Some are speculators, others are banking on handsome reimbursements should the experiment fail. In all, they are “soft suburbanites” and not the kind of people we need here. The typical response in return is “who cares?” As long as they are here they are making a statement and helping to prevent another Yamit.

Yet serious consideration must be given to the implications of such a program, especially among those who will consider settlement or whose children will. Precisely what kind of statement is one making when one chooses Maale Adumim instead of Jerusalem on financial grounds? Is negotiation and autonomy genuinely a lie? If the Palestinian movement is now forced into serious negotiations, will there be anything left to negotiate? If not, then will Israel have any further credibility? From a religious standpoint do we care?

Neither Raanan nor Rubinstein confront these issues. Nor does anyone else in a systematic fashion. Their treatments view the movement with equal amounts of disdain and amusement, offering the sense that Gush Emunim will not be around for very long.
Rubinstein’s work is far easier to read and perfect for fairly superficial yet comprehensive overview of the movement’s development and chronology. Raanan is much less fun but more worthwhile.

NOTES