THE TENSION BETWEEN UNIVERSAL AND PARTICULAR ORIENTATIONS WITHIN RELIGIOUS ZIONISM AND ITS CONSEQUENCES: THE “TORAH AND LABOR” MOVEMENT AS A TEST CASE

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Recent events within Israeli society brought the tension between the Likud political leadership, headed by former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, and the predominantly religious-Zionist leadership of the settlers in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip to new heights. These conflicts were reminiscent of the resolute struggle of the settlers’ movement against Yitzhak Rabin’s left-wing government at the peak of the Oslo Process in the mid 1990s, a struggle that was then supported by the Likud party and by Ariel Sharon himself. For many Israelis, the confrontation between the (greater) “Land of Israel” movement and the “State of Israel” is highly influential in shaping the character of the Jewish State at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

It is widely acknowledged that religious-Zionism has undergone significant and even dramatic changes since the Six-Day War, following which the religious messianic ideas of its followers became progressively more pronounced. In particular, the “doctrinal reversal” within religious Zionism is outstanding. This ideological shift has involved an increasing commitment to the Torah and its commandments, often characterized by quasi-fundamentalist opinions, together with a tendency to elevate the Land of Israel, in general, and “Greater Israel,” in particular, to the rank of a supreme value. Underlying both ideologies is the concept that settling the Land of Israel is the highway to a spiritual revolution that would entirely transform Israeli society as part of an ongoing process of redemption. Historically, the disciples of Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook (1891–1982)

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of the Merkaz HaRav Yeshivah in Jerusalem were the leading force in this religious extremism. Politically, the same disciples, together with other religious Zionists, were those who founded the Gush Emunim (Bloc of the Faithful) movement, which initiated and maintained the extensive settlement in the West Bank and to a large extent determined the political direction of the State of Israel.¹

The thesis on which this article is based is that in order to understand the spiritual and political processes that impacted religious-Zionism in the last generation, one must look into the internal, insolvable tension between its modern, universal tendencies and its traditionalist, particularistic outlook. As this article will attempt to demonstrate, this tension existed even when religious-Zionism was a partner to the “historical alliance” with secular, left-wing Zionism, and it persisted even amid the more modern and strong-minded trends, which were open to foreign influence, Jewish secular and non-Jewish alike. In order to substantiate this thesis, I shall turn to a more modern and moderate stream in religious Zionism: the Torah and Labor pioneering groups, which are associated with HaPo’el haMizrachi (Religious Workers) movement.

This latter movement was one of the major divisions within the religious-Zionist camp. Active since the 1920s, this movement waved a banner combining religious values with modern ones, such as Zionism, pioneering, cultural openness to a changing reality, and so forth. Over the years, HaPo’el haMizrachi became the dominant factor in the National Religious Party. In fact, the revolution initiated by the circles of Merkaz haRav and Gush Emunim was directed to a large extent precisely against the values of the Torah and Labor movement and against the political dominance of the members of HaPo’el haMizrachi. Yet, as this article suggests, side by side with this revolution there was a considerable measure of continuity, at least from the standpoint of some of the Torah and Labor leaders. To demonstrate the ideological problems involved in a modern and daring religious movement, I shall focus on two figures whose opposing ideologies strongly influenced these circles in the long term. They are Moshe Unna and Shlomo Zalman Shragai.