

Preface by the Authors of the Covenant to the Essay “Main Points and Principles”

During January 2003, around the time of the Knesset elections, the preliminary edition of our essay, “Foundation for a New Covenant among Jews in Matters of Religion and State in Israel” was published.* To a large extent, the elections were conducted not only in the shadow of the violent conflict with the Palestinians and its impact on the internal political struggle within the State of Israel, but also in the throes of the internal political battle over the country’s profile. This battle is being waged even among those who agree – including the covenant’s framers and the majority of the nation’s population – that Israel is and should remain the state of the Jewish people. This battle has yet to be decided. The dispute, at least as presented in the media, has become increasingly divisive, evoking such hatred and suspicion among various social sectors as to jeopardize the possibility of collaboration. The covenant was written to broach these problems from a different angle, emphasizing our commonalities. It therefore aims to create a common ground, through **a common framework which, while unifying, leaves room for disagreement on a number of issues**; such a framework has the potential to be beneficial to all parties.

After three years of drafts and revisions, the covenant is now ready for what will be the longer leg of its journey—the trip through the public and the political system. This journey began with the blessing of the President of Israel, Moshe Katsav, and other leading figures. At the time this document went to press, the covenant was slowly circulating the tortuous corridors of Israel’s political institutions, and its main task still lies ahead: the creation of a public and educational climate, underlying which is the notion that our commonalities must prevail over our

* The preliminary version was entitled: “A Foundation for a New Social Covenant between Religiously Observant and Secular Jews in Israel”.

differences. Recognition of this fact will enable the creation of an operative framework for devising solutions, and discourage a particular side from forcing defeat upon the other. It is our intention in publishing this volume to present the spirit of the covenant and its practical proposals to a broad cross-section of the population. Once the document has been widely circulated, we will examine how the proposals fared under scrutiny, and then draft the final version.

The covenant itself, with all its preambles and clarifications, is too long and complex for the amount of time the average person will have to devote to it. We have therefore encouraged the publication of the following essay, **Main Points and Principles**, written by our colleague Yoav Artsieli, under our guidance and direction. In keeping with our request, the essay is written in the first person and preserves the spirit of the original. The aim of this (relatively!) brief essay was not brevity *per se*, but a wish to present all of our proposals in every sphere together with the **main points** of their explanations. Also articulated here are the **principles** on which the covenant is based. The main points and principles are introduced in this essay after two particularly short prefaces. The first is “**The Spirit of the Covenant and a Summary of its Proposals**” (this is the only chapter that we wrote ourselves, aside from this introduction), and the second is “**The Background to the Writing of the Covenant**”. We recommend that readers who cannot read the entire essay confine themselves to these short sections.

What, then, are the main points and principles?

The **main points** of this essay are the central ideas that we sought to introduce in the covenant, and through them to arrive at a proposal for agreed arrangements in various areas.

The legal-civic and theoretical-universal examination of the proposed provisions was conducted primarily by Prof. Gavison, while Rabbi Medan focused chiefly on the theological-halakhic inquiry. In seeking to retain the spirit of each of our explanations, the author of the present text at times deliberately repeats similar statements with the differing and unique emphases brought by each of us.

The main points also contain references to the chief aspects of each proposal. We advise readers to begin each chapter by reading the main points, which include a clear rendering of the highlights and innovations of the proposal, with references to the specific sections. We suggest reading the proposal itself only afterward (proposals are presented in a distinct graphic format at the beginning of each chapter and appear in the original).

The **principles** were distilled in a concise and judicious fashion by the author from the long personal forewords we wrote in the original covenant. They relate the ideological dilemmas experienced by each of us in our joint endeavor and our respective reasons for embarking on this endeavor despite the difficulties. The principles demonstrate that it is possible to arrive at a single joint proposal without contradicting the tenets of our divergent beliefs: the Torah and Jewish law on the one hand, and the centrality of the principles of equality and human dignity and liberty on the other.

In the full version of the covenant our personal forewords preceded the proposals and their explanations. In this rendering we assume a reverse approach, beginning with the agreed, practical proposals, each preceded by elucidations (“Main Points”), and only subsequently presenting the personal credos that guided each of us in this endeavor (“Principles”).

As mentioned, this essay – in contradistinction to the covenant as a whole – was written not by us, but under our guidance. With all due modesty, we believe that reading the covenant itself – despite the effort required – enables one to explore the roots of the problems and clarify them more thoroughly than can be achieved through a study of the Main Points and Principles alone. We accept, however, that there is a need for this essay as well, as it provides an important prelude to any study of the complete document. We thought it appropriate that a single author, who understands both of our styles and knows the covenant well, should present this issue in his own style, which is lighter and more popular and flowing than our own. We therefore welcome this essay and believe that it can provide the basis for a public discourse regarding the covenant, its main points and its principles, a discourse in whose absence we will have failed to accomplish very much. For, not all wisdom resides within us, nor is it our responsibility to complete the task. Of this we are certain: the common ground is extensive, while that which divides us can be settled in a manner that is agreeable to both sides, even if it differs somewhat from that proposed in the covenant. And this agreement is of critical importance to us all.

We would like again to thank Israel Harel for conceiving this project and bringing it into being. Without him none of this would have been possible.

Yonina Hoffman, Meir ben Shazar and Yoav Artsieli assisted us greatly in the course of our work.

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And a final thanks to the Israel Democracy Institute and the AVI CHAI Foundation, which undertook the publication of the full covenant, of this essay **Main Points and Principles**, including its translation into English and Russian, and the vitally important mission of introducing the covenant to the public.

Ruth Gavison and Yaacov Medan
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