

# Religious Zionists say West Bank settlement could usher in messianic age

As Rabbi Dovid Ben Meir leads visitors through the ruins of this ancient city, believed to have served as the Jewish capital more than 3,000 years ago, his love of history is clear. But it wasn't his love of the past so much as his desire to shape the future that led him here. When he was a teenager in Chicago, a class on modern European history got him thinking: In every revolution, there are people for, against, and indifferent. "I wanted to say to myself that I would be for revolution, for progress. But I was born 200 years too late."

Then he had a second thought.

"I realized there was something immense going on in the world – the restoration of the state of Israel, the redemption of the people of the Jewish nation," recalls the rabbi. His parents were both Holocaust survivors, barely – his father was pulled off a mound of bodies when someone saw him move. "I wanted to take part in building a better future, the building of the Jewish nation in the land of Israel."

Today, he is a father of nine and lives with his wife in a West Bank settlement near Shilo.

It's communities like his that the United Nations rejected on Nov. 29, when an overwhelming majority of member nations affirmed the right of Palestinians to establish a state here.

Since Israel captured East Jerusalem and the West Bank in a 1967 war with its Arab neighbors, the Jewish population in these areas has grown from virtually zero to at least 550,000, leaving Palestinians with shrinking patches for a homeland.

Many in the international community view settlements politically, as a maneuver to maximize the Israeli advantage in negotiations with Palestinians – or to scuttle those talks entirely. For peace negotiations to resume after a four-year deadlock, Palestinians have called on Israel to freeze settlement construction for six months. Ultimately, they and many others want the settlers to leave the past behind and go back across the pre-1967 border.

But for religious Zionists like Mr. Ben Meir, being here is not just about the past but about fulfilling a divine commandment to resettle the land that God promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And they believe that doing so is part of a process that is fulfilling biblical prophecy and ushering in a messianic age. Those beliefs represent a major challenge to the prospects for a two-state solution, as the idea of a covenant made with God is effectively nonnegotiable, whereas political objectives or positions can often be adjusted in return for other benefits.

Religious Zionists have never made up a majority of settlers. But shortly after Israel more than doubled its territory in 1967, they became the most visible and energized proponents of settlement, especially in areas deep in the West Bank. They steadily gained leverage over divided governments, and today carry

outsized influence on government decisionmaking, serving as a kind of "internal deterrence" to any Israeli leader weighing an exchange of land for peace, says Gershom Gorenberg, a historian of Israeli settlement.

These religious Zionists describe the redemptive era they espouse as already well under way, and say it includes the coming of the Messiah, who is widely expected to be a human leader; the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem; the uplifting of all peoples; and the establishment of lasting global peace.

"Everything that happens, there's a divine reason and a divine hand behind it," says David Wilder, spokesman for the Israeli settlers of Hebron. "We believe that our being back here is a stage in the redemption of the Jewish people, which will culminate in some point in time with *mashiach*," the anointed one, or Messiah.

### Evolution of religious Zionism

When Zionism began gathering momentum as a secular European movement to establish a home for the Jewish people, many religious Jews looked askance at it. Many denounced it as a heretical plan to try to hasten God's redemptive process.

Enter Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, a renowned Torah scholar originally from the Russian Empire, who incorporated teachings from the mystical branch of Jewish thought known as kabbalah. He argued that Zionists were an unwitting part of the divine plan to bring the exiled Jewish people back to Israel, or Zion, and that it was incumbent upon religious Jews to take part – and eventually persuade their secular brethren of the divine mission they shared.

In 1924, while Palestine was still under British rule, Mr. Kook founded the Mercaz HaRav yeshiva in Jerusalem, which became a spiritual and intellectual headquarters of religious Zionism.

He and his son cultivated generations of religious Zionists, including Ben Meir, who arrived from Chicago as a teenager.

On a recent evening, the yeshiva was pulsating with Hanukkah music as the latest crop of students celebrated.

"That's one of my students on the guitar," says Rabbi Yehoshua Magnes with a twinkle in his eye, listening to the concert from his apartment across the street. Surrounded by hundreds of books, he marvels at the depth of Jewish thought and philosophy cultivated during nearly 2,000 years in exile.

He sees the ingathering of the exiles in Israel as part of a messianic process, but says he doesn't know what shape the Messiah will take or when he will come. As for where, he cites a 12th-century rabbi and philosopher from Spain, Rabbi Judah Halevi, who wrote that the land of Israel is the only place where a person can be a prophet – which is to say, someone who has a direct connection with God.

Mr. Magnes refers to a page in the Talmud that says that the Messiah will come on clouds – or on a mule. "If we do it the easy way, then he'll come on clouds.... But if we do it the hard way, we're talking about a lot of suffering," he says.

Given the Holocaust and sufferings in the land of Israel over the past 100 years, he says, "then I can't say he's coming on clouds.... But it's coming."

Within the broader Jewish community, there is no unanimity on the exact characteristics of the Messiah or the prerequisites for his coming, says Bible scholar Israel Knohl of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem.

Previous figures seen by some as messianic include fighters like Bar Kokhba, who led a rebellion against Roman rule, as well as spiritual leaders like Shlomo Molko, a "very impressive scholar of Talmud and kabbalah," says Professor Knohl.

And some, Knohl adds, "see the state of Israel as a messianic response to the Holocaust. Namely, that it was a type of redemption to the people, which came after the Holocaust."

Building 'ruined places'

While many religious Zionists don't expect the Messiah to appear imminently, and some say it's a secondary point in settling the land, they see signs that the process is under way.

Three signs they point to are the return of Jews to this land, Israel's quick conquering of the West Bank in 1967, and the land becoming fruitful under Jewish cultivation.

"I see the liberation of Judea and Samaria, which is the heart of biblical Israel, in the 1967 war as just the next step of this amazing miracle and fulfillment of prophecy," says Sondra Oster Baras, a Columbia University-educated lawyer who lives in the Karnei Shomron settlement.

She also cites Ezekiel 36, a favorite among religious Zionists. The chapter includes the promise, "I will multiply the fruit of the tree, and the increase of the field.... Then the heathen that are left round about you shall know that I the Lord build the ruined places, and plant that that was desolate: I the Lord have spoken it, and I will do it."

"God is basically beckoning you; and realize that all you need to do is do your part," says Ms. Oster Baras, an Ohio native who moved here and now serves as director of the Israel office for Christian Friends of Israeli Communities Heartland. "God doesn't put cities down from the heavens; he's never done that," she says. "He opens the opportunities, but humans have to make it happen."

Why compromise comes hard

But peace depends on dealmaking. And that can be a hard sell. Mr. Gorenberg, the historian, says that

the lessons of previous Israeli territorial compromises – withdrawing from Sinai in 1982, pulling back from Palestinian cities under the 1993 Oslo Accords, and evacuating Gaza in 2005 – are that they can "provoke an extremely strong response, which can run from political protests up to the assassination of a prime minister from people who believe that state of Israel must hold on to all the territory."

Gorenberg's recent book, "The Unmaking of Israel," presents settlers as undermining the state. "I should stress that I think it would be a tremendous tragedy for any Israeli government to make its policies on the basis of the views of a radical minority and particularly on the basis of fear of a potentially violent minority within that minority."

While most religious Zionists have traditionally supported the state as an essential tool in resettling the land, conflicts arise when state interests diverge from settler goals.

And what happens if government policies conflict with the Torah? The answer is simple, says Mr. Wilder, the spokesman for Hebron.

"While I personally and others here see the state of Israel as the result of divine intervention in the world – the fact that we're here is a miracle – with all respect for the state of Israel ... if I have to decide between what the state of Israel says and what the Torah tells me to do, I'm going to do what the Torah tells me to do."

### The impact on Palestinians

Sometimes the conflict between the state policies and settler goals turns violent, although Wilder opposes such activity. A small minority of settlers has increasingly engaged in "price-tag" attacks, in which Palestinian, Christian, or Israeli military property is vandalized in retribution for Israeli policies seen as antisettlement.

On Aug. 29, the day after the Israeli Supreme Court ordered the evacuation of the Migron settlement, vandals spray-painted graffiti in a Palestinian neighborhood near Beit El that read "death to the enemy, freedom for the homeland, price tag Migron, vengeance against Arabs, regards from those banished."

Khaled Amayreh, a US-educated journalist living near Hebron, says that secular Zionists tend to be more humane, while religious Zionists have been "indoctrinated in a kind of nihilistic theology which views all non-Jews as lesser human beings whose life has no sanctity."

Mr. Amayreh has engaged in dialogue with a religious Zionist, Rabbi Menachem Froman, but he says that those voices in the movement that are humane tend to get drowned out by the "vociferous" voice of extreme settlers.

In particular, he mentions Daniella Weiss, a former settlement mayor who drew harsh criticism even from settler advocates for backing a group of Jews who in 2008 took over a Palestinian property in

Hebron in defiance of the Israeli government.

"She said the only way to deal with the Palestinians was the biblical way, Joshua's way, and you know what she was alluding to ... the waves of ethnic cleansings carried out by the ancient Israelites against Canaanite tribes."

A September report on Israeli settlements from the UN secretary-general condemned the settlement enterprise. Calling it an "existential threat to the viability of a future Palestinian state" that violates the Palestinians' right to self-determination, the report noted that the secretary-general "has called on the Government of Israel to begin the process of reintegrating the settler population into its own territory."

Ben Meir and other religious Zionists, who believe the redemption of the Jewish nation will uplift all peoples, say they hope for peaceful coexistence in the West Bank but that Palestinian terrorism has made it hard.

"I want to give all the people here equal rights. After all, I am Jewish and I grew up in the Democratic Party," he says. "But you can't give equal rights to people that are going to turn around and try to use those to kill you. So they have to accept that there's a Jewish state."