

# The Recovery of the Israeli Covenant

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## Abstract

When the Israeli government introduced judicial reforms to limit the Supreme Court's authority, widespread demonstrations demanded a halt to the legislative changes. Protests escalated, and demonstrators clashed with the police and disrupted daily life. Israel was in a state of civil unrest – perhaps even en route to civil war. However, on October 7, 2023, Hamas and other Palestinian militant groups attacked southern Israel, creating chaos and committing atrocities. Israeli civilians reacted immediately, swiftly switching from protest to mobilization, from internal turmoil to unified patriotism. This paper grapples with the question of how this rapid transformation was possible. Relying on Jonathan Sacks's notion of covenant and Henri de Saint-Simon's idea of avant-garde groups and individuals, it sheds light on Israeli society and its patterns of behavior.

**Keywords:** judicial reform, civil unrest, social mobilization, covenant, avant-garde, Israeli society

## Introduction

In January 2023, the newly established Israeli government introduced extensive judicial reforms aimed at restraining the supposedly excessive authority of the Supreme Court and countering its perceived liberal inclinations. This move prompted an immediate backlash, leading to widespread protests across the nation for several months. Protesters demanded that the government refrain from implementing any legislative changes regarding the judiciary. The demonstrations received substantial support from prominent former Israeli officials, some of whom voiced concerns about the government's legitimacy and the potential for civil rebellion to protect democratic principles.

The protests peaked in July 2023, culminating in clashes with law enforcement as demonstrators disrupted daily life. Despite efforts at compromise, the legislative changes proceeded, sparking further unrest and clashes.

Amid this backdrop, on October 7, 2023, Hamas and other Palestinian militant groups launched coordinated attacks on southern Israel, perpetrating atrocities and creating chaos. Israeli civilians responded heroically, rallying to defend their communities in the face of the brutal Nukhba insurgency. The sudden shift from internal turmoil to unified patriotism raises questions about societal behavior in crisis. Scholars point to the "rally round the flag" phenomenon, where nations unite in times of crisis, but the durability of this unity can vary based on circumstances. Understanding this abrupt societal transformation is a key research objective moving forward.

To explain the shift from civil unrest to full social mobilization within hours, if not minutes, a cultural analysis is needed. We open with an explanation of the judicial reform that sparked the riots; we then analyze the reactions to the reform as an embodiment of an ethos clash in Israeli society between republican and liberal ideologies. Next, we portray civil unrest as a sign of social autoimmunity. To understand the immediate switch from social autoimmunity to total commitment, we take the idea of a contract between citizens and the state, as articulated by demonstrators, and replace it with a different term: *covenant*. Understanding the

deep roots of the covenant, from Judaism to Zionism, allows us to comprehend the protestors' quick mobilization. To further comprehend the way the covenant works, we reviewed how, for decades, avant-garde factions within the Zionist movement provided the social mechanism for the fulfillment of the covenant. Finally, we concentrated on the actions of avant-garde groups and individuals on October 7, 2023.

## **The Judicial Reform**

In January 2023, the Israeli government, with the support of a new coalition, announced its intention to enact a comprehensive reform of the judicial system in Israel. While the concept was not entirely novel and had been addressed in the Israeli public discourse before, this marked the first serious attempt in recent years to significantly alter the balance of power between the judiciary and the elected branches. This section explores contrasting perspectives on the matter. To unravel the roots of the divergent stances taken by various factions, we initially revisit the unofficial constitutional shift that occurred in Israel in 1992, characterized by a rise in judicial activism spearheaded by Justice Aharon Barak. Subsequently, we delve into the mindset of certain political actors who found themselves at odds with this trend, especially considering the implementation of the Disengagement Plan in 2005. To grasp the rationale behind each side's position in the debate beyond mere emotional motives, we analyze the five components of the government's 2023 judicial reform proposal: clauses on judicial selection, judicial review, a Knesset override, legal advisers to government ministries, and reasonableness. For each clause, we present arguments from proponents and opponents, providing readers with insight into the legal intricacies that fueled the public discourse in Israel throughout 2023, alongside a glimpse into the underlying political dynamics.

### **The 1992 Constitutional Revolution**

The Israeli Supreme Court has played a significant role in shaping the country's legal framework despite the absence of a comprehensive constitution. Since the

enactment of some basic laws in 1992, the Court has engaged in judicial activism. This has meant an increase in judicial review and the establishment of judicial precedents serving as constitutional law. Notably, the Court's landmark rulings have asserted the supremacy of basic laws over regular statutes, impacting the Israeli legal system profoundly.

The Court's approach involves intricate legal principles, including assessing the conformity of laws with constitutional rights, core state values, and the principle of proportionality. This ensures that legislation aligns with democratic principles and does not overly infringe on individual rights. The use of proportionality as a guiding principle has empowered the Court to nullify laws deemed excessive in limiting rights or failing to serve legitimate purposes effectively.

Despite facing criticism from some for overstepping its boundaries, the Court's activism has been instrumental in safeguarding minority rights, ensuring government accountability, and upholding democratic values. However, concerns have been raised about the potential weakening of popular sovereignty and the balance of powers within the Israeli government due to the Court's expanded role. The criticism often revolves around the perceived intrusion of unelected judges into the domain of democratically elected officials, potentially leading to a shift towards a "juristocracy" rather than a democracy.

Moreover, the elimination of standing requirements in Israel has meant that any individual can challenge laws or government decisions in court, leading to a wide scope of judicial review. This has raised debates about the impact on public trust in the judiciary and the balance of power between the branches of government. The Court's decisions, particularly in controversial areas such as illegal immigration and combating terrorism, have been scrutinized for their implications for the economy, property rights, and the rule of law. Ultimately, the discussion surrounding judicial activism in Israel extends beyond legal considerations, sparking broader debates on democratic governance, the separation of powers, and the role of the judiciary in a democratic society (Cohen and Shany, 2023; Cohen and Levi, 2023).

The emotional seeds of judicial reform were planted in the summer of 2005 with the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, which led to feelings of betrayal on one side

of the political spectrum. In 2004, the State Attorney's Office reopened criminal investigations involving Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, but Attorney General Menachem "Meni" Mazuz dismissed all legal allegations against him. This decision surprised legal professionals. Supreme Court Justice Mishael Cheshin suggested that the Gaza Disengagement had influenced Mazuz's decision. Right-wing critics of the Disengagement had faced harsh actions, and the legal system had supported the government's narrative. Following the Disengagement, there was a decline in trust in the Supreme Court among right-wing voters. In 2023, there were efforts to reform the Supreme Court due to perceived biases and challenges to its authority. The reform sought to alter the Court's composition and nature, reflecting a backlash against its past decisions.

The push for judicial reform in 2023 was the culmination of ongoing efforts since 2005 to undermine and limit the Supreme Court's authority. This push started as a discussion of the Court's rulings but evolved into a challenge to its legitimacy, particularly driven by a desire to revolutionize the Supreme Court (Kingsley, 2023; Breuer, 2023; Nativ, 2021).

## **The 2023 Judicial Reform**

The proposed judicial reform in January 2023 comprised five clauses aimed at reshaping the Israeli judicial system and the distribution of powers. The core objective of these provisions was to limit the judiciary's impact on legislation and public policies by restricting the Supreme Court's authority to conduct judicial review, giving the government control over the appointment of judges, and reducing the influence of government legal advisers. Spearheaded by Minister of Justice Yariv Levin and Simcha Rothman, chair of the Knesset's Constitution, Law, and Justice Committee, who had long criticized the flaws within the judicial system and advocated for its improvement (Rothman, 2020), the reform garnered support from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and other leaders within the ruling coalition. Apart from political figures, legal scholars also voiced the need to address certain shortcomings within the judicial system (Segev, 2023; Green, 2023; Gordon, 2023; Klein and Berney, 2023; Oren-Harush, 2023; Erlich, 2023). While some individuals

had previously highlighted the weaknesses of the High Court resulting from its judicial activism, they were not entirely convinced that an immediate comprehensive reform was the best approach to addressing these issues (Friedman, 2023; Dotan, 2023).

Many individuals who opposed the reform had been supporters of Barak's constitutional revolution in the 1990s. They believed that preserving this revolution was crucial if Israel was to uphold its democratic values, human rights, and liberal principles (Shalev, 2004; Weill, 2020; Roznai, Dixon, and Landau, 2023; Nets-Zehngut, 2023; Meydani, 2014) and effectively combat corruption (Sommer, 2009). These critics argued that the proposed reform amounted to a significant upheaval. They contended that it was a move driven by populism (Roznai and Cohen, 2023), a political assault on Israel's democratic system (Medina and Bloch, 2023), and a threat to the principle of the separation of powers (Navot, 2023). The proposed judicial reform included five clauses aimed at altering judicial, executive, and legislative processes and functions: (1) a judicial selection clause; (2) a judicial review clause; (3) a Knesset override clause; (4) a clause on legal advisers to government ministries; (5) a reasonableness clause.

### **(1) The judicial selection clause**

The proposed reform sought to change the composition of the Judicial Selection Committee by giving the government a majority of votes, thereby enhancing its influence. Supporters argue that the current system makes it difficult to appoint judges without the approval of the unelected officials who dominate the committee. Critics say this change would lead to government control over judicial appointments. The process of appointing judges in Israel, particularly for the Supreme Court, differs from that in many democratic nations where elected officials have the exclusive authority to appoint judges.

In contrast, critics highlight differences between Israel and other countries, emphasizing the unique political culture surrounding judicial appointments. In many developed nations, judges are selected with the consultation and endorsement of the judiciary, unlike in Israel. Other countries with written constitutions have decentralized government structures that require multiple approvals for judicial

appointments, fostering diverse perspectives on the bench. The concern in Israel is that the appointment process established by this clause could lead to a less diverse and potentially one-sided High Court (Segev, 2023; Green, 2023; Cohen, Nataf, and Bakshi, 2022; Levush, 2023; Gupta and Raj, 2023).

## **(2) The judicial review clause**

The proposed provision sought to limit the Supreme Court's authority to interpret and nullify basic laws, emphasizing the supremacy of laws passed by the Knesset. It sought to restrict the Court's power to review laws, particularly basic laws, by requiring a full panel of judges to vote on the invalidation of legislation, with a large majority needed for a decision. Supporters argued that since basic laws represent the highest legal principles in Israel, the Court should not have the authority to review or invalidate them. They claimed this would ensure the Court's adherence to the rule of law and democratic principles, aligning with the practices in many Western countries that lack judicial review of constitutional norms (Levush, 2023; Gupta and Raj, 2023).

Critics of the reform pointed out that Israel's system lacked certain checks and balances present in other countries, such as a bicameral legislature, a president with executive powers, and a federal governmental structure. They argued that the Supreme Court's role as a defender of human rights was crucial due to these institutional gaps and emphasized the need to maintain its current position (Lurie, 2023; Humphries, 2023).

## **(3) The Knesset override clause**

The proposed changes in this provision sought to allow the Knesset to overturn a Supreme Court ruling regarding a law with a majority vote (61 out of 120 members) if they disagreed with the Court's decision. This would give the Knesset the power to override a judicial decision that deemed a statute invalid (Levush, 2023; Gupta and Raj, 2023).

Supporters argued that this override provision was not meant to undermine constitutional principles but to give lawmakers the authority to make decisions

that differ from those of the Court. Critics raised concerns about the excessive authority granted to the Knesset, which could allow a majority to enact laws without sufficient checks and balances, potentially disregarding basic laws. Unlike in other democracies where checks and balances limit the influence of the political majority, in Israel, the Supreme Court plays a crucial role in maintaining balance (Lurie, 2023; Humphries, 2023).

#### **(4) The clause on legal advisers to government ministries**

The proposed provision sought to give ministers the authority to disregard the attorney general's advice and establish the government's legal position. It called for reclassifying ministry legal advisers as politically appointed counselors whose opinions would not be binding, thus allowing ministers to select and dismiss them freely. This change would enable the government to reject legal advice, acting contrary to it, in contrast to the current system where legal advisers operate under the attorney general's authority (Levush, 2023; Gupta and Raj, 2023).

Supporters argued that this change would address the imbalance whereby judges' decisions hold weight without accountability, while elected officials are constrained by legal advice without the power to implement policies. They viewed the current system of mandatory advice as unique and restricting. Opponents argued that the attorney general safeguards the rule of law, and legal advisers act as independent overseers of democracy, emphasizing Israel's limited system of checks and balances (Lurie, 2023; Humphries, 2023).

#### **(5) The reasonableness clause**

The goal of this provision was to limit judicial oversight by eliminating "reasonableness" as a basis for reviewing administrative decisions. This change would prevent the High Court from hearing petitions challenging government decisions solely on the grounds of being deemed "unreasonable" (Levush, 2023; Gupta and Raj, 2023).

Supporters argued that reasonableness is a subjective concept and not bound by strict logic, and therefore the Supreme Court might invalidate administrative

decisions even if legally sound. Critics, however, contended that the reasonableness doctrine was crucial in preventing arbitrary government actions and maintaining accountability. Abolishing this doctrine could potentially grant unchecked power to governmental entities and limit judicial scrutiny over administrative actions, thus affecting individuals' rights and recourse (Lurie, 2023; Humphries, 2023).

## **The Reform as a Republican-Liberal Ethos Clash**

An ethos represents the core beliefs shaping a society's values and principles, uniting people around a shared vision of identity. A nation's ethos forms the foundation for social norms, emphasizing responsibility and social unity. Such an overarching national ethos is crucial for fostering cohesion and guiding a community's collective identity (Bar-Tal, 2000; Etzioni, 2009). The enduring elements of a society's ethos encompass beliefs, values, and myths that define its essence, shaping how individuals perceive their community. The societal ethos plays a vital role in establishing social systems and influencing group dynamics (Bar-Tal, 2000; Giddens, 1984).

While national ethoses can be categorized into various types, such as republican and liberal, it is essential to recognize the nuances and complexities within these classifications. Within a democratic framework, despite differing perspectives, both republican and liberal ethoses often share fundamental democratic principles like equality and human rights (Waldron, 2004). Modern approaches blend traditional republican values with liberal ideals, highlighting a hybrid "republican liberal" perspective that adapts to contemporary societal demands (Laborde and Maynor, 2008; Battan, 2001). Ultimately, when discussing republicanism and liberalism, it's crucial to consider their roles within the democratic context.

### **The Republican National Ethos**

The republican tradition, shaped by historical contexts, spans over two thousand years, with influential figures like Aristotle and Polybius contributing to its legacy (Kennedy, 2009). This tradition, rooted in civic virtue and loyalty to the nation,

has left a lasting impact on Western politics, influencing figures like the American Founding Fathers (Riesenber, 1992; Pettit, 1998; 1999). Although republicanism evolved over time, its core ideas persisted in concepts of civic responsibility and the common good, with a resurgence in popularity in the latter part of the 20th century (Galston, 1990). Central to republicanism is the emphasis on community over individual rights, civic virtue involving self-sacrifice for the collective good, and a trust-based society encompassing social and political engagements (Miller, 1995; Pettit, 1999).

In comparison to liberalism, republicanism emphasizes civic duty and law as tools for upholding freedom through civic responsibility (Pocock, 1985; Schochet, 1993). Trust is a cornerstone of republicanism, fostering social cohesion and reliance on public officials and fellow citizens (Pettit, 1998; 1999). Ultimately, a republican national ethos embodies a collective commitment to shared values and sacrifices for the community's greater good, and it highlights civic virtue and trust as vital components of a thriving society.

## **The Liberal National Ethos**

Liberalism, like republicanism, encompasses diverse interpretations, from laissez-faire to government intervention, and has evolved over the course of history (Bell, 2014). Influential figures like Locke, Kant, Mill, and Rawls have shaped liberal principles, which emphasize individual freedoms and equality (Pocock, 1975; Shklar, 1998). Liberalism, a fundamental political ideology in modern democracies, revolves around individual rights and freedoms, and political discussions are often based on it (Bell, 2014; Nagel, 2003). Contrary to republicanism, liberalism prioritizes individuality, equality, and the protection of personal liberties against state authority (Boyer, 2001). Equality serves as a cornerstone of liberalism, affording citizens diverse choices for independent decision-making (Mill, 2002; Dworkin, 1985). Liberalism also emphasizes the common good through public reason, focusing on principles like freedom, equality, and justice to maintain legitimacy (Rawls, 1996). While liberalism champions personal freedom and universal citizenship, it also navigates ideological conflicts within individual nation-states, balancing competing objectives

for the sake of societal harmony (Doyle, 1997; Hacohen, 2006). The promotion of peace is integral to liberalism; conflict resolution receives strong emphasis as an inherent value rooted in democratic peace theory (Kant, 1957; Hegre, 2014).

In summary, liberalism centers around individual freedom, minority rights, and universal citizenship but must also address national solidarity and societal balance. A liberal national ethos emphasizes peace as a fundamental value, guiding efforts towards conflict resolution within a framework of individual rights and responsibilities.

### **The Origins of Republicanism and Liberalism in Israeli Society**

The contrasting ethoses within Israeli society, which blend republican and liberal elements, have been instrumental in shaping Zionism from its early days. Israel's diverse national ethoses have evolved through significant waves of immigration and a mixture of Western and Middle Eastern influences, manifested in varied cultural practices and societal structures (Samuel, 1989; Talmon, 1970).

While some view Israel as functioning on an ethnic democracy model (Smooha, 1997), others argue that it leans towards an ethnocracy, particularly in its promotion of a Jewish identity (Yiftachel, 1999). This perspective points to differential treatment of Jews and non-Jews, underscoring a debate between liberal democratic ideals and ethnocentric practices (Dowty, 1999). The tension between particularistic and universal values persists, with some scholars questioning Israel's commitment to genuine liberalism (Judt, 2003).

Both republican and liberal ideologies have been influential in the history of the Zionist movement. Figures like Theodor Herzl and Ze'ev Jabotinsky illustrate the interplay between individualism, liberal principles, and Jewish nationalism (Sarig, 1999; Kedar, 1981). Israel's political spectrum echoes this nuanced blend of liberal and republican values, evolving through legislative shifts towards basic laws affirming human liberties and freedoms (Barak, 2006).

The enduring interplay between liberal and republican ethoses within Zionism signifies a complex dynamic that is destined to persist, as Israelis navigate the balance between the particularistic ethnonational heritage and universal liberal

values. Israel's ideological landscape, shaped by historical movements and legislative developments, reflects this ongoing tension.

## **The 2023 Dispute as an Ethos Clash**

To understand the intense strife over the judicial reform, we analyzed articles and newsletters by two organizations with divergent political ideologies: the Kohelet Policy Forum (KPF), which represents right-wing viewpoints and actively engages with policymakers to advocate for political change in Israel (Sadeh, 2023; Rubin, 2023); and the Israel Democracy Institute (IDI), a nonpartisan think tank dedicated to strengthening Israeli democracy by emphasizing policy research and informing decision-makers (Weinberg, 2022).

The contrasting perspectives of these two organizations focus on the five characteristics that differentiate the republican and the liberal ethoses: community versus individual, civic virtue, liberties, law, and trust.

### **(1) Community versus individual**

KPF is critical of the Israeli Supreme Court for questioning the community's fundamental pillars and entertaining challenges to the Basic Law: Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People, disregarding its ratification by a significant majority in the Knesset. KPF opposes the Court's frequent interventions in political matters, accusing judges of neglecting Jewish identity as a guiding principle. Examples cited include decisions during election campaigns and cases concerning the inquiry into the 2006 Lebanon War and the security barrier route in Judea and Samaria. Thus KPF highlights the foundational importance of Jewish sovereignty to the establishment of the State of Israel (Kontorovich, 2021).

### **(2) Civic virtue**

The Republican ethos values civic virtue, which it sees as a profound commitment to society. In fact, KPF members claim that they have faced media intimidation due to their fulfillment of their civic responsibilities (Erlich, 2023). In contrast, IDI members stress the importance of government legitimacy in ensuring public compliance

with laws. While republicans emphasize societal duty, IDI members view public cooperation as vital for the smooth functioning of Israeli society (Feldman, 2023).

### **(3) Liberties**

Republicans, including members of KPF, advocate active citizen engagement in society and oppose judicial intervention, which they believe curtails Israeli citizens' self-governing capacity (Erlich, 2023; Shalev, 2023). KPF argues for public involvement in the judicial appointment process to address perceived political influence on the selection committee and uphold democratic principles. In contrast, IDI members emphasize individual liberty and equality as the bedrock of political legitimacy, highlighting rights such as freedom of religion and equality.

### **(4) Law**

Republicanism views the law as a mechanism for compelling individuals to live up to their civic responsibilities; the emphasis is on one's duty to the collective political body. KPF contends that the Supreme Court's emphasis on reasonableness grants judges excessive authority to invalidate administrative judgments (Shalev, 2023). Liberals believe that the purpose of forming a state should be to minimize harm, and they advocate limited sovereignty with minimal political authority. IDI members draw comparisons with past leadership decisions, such as the 1953 cession of authority to nominate judges, underlining strategies to adjust the balance of power (Lurie, 2022).

### **(5) Trust**

Republicans emphasize the link between citizenship and both vertical and horizontal trust, with KPF members lamenting the judiciary's effect on public trust in elected officials (Shalev, 2023). Liberals advocate vigilance against decisions limiting freedom and equality, as seen in IDI members' concerns about potential restrictions on opposition if checks on politicians are removed (Fuchs, 2022).

## **Sociopolitical Autoimmunity**

The profound ideological disparities between the republican and liberal ethoses in Israeli society have led to an ongoing crisis. The dialogue following the proposed judicial reforms was part of a long-standing clash of ethoses. However, unlike in previous cases of differences, the government's 2023 announcements sparked widespread protests, revealing societal divisions.

In all, about two million Israelis – one out of every five citizens – attended at least one demonstration. Over 700 citizens were arrested throughout the months of protests, and 162 were injured (39 of them police officers). No wonder, then, that a survey taken in late July 2023 showed that 58 percent of Israelis believed that the country was in a state of emergency as a result of the protests and 45 percent thought the chances for a civil war were high. Consequently, 73 percent of the respondents agreed that a compromise had to be reached before Israel degenerated into violence (Hermann and Anabi, 2023). When we consider the 2023 protests as an unprecedented event in Israel's sociopolitical history, the focus naturally shifts to the number of citizens participating in the demonstrations. Widespread nationwide protests spanning a nine-month period (encompassing 39 weekends) were organized in response to the government's proposed restrictions on the judicial system. However, the significance of this protest in Israel's political history extends far beyond mere numbers of participants. It is essential to explore various other dimensions that shed light on the broader implications of the events leading up to October 7, 2023. Rather than simply being a society divided, Israeli society was engaged in a collective act of self-destruction, akin to a sociopolitical autoimmune illness. To grasp this concept fully, it is crucial to analyze the significance of the 2023 events from multiple perspectives, considering various aspects such as the physical upheaval in the streets, acts of violence against political figures, the military's involvement in politics, the intervention of the healthcare system in political matters, the influence of workers' unions in the political arena, and calls for civil discord.

## **Fires in the Streets**

The recent protests in Israel, marked by bonfires and the burning of tires on major roads, stand out as a unique and impactful display not often seen despite the nation's history of significant sociopolitical demonstrations. This visual element symbolizes passion, defiance, and the desire for change, evoking a sense of resistance to oppression and fostering unity among participants.

## **Violence against Political Leaders**

Demonstrators obstructed the homes and workplaces of Israeli politicians, disrupting ceremonies and speeches. Protestors demanded that officials abstain from participation in state functions, even Memorial Day ceremonies. Personal harassment of ministers became common: Science and Technology Minister Ofir Akunis was verbally attacked at a beach, MK Simcha Rothman received death threats, and coalition chairman Ofir Katz was spat on and threatened.

## **Involve ment of the Army in Politics**

In July 2023, over 160 reserve officers at Air Force headquarters, including high-ranking officers, declared they would stop reporting for reserve duty in response to the judicial reform. More than 1,100 officers, including fighter pilots, and 10,000 reservists from various IDF units also pledged to stop reporting for duty if the reform was enacted, emphasizing that their refusal was rooted in conscience, not politics. These acts of civil disobedience highlighted a fundamental shift in national values that conflicted with their military obligations.

## **Involve ment of the Medical System in Politics**

The Israeli Medical Association declared a one-day general strike on July 24, 2023. As a result, healthcare services operated on a limited schedule akin to that on the Sabbath and festivals, with only emergency rooms in general and psychiatric hospitals open, as other physicians and medical students doing rotations stayed away from work.

## **Involvement of the Workers' Unions in Politics**

The Business Forum, which includes 200 major companies, imposed a widespread shutdown of businesses on July 24, 2023, affecting shopping centers, malls, and various commercial establishments countrywide. This action halted the Israeli economy and set the stage for a larger strike initiated on July 27, 2023, by the Histadrut (the General Federation of Labour in Israel). This strike gained support from labor unions, major corporations, and high-tech leaders, resulting in the shutdown of various sectors, including the high-tech industry and airports.

## **The Call for Civil Strife**

The calls for civil unrest in Israel in 2023 involved prominent political figures inciting public disobedience, unlike historical instances in which marginalized groups typically used civil disobedience as a last resort. These former officials, once part of elite circles, appeared to exploit a turbulent environment to amplify the existing unrest and position themselves as saviors of society, marking a departure from traditional profiles of civil disobedience advocates.

## **Sociopolitical Autoimmunity in 2023**

Jacques Derrida is credited with introducing the concept of autoimmune disease to the realms of social theory and philosophy (Derrida, 2005). In contemporary discourse, immunity is commonly linked with the medical domain, representing a complex defense mechanism present throughout the body. This intricate system, involving white blood cells, tissues, organs, and proteins, works in harmony to create a protective shield against external threats like pathogens, thus maintaining the body's integrity. Immunity is vital for survival, as it defends against potential attacks from various elements in our bodies and environment. The biomedical view of immunity is founded on the idea that the immune system can discriminate between the authentic self and external entities and can thus safeguard the self from foreign invaders (Gavin, 2022). Derrida's perspective offers a unique lens through which to analyze the events of the 2023 protests (Derrida, 2005).

In the first nine months of 2023, Israeli society faced challenges that compromised its resilience to social, economic, and security threats. A meeting convened on December 14, 2022, by notable figures such as Gilead Sher, Yossi Kucik, Dan Halutz, Amos Malka, and Dina Zilber sought to raise funds and recruit elite personalities to undermine the government even before it was formed. This diversion of leadership resources, alongside actions taken to destabilize the state, pushed Israel into crisis.

Three years prior, former prime minister Ehud Barak had engaged with a group of retired Air Force personnel known as Forum 555 to sow civil unrest and challenge the legal authority of the elected coalition. Despite evidence of a coup plot and the revelation of strategies aimed at inciting public discord, significant segments of the Israeli elite remained steadfast in pursuing a self-destructive path. The unrest, driven by motives beyond judicial concerns, spread across the military, healthcare, industry, commerce, and technology sectors, jeopardizing the entire Zionist project.

The societal turmoil in 2023 mirrored an autoimmune illness, in which the immune system mistakenly attacks healthy organs. This parallel highlights the tragic nature of events unfolding within Israeli society.

## **The Plot Twist**

On October 7, 2023, Palestinian militant factions launched a massive invasion of southern Israel involving killings, abductions, and other heinous acts. This sudden attack prompted protest organizers to shift their focus from demonstrations to supporting the nation. Thousands of reservists reenlisted, former opponents united to aid the war effort, and protest groups mobilized networks to help those affected. Efforts included collecting gear, providing mental health support, and organizing shelter and supplies for evacuees. Protest organizations swiftly adapted, creating a cohesive support network, coordinating relief efforts, and helping those impacted by the conflict.

## The Covenant

Opponents of the reform who had violated basic civic norms through actions such as setting fires in the streets, violently attacking politicians, shutting down social systems – including the hospitals – and most of all, involving the army in the debate had a major justification for their actions: the breach of the contract between the state and its citizens. Opponents of the legislation contended that the new laws altered the established rules. By expressing its intention to shift the balance of power from the judiciary to the legislature, the coalition majority not only upset the necessary democratic balance but also broke the contract between the state and its citizens. According to this perspective, the agreement between a soldier or officer – who puts themselves at risk – and the state, which initially pledged to uphold a liberal democracy, is now null and void. Once this contract is broken, soldiers are no longer bound to fulfill their obligations. Morally speaking, the breach of this contract by the state justifies the decision by elite pilots and officers to abandon their duties. The very purpose of their service has changed, granting them the right to refuse to serve.

However, this paper draws upon the insights of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, a revered global spiritual figure known for his religious and scholarly expertise, to explore distinctions between different concepts, particularly emphasizing the notion of covenant. In contrast to a contract, which delineates legally enforceable rights and obligations of multiple parties, often involving the exchange of goods, services, money, or promises of future transfers, a covenant represents a deeper, foundational bond. In cases of breach of contract, the aggrieved party has recourse to legal remedies (Beaston, Burrows, and Cartwright, 2020; Elazar, 2017; 2020). Contracts represent binding legal agreements between two or more parties and form the bedrock of commercial, legal, and personal relationships by establishing the framework for transactions and responsibilities.

The concept of covenant, on the other hand, which is pivotal in Jewish political philosophy, influences various aspects of communal life, including rituals, religion, politics, social dynamics, and economic practices. Three significant biblical events—God's covenants with Noah, Abraham, and the Israelites at Mount Sinai—

provide a contextual foundation for understanding covenantal principles in Jewish theology. The Sinaitic covenant embodies five key attributes, emphasizing direct engagement with God, mutual promise-making, community distinctness, contested interpretations, and debatable political authority.

Moving to Deuteronomy, a significant shift from divine intervention to human accountability is observed. Here, Moses imparts the details and context of the covenant to the Israelites, identifying them as active participants in the covenantal journey. Deuteronomy serves as a "second law," reiterating the covenant established at Sinai and reaffirmed at critical junctures in Jewish history. This text, akin to a marriage contract outlining responsibilities, forms the nucleus of Jewish history, emphasizing memory, identity, and moral values for future generations (Sacks, 1993; 1997; 2019).

The covenant expressed in Deuteronomy intertwines profound political theory with religious reverence, reminding Jews to preserve communal memories, uphold their identity, and pass down a legacy. This covenant, rooted in biblical traditions, underpins Jewish civilization, emphasizing the enduring value of moral principles and social laws. It poses questions on contemporary interpretations and fundamental principles in a modern context.

### **The Zionist Deuteronomy**

The historical connection between the Jewish people and the Land of Israel has been an enduring one, forming a significant part of Jewish identity. Throughout history, Jews have maintained this link despite exile and hardships, with groups reviving settlements and contributing to the relationship. While this connection dates to the destruction of the Second Temple, modern Zionism in the late 19th century ushered in substantial changes, intertwining Western ideologies to reveal a revitalized covenant.

Zionism, beyond merely having established a state, is a multifaceted social and ideological movement, transcending conventional notions of nationalism. Drawing inspiration from European political thought, Zionism sought not just sovereign statehood but a broad solution to Jewish challenges, embracing political self-determination and societal transformation. Central to this transformation was David Ben-Gurion, a pivotal figure who shaped Israeli society through his leadership and visions.

Ben-Gurion's leadership embodied ethical and cultural principles, navigating challenges to ensure Jewish survival and identity in complex environments. His approach reflected a unique blend of personal perspective, intellectual freedom, and a deep commitment to Jewish revival. Ben-Gurion's vision extended beyond statehood; he sought a societal revolution encompassing political, cultural, and structural aspects of Jewish life, emphasizing civic awareness and the rule of law to achieve the goals of Zionism. In a lecture to the IDF high command on military and civilian education on September 1, 1950, Ben-Gurion said:

The Jewish nation is not just a political and national entity; it has embodied a moral imperative and carried a historical vision since its inception. To truly grasp Jewish history and the Jewish people's ongoing struggle for survival, one must recognize the ideological distinctiveness of the nation and its battle – a struggle that transcends mere physical, economic, political, and military dimensions to encompass a spiritual, moral, and ideological dimension. This enduring struggle has defined the Jewish people throughout history, from ancient times to the present, and will continue to shape their path until the end of time, awaiting the fulfillment of the ultimate vision.

(Ben-Gurion, 1950)

Like the biblical book of Deuteronomy, Ben-Gurion's lectures provide a detailed overview of Jewish history. His central message emphasizes that Israel is more than just a nation: it bears a deep spiritual and practical mission. Ben-Gurion called on each member of the community to actively contribute to building national unity.

### **The Covenant in Israeli Civil Religion Rituals**

The covenant's endurance over time requires a solid spiritual foundation upheld by a civil religion that shapes its evolution and impact on future generations. Just as the religious covenant relies on divine faith, the civil covenant is deeply entwined with civil religion. The Enlightenment thinker Jean-Jacques Rousseau introduced the concept of civil religion, envisioning a unifying spiritual force based on secular

laws rather than divine authority. Scholars like Emile Durkheim explored societal manifestations of religion and also arrived at a concept of civil religion, exemplified by secular forms of belief seen in various ideologies such as Soviet Communism and Fascism. Robert Bellah further explored civil religion in America, showing its influence on the social structure.

In the Israeli context, Myron Aronoff's work "Civil Religion in Israel" emphasized how the collective belief system of Zionism fostered a shared national identity (Aronoff, 1981). Charles Liebman and Eliezer Don-Yehiya expanded on this idea, focusing on Ben-Gurion's influence on civil religion. Ben-Gurion's notion of *mamlachtiut* resonates with John Coleman's view of civil religion as a system connecting citizens, society, and history to fundamental aspects of existence (Liebman and Don-Yehiya, 1983; Don-Yehiya, 2014). Ben-Gurion's comprehensive writings explore fundamental dimensions of a civil religion. The civil religion in Israel is deeply intertwined with key rituals, notably observed during Memorial Day, which immediately precedes Independence Day. Memorial Day commemorates the sacrifices of those who fought for the establishment of the State of Israel and military personnel who perished in service. Global Jewry's indebtedness to these fallen heroes is emphasized by the closure of public entertainment venues for 24 hours and the sounding of a siren twice, marking solemn moments of remembrance (Gideon, 2018; Weiss, 1997; Lomsky-Feder, 2004).

The educational importance of Memorial Day in schools is indicative of the covenant between individuals and the community, as well as between citizens and the nation, within the context of civil religion. School ceremonies are organized meticulously, with students gathering in a quiet and respectful manner, surrounded by symbols such as flags, elements of military service, and solemn verses displayed on placards. The ceremony evokes values of heroism, self-sacrifice, and the enduring bond between the living and the deceased, culminating in a collective singing of the national anthem, "Hatikvah" (Weiss, 1997; Lomsky-Feder, 2004). These messages reinforce the foundational covenant, providing an annual reaffirmation that transcends boundaries of time and space.

## **The Covenant on October 7, 2023**

The war in Israel prompted a significant mobilization that brought together people from different backgrounds to support the cause. Social divisions were set aside as people participated in various military and civilian support activities. Nonprofit organizations, voluntary initiatives, philanthropic groups, and dedicated individuals coordinated efforts on a large scale. Over a thousand initiatives were active across Israel during the first two weeks of the war, operating in various sectors of society and having a significant impact.

These initiatives involved diverse activities such as rescuing civilians, evacuating civilians from conflict zones and caring for them, rescuing animals, providing essential supplies, offering support to families of abducted individuals, and assisting bereaved families. Local community initiatives played a crucial role, addressing unique needs and extending assistance beyond immediate areas. The active participation of volunteers, including digital volunteering, was key in meeting various needs during this critical period.

Volunteerism was significant across age groups, genders, and religious backgrounds. A large percentage of volunteers acted spontaneously after not having volunteered before; others had prior volunteering experience. New volunteers tended to have a more secular outlook and were often from higher-income brackets. Various volunteer activities like collecting and distributing supplies, transporting people, providing support to security forces, engaging in outreach, and assisting evacuees have been prominent during the war.

Professional nonprofit organizations played a crucial role in the civil mobilization effort, leveraging their expertise and resources. Financial resources were mobilized significantly, with substantial contributions from North American Jewry and donations from the Israeli population. The shared foundation that drove these efforts was the covenant. Israeli society demonstrated its unity and commitment during challenging times in October 2023.

## From Covenant to Pre-State Avant-Garde Groups

We have discussed the Israeli national covenant and its preservation by means of a Zionist civil religion, guided by Ben-Gurion's societal vision as outlined in his version of Deuteronomy. The conduct of Israeli society on October 7, 2023, reflected a commitment to upholding the covenant. This section looks at individuals and groups in the period before Israeli independence who advanced the covenant. We start with a socialist group known as the *Halutzim*. Going beyond this one political faction, and inspired by Henri de Saint-Simon's concept of the avant-garde, we use the term *avant-garde* to encompass innovators advancing Zionist ideals, shaping norms, challenging boundaries, introducing cultural innovations, and upholding covenantal obligations. We then delve into various avant-garde groups and individuals from pre-state Israel, including Bnei Moshe, Nili, Brit HaBirionim, and Lehi, exploring ideological and personal connections among them.

### **Halutzim**

The *Halutzim*, Hebrew for "pioneers," arrived in the late 19th century and established the first agricultural settlements in Israel, which were initially reliant on the support of Baron Edmond de Rothschild for financial stability. A second wave of immigrants before World War I shared their strong ideological commitment. Influenced by movements such as the Russian Narodnaya Volya, leaders such as A. D. Gordon viewed primitive agricultural labor as an ideal. These people laid the foundation for *kibbutzim* and *moshavim*. After World War I, a third wave settled in the region, with both men and women taking up infrastructure projects supported by the British authorities.

Many of these pioneers formed small contracting groups for labor, with notable examples like the *Trumpeldor* Work Brigade engaging in road construction. Challenges such as unfamiliar physical labor and separation from family were too much for some of the pioneers, and they returned to Europe. Those who stayed played significant roles in shaping the Jewish community in Palestine. By the outbreak of World War II, organizations like *Hehalutz* had around 100,000 members, with a substantial influence on Jewish workers and *kibbutz* residents.

The term *pioneers* denotes individuals leading the way in new territories or ideas, paving paths for others. The Halutzim who cultivated the Land of Israel were true pioneers of Zionism. The concept extends beyond geographic pioneers to imaginative individuals pioneering new ideas and trends. In the Book of Joshua, the term *halutzim* symbolizes leadership in the procession around the walls of Jericho. Modern Halutzim, drawing inspiration from biblical mandates, embodied resilience, discipline, and readiness for self-sacrifice. The term gained prominence in the late 18th and 19th centuries amid changing Jewish communities. The community and leadership of the Halutzim and their sense of divine imperative shaped their vision of rebuilding a homeland. This self-selected group embodied communal solidarity, leadership of the collective, and a sense of divine imperative that drove their commitment to national objectives and altruistic service.

Ben-Gurion and his supporters viewed the Halutzim as the epitome of the covenant bearers, serving as a blueprint for the wider populace. This sentiment was articulated during his address to IDF officers in 1950:

Pioneering is not the property of virtuous individuals. It is stored in the soul of each person. Everyone has hidden powers and virtues and spiritual treasures.... The pressure of historical needs can uncover and activate each person's hidden springs and raise him to the highest level of heroism and pioneering. (Ben-Gurion, 1950)

Joseph Trumpeldor, a key figure in the Halutz movement, led a remarkable life marked by personal and Zionist achievements. Born in Pyatigorsk, outside the Pale of Settlement, in 1880, he immersed himself in Russian literature and Zionist ideals from a young age. Although initially interested in science, he pursued dentistry due to a Jewish quota. Conscripted into the army, he fought in the Russo-Japanese campaign, where he lost an arm and was taken prisoner. While in captivity, he expanded his Zionist activities, organizing educational programs for Jewish prisoners in Japan. After his release, Trumpeldor became the first Jew to receive a Russian officer's commission. He later founded the Russian branch of Hehalutz and immigrated to

Palestine in 1912, joining Kibbutz Degania. During World War I, he played a pivotal role in establishing the Jewish Legion, the first all-Jewish combat unit in over two thousand years.

Upon returning to civilian life in Palestine, Trumpeldor dedicated himself to uniting various political factions within the Zionist movement. In 1920, he organized the defense of Jewish settlements in the northern Galilee, particularly Tel Hai. Despite facing dwindling resources and manpower, Trumpeldor's valiant efforts to defend the outpost ended tragically in a shootout after which he succumbed to his injuries. His final words, "Never mind; it is good to die for our country," epitomized his unwavering commitment to the Zionist cause and became a cornerstone of Zionist lore.

Joseph Trumpeldor's unwavering willingness to sacrifice, epitomized by his famous declaration, became a lasting symbol of Jewish courage and the Israeli spirit. Despite his untimely death at 40, his legacy endured beyond his years. His heroic deeds were celebrated through odes, prose, and anecdotes, inspiring generations. Children were named for him, and youths drew inspiration from his life story. Both socialists and right-wing Zionists found inspiration in Trumpeldor's narrative. For the labor movement, he represented a dedicated pioneer and symbol of Zionist commitment. Jabotinsky, influenced by their comradeship despite their ideological differences, established the Betar youth movement in Trumpeldor's honor. Trumpeldor's legacy transcended his lifetime, becoming ingrained in the collective memory of pre-state Jewish society and later integrated into Israel's educational curriculum. He is regarded as a pioneering Zionist leader who paved the way for future generations.

The socialist Halutz factions of the Zionist movement passed down the responsibility of upholding the covenant through the generations, as exemplified by the enduring ethos of the kibbutz movement. The kibbutz embodies core principles such as voluntarism, communal living, equality, and a pioneering spirit, rooted in transforming desolate lands into productive territories ever since the founding of the first kibbutz, Degania, in 1910. Despite a gradual decline in their share in the population, kibbutz members have played pivotal roles in the IDF, advocating collaborative efforts to enhance security in outlying regions (Drory, 2014).

Kibbutz leaders emphasized shared responsibility with the army for security, with many members actively involved in combat forces. Kibbutz youth took on leadership roles within the infantry and armored corps, contributing significantly to volunteer units and reserve formations. The establishment of Unit 101 under Ariel Sharon in 1953, with a substantial kibbutz representation, showcased the integral role of kibbutz youth in military operations. One poignant example is that of Kibbutz Beit Hashita, established in 1928, a community that experienced profound loss during the Yom Kippur War in 1973. The kibbutz suffered a significant number of casualties, reflecting the sacrifices made by its hardworking residents who bravely served their country. This tragedy left a lasting impact on the close-knit community, underscoring the deep-seated commitment to national defense within the kibbutz movement.

The 1973 Yom Kippur War, perceived as a military setback, led to a decline in political support for the IDF and resulted in the gradual fading of its symbols. This trend continued with disagreements over subsequent conflicts like the 1982 Lebanon War and varying opinions on service in the territories during the 1987 Intifada. These factors, combined with waning trust in right-wing governments, caused a rift between the kibbutz movement and the IDF (Drory, 2014).

Despite these challenges, recent data suggests that the rate of enlistment among youth from kibbutzim and moshavim has remained steady over time. In these agricultural communities, the percentage of individuals serving in the military is typically 15% higher than that in the general population. This enduring trend can be linked to the tradition of the Halutzim within the kibbutz movement. The decision to join combat units is often influenced by family military history, with older relatives' service shaping the participation of kibbutz youth in combat roles, highlighting a commitment to the covenant passed down through generations.

## **The Pre-State Avant-Garde**

The covenant, rooted in Ben-Gurion's version of Deuteronomy, was a comprehensive commitment that transcended political ideologies, involving diverse individuals beyond the socialist-leaning pioneers in the Zionist movement. To explore this

broader participation in upholding the covenant, the term *avant-garde groups and individuals* is employed in this study.

Because they question norms and foster cultural innovation, avant-garde groups play significant roles in artistic, philosophical, and social spheres. By challenging existing paradigms and promoting experimentation, these collectives drive societal progress, influencing mainstream culture and inspiring new developments. The term *avant-garde*, popularized by the French utopian socialist Henri de Saint-Simon, reflects innovative individuals who spearhead artistic and societal advancement.

While traditionally associated with socialist Zionists like the Halutzim, the term *avant-garde* has been used to denote any pioneering individuals and groups in Israeli society. From the early Zionist movement that proclaimed itself a Jewish vanguard (akin to the Bolsheviks in Russia) to clandestine groups such as Bnei Moshe, Nili, Brit HaBirionim, and Lehi, avant-garde organizations have played significant roles across various aspects of society, influencing history and shaping the future of Israel.

### **Bnei Moshe**

Bnei Moshe, the "Sons of Moses," surfaced as a clandestine Zionist group in Odessa in 1889 under the leadership of Ahad Ha'am (Asher Ginsberg). Ahad Ha'am championed cultural Zionism, an ideology that advocated a transformation of the Jewish religious heritage within the Zionist movement. His approach diverged from the more prominent political, practical, and Revisionist Zionisms of Herzl, Weizmann, Ben-Gurion, and Jabotinsky. While Ahad Ha'am's intellectual depth influenced notable followers like Gershom Scholem, his cautious visionary stance was often seen as theoretical rather than actionable.

Despite being in ideological opposition to the established Zionist leadership, Ahad Ha'am was a practical and effective leader, supporting Jewish self-defense and contributing significantly to Zionist political history, including advising Weizmann during negotiations for the Balfour Declaration. His vision for Bnei Moshe was to have a group of receptive Zionists within the Hibbat Zion movement who would lead by example and reshape the community through personal conduct and activism. Bnei Moshe sought to rejuvenate the cultural-nationalist spirit through endeavors

like modernizing Jewish education, establishing agricultural settlements, and creating Hebrew publishing ventures. Although the organization had limitations in the evolving era of mass politics and eventually dissolved due to internal disputes and disillusionment, its impact on Hebrew education, agricultural development, and cultural endeavors was significant while it lasted (Zipperstein, 1990; 1993).

### **Nili**

Nili, a pro-British Jewish underground network operating from 1915 to 1917, was led by a few individuals in Ottoman-controlled Palestine who supported the United Kingdom against the Ottoman Empire. Established in Zikhron Yaakov, Nili sought to aid the British invasion, relieve Jewish suffering, and expose Turkish oppression of Jews, all with the aim of fulfilling the Zionist aspiration for a Jewish homeland. Despite initial resistance from British intelligence and the Jewish community leadership, Nili played a crucial role in providing intelligence to General Allenby, contributing to British successes in Palestine.

Key members of Nili included Aaron and Sarah Aaronsohn, with Aaron utilizing his agricultural expertise to establish vital connections with British diplomats. Employing homing pigeons to transmit messages, Nili shared essential intelligence on Turkish defenses, troop movements, and natural resources crucial for British advances. Unfortunately, a pigeon's landing led to the exposure, capture, torture, and execution of Nili members. Sarah Aaronsohn tragically took her own life, sacrificing herself to protect her father and comrades. The group's intelligence significantly aided the British offensive in Beersheba and contributed to the surrender of Jerusalem, marking the end of Ottoman rule in central Palestine (Katz, 2007).

### **Brit HaBirionim**

Brit HaBirionim, a faction within the Revisionist Zionist movement, was established in 1930 as an underground organization advocating the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. The organization's name, Brit HaBirionim, has been interpreted in various ways in historical accounts, but the original intention of the founders was likely along the lines of "The Covenant of the Defenders of Jerusalem." They

were influenced by events such as the 1929 Arab massacres and sought to challenge British rule and corruption within the Zionist movement.

Key figures in Brit HaBirionim included Abba Ahimeir, Uri Zvi Greenberg, and Yehoshua Heschel Yevin. Ahimeir had a complex background and ideological journey, transitioning from socialist principles to Revisionist Zionism under Ze'ev Jabotinsky. The group engaged in civil disobedience, such as sounding the shofar at the Western Wall and protesting against the British authorities.

Brit HaBirionim also took a stand against Nazi Germany, orchestrating actions against Nazi symbols and criticizing the Zionist leadership for entering into agreements that compromised Jewish dignity. Ahimeir was charged, along with others, with involvement in the 1933 assassination of Haim Arlosoroff, but he was only found guilty of orchestrating an unauthorized covert group. He served time in prison until 1935, during which period the organization disbanded.

Fervent dedication to the Land of Israel and commitment to the cause characterize the legacy of Brit HaBirionim and its members, echoing through their actions and Abba Ahimeir's writings. Their impact on challenging authority and advocating for Jewish rights was significant in the historical context of Zionism and resistance movements (Shindler, 2006; 2015).

## **Lehi**

Lehi, an acronym of Lohamei Herut Yisrael ("fighters for the freedom of Israel"), was a Zionist paramilitary group founded by Avraham Stern in 1940 to oust the British administration from Palestine and establish a Jewish state. Motivated by disapproval of British policies in the 1930s and the introduction of the 1939 White Paper restricting Jewish immigration, Lehi opted for violent resistance, even while other groups were cooperating with the British during World War II. Lehi faced setbacks, including internal unrest and high-profile tragedies like the execution of its leader, Avraham "Yair" Stern.

The group carried out various actions, including assassinations and sabotage, resulting in notoriety and clashes with British authorities. Notable targets included Lord Moyne and Folke Bernadotte; these assassinations led to repercussions for Lehi

members. The organization's strong nationalist aspirations were reflected in their actions and commitment to a sovereign, independent Jewish homeland.

Lehi members chose defiance even in court proceedings, demonstrating their unwavering dedication to the cause. Individuals such as Meir Feinstein and Moshe Barazani willingly sacrificed their lives for their beliefs, leaving behind messages of defiance and commitment to the homeland. Despite its controversial methods, Lehi's legacy embodies an extreme form of Zionist patriotism and a belief in the necessity of sacrifice for their vision of a Jewish state (Heller, 2004; Hoffman, 2015).

## **The Avant-Garde after Independence**

We now shift our focus to avant-garde individuals and groups as key bearers of the covenant after the establishment of the State of Israel. Following independence, Israeli society explored new areas where these avant-garde figures could demonstrate their dedication to the national ethos. This chapter delves into four specific categories of such bearers of the covenant: whistleblowers, dissidents, political messianists, and defenders.

### **Whistleblowers**

Whistleblowing involves exposing corrupt, illegal, or harmful activities within an organization in the interest of the common good. Whistleblowers may face legal battles, financial strain, and social exclusion, despite being motivated by a sense of moral duty and ethical values. While whistleblowers play a crucial role in enhancing transparency and accountability, they also run the risk of retaliation and persecution. Establishing a supportive environment for whistleblowers is essential for protecting them from adverse consequences and promoting ethical standards within organizations (Nadler, Petkas, and Blackwell, 1974; Culiberg and Mihelik, 2017).

One compelling example of avant-garde individuals challenging the status quo was the *Shurat ha-Mitnadvim* organization in Israel during the 1950s. Founded by students from the Hebrew University, it sought to promote good citizenship

and expose corruption in public administration. The group's initiatives extended from monitoring food ration violations to supporting new immigrants and identifying government irregularities. Despite facing resistance and suspicion from government officials, Shurat ha-Mitnadvim persisted in its mission, leading to significant revelations of corruption. Their story demonstrates the potential impact of individuals dedicated to integrity and social accountability, even in the face of adversity and opposition.

The activities of Shurat ha-Mitnadvim reflected a commitment to social responsibility and ethical governance, illustrating the transformative power of individuals who challenge misconduct and promote transparency. Their endeavors exemplify the essence of avant-garde guardians of the covenant, driven by a deep sense of duty to their community and a vision of a more just and accountable society (Kabalo, 2008; Hermann, 1995).

## **Dissidents**

A dissident is an individual who challenges an established political or religious system, belief, or institution. Dissidents contribute to a culture of citizenship and embody the political courage essential for democratic engagement. Dissident voices emerge in times of political turmoil and social transformation, advocating revolutionary ideas and a commitment to challenging historical norms. Despite facing marginalization and suppression, dissidents encounter obstacles such as rivalry and dismissal in their pursuit of justice. In a society driven by competition and consumerism, dissenters advocating for change may face stigmatization and opposition.

Political dissidents embody intellectual rigor and bravery as they confront prevailing ideologies and societal norms. Their dissent resists the control of minds and bodies imposed by dominant power structures. Unlike celebrities motivated by personal gain, political dissidents do not seek recognition or power but instead make sacrifices for the sake of their beliefs and truths. Their actions reflect a commitment to truth and dignity as citizens, often at personal cost and amidst suspicion due to their rejection of established norms (Sparks, 1997; Darder, 2011).

### **Abie Nathan**

Abie Nathan was a prominent dissenter in Israel during its early years. Born in Iran and raised in India, he had a diverse upbringing. He enlisted in the Royal Air Force during World War II, falsifying his age to become a pilot. After the war, he volunteered for the newly formed State of Israel and flew combat missions. Following his military service, Abie pursued various entrepreneurial ventures, including running the California restaurant in Tel Aviv. He later became a significant figure in the city's nightlife, supporting artists, funding scholarships, and aiding those in need.

Abie's most notable achievement was the establishment of the Voice of Peace, a radio station that broadcast from a ship in the Mediterranean Sea. The station focused on promoting peace and humanitarian ideals, played music, and aired discussions aimed at fostering harmony among listeners.

Throughout his life, Abie Nathan undertook numerous humanitarian efforts, including aiding refugees, advocating for peace in the Middle East, and engaging in dialogue with leaders from various factions. Despite facing challenges, criticism, and imprisonment for his beliefs, he remained dedicated to his cause. Abie continued his advocacy work even in his later years, when he was troubled by health issues. His legacy as a social influencer, humanitarian, and peace advocate continues to inspire many to this day (Rosler, 1998).

### **Peace Now**

Peace Now is a significant social movement in Israel and a key part of the Israeli peace camp. It emerged in the late 1970s in response to the political climate of the times, marked by territorial disputes and the establishment of settlements in the territories. During a challenging period in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Peace Now became a prominent voice for peace in Israel. Through grassroots activism, demonstrations, and advocacy efforts, the movement garnered widespread support and pushed for negotiations with neighboring countries.

Peace Now's approach was distinct from that of traditional protest movements, as it positioned itself as a facilitator of the peace process within the existing political system. By engaging with institutions and advocating for peaceful coexistence, the

movement sought to uphold the values of the Israeli state while working towards resolving conflicts.

The movement's efforts culminated in the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993. Through sustained activism, Peace Now played a crucial role in influencing government policies and decisions, ultimately contributing to the advancement of peace initiatives in Israel (Bar-On, 1985; Hermann, 2010).

## **Political Messianism**

Next we examine Gush Emunim, a political-messianist group. The distinction between Gush Emunim and Peace Now is worth highlighting. Although both fall into the sociological category of counter-movements, they differ in their approaches and ideologies. Peace Now aligns with dissenting viewpoints and focuses on civil protests addressing socioeconomic disparities and ethnic inequalities, whereas Gush Emunim adheres closely to traditional Zionist ideals, emphasizing territorial expansion, cultivation, and defense as integral to its beliefs. Gush Emunim's association with political messianism, with its emphasis on religious fervor and commitment to settling biblical lands, sets it apart.

Political messianism within Gush Emunim is linked to a visionary mindset that traces back to Israel's first prime minister, Ben-Gurion. This ideology envisions the State of Israel as the focal point of a Jewish revival, characterized by principles of peace, social equity, and moral advancement. The notion of secularized messianic ideas played a pivotal role in shaping Zionist leaders' perceptions of national revival and collective aspirations. The founding of Gush Emunim, led primarily by followers of Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook, centered on the physical redemption of the Land of Israel. Their commitment to settling the West Bank and Gaza Strip was driven by a fervent religious conviction that emphasized biblical directives and Jewish sovereignty over historical territories. The movement's transformation post-1967, under Rabbi Zvi Yehuda's influence, marked a shift towards an insular ideology focused on sanctifying the Land of Israel based on biblical principles (Weissbrod, 1982; Hoch, 1994).

The establishment and expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip were vital components of Gush Emunim's mission, demonstrating a

dedication to ensuring an Israeli presence in these areas. Despite challenges such as harsh living conditions and security concerns, Gush Emunim settlers remained steadfast, viewing their efforts as the fulfillment of Jewish destiny and redemption.

Gush Emunim's organizational structure, educational initiatives, and political activism played integral roles in advancing its goals. Through a dual approach of non-parliamentary protests and integration into governmental structures, the movement wielded considerable influence over political decisions, surpassing its numerical size. The commitment to maintaining settlements and asserting Jewish rights in the West Bank and Gaza Strip defined Gush Emunim's steadfast advocacy over the years.

Hanan Porat, a key figure in Gush Emunim, exemplified the dedication to Zionist principles and the Land of Israel. His instrumental role in establishing settlements and bridging societal divides reflected a deep commitment to brotherhood and enduring friendships. Hanan's political journey, marked by challenges and unwavering values, underscores the complexity and passion of those involved in Gush Emunim's mission.

The legacy of Gush Emunim as a pioneering force in Israeli society, championing religious Zionism and territorial commitment, continues to resonate through its influence on settlement activity and political discourse within Israel (Huberman, 2013).

## Defenders

There have been numerous instances of avant-garde individuals and groups serving as remarkable embodiments of personal commitment to the covenant through acts of self-sacrifice. Here we showcase those who embody three common themes in avant-garde conduct: the self-propelled task force; the jump on the grenade; and Hannah and her seven sons.

### **The self-propelled task force**

On October 6, 1973, 21-year-old Lieutenant Zvika Greengold was at home when he witnessed signs of conflict in the distance, signaling the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War. Rushing to the Golan Heights, he commandeered two repaired tanks, forming a unit that became known as Zvika Force. Despite facing overwhelming Syrian

forces, Greengold demonstrated exemplary leadership, destroying enemy vehicles and holding his ground. Misleading the Syrians and coordinating with fellow tank crews, he played a crucial role in repelling the Syrian advance. Greengold's valor, determination, and strategic maneuvers earned him the Medal of Valor for his heroic actions during the conflict (Book, 2017; Lappin, 2015).

During the 2006 Lebanon War, Captain Benaya Rhein formed the "Benaya Force," a tank unit that operated independently, carrying out critical missions to support frontline troops. Comprising a diverse team, the unit engaged in rescue operations, delivery of supplies, and aid to wounded soldiers. Benaya's selfless dedication to service and his commitment to helping others, both in the military and through charitable endeavors, demonstrated his character and values. Tragically, Benaya Rhein lost his life in the line of duty, leaving behind a legacy of bravery and compassion (Lax, 2007).

These stories underscore the courage, sacrifice, and leadership exemplified by individuals who selflessly served their country and fellow soldiers in times of crisis. Their unwavering dedication to duty and their willingness to put themselves in harm's way for the greater good epitomize the spirit of heroism and commitment within the Israeli military.

### **The jump on the grenade**

Throwing oneself onto a live grenade to shield others is a universally recognized act of courage and sacrifice in times of war. This selfless deed, often observed in various armed forces, including the IDF, has been honored in history. Examples in Israel include Nathan Elbaz and Roi Klein. Nathan Elbaz, a Moroccan-born soldier in the IDF, sacrificed himself in 1954 to protect his comrades by embracing a live grenade, earning posthumous recognition. Roi Klein's selfless act during the 2006 Lebanon War, when he jumped on a grenade to save his unit, exemplified his dedication to service and his values.

Roi Klein's life story reflects his deep commitment to Israel and its values. From his involvement in education and military service to his leadership roles and personal sacrifices, Klein's journey shows dedication and heroism. His decisive act

of self-sacrifice during the Battle of Bint Jbeil epitomizes his profound loyalty and selflessness. Although he posthumously received the Medal of Courage, Klein's legacy goes beyond a single act of valor. His former soldiers' heartfelt accounts emphasize his consistent heroism, leadership, kindness, and humility in various aspects of his life, making Roi Klein a true model of dedication to his country and the values he held dear (Elyashiv, 2008).

### **Hannah and her seven sons**

The account of Hannah and her seven sons first appeared in the Second Book of Maccabees, which details their resistance against the persecution of the Jews under King Antiochus IV Epiphanes and the subsequent Jewish revolt. The story, found in Chapter 7, emphasizes national rebellion and has become ingrained in Zionist tradition. This story is part of the Israeli educational curriculum, from early childhood through high school, as part of the Hanukkah observances.

Similarly, the narrative of Rivka Grabowski exemplifies the courage of Jewish women and their sons through history. Her sacrifice and resilience during times of conflict demonstrate a spirit of determination and patriotism. Rivka's endurance, despite loss and captivity, epitomizes a mother's strength in adversity. Her grandson Karmi later continued the family's legacy through his service and ultimate sacrifice (Tessler, 2021).

Miriam Peretz, an educator and inspirational figure, has profoundly impacted numerous lives through her dedication to preserving her sons' legacies of service and sacrifice. The stories of her sons, Uriel and Eliraz, highlight their commitment to their country and comrades. Miriam's persistent efforts with educational initiatives reflect a mother's love and unwavering support for her children's memory and values.

The narratives of these individuals echo the prevailing theme of sacrifice, leadership, and duty passed down through the generations, exemplifying a deep-rooted commitment to heritage and national identity. Such tales inspire reflection on the enduring legacy of individuals who demonstrate courage, resilience, and selflessness in the face of adversity.

## The October 2023 Avant-Garde

On October 7, 2023, a diverse array of individuals in Israeli society, spanning various ages and backgrounds, collectively embraced the Israeli covenant. Despite differing political views, men and women from different communities and social strata undertook individual paths and, at times, came together in unity to uphold their roles as avant-garde representatives, highlighting their unwavering loyalty and dedication. We will delve into specific avant-garde individuals and groups, focusing on whistleblowers, dissidents, political messianists, and defenders. The defenders, in turn, exemplify three key themes: the self-propelled task force, the jump on the grenade, and the narrative of Hannah and her seven sons.

### Whistleblowers

In October 2023, a diverse group in Israeli society rallied round the Israeli covenant, demonstrating unity despite conflicting political views. Among these individuals were whistleblowers like Vered, a warrant officer in an IDF counterintelligence unit. Vered had warned her superiors of an imminent Hamas attack, describing Nukhba's preparations in meticulous detail. Despite her persistent alerts and humor-laced emails, her urgent message was not taken seriously by higher-ups. Notably, Vered's position and noncommissioned rank posed challenges, yet she persevered.

Additionally, female border surveillance soldiers, known as "observers," diligently monitored Hamas activities along the borders. Despite their having seen worrisome training exercises and alerting commanders, their warnings were dismissed or deemed unwarranted. Facing skepticism and even threats when they persisted with their reports, these determined young soldiers maintained their vigilance until the day of the attack, when tragically, almost all lost their lives in the Hamas assault.

### Dissidents

In 2023, Brothers in Arms, a group of reserve soldiers from diverse IDF units, emerged as dissidents opposing the government's judicial reform. The group's origins among IDF special forces veterans highlight their deviation from military-political

norms, underlining their dissident status. Furthermore, the unconventional and extreme actions of Brothers in Arms, such as disruptive demonstrations and protests, solidified their dissident identity.

Their actions fell within the dissident realm, challenging established systems to prompt democratic engagement. Despite facing marginalization and backlash, they persisted based on principles of justice and societal transformation. Emerging during a period of crisis, Brothers in Arms exemplified civic integrity through their pursuit of truth and societal change. The group's coordinated efforts – notably ceasing to volunteer for reserve duty as a means of opposing the judicial reform legislation – demonstrated their disruptive approach within Israeli society.

Brothers in Arms' transition from protesters to humanitarian aid providers during the Hamas conflict demonstrated their adaptive response to a national crisis. Their large-scale relief efforts, including evacuation, provision of medical aid, and support for affected families, epitomized their avant-garde commitment to the Israeli covenant amid perilous circumstances. Their transformation from dissidents to vital contributors in their nation's time of need marked a profound shift in their role within Israeli society (Rubin, 2023; Meyer, 2023).

## **Political Messianism**

Political messianism in Israel seeks to inspire societal progress by blending Zionism and messianism. One key aspect is the transformation of religious Zionism by Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook after the Six-Day War in 1967 to emphasize Jewish control over all parts of the Land of Israel, linking the modern state to ancient prophesies.

The introduction of religious pre-military academies known as *mechinot* has helped national-religious youth prepare for military service without compromising their religious identity. These institutions, such as Bnei David, have been successful in integrating their students into the IDF and Israeli society. Graduates often take up combat roles, with many serving as officers and making significant contributions in various fields. Bnei David stands out for its mission to cultivate visionary leaders committed to Israel's well-being. During times of conflict, alumni and leaders swiftly respond to the call for emergency service, demonstrating their deep sense

of duty and love for their country. The mechina community expresses solidarity through volunteer initiatives and support for families connected to the institution (Rosman-Stollman, 2014; Cohen, 2013).

The words and actions of the Bnei David community reflect a unique dedication to Israel and Jewish values, highlighting the significance of their covenant in both life and death. On October 7, 2023, leaders and alumni of Bnei David swiftly made their way to the conflict zone, with some arriving well before the official call for emergency reserve service. The toll that mechinot, as pioneering groups, paid during this time was substantial: 87 individuals killed within the first six months of the war, 20 percent of them graduates of Bnei David. However, what deserves emphasis is not just the sheer number of Bnei David's fallen soldiers, which far exceeds their representation in the overall population, or the fact that many of them served in prominent combat units both in the regular army and the reserves. What truly stands out, as repeatedly highlighted during the funerals by mechina instructors, classmates, and close relatives of the fallen soldiers, is a recurring pattern: individuals had dedicated their lives to various public causes such as healthcare, social welfare, and education, and just before abruptly leaving all of that behind, they seized the opportunity to express their deep-seated desire to serve their country out of love and duty.

When the war broke out, the entire mechina community, comprising students and their families, was immediately mobilized, engaging in diverse volunteer initiatives within Israeli civil society. They also provided support to the hundreds of families of Bnei David alumni in Eli and thousands more across the country. Without a doubt, what we see here are the distinctive actions of an avant-garde group that has undertaken the task of imbuing the covenant with significance, both in life and in death.

## Defenders

In examining acts of selflessness, we highlight three common themes in the conduct of avant-garde individuals and groups: the self-propelled task force, self-sacrifice for others (e.g., jumping on a grenade), and Hannah and her seven sons.

### **The self-propelled task force**

In October 2023, Elchanan Kalmanson, along with his brother Menachem and nephew Itiel, responded to a security crisis in Kibbutz Be'eri near the Gaza border. Despite the chaos and danger, they formed a team and rescued over 100 individuals from the besieged kibbutz, facing hostile terrorists to do so. Employing various tactics to increase the kibbutz residents' chances of survival, the "Elchanan Team" exemplified courage and compassion in the face of adversity.

During their heroic mission, tragedy struck as Elchanan lost his life while attempting to save others, leaving behind a legacy of selflessness and commitment to defending the nation. In a speech at the Knesset to honor his memory, his widow Shlomit highlighted his love for his people and his willingness to make the ultimate sacrifice. Elchanan's family faced further losses in subsequent combat, yet his spirit lived on as his cousin welcomed a son named after him in February 2024 (Margulies, 2024).

### **The jump on the grenade**

During the events of 2023, several instances of selfless sacrifice and bravery were witnessed. One such incident involved Matan Avgil, a young private who shielded a medic from a grenade blast, sacrificing himself in the process. Another remarkable story unfolded with Aner Shapira, who courageously defended a group of festival attendees from Hamas terrorists, ultimately losing his life while protecting them.

Lastly, Rami and Oz Davidian, from neighboring farming communities, displayed exceptional courage and selflessness during the October 2023 events. They risked their lives to rescue festivalgoers from terrorists, demonstrating loyalty to the covenant by protecting others in the face of danger (Raymond, 2023).

These individuals exemplified the avant-garde pattern of behavior, showing unwavering dedication to safeguarding lives and engaging in extraordinary acts of heroism in a crisis.

### **Hannah and her seven sons**

Some of the stories of extraordinary courage and sacrifice on October 7, 2023, echo the tale of Hannah and her seven sons. There were numerous parallel examples of inspiration, only a few of which are highlighted here.

Major Ariel Ben-Moshe, a standout commander, led his team bravely against Hamas terrorists in Re'im, making the ultimate sacrifice to save a child. His younger brother Shavit, also an IDF paratrooper, continued his duties despite the loss of his elder brother. Galit Waldman, the mother of these two outstanding officers, epitomized strength and dedication, urging her surviving sons to continue their military service, even after the loss of Ariel. She established an organization in his memory to provide opportunities to underprivileged youth aspiring to serve in elite military units (Rath, 2024).

The Mothers of IDF Soldiers organization, comprising supportive mothers dedicated to striving for victory and the safety of IDF soldiers, advocates for Israeli unity and the eradication of Hamas. Ruchama Hershkovitz appealed for national unity after the loss of her son Yossi, echoing Yossi's desire to unite the country. These accounts exemplify the diverse roles and responses of mothers and families amidst conflict, as they demonstrated resilience, determination, and a steadfast commitment to the nation's security and unity.

## **Conclusion**

The 2023 ethos clash in Israeli society, characterized by violent protests and public conflict over the proposed judicial reform, turned at once from civil unrest to total social mobilization. Our analysis found that on the morning of October 7, 2023, avant-garde individuals from various segments of Israeli society embraced the Israeli covenant. Men and women, along with diverse groups representing different communities, socioeconomic backgrounds, and often conflicting political ideologies, came together to transform society into a unified entity committed to overcoming the immediate challenges. They did so by upholding the covenant and exemplifying

the distinct characteristics of avant-garde behavior previously outlined – as whistleblowers, dissidents, political messianists, and defenders. Whether they survived or not, their actions left behind a legacy: the enduring strength of a national Zionist covenant.

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