

# “On the Side of the Good”: Political Alliances of Religious Zionists and Israeli Conservatism in the Quest to Hegemony

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**Abstract:** This article discusses the recent political alliance between Israeli Conservatism (IC) and the “Hardal” (acronym for Haredi-Dati-Leumi, meaning Ultra-Orthodox-Religious-Zionists) followers of Rabbi Zvi Thau. This new cooperation is surprising, due to Thau’s tendency to criticize groups that do not adhere to his strict interpretation of Judaism. In this article we analyze the recent developments within Thau’s circle, and determine that this cooperation is a consequence of a unique interpretation of a spiritual state of emergency. We conclude by analyzing the circumstances in which IC was formed, as a lesson religious Zionists took from the 2005 disengagement from Gaza plan. The article demonstrates that IC intentionally intended to enable the creation of this sort of political alliance.

**Keywords:** Religious-Zionism, Israel, conservatism, mysticism, Judaism

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## Introduction

Since the 1970s, the religious-Zionist movement has been supporting mainstream right-wing politics. However, some factions within the religious-Zionist movement were still considered too radical for political cooperation. 2022 was the year in which these factions of the Israeli religious right have finally fulfilled their quest to enter the Israeli mainstream. Political parties and organizations that were formerly perceived as too radical, such as the “Jewish Power” party led by Itamar Ben-Gvir, were now explicitly endorsed by the relatively moderate right-wing party Likud. Likewise, the political party “Noam,” led by the spiritual followers of rabbi Zvi Thau, has signed an agreement with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Netanyahu and Noam’s MK Avi Maoz agreed that he will be appointed as a deputy minister in the Prime Minister’s Office, heading an office called “The Authority for National-Jewish Identity.” This agreement has generated wide criticism in Israeli secular society and among liberal religious-Zionists, due to Maoz’s party’s stand towards the LGBTQ+ community. NOAM strongly opposes LGBTQ+ rights, and their leaders see the LGBTQ+ community as a threat on Israel’s Jewish identity.

Just a few months before this agreement, Netanyahu published his autobiography, “Bibi.” This autobiography was published by the “Sela-Meir” publishing house, in cooperation with the “Shibboleth” library, which is a branch of The Tikvah fund. Both Sela-Meir and The Tikvah Fund are organizations that operate within Israeli Conservatism (hereinafter, IC). Netanyahu’s actions – establishing a political agreement with Thau’s Noam party, along with his endorsement of IC - exemplify the surprising recent cooperation between these two rising political groups: The *Hardal* subculture and IC.

This article will analyze the factors in play behind this cooperation. Alliances that cross ideological, historical, political, and cultural boundaries, are not exclusive to contemporary Israeli politics. The prevalence of conservative alliances in numerous countries, with their transnational nature, prompts us to examine the distinctiveness of the Israeli case and the role of transnational ties in shaping seemingly paradoxical alliances locally.

First, this article will present a short overview of IC and the main organizations promoting this ideology. Then, the article will discuss the *Hardal* religious-Zionist subculture, focusing on Rabbi Thau’s tendency to operate alone, and his harsh critique of any political/religious movement that does not completely align with his worldview. This section will also describe Thau’s recent cooperation with members of IC and present the internal discussion within the *Hardal* subculture regarding this cooperation with individuals that do not follow the *Hardal* religious

code. The next section will provide an analysis of political developments within the religious-Zionist movement as a result of the Israeli evacuation of the Gaza Strip settlements in 2005. The article argues that the rise of IC is a direct consequence of the disengagement, intended to form a religious right-wing hegemony in Israel. This goal requires the formation of political alliances with various parts of Israeli society, and therefore they have created a fluid ideology that can bring together *Hardal* religious-Zionists as well as secular individuals. This alliance is based on the broad agreement over the presence of Jewish religion in the Israeli public sphere.

### **Israeli Conservatism: An Overview**

IC presents itself as building on the long entrenched political philosophy of Conservatism. Scholars have debated over the exact definition of conservatism, but according to Samuel Huntington, "All the analysts of conservatism ... unite in identifying Edmund Burke as the conservative archetype and in assuming that the basic elements of his thought are the basic elements of conservatism." (Huntington 1957, 456). Burke was a religious man, and he believed that religion is the foundation of civil society. He was skeptical towards French individualism and human reasoning, and preferred tradition, inherited order and existing institutions over man-made change. As put by the 20<sup>th</sup> century conservative thinker Michael Oakeshott: "To be conservative, then, is to prefer the familiar to the unknown, to prefer the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, the limited to the unbounded, the near to the distant, the sufficient to the superabundant, the convenient to the perfect, present laughter to utopian bliss." (Oakeshott 1992, 168-197). However, IC does not refrain from calling for substantial changes in Israeli society and politics. This is not a unique characteristic of the Israeli case, but rather a phenomenon that can be observed also among the American conservative movement. Therefore, while Conservative activists in IC present themselves as following the tradition of Edmund Burke, they are actually promoting a novel religious-nationalist ideal, influenced by their American counterparts (Sagiv 2020).

The penetration of neo-liberal and libertarian economic ideas into religious-Zionist society received considerable attention from the Israeli media and academia (Peled and Peled 2019). These economic ideas, which advocate minimizing taxation and state regulation, as well as the dismantlement of the welfare state, are only part of a broader ideological worldview, promoted by NGOs, think tanks, educational programs, news websites, and two publishing houses. Over the past few years, and specifically since the first conservatism conference in 2019, individuals and organizations acting in this sphere started to self-identify as "conservative"

[*Shamrani*]. This was a conscious attempt to rebrand this ideology and market it to a broader audience in Israeli society, who might not be well-versed in political economy or constitutional law.

IC revolves around several central organizations. The first organization to present conservative thought to the Israeli public was the Shalem Center, established in 1994 by Yoram Hazony. The Shalem Center laid the foundations for IC in two important ways. First, they introduced the intellectual ideas of American neo-conservatism to the Israeli public. And second, they imported the think-tank culture of the American right. However, the Shalem Center no longer operates as a think tank and since 2013 focuses mainly on academic studies through the *Shalem College*, which is an academic institution designed to follow the model of American liberal-arts colleges. Since the early 2010s, then, the two most central organizations in the conservative sphere are the Tikvah Fund and the Kohelet Policy Forum (KPF).

The Tikvah Fund was founded by Zalman Bernstein, an American-born Jewish philanthropist. In 1989 he immigrated to Israel, where he lived until he passed away in 1999. After his death, his wife Mem Bernstein continued the philanthropic work. At first, The Tikvah Fund focused on organizing seminars for students in New York, but since the early 2010s it began to expand its activities in Israel too, by opening the conservative news website “Mida” and organizing seminars for Israeli students. In 2016, the Tikvah Fund started publishing a journal – “HaShiloah” – which publishes original and translated articles on conservative thought. The Tikvah fund is also involved in the translation and publication of books on political conservatism through a partnership with the “Sela-Meir” publishing house.

The Kohelet Policy Forum was initially established in 2013 by Prof. Moshe (“Moish”) Koppel, an Orthodox-Jewish American-born computer scientist from Bar-Ilan University, who also serves on the board of The Tikvah Fund. The KPF serves as a conservative think tank, and employs researchers who write policy papers on a wide variety of subjects – from constitutional law, through Israel’s control of the West Bank, to the Israeli education system. The KPF is extremely influential among Israeli legislators. Many policy initiatives that started in the KPF were later passed as laws in the Knesset.<sup>3</sup>

## The Conservative Ideology

It is impossible to find a cohesive unified ideology within IC. The activists in these organizations are bright, intelligent critical thinkers, and they do not like

<sup>3</sup> The most prominent example is the controversial “Nation-State Law” (2018).

to fit themselves into ideological categories. However, despite this individualist character of people within the movement, it is possible to identify three central ideological themes that IC is concerned with. Ronald Reagan famously described the American conservative movement as a three-legged stool - standing on religion, national-security, and economics. IC has a slightly different three-legged stool of its own: liberal economics and deregulation; judicial restraint (formalism); and Jewish nationalism.

IC, with its three legs, offers both secular and religious-Zionist individuals an ideological framework that enables them to bring together what might seem like incommensurable values. On the one hand, they support the liberal "small state" – cutting taxes, reducing regulation, and limiting the role of the state only to necessary functions. On the other hand, they oppose the Rawlsian perception of a "value-neutral" state: the state must have a strong Jewish identity, hold a strong conscription army, and actively defend conservative values. The "conservative" tag helps them avoid these blatant contradictions. This flexibility enables IC to bring together under one umbrella a religious-Zionist libertarian settler who wants to privatize healthcare, a secular professor who opposes judicial activism, and also the *Hardal* followers of Rabbi Tau who, although they demand public funding for their private educational institutions, identify with the movement's criticism of "postmodernism."

### *Economics*

The most controversial aspect of IC is their support of neo-liberal economics. Sometimes, they will present this as a concern for freedom, individual responsibility, or community autonomy. They mention Adam Smith and Edmund Burke as their intellectual influences, but also later thinkers such as Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman. For example, The Tikvah Fund runs the "Adam Smith Program" for MA and PhD students, which is intended to "deal with political economy and public policy from the classical liberal and conservative perspectives, and will encourage its participants to use the intellectual tools provided by the program in the Israeli arena." (Argaman Institute).

Most of the conservative activists are not libertarians, but rather focus on "deregulation" - a struggle spearheaded by the KPF's economic department. For example, the KPF published a policy paper on "Labor unions in Israel: A financial analysis and legislation recommendations," which recommends putting more restrictions on the right of labor unions to strike, weakening solidarity between labor unions, making it more difficult for workers to organize in a workplace, and

allowing workplaces to financially penalize workers for striking (Feder, Sarev and Zicherman 2016). Other policy papers published by the KPF advocate stopping public subsidies for daycare centers, giving schools more “flexibility” in the employment of teachers, and the removal of international trade barriers.

### *Judicial restraint*

Criticism of the judicial system, and specifically of the supreme court, is a long-entrenched theme in religious-Zionist thought. Rabbi Zvi Yehudah Kook was known for his critique of the Israeli legal system, which is not based on rules of the Torah, but rather on the British and even Ottoman legal systems (Aran 2016). Later on, this idea was used by “Gush Emunim” and their followers in order to argue that laws prohibiting Jewish settlement in the Occupied Territories were ‘illegal’ (Hellinger, Herchkowitz and Susser 2018).

IC preserves the religious-Zionist critique of the judicial system but secularizes it. This critique of the judicial system blends into the global populist trend, which emphasizes the democratic concept of the “will of the people.” In their eyes, democracy is first and foremost majority rule, and ideas such as “substantive democracy” and minority rights are secondary. In addition, they argue that the leftist elites, through their stronghold in the courts, distort the democratic process by promoting judicial activism. This judicial activism overruns the legislative branch and impedes the balance of powers.

Judicial activism has been a contentious issue in Israel since the 1980s, but more so since the “constitutional revolution” that took place during Aharon Barak’s term as president of the supreme court between 1995-2006. Israeli legal scholar Menachem Mautner describes some of the main changes in the jurisprudence of the Israeli Supreme Court. Understanding judicial activism as “[T]he greater role it (The Supreme Court, HK) assumes vis-à-vis the other branches in determining the country’s values and the allocation of its material resources, the more activist it is considered to be,” Mautner argues that since the 1980s and 1990s the Israeli Supreme Court can be considered as extremely activist (Mautner 2011, 54-55).

The battles carried out in this arena were supported from within the government, with the appointment of MK Ayelet Shaked as Minister of Justice (2015-2019). Through her work at the judicial selection committee, Shaked promoted “diversity” in the judicial system through the appointment and promotion of conservative judges, appointing a record 330 judges during her term. Most notable was the appointment of the conservative Prof. Alex Stein to The Supreme Court. Stein has strongly expressed his negative opinions about judicial activism in Israel, and Shaked

met with him personally before suggesting his appointment to the committee. In addition, Shaked published an article in *Hashiloach*, in which she presented her criticism of the Israeli judicial system and the balance of powers, arguing for a more restrained Supreme Court (Shaked 2016). The conservative agenda to restrict judicial review in Israel has gained support, and after the right-wing victory in the 2022 elections (in which Shaked herself was ironically left out of the Knesset), politicians have been calling to legislate an override clause that would, in effect, prevent the supreme court from reviewing legislation or even administrative actions of the government.

### *Jewish Nationalism and settlement*

The third leg of the Israeli conservative stool is Jewish nationalism. While the commitment to ideologies of neoliberal economics and judicial restraint can be lukewarm among some activists, they are all strongly committed to the ethno-nationalist idea of Israel as the state for the Jewish people. This is where the liberalism comes to a dead-end. In their eyes, non-Jews (i.e., Palestinians) may enjoy individual rights, but they do not deserve collective rights, most importantly the right for self-determination. The aspiration for Jewish sovereignty over the entire Land of Israel, and the ethno-nationalist interpretation of Israel as a “Jewish and democratic” state, were ideologies that the religious-Zionists have been promoting for decades. Here again, though, these ideas have been secularized to appeal to a broader non-religious public. Instead of mentioning God’s promise of the land to Abraham and justifying the settlement in the West Bank in messianic terms, Israeli conservatives see themselves as political realists, and their argumentation focuses on national security. This process is not unique to conservative religious-Zionism but is a trend among religious settlers since the time of the struggle against the disengagement from Gaza (Taub 2010).

One of the main campaigns of IC, led by the KPF, was the legislation of “*Basic Law: Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People*” in 2018. Since Israel does not have a constitution, this semi-constitutional law is the first time that Israel’s character as a Jewish state is interpreted and specified in legislation. The law specifies the Israeli state symbols, declares Hebrew as the only official language (giving Arabic, previously official, a “special status”), and emphasizes the value of *Jewish* settlement. The legislation of the bill raised controversies, and generated mass demonstrations by Arab citizens, especially the Druze who serve in the military and see themselves as ‘loyal’ to the Israeli state. This bill, they argued, does not mention the value of equality, and turns them to second-class citizens.

From the conservative standpoint, this law serves two main goals. First, it cements Israel's character as a Jewish state even if the Jewish majority is compromised. As of 2019, only 21% of the Israeli population was Arab, but the annexation of all or part of the West Bank might entail granting citizenship to the Palestinians in those areas, which will increase the rate of non-Jewish citizens in Israel. Second, this is a long-term strategic tool that can be used in the judicial arena. As for now, discriminatory laws can be annulled as unconstitutional. However, in the future, conservative judges will be able to use the "Nation-State Law" to justify laws that prioritize Jewish citizens. Therefore, the law is an important milestone in setting the ground for an ethno-national democracy.

In addition, people in IC support Jewish sovereignty in territories occupied in the 1967 war. This is not surprising, as the overwhelming majority of the executives in these organizations live in West Bank Settlements. The KPF has expressed avid support for the annexation of the entire or parts of the West Bank, opposing the uprooting of Jewish settlements and rejecting the "land for peace" idea.

### **The Hardalim: A Theological and Political Portrait**

The *Hardalim* (acronym for *Haredi-Dati-Leumi*, meaning Ultra-Orthodox-Religious-Zionists) are a distinct stream in religious Zionism, characterized by firm right-wing political views, religious strictness, and loyalty to the teachings of Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook (1891-1982). Politically, the *Hardalim* support the settlement movement in the occupied Palestinian territories and have been mobilizing to fight against government plans to evacuate settlements. From a religious point of view, the *Hardalim* adhere to a stricter interpretation of the Jewish religious code (Halacha) than other religious-Zionists. For example, they forbid the possession of television in their homes and demand that women observe meticulous modesty restriction customs (*Tzniut*). Hardal men wear large, knitted caps (*Kippot*), and some males will adopt the Haredi custom of growing side-locks (*Pe'ot*) (see more on *Hardalim* in Schwartz 1999; Pfefer 2007; Sheleg 2020; Tamar et al. 2014).

As followers of Rabbi ZY Kook, the *Hardalim* view the State of Israel as an important stage in the realization of the long-awaited redemption (*Athalta deGe'ulah*) and perceive Jewish sovereignty in all parts of the Land of Israel as a fulfillment of God's will. The state of Israel they wish for is one in which Jewish laws (*Halacha*) apply (see Staff 2022; Siegal 2022). The Jews are seen as a nation returning to their ancestors' land and reconnecting to their inner *selves*. This reconnecting to the *self* is associated with fundamental *naturalness*, *simpleness*, and *healthiness* (*on the nation connecting to its self*, see Zvi 2016). The ultimate Jewish



body is the strong and muscular body that inhabits the Land of Israel, the Jewish symbols are externalized (*Pe'ot, Tzitzit*), and the military is seen as holy (the notion of physical fitness in messianic context is based on Kook A. 1910, 94-5; see also Kook Z. 2011).

The *Hardalim* are divided into two main subgroups, named after two central religious-study institutions (*Yeshivot*). The first is the *Merkaz Harav* circle (named after the *yeshiva* founded by Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, 1865-1935). *Merkaz* circle gained significant momentum under the leadership of Rabbi ZY, son of Rabbi AI Kook. The second institution is the *Har-Hamor* circle under the leadership of Rabbi Zvi Thau.

Rabbi Zvi Thau was born in Vienna in 1938 and sought refuge with his family in the Netherlands during World War II. In 1954, he immigrated to Israel. Over time, Rabbi Thau became a prominent disciple of Rabbi Zvi-Yehuda Kook, the esteemed leader of the "Merkaz Harav" yeshiva and son of Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Kook. Rabbi Thau has emerged as one of the most prominent leaders within the religious-Zionist *Hardal* sector. Throughout his career, he has adhered to a strict religious stance, expressing hostility towards academia and the media. In recent years, he has also become politically active, particularly voicing his opposition to LGBTQ organizations and non-Orthodox Jewish streams.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Rabbi Thau has expressed deep mistrust towards other religious-Zionist rabbis, asserting that certain educational programs are influenced by Christianity and aim to undermine the Jewish character of the State of Israel (on Rabbi Thau's philosophy see, Miller 2022).

The influence of Rabbi Thau on the Israeli landscape cannot be overestimated. His teachings have shaped various spheres of society, including educational institutions, settlements in Judea and Samaria (occupied West Bank), and communities in southern Israel, all of which abide by his guidance. Notably, his students occupy key positions within the military, political, and educational systems. The unwavering loyalty demonstrated by his followers further solidifies his status as one of the most influential rabbis in Israel (for a comprehensive analysis of Rabbi Zvi Thau's substantial influence in Israeli society see, Miller 2023).

As part of his opposition to what he identified as *foreign influences*, Rabbi

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<sup>4</sup> In light of the aforementioned points, it is crucial to acknowledge that gender and sexual politics are fundamental components of the "real" business of politics, as exemplified by extensive research conducted in Europe, Israel, and the United States. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of *Hardal* politics requires a deeper exploration of their preoccupation and emphasis on these issues. It is our hope to delve further into these crucial aspects in future research, unraveling their significance within the context of the alliance and shedding light on their broader implications. Scholars such as Tanya Zion-Waldoks, Lea Tarragin Zeller, Elazar Ben-Lulu, and Orit Avishai, among others, have extensively examined and shed light on these aspects.

Thau split from *Merkaz Harav*, which until then had been the flagship *yeshiva* of the *Hardalim* and founded *Har-Hamor* in 1997 (see Miller 2021). Thau, along with other *Merkaz* rabbis, revolted against the head of the *yeshiva* and former chief Ashkenazy rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Abraham Shapira, due to his intention to allow the *Yeshiva* students to combine external teaching-certificate studies with their religious *yeshiva* studies (see Rosen-Zvi 2003; Ravitzky 2005). The external program was portrayed as a violation of the sanctity of the *Torah* and as an "Idolatry statue positioned in the holy of holies." Thau and his followers claimed that *Merkaz* failed to fulfill its mission to materialize a religious ideal: "splendor and glory turned away from our holy *Yeshiva*." (Lederech Hakodesh 1998, 84).

In order to better understand Rabbi Thau's circle, we must start with a short discussion of his theological-messianic thought. Rabbi Thau follows the teachings of the Kook Rabbis (father and son), who presented a mystical dialectical interpretation of history, emphasizing the fathomless polarization between the sacred and the profane. The spiritual struggle between these two domains, they maintained, is the moving force behind actual historical processes. Respectively, Rabbi Thau emphasizes the binary contrast between the holy soul of the Jewish nation and what he considers the impure Western culture of the non-Jews. This mystical struggle between the sacred and the profane is intended to culminate eventually and realize the divine redemption.

Thau's followers perceive him as the ultimate authority for deciphering the hidden ways of the progress of the mystical redemption process from the political reality, and as someone who knows how to distinguish between the illusive senses and the metaphysical truth. According to Rabbi Thau, the phenomena in the physical world are merely false and visible appearances of the truthful internal, authentic reality, which he can identify. Hence, Rabbi Thau knows not only redemption's ways but also the inner ways of the Jewish souls, even when the Jewish people are unaware of them. Therefore, Rabbi Thau and his circle often claim to speak in the name of the nation.

Since the split from *Merkaz*, Thau continued the habit of boycotting many religious Zionist rabbis, as well as contemporary rabbinic books and doctrines that did not meet the strict standard he set; study programs were banned from *Hardal* schools, and religious institutions were suspected to be influenced by Christianity – which he perceives as the source of impurity and evil – in disguise for Rabbi Kook's approach to Christianity (see Ben-Johanan 2016). In the early 2000s, Thau waged one of his fiercest battles against the *Har-Etzion yeshiva* rabbis who taught at the *Herzog* college. In Thau's opinion, the academic approach of Biblical studies at *Herzog* was contaminated with impure and foreign influences, which led to

inherent disrespect towards Biblical figures. In his 2002 book, *Tzadik Be'emunato Yichy'e* (meaning, the righteous shall live by his faith, see Habakkuk 2:4), Thau came out harshly against the students and teachers at *Herzog*. According to him:

"Anyone who studies and teaches in such places [...] is poisoned, poisons and one should revolt against this; one should cleanse the heart from all of this [...] This is impurity like no other [...] It is forbidden to study in such places under any circumstances. This is a case of *Yehareg ve'al ya'avor* (meaning, let him be killed rather than sin, see BT *Pesachim* 25a).

In addition, Thau directed his attacks mainly towards the left, the academia, the media, the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Justice. According to him, Christian entities are trying – through their agents in key positions in Israel – to separate religion from state, to weaken Israel's Jewish identity, and ultimately lead to a spiritual and physical destruction of the State of Israel. As a counter-reaction, he and his followers are trying to connect the *soul* (religion) with the *body* (state), while they believe that all Jews desire this connection within their souls, even if they are unaware of it (see Zvi 2017; 2014). Therefore, due to Thau's extremist religious and messianic line, cooperation between *the Har-Hamor* circle and other religious circles that did not align with Thau seemed impossible.

Although Thau used to present a moderate "statist" approach with regard to confrontations with the state of Israel, following the Gaza disengagement plan in 2005 he gradually formulated a historiosophical view justifying his decision to take political action (Katsman 2020; Zvi 2022). Thau explained that in the process of redemption, a unique stage has begun, in which the forces of impurity increased in unprecedented ways, aiming to undermine the Jewish identity of the State of Israel and thus delaying redemption's final stage, i.e., the fusion of religion and state. According to him, Israel has entered a state of emergency. New measures must be taken to combat what he referred to as foreign *influences* by *foreign entities* which operate secretly through *foreign funding* and advanced psychological methods to brainwash the masses (Zvi 2016). In a recent public statement, signed by Rabbi Thau, among others of his circle, his drive to take political action is emphasized:

"Spiritual confrontation is not enough to purify this scourge that has permeated the nation. This [progressive, postmodern, author's note] movement is promoted by change agents blinded by the so-called "enlightened" discourse; These agents hold

influential positions all across the Israeli establishment and society. At its core, parties with extreme power and resources lead these movements. Therefore, there is an actual need to put in place a realpolitik force that will work vigorously to return the State of Israel to its healthy and natural course (*Giluy Da'at* 2020).<sup>5</sup>

Following this line, Thau and his disciples aim to 'expose' the *engineering of consciousness* led by concrete bodies such as the *New Israel Fund*. For example, it recently was revealed that the Noam party prepared a blacklist, listing members of the LGBTQ community who work in the media industry. Noam prepared additional lists to expose workers in the education and legal system in Israel, who are allegedly agents of the New Israel Fund and other left-wing organizations (Eyal 2022).

While in the past he opposed political activity through national parties, Thau thought this situation requires action in the political sphere, and in July 2019, he founded the Noam party (Miller 2023). At first, Noam ran as a separate party, but after their initial failure to pass the electoral threshold they decided to create a political bloc with other *Hardal* political subgroups. Ahead of the 24th and 25th Knesset elections (2021 and 2022, respectively), Avi Maoz, chairman of the *Noam* party and Thau's devout follower, joined other *Hardal* figures such as Betzalel Smotrich and Itamar Ben-Gvir under the *Religious-Zionism* party (see more, Herman 2022; Itai 2022).

Following the elections for the 25th Knesset, an agreement was signed (November 2022) between Prime Minister-designate Benjamin Netanyahu and Maoz, according to which Maoz will be appointed deputy minister in the Prime Minister's Office and head the *Jewish National Identity Authority*. In the past (April 2021), Maoz expressed a desire to establish a national headquarters with the aim of "preventing anti-Israeli foreign entities from penetrating the public systems in the State of Israel and influencing consciousness, changing values and weakening national resilience." It can be assumed that in this spirit, Maoz will act in his expected role as the head of the *Jewish National Identity Authority*.

Indeed, the inner political alliance within the *Hardal* is relatively new; however, in many ways, it is expected. After all, both *Hardal* subgroups stem from Rabbi ZY Kook's political-theological doctrine. Now, more than a decade after Rabbi Shapira, former head of the *Merkaz*, passed away (2007), and with the declaration of a state of emergency and the emergence of a common enemy, cooperation has

<sup>5</sup> "For Zion we shall not be silent".

become possible again. However, a more surprising alliance has been occurring in recent years: the *Hardal* partnership with conservative organizations in Israel.

## The New Alliance

The *Ne'emanai Torah V'avoda* movement – which represents the more progressive wing of religious-Zionism – recently dedicated an issue in its journal, *De'ot* (Issue 102, October 2022), to analyzing various aspects of the new alliance between the *Hardalim* and IC (for a review of this issue see, Persico 2022). One of the prominent examples of links between the *Hardalim* and the conservatives is their close collaboration with the *Shapira Coffee Forum*, founded in 2016 by Dalit Suter (hereafter, according to the nickname she adopted, Gali Bat-Horin). The *Forum* consists of secular members who proudly present themselves as academics who are ex-left-wing supporters who turned into right-wing conservatives.

The organization's enthusiastic adoption by the *Hardalim* is reflected in Thau's declared support for them, and according to the testimony of his students, he is a consistent consumer of the *Forum's* contents.<sup>6</sup> Also, writers on behalf of the *Forum*, such as Gali Bat-Horin, Ben Sabo, Udi Ben-Hemo and Hadas Tsur, publish regularly in the most popular *Hardal* weekly, *Olam Katan*. Furthermore, *Forum* representatives spoke at *Hardal* conferences against post-modernity alongside prominent *Hardal* figures from the *Har-Hamor* circle, such as Rabbis Hannan'el Ethrog, Yehoshua Shapira (a fierce opponent of reform-Judaism) Yigal Lewinstein (well-remembered as calling LGTB "perverts") and Eliezer Kashti'el.

For instance, Bat-Horin (who translated Jordan Peterson's "12 rules for life" in cooperation with the Tikvah Fund) lectured at conferences on behalf of the *Hardal* organization on the topics of "femininity, masculinity and feminism" (June 2021) and of "dangers of Trans ideology" (September 2021). Gadi Taub, who published his book *Global elites and national citizens: the Attack of the Upper Classes on Israel's Democracy*, in the conservative publishing house *Sela-Meir* (in cooperation with *Tikvah*) and won the "Man of the Year" award in the field of thought and spirit from the conservative *Mida* website (formerly owned by the Tikvah Fund), lectured at the *Even Israel* conference on the topic of "Identity Politics and the prohibition to speak the truth" in June 2021 (see Taub 2020). Taub and the *Forum* frequently speak out against what they define as the postmodern

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<sup>6</sup> This information was sent to us in a form of an authentic message written by one of the CSF members, from a private WhatsApp group. For privacy reasons we are prohibited from sharing further details. Also see "Rabbis of one of the Yeshivot ask Rav Thau about pro-Noam activity", Talk no. 276, Inner-document, 2021. Both documents were sent to us and are in our possession.

takeover of the State of Israel and thus fit the *Hardals'* agenda. In one of her articles in *Olam Katan*, Bat-Horin tried to connect the ideology of Jordan Peterson with that of Rabbi Kook (Bat-Horin 2022). Taub himself admitted that "I have learned that Rabbi Thau and I are partners in many ways" (Yozevitch 2023). However, Bat-Horin, Taub, and other partners in the battle against post-modernity are openly secular individuals. Taub even stated that he lacks belief in God and that he is an "outside observer" of religion.

To illustrate the complexity created by the *Hardal*-conservative alliance, we can examine the case of the *Hardal* weekly *Olam Katan* granting a writing platform to Bat-Horin, who is married to a non-Jew. Some *Hardal* readers felt that this legitimizes inter-religious marriages, which they perceive as risking the future of the Jewish people. The problem with Bat-Horin's inter-marriage emerged after the *Hardalim* launched a publicized attack against Rabbi Beni Lau, who invited the Arab Israeli media woman Lucy Aharish to moderate a panel in the 929: *Tanakh B'yachad* (Bible together; a daily bible-learning initiative) conference in 2022. According to the *Hardalim*, Aharish, married to the Jewish actor Tzachi Halevi, became a "symbol of assimilation." Therefore, her moderating at a bible conference legitimizes 'assimilation.' However, after the harsh criticism from the *Hardal* side, some pointed out that also two of the key speakers at the *Hardal* conferences, Gadi Taub and Gali Bat-Horin, were also married to non-Jews.

Yosef Russo, the editor of *Olam Katan*, announced that after consultation with the *Hardal* Rabbi Yaakov Ariel, Bat-Horin would continue writing for the weekly. According to Russo, "We are on the same side with Gali Bat-Horin since *she is on the side of good*, on the side fighting against progressive liberalism and assimilation" (Russo 2022). Regardless of his above words, in the interview he conducted with Bat-Horin, Russo failed to extract from her a clear statement against 'assimilation.' (TOV 2023). Bat-Horin insisted that she was not proud of her marriage to a non-Jew, but neither was she ashamed of it; She did not feel this was an important issue. To the straightforward question of whether she is for or against intermarriage, she replied, "I never gave my opinion on it in my life; it did not concern me." In the interview mentioned above, Bat-Horin criticized the Israeli political left and repeated a previous statement that in the event of civil war, she would side with the ultra-Orthodox. However, as for her private life, she refused to declare her support for religious values and even expressed reservations towards the more neutral term *spirituality*, "The word *spirituality* has too many connotations that I would not want to take upon myself."

Furthermore, it is pertinent to address a gender-related aspect within this context. Notably, the marriage of Gali Bat-Horin to a non-Jew garnered

considerably more attention and ignited a broader public discourse compared to Gadi Taub's union with a non-Jew, despite the fact that Bat-Horin's children are halakhically recognized as Jews, while Taub's children would not be considered Jewish. The heightened scrutiny surrounding the marriage of a single individual may be attributed to Bat-Horin's gender. Thus, the gender factor is indeed in play in this issue, and requires further research that is beyond the scope of this article.

If so, it turns out that *Hardalim* partner in the fight against post-modernity with conservatives who are also openly secular. Rabbi Thau, leader of the *Hardal* struggle for *Jewish identity* in Israel, refused to recognize rabbis and religious-nationalist circles who did not align with his path. Yet how does he, despite his identification with the conservative struggle against postmodernism, lead a passionate ideological partnership with people who include atheists, inter-married, and academics from the fields of humanities, which he strongly opposes? This requires an in-depth explanation.

### **The Battle Over Israel's Public Domain and the *Masorati* Identity**

In order to understand the seemingly paradoxical stand of the *Hardal* towards secular influences, we must make a distinction between different kinds of secularist approaches. The *Hardal* opposition to those perceived as deviating from the 'true' religious path is directed towards those who present a coherent and solid religious alternative - whether secularist or a progressive religious worldview (on secularization in Israel see, Ben-Porat 2013). However, individuals who do not advocate for secularism as a worldview, but rather as a personal choice or preference, do not seem to the *Hardalim* as a spiritual threat. Indeed, the *Hardalim* would prefer that all Jews follow the *Halacha* according to the *Hardal* way. However, they do not (yet) try to force individuals to change their lifestyle. Loyal to the collectivism of Rabbi Kook's philosophy, the *Hardal* seeks to control the public domain so that it bears a Jewish-religious character as much as possible. For example, the Noam party opposes holding gay pride parades, and they call for a state that observes Shabbat and kosher in the public sphere (Segal 2022; Tamir 2021). The individuals in and of themselves are irrelevant to the collective (see more on collectivism in the Kokkism context, Rosen-Zvi 2002). Therefore, as the individual does not seek to influence the collective, he does not arouse any objection.

Indeed, despite the explicit secularism of key figures of IC, they support Jewish nationalism and seek to impose a Jewish character on the State of Israel. Thus, Bat-Horin stated, "The absolute majority of the people in Israel want a Jewish identity in the country; want a Jewish public domain" this is because:

”If you take Judaism out of the country, you do not remain with secularism, but rather all the sects of *Sitra-Achra* (literally *the other side*, meaning the mystic forces of evil), Progress, Marxism, Islam, Christianity fill the void [...] Either it will be a Jewish state with a Jewish identity, with a Jewish public domain and education for Jewish and Zionist tradition or we will not be here at all” (Bat-Horin 2023).

Rabbi Eli Sadan, the head of the Pre-Military Preparatory School in the *Eli* settlement, said words in this spirit:

”We must remember what our main mission is! [...] To ensure that the public domain and the *Mamlachtiut* of the State of Israel are shaped as much as possible and more and more according to our holy Torah. *We are against religious coercion. At one's home, each person will do as he wishes. However, the state's public sphere belongs to everyone, and each group and party has the right and even the duty to shape the character of the state according to the values it believes in and believes that they will promote and strengthen the state [...]* According to the Torah, our duty is to shape the state in a Jewish image” (Sadan 2022, 6-7).

According to Sadan, then, there is a distinction between the individual's way of life, where he can do ”as he pleases,” and between the ”public domain of the state” over which there should be a struggle between various groups in the state, where the winner gets to shape the public sphere's image. Sadan hopes that the religious-Zionist sector he belongs to will win the identity battle and that the public sphere in Israel will unite religion and state.

Promoting the notion of a Jewish public domain is also related to the glorification of the *Masorati* (literally traditionalist, referring to Jews of *Mizrabi* origins who hold on to what is the basics of Jewish traditions, albeit generally leading a secular life).<sup>7</sup> The *Masorati* is described by the *Har-Hamor* circle as a spiritual hero, and his existence serves as proof of the inner truth in every Jewish soul. The *Masorati* is romanticized and pictured as the prototype of a 'simple,' 'healthy,' and 'natural' Jew who instinctively opposes any attempt to blur Jewish identity alongside fully supporting national expressions of Jewishness (see Avi 2023).

<sup>7</sup> The *Masorati* referred to here, differentiates from the conservative movement in Israel, sometimes named the *Masorati* movement, see Yadgar 2012.



Albeit his general secular life, the *Masorati* is seen as someone who looks up to the Orthodox rabbis and supports the *Chief Rabbinate* institution. Also, he opposes intermarriage and any alternative forms of family other than the traditional institution of "father, mother and children"; More so, the *Masorati* delegitimizes the Reform movement and sees it as fake Judaism. He is anti-left-wing organizations that import *foreign opinions* and seek to undermine distinct Jewish identity. Thus, for example, Taub stated that the *Masorati* are "natural Zionists" (Yashar 2022). Therefore, a large part of the Noam party's political campaign was directed towards the *Masorati*.

In a certain sense, the *Masorati* figure that has not been corrupted by postmodern culture can be seen as a contemporary version of the *Zionist pioneer* (*Halutz*) figure of the *Kibbutz* that Rabbi AI Kook (early 20th century) warmly embraced. For many years, the secular founders of the State of Israel were perceived by the religious Zionists as unknowingly and profoundly connected to their inner Jewish spirit. Their pure idealism and willingness to suffer for the establishment of the state, including risking their lives, were evidence of this (Kook A. 1906, 1-18.). Now, in the postmodern era, the *Mizrahi Masorati* replaced the *Ashkenazi* pioneer of the *Kibbutz*.

If so, IC has two main characteristics that explain the new alliance with the *Hardalim*: first, the conservatives align with *Hardalim* in their struggles against the influences of 'progress' and 'post-modernity'; Second, and more important, the secular conservatives embraced by the *Hardal* support the expansion of Jewish-Orthodox control over the public domain in Israel, in their attempt to fuse religion and state. It is therefore not coincidental that despite the fact that there are many religious-Zionist intellectuals in IC, the *Hardal* actually prefer to partner with the secular conservative individuals. As opposed to the somewhat more liberal religious worldview that is presented by religious individuals in the conservative movement, the personal choice of secular conservatives not to maintain a religious life does not threaten the *Hardal's* self-perception as the sole true representatives of Jewish religion. On the contrary: the secular conservatives avoid offering a Jewish alternative to Ultra-Orthodoxy. The fact that, despite being secular, these conservative individuals support the *Hardalim* is solid evidence of the inner and deep connection of all Jews to Judaism, whose main manifestations are the *Masorati* that have not been defiled and corrupted by post-modernity.

Now, it remains to examine another question: Why did religious-Zionists suddenly start to self-identify as "conservatives"? And what role did this political movement play in enabling the cooperation between religious and non-religious right-wing individuals?

## Why now? The Political Crisis

Religious-Zionists have been seeking more influence in the Israeli public sphere already since the 1960s. However, the unique form of conservatism described in this article is a relatively new phenomenon (Katsman 2020). This urges the question - Why has IC been gaining support over the last 10-15 years? Activists from IC mention the 2005 evacuation from Gaza as the main event that led them to become more politically involved. However, as opposed to the “Kookist” religious-Zionists who viewed the disengagement as a crisis of faith, the conservatives were more rational and pragmatic. Their main takeaway from the disengagement was that the state of Israel does not have a theological problem, but a political one.

To understand this, we must understand how the 2005 disengagement was perceived by religious-Zionists. First and foremost, Ariel Sharon, the prime minister who carried out the plan, was the head of the right-wing Likud party and a long-time supporter of the settlements. In 2002 he even stated that “The fate of Netzarim and Kfar Darom (two isolated settlements in Gaza) is like the fate of Negba and Tel-Aviv” – meaning that just like Israel’s major city Tel-Aviv will not be evacuated, so the Gaza settlements would not be evacuated. However, one year later Sharon backtracked from his promises to his voters, and announced his plan to evacuate Gaza settlements. Religious-Zionists, many of them Likud voters, saw this as a betrayal and a blatant distortion of the democratic process. On top of that, many religious-Zionists believe that this was not a genuine change of heart. At the time, Sharon was accused in three cases of corruption. Religious-Zionists believe that the disengagement plan was an attempt by Sharon to divert attention and avoid his criticism by the media (which mostly supported the plan).

In addition, in order to carry out the disengagement plan, Sharon used questionable political tactics. When it was time to bring the plan for vote in the government meeting, Sharon fired two ministers from the Hawkish *HaIhud Haleumi* party just 48 hours before the vote, in order to secure a majority. Later, in order to demonstrate public support for the plan, Sharon carried out a referendum among Likud party members. Religious-Zionists undertook an impressive door-knocking operation, visiting homes of Likud voters and convincing them to vote against the plan. This campaign had a tremendous success. 59.5% voted against the disengagement plan, while only 39.7% supported it. However, despite these results, Sharon decided to move on with the execution of the plan, arguing that the results were not binding.

Sharon’s moves generated a great outcry among religious-Zionists, and they began to protest the evacuation. Religious-Zionists organized mass-demonstrations, sit-

ins, and even roadblocks, demanding to stop the evacuation. During these protests, many religious-Zionists, 688 of them minors, were arrested (Tal 2005).

The fact that Sharon was able to carry out the disengagement plan led some religious-Zionists to the conclusion that something in the Israeli democratic system was not working. How can a politician so blatantly disregard the will of his people? If within the democratic system carrying out such an undemocratic process is legal – there is problem with the system itself.

For others, the disengagement plan was a wakeup call from mystical theology. They concluded that the religious-Zionist “Kookist” idea of the Israeli state as “the foundation of God’s throne in the world” no longer fits reality. This understanding brought them to adopt a liberal perception of the state as value-neutral, an idea that is easily compatible with neo-liberal or even libertarian economic politics.

Another takeaway from the disengagement plan was that the struggle against the evacuation was perceived by the Israeli public as a religious-Zionist struggle. The secular and Haredi Jews who opposed the evacuation did not take active part in the struggles, which were led by the religious-Zionist community and had a strong religious messianic tone. Religious-Zionists understood that in order to prevent future evacuations, they must create alliances with the other sectors of Jewish-Israeli society: The Haredim (ultra-Orthodox) and secular Israelis. This can also explain the Hardal draw to conservative thought. They acknowledge the need for a non-mystical framework that will appeal to other sectors, though without compromising their own mystical ideology.

In conclusion, the disengagement plan has contributed to the rise of IC by bringing them to an understanding that they must take a more active role not just in the political arena, but also to create a broader hegemony. Gramsci famously stated that the rise of “organic intellectuals” is the first stage in the creation of a counter-hegemonic process (Gramsci 1971). The educational programs at Tikvah and KPF precisely intend to do that – by filling the intellectual vacuum in the Israeli right-wing. Moreover, hegemony is achieved through ideological compromises and political alliances. Religious-Zionists realized that to promote their political goals, they must adjust their ideology and make certain compromises, such as downplaying the messianic elements in their worldview, in order to gain the support of secular and Haredi Jews.

## Conclusion

This article analyzed the relation between two of the major contemporary trends in religious-Zionist politics: The rise of IC, and the participation of rabbi Thau's *Hardal* followers in national politics. We argued that the two phenomena are related, as they are both consequences of the impact of the 2005 disengagement plan on religious-Zionists. Both the *Hardal* and the religious-Zionists activists in IC share the aim of influencing Israeli politics on the national level, and they understand that in order to do so, they must form political alliances with other sectors of Israeli society. IC has been working on creating the ideological framework and organizational structure for this mission. It is the loosely defined "conservative" ideology, that enables the *Hardal* to cooperate with IC and adopt its terminology. The *Hardal* have come to realize that they must reach out and "settle in the hearts" of the Israeli public. To that end, they must overcome their tendency to operate within an ideal and "pure" group and to avoid boycotting groups they slightly disagree with. We demonstrated that the *Hardal* are even willing to cooperate with secular individuals, as long as they share an agreement on fundamental principles. Most importantly, these alliances are based on accepting the idea that there should be more presence of the Orthodox Jewish religion in Israel's public sphere.

It is hard to predict how long this unpredicted alliance will last. Do the *Hardal* see this as just a temporary compromise due to the current "state of emergency" declared by their rabbi Thau? Or do they genuinely see the secular conservatives as their political partners? It will also be interesting to follow what stand IC will eventually take with regard to matters of religion and state. In the 2019 conservatism conference, KPF's chair Koppel explicitly stated that conservatives are intentionally avoiding the discussion of contentious topics, in order to create the largest common denominator among right-wing activists (Keren Tikva 2020). However, Koppel himself, along with other key figures in the movement, calls for the privatization of public services, including religious institutions such as the chief rabbinate. Koppel even criticized the *Hardal* religious-Zionist ideas of the state as "endowed with a divine imprimatur," and that "the state ought to appoint rabbis, enforce religious legislation, and fund religious services." (Koppel 2020). Inevitably, these fundamental ideological disagreements among activists in IC must be dealt with eventually, and it will be fascinating to see what impact that will have on the movement, and if they will be able to sustain their alliance with the *Hardal*.

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Морди Милер и Хајим Катсман

***“На страни добра“: Политички савез верских циониста и Израелског конзервативизма у потрази за хегемонијом***

**Сажетак:** Овај рад истражује скорији политички савез између Израелског конзервативизма и следбеника учења рабина Цви Тауа „Хардал“ (акроним за *Haredi-Dati-Leumi*, што значи ултра-ортодоксни-верски-ционисти). Овај савез је изненађујућ због Тауове тенденције да критикује групе које не прихватају његове стрикне интерпретације јудаизма. У овом раду истражујемо скорије развоје унутар Тауовог круга, и објашњавамо да је овај савез последица јединствених интерпретација духовне кризе. Закључујемо да је, на основу анализе услова у којима је створен покрет Израелског конзервативизма, повлачење Израела из Газе 2005. године била лекција коју су верски ционисти научили. Показујемо и да је Израелски конзервативизам имао интенцију да омогући стварање овог савеза.

**Кључне речи:** верски ционизам, Израел, конзервативизам, мистицизам, јудаизам