# PLACE AS A SOURCE OF IDENTITY
# IN COLONIZING SOCIETIES:
# ISRAELI SETTLEMENTS IN GAZA

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ABSTRACT. The tendency to reduce the role of places in the formation of sociospatial identities and to emphasize the impact of sociopolitical structures on place making is growing. We argue that, under certain conditions, places may become salient sources of identity formation. In addition, we suggest viewing different types of places on a continuum from mythical "big places," to everyday-life places, to parochial "little places." We further suggest a distinction between mythical and everyday-life senses of place. Following Zali Gurevitz, who describes the characteristics of West Bank Jewish settlers' mythical sense of place, we demonstrate how Gaza settlers only partially internalized their conception of place, adopting an everyday-life conception of thereof. Yet place became a main source of identity for Gaza settlers, who viewed their experience in the settlements as an empowering process that helped them escape their marginality and join the national elite. Keywords: everyday-life place, mythical place, senses of place, West Bank and Gaza settlers.

$T$he threat of evacuation posed by the Israeli government on Gaza settlers in 2005 and, later, the actual evacuation and the settlers' resistance to it give us a unique opportunity to highlight the relevance of place to identity. In this article we show that the settlers' mobility—relocating from the southern periphery of Israel to Gaza—had a tremendous impact on the empowerment of their self-images and identities. We contend that, unlike the "mythical sense of place" developed by the core of the settlers in Judea and Samaria (the West Bank), in Gaza an "everyday-life sense of place" was more significant to settlers than was the mythical one. We also highlight the main dimensions of the settlers' sense of place and their significance in re-forming their identities.

## FINDING ATTACHMENT AND EMPOWERMENT

We adopt a constructivist approach in unraveling settlers' attachments to place and the ways in which place empowered their identities. Our sources were statements of settlers published in brochures, on the Internet, and in local newspapers, as well as local rabbis' brochures distributed in synagogues between July 2004 and February 2005. In addition, we conducted thirty open, in-depth interviews with settlers during 2005, maintaining representational balance among religious, conservative, and secular settlers.[1] We contacted eighteen women, who were more readily available as respondents than were men, and twelve men. Nine settlers (30 percent) were of Ashkenazi origin (European, American, or Oceanic) and the rest were of Mizrachi origin (Asian or African, mainly from Arab and Moslem countries), giving slight overrepresentation to Mizrachi Jews, estimated to be about 60 percent of the Gaza

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population. The interviews began a year before evacuation and continued for nine months; we ended them three months prior to the evacuation, when interviewees stopped speaking about their personal feelings and experiences and preferred to talk politics.

Interviews were very open, allowing the settlers to develop their feelings about the threat of evacuation. Gradually we added questions about their process of rooting themselves in the place, stimulating them to recall memories. At a certain point, we asked the settlers to imagine themselves five years after the evacuation nostalgically dreaming about life in their settlement. What would they miss most? How would they remember the settlement?

We interpreted the information in three stages of extraction of categories from the texts produced. First, a search for any statements in the literature related to the settlers' sense of place and the power of place to affect identities led to the encoding of a list of references. Second, dimensions of sense of place and identity formation were extracted based on the interviews. At this stage we tried, as much as possible, to set aside our preconceptions of place formed by our experiences and academic knowledge. Third, the field models of sense of place and of place as a source of empowerment were articulated in written form using the minimal number and most effective quotations in order to demonstrate our case. In addition, we embedded our results in theoretical knowledge. In the text that follows we present a minimal number of translated quotations in order to buttress our argument. Despite our leftist political orientation regarding Gaza settlement, many settlers appreciated our empathy with their crisis.

## THE CONCEPT OF PLACE

John Agnew defined "place" in terms of location, locale and sense of meaning, care, and identity (1987). Until the 1990s, the literature was based on the existentialist theory that emphasized the role of places as closed entities in constituting authentic identities (Relph 1976; Buttimer 1980; Pred 1986). According to this concept, each place is dominated by one community of residents, which tends to believe in one set of meanings about the place, evoking in its members one cohesive identity. This identity crystallizes from the close and habitual associations among insider community members, their memories of their common past, and their aspirations for their future.

These conceptualizations have been subjected to increasing criticism since the 1990s due to the impact of globalization on places as locally bounded units of space. Scholars differ in their understanding of the significance of place under globalization, but they agree that their role in forming social identities is significantly undermined (Bauman 1995; Harvey 1996; Escobar 2001; Castree 2004; Smith 2004; Marston, Jones, and Woodward 2005). Studies tend to assign major power to global forces and only marginal power to local places. Some scholars even further undermine the significance of place in a globalized world: Doreen Massey emphasizes the role of open networks that may spread globally in determining human social networks,

worldviews, and identities; accordingly, she suggests redefining place as "an intersection of networks in a boundless space" (1995, 2002). Tim Cresswell concludes that, in the current reality, places have lost much of their power to shape social identities (2004).

In this article we put forward two arguments. First, even today, under certain conditions, places may play a key role in shaping social identities, as was demonstrated in the Gaza settlements, which were established during the second half of the twentieth century. Second, distinguishing "mythical" or "big" places from "everyday-life" places may enrich our understanding of the significance of sense of place. Jane Jacobs, who briefly introduces the concept of big places in the context of skyscrapers, restricts the concept to places produced by utopian visions, national monumental projects, and the like that have gained significant sociopolitical recognition (2006). In contrast, Philip Crang's description of his parochial sense of place that is made up of the paving stones down the street, the peeling paint on the Vietnamese take-out restaurant across the road, and so forth can be defined as "little places" (2002). In line with this emerging argument, we suggest thinking of mythical big places and parochial little places as the extremes of a continuum with everyday-life places in between.

Sociopolitical authorities mystify places. Whereas capitalist corporations institutionalize skyscrapers (Domosh 1988), state elites exalt national monuments (Zukin 1995; Mitchell 2000; Harvey 2000; Redfield 2006), and religious places have become sacred by bestowing the name "place" (*makom* in Hebrew, *makam* in Arabic), which relates semantically to the "place of God." By mystifying places we mean that places are invested with socially unifying interpretative schemes in order to define an ultimate intersubjective claim of truth, rooted in a glorious past and articulated in transcendent language (Cassirer 1953; Lévi-Strauss 1966; May 1991; Gadamer 1996). Mystification of places is likely to be initiated by sociopolitical groups in search of hegemony; marginal groups tend to adopt not a systematic consciousness comprising incompatible values and ideas rooted in hegemony-seeking social groups but ideas that spring from more their direct, everyday-life experiences (Gramsci 1971).

Robert Redfield and James Scott deepened our understanding of the "bigness" of places and the relationships between them and everyday-life places by portraying the role of "big" and "little" traditions in managing national discourses (Redfield 1960; Scott 1977). In their view, big traditions represent discourses of those who strive for hegemony. Relationships between elites and the rest of society are characterized by the difficulties the elite encounter in imposing their hegemony. As a consequence, interrelations between elites and other groups may be characterized on one hand by shared interests and on the other by tensions and even revolt against the elite. These relationships also characterize discourses about the ways in which sense of place is constituted.

In consolidating place meanings as cores of identity formation, elites tend to anchor places in solid time-space frameworks. Elites show a tendency to invest in building material, monumental constructions that objectify the invested meanings

and magnify the mythical status of these places. By the same token, mythical places are presented as being "bigger" than human everyday life, and their identity is embedded in successions of generations. This commitment helps elites to delegitimize any change in hegemony-seeking meanings in the name of generations of people in the past and in the future, thus securing their interests. Mythical places therefore become sources for recruiting human everyday lives for the elites' ends. Last, mythical places gain the power to radiate meanings and centers of power to wider expanses and larger communities of believers. In addition, we need to remember that places may be hierarchically defined with, for example, local settlements representing hologramic pictures of larger regional or national territories.

Little places remain intimate and personal, relevant to individuals and small groups; only partially, if at all, do they attain any publicized status, not to mention a mythical one. They relate to fragmented spheres of human daily lives that act as sources of care and attachment. They give meaning and a sense of warmth that adds to their sense of quality of life and attachment to certain places. Accordingly, they maintain their livelihood for a limited time span, effect identities, but do not dominate human life as a whole.

In between are everyday-life places that play an essential existential role in the daily lives of individuals and groups and in incubating identities but lack any mystification that is bigger than their daily lives. It is argued that modernization and globalization lead to the fragmentation of comprehensive, locally based senses of place constituted within relatively close boundaries around home. Instead, places change into a multitude of settings relevant to individuals as incubators of one identity in complex repertoires of identities that people practice in the different places they move through while practicing their daily lives (Schnell 2002; Amara and Schnell 2004). Cresswell concludes that contemporary places should be defined as "socially structured units of space" (2004). We argue that the settlers in Gaza did not fully internalize the hegemony-seeking elite concept of a mythical sense of place based in the West Bank; instead, they adopted a quotidian sense of place. However, being stimulated by what they perceive as a pioneering experience, their settlements evoked in them a strong sense of place, in this way becoming essential sources of identity.

The importance of a sense of place to the settlers is confirmed in several studies in which it was found that the settlers attached themselves strongly to their place (Dasberg and Shefler 1987; Marten 1999; Passic 2003; Kliot and Albeck 1996). Other research shows that people, including the second generation, tended to attach themselves to the settlement, despite the high risk to which they were exposed (Billig 2006a, 2006b), and, when they were forced to leave, they suffered from disorder and alienation (Billig, Kohn, and Levav 2006).

## THE COLONIZATION OF GAZA

The government of Israel, stimulated by the pioneering spirit of groups of settlers and by security considerations, drove the settlement of the Gaza strip (Newman 1985; Kemp 1991). As early as 1970 a plan for establishing settlements in Gaza was
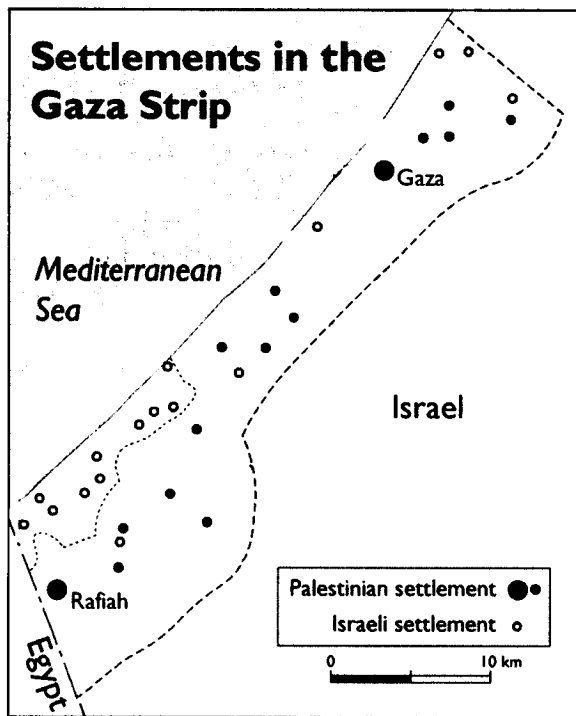
**Settlements in the Gaza Strip**

FIG. 1—Israeli and Palestinian settlements in the Gaza Strip, 2005. (Cartography by Orna Zafrir, Geography Department, Tel Aviv University)

approved, in response to increasing Palestinian military resistance. The plan suggested partitioning Gaza into five isolated Palestinian urban fields, hoping to inhibit the free movement of Palestinian militants in their hinterland. Due to shortages of water and land, however, Israeli Labor governments remained hesitant about implementing the plan.

Colonization began when it was thought that settlements would send a political message to the Palestinian public that the Israeli presence was permanent and that, as a consequence, Palestinians would be convinced to give up their militant activities and cooperate with the Israeli administration (Admoni 1992). This plan was followed by vague ideas that never led to any concrete plan to resettle the Palestinian refugees in neighboring countries. By 1977 the government had founded only five semimilitary settlements and one nonmilitary settlement. In that year a Likud-led government came to power. Backed by expansionist ideology and confronted by growing guerrilla actions, the government adopted a more aggressive settlement policy. The foundation of the regional municipality, led by settlers' associations, created local interest in the growth of the settlements. Above all, the revival among national religious groups of the program to settle in the Occupied Territories led young people, mainly from the moderate Mizrachi movement, from villages and towns in southern Israel to accept the challenge of settling in the territories, which they perceived as "new frontiers." By 1992, fourteen settlements had been established in the Gaza Strip, and their population was increasing at a tremendous rate.

After the two waves of uprisings that began in the late 1980s, the government founded two more settlements, but population growth slowed. On the eve of the withdrawal from Gaza, in 2005, about 8,000 Jews with an average household of 5.4 persons lived in sixteen settlements in the Gaza Strip (Figure 1). Most of the settlements were located in the southern part of the strip, where larger units of land, formerly used by the Egyptian army, remained sparsely populated by Palestinians.

The colonization was backed by large expenditures by the Israeli government, high subsidies to the settlers, and payments to Palestinian laborers that were below the minimum wages allowed by Israeli law. At the same time, the doubling of the Palestinian population every fifteen years led to growing competition for water and land. More than 1.5 million Palestinians whom the settlers had estranged and dehumanized surrounded the Israeli settlements.

A large majority of the settlers were Jews who had immigrated to Israel from Arab countries and were channeled during the 1950s and 1960s to the poorest villages and "development towns" in southern Israel (70 percent of our interviewees). Finding themselves caught in a vicious circle of economic, political, cultural, and social marginalization, the call to join the pioneering conquest of the "new colonies" gave them a way to escape their marginality. In Gaza, about half of the families became associated with high-tech farming of organic vegetables and related activities, directly connected to European markets.

The leading group behind the settlement project was the Gush Emunim movement, led by Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook of the Jerusalem yeshiva Merkaz HaRav. Believing that Zionism represents a messianic process in which the nation, the Bible, and the land are a single, organic whole and that the traditional leadership had lost its drive to lead that process, he established Gush Emunim as a romantic, messianic movement. The movement's ideology is based on three complementary principles: first and most urgent, settling the biblical land that had been wrested from Jewish control; second and third, strict obedience to the ten commandments and seclusion from the secular community that had given up the messianic process for an easy and corrupted lifestyle. Zali Gurevitz analyzes the tension between the mythical and everyday-life senses of place that are rooted in Judaism (2007). He concludes that, for Rabbi Kook, the state of Israel represented an everyday-life place and the newly occupied territory represented a mythical sense of place yet to be conquered. A comprehensive description of Gurevitz's argument and the Gush Emunim settlers' sense of place are beyond the scope of this article; we limit ourselves to summarizing the argument in terms of mythical senses of place and illustrating it with several short quotations by settlers:

> We return home to the bloody and glorious fields, to the fabulous mountain. Its believers become lions. Etzion, Etzion, our mountain of light and sacredness. Your memory lives in our hearts, you will never fall again. (Porath 1989)

> [Our goal is] to return people to the Soil, Nature and the Bible[,] . . . to redeem themselves, the land and the nation by returning to nature, getting close to land and heaven. (Porath 1989)

> It is clear that a soldier who is given an order that negates biblical commands is obligated to disobey it. (Goren 1993)

The Gush Emunim settlers adopted a rhetoric that presented themselves as messengers of a greater divine cause. They asked themselves how they could serve that cause instead of how they could obtain wealth and comfort in their everyday lives in

the settlements. They viewed the newly occupied territories as the virgin mythical holy land that had not yet been corrupted by secularized everyday life and should be actualized according to the messianic principles of *Eretz Israel* (the Kingdom of Israel) (Gurevitz 2007).

For the Gush Emunim settlers in the West Bank, the place was the newly occupied territories in the Holy Land. Any place within it was a stronghold in the defense of the place as a whole. Archetypical settlers founded dozens of new settlements, wandering from one to another, as did some of their children, who continued to settle abandoned hills. Once they matured they settled down in one of the settlements, where they continued to fight for the settlement of every inch of biblical territory, avoiding any withdrawal from the lands. They also campaigned for Israel to annex the Occupied Territories (Shprintzak 1995). They expressed their sense of mythical place and their claim of hegemony during their campaign against withdrawal. Their rabbis preached the need to delegitimize the government's authority to decide whether to dismantle settlements; instead, they presented themselves as the only legitimate representatives of the heavenly commandments concerning territorial control of the Holy Lands. They also portrayed secular society as corrupt because it concentrated on momentary satisfactions and forgot about eternal commitments to the Jewish faith (Sheleg 2004). Although only 15 percent of the settlers we interviewed believed that their council and rabbis represented their beliefs, the members of Gush Emunim remained the most active force in the settlement process, with close ties to the political elite in Israel (Hopp and others 2003–2005).

Unlike mainstream national religious settlers in the West Bank, the Gaza settlers were attracted to the new opportunities created for them, and they developed a powerful inner attachment to their localities, avoiding any rhetoric that hinted at the mystification of the place. They did not view any other place inside Israel as more or less sacred and therefore not worthy of settlement. Theirs was not a mode of sacralizing colonization but an act that opened a route to breaking the vicious circle of their marginality and enhancing their upward mobility.

## ATTACHMENT TO PLACE

The Gaza settlers tend to describe their sense of place in personalized and localized terms. Their rhetoric emphasized more what the place has done to them than what they have done to the place. One religious Oriental woman in her thirties told us: "It will be extremely difficult to detach myself from this piece of land. I feel as if my government betrayed me and tore out part of my body. I gradually grew here into a new person. . . . I was given a new ideology here, a set of values as well as a supportive community. All of it is going to be lost." She believed in the heavenly cause but stressed how the place helped her reconstruct her identity to such a degree that she failed to find any sense of continuity between herself in the settlement and her future outside the settlement. She imagined the evacuation as dismemberment, thus expressing her bodily association with the place, an attachment that went beyond

reason or political interest. She did not resist the political move that betrayed the messianic process concerning the mythical place central to the Gush Emunim campaign for hegemony; instead, she complained about the implications of the evacuation for her personal life.

This strong attachment to the place is strengthen by its position in the heart of a Palestinian populace. A description of a visit to a Gaza settlement published in the settlers' newspaper reveals the visitors' spatial perception: "When you enter the settlement yard, after crossing the wild and dangerous Palestinian populated areas, you feel the relief of someone who reaches a safe haven. You feel the surplus of a superior sense of spirituality here, even before meeting the residents of the place" (Dolev 1994). The visitors pointed to the fragmentation of sociopolitical space as the settlers experienced it in their daily round of life. They described civilized home space in topophilic terms, while describing the savage wild and alien Palestinian space in topophobic terms. What made this place so special and rewarding was the risk from the outside, the sense of isolation and the communal reciprocal support systems that developed among the pioneers in order to compete with the external risks as they fulfilled their mission. They described Palestinians only as an estranged and faceless dehumanized crowd.

What are the components of the place as sensed by the settlers? What imbues the place with its unique qualities that have the power to attach the settlers to this locus despite all the risks? Reading the texts, it is possible to identify four main components: a community of settlers; particular landscapes; a set of common meanings and beliefs; and a unique risky set of everyday practices.

Most settlers in Gaza considered their community life the most attractive characteristic of the place. Our interviewees mentioned this frequently, either directly, by referring to the high quality of communal life developed in the place or, at times, indirectly, viewing the community as responsible for other qualities of the place. One secular settler, the father of four children, expressed what community meant to him: "The children grow up here in a safe environment. As strange as it may sound, this is true. What we do here counts more than the enemy's actions from outside," he adds when he sees our surprised expressions. "The children know that if we are not at home they will find a warm welcome at our neighbors' homes, something to eat and children to play with. I grew up in a city and I didn't have this luxury."

The settlements are frequently presented as safe-haven spaces for children. At the same time, they push the risks from outside to the back of their minds. One settler, in his fifties and the father of three children, described the value of the community for him thus: "Over and beyond the risk, we have here an excellent quality of life. That is what attracted 90 percent of the residents to the place. Ideology comes second." Clearly, he downplayed security problems. The immediate risk seemed to generate only a marginal sense of disturbance as they described their habitual life in the settlement. With respect to other contexts, such as evaluating the performance of the government in defending them from Palestinian attacks, they tended to exag-

gerate and replace their fear of Palestinian attacks with their fear of impending evacuation and their children's anxieties about such uprooting. Our fifty-year-old interviewee also distanced and dehumanized Palestinians, who existed only in the context of a threat posed by savage, evil, faceless enemies. Finally, the ideological aspect imported from the Gush Emunim elite was downgraded to second rank, ancillary to the heightened self-worth they felt due to the intimate communal relations they had developed.

The fences and protective barriers that encircled the settlements helped allow the settlers to perceive the home place as isolated from the insecurities of the external world. Even so, they negated the Palestinian spaces with the safe-haven home place in a sharper and more realistic contour, fed by the daily necessity to cross boundaries. As one settler told us, "The fence seems to separate the homeland from that of horror, fear and alienation." As the home place became a safe haven, community became the main support group that enabled individuals to cope with the threat. In a survey conducted in July 2003, at the peak of the Palestinian uprising, the national religious settlers in the Occupied Territories, including Gaza, showed the lowest levels of stress in the entire Israeli population, because of the communal support they had gained in the settlements (Hopp and others 2003–2005; Billig 2006a).

But the Palestinian threat to settlers' life strengthened the community in other ways. One conservative young mother explained to us: "Social life is founded on high moral standards, mainly for the children. This is a matter of survival for us. We have to be able to justify to ourselves and for our children the risk and the difficulties we take upon ourselves." Elsewhere, a woman stated, "People are strengthened by our religious belief in the settlement project. The hardships we are forced to confront in performing our mission emphasize and draw out in each of us the best aspects of our personalities. The community as a whole gives a sense of clear direction to my life." Another middle-aged religious woman noted, "Community members are aware of their neighbors and friends helping people, in moments of weakness, to deal with feelings of hesitation and fear. Communal ties enable us to be strengthened in our belief in our cause." A religious man in his forties who came from a development town in southern Israel presented the settlers' communal lifestyle as the negation of his former urban life on the national periphery: "Our lifestyle negates the egocentric atmosphere we experienced in our former towns within the Green Line. Here the others in the community are at the center of members' minds. This is the right place to raise children."

Another testimony presented the communal lifestyle in settlements as a negation of secular culture in Israel: "The world is falling apart. People are removed from their true identities, children from parents and husbands from wives. That's why so many people get drunk, smoke and become enslaved to momentary satisfactions. We're just the opposite. We are united and involved in and concerned about the lives of our fellows." A young, secular settler of Oriental origin summarized the place of community in his life: "The support you get from other people is the main advantage of the place. Here are the people with whom I want to grow and de-

velop." Personal growth was a major theme in the settlers' rhetoric, hinting at a key main argument advanced here concerning the power of place to feed and shape identity and the secondary importance the Gaza settlers devoted to the mythical meaning of the place.

Landscapes were also mentioned as a high priority for settlers' formation of a sense of place. Most settlers noted the sand dunes that face the sea as the most important characteristic that engendered a powerful sense of attachment to the place. One young settler, a former Kibbutz member, said: "I am mainly attached to the scenes from my home. My father used to mention in his visits that the place looks like a slum, but we are attached to it. We love to return every afternoon to our slum located in these beautiful scenes." As we analyzed the stories we gathered, it seemed as though half of them made it clear what the attractive landscapes represented. Consider the explanation of one settler, formerly from a new town in the south: "Charming sandy landscapes covered by date trees are all around our home, the air is clean, and the landscape supplies the best quality of life possible. There is no such place anywhere in Israel, and it is ours."

The statement "it is ours" encapsulates what the landscape meant to settlers. It is loaded with symbolism: They had conquered the land, and it gained legitimacy through comparison with the founding of Tel Aviv, which, according to myth, had grown out of sand dunes (Schnell 2000; LeVine 2005). The message was that the settlers had not evicted Palestinians from their lands but, like early Zionists, had conquered the wild frontier after civilization abandoned it. As one settler articulated the primeval meaning of the dune landscape, "It is a unique experience, the sea, the empty spaces, the clean air; everything looks so open, empty, and primary. It gives me a feeling of freedom." A pithy comment by another religious settler, "One cannot ignore the God in these marvelous landscapes," expressed, perhaps unconsciously, the broader import of the story. The landscapes of the dunes are associated, in Zionists' minds as well as in other pioneering societies, with abandonment and desolation, especially when the eye is trained to ignore the ocean of houses in the Palestinian refugee camps that fuse so well with the landscapes of dunes. One young settler, as he was proposing marriage to his girlfriend, demonstrated how selective the eye can be in visualizing the landscape while trying to convince her that they should strike roots in the settlement: "Avoid for a moment the refugee camp and look to see just how beautiful the view is all around. How is it possible to leave such a place?"

The symbolic meaning of the sand dunes was also associated with the primordial quality of these landscapes, as though they reflected the appearance of God in creation. This motive returned in many colonizers' experiences, engendering romantic attitudes toward nature, guiding the declaration of preservation for some of these natural landscapes and shaping a sense of freedom stemming from the experience of being close to God, unmediated by social institutions (Cronon 1996). One settler ended a comment on the sand-dunes landscape with: "Every day, when I return home, I pay attention to these landscapes. I feel a wave of warmth spreading

through my body. I cannot explain that feeling, but it demonstrates the power of the landscape in making me feel at home here."

The sand-dunes landscape also incorporated a third meaning for the settlers—as a symbol of class affiliation. A 360-square-meter private house on the sand dunes in front of the seashore symbolized the most prestigious places in Israel, including Caesarea, Hoffit, and Herzeliya Pituach, all of which are on the beach north of Tel Aviv where the wealthiest strata in Israel live.

In addition to community and landscape, religion plays a significant role in motivating the settlers to colonize the Gaza Strip and develop a sense of place. In an attempt to disseminate its ideology, Gush Emunim established a high school in Gaza that also serves as a community school. One settler in his forties, close to the community of the Gush Emunim School, stated: "I feel here close to our biblical father Abraham, who lived in the land of Gerar [now Gaza]. Every day, when I go through the Palestinian village of Garash, named after the biblical place, this knowledge stimulates me to respond to the Palestinian hostility by demonstrating the national meaning of my stay here and to show them that we are here forever because this land belongs to us."

Despite their strengthened belief in the salience of the biblical command to settle the land, even the rabbis of the Gaza settlers did not use the messianic rhetoric of Gush Emunim settlers in the public campaign against evacuation of the settlements. Instead, they opposed the evacuation plan by rational, more secular arguments. Rabbi Igal Kamintzki, one of the key rabbis in the Gaza Strip, is quoted in the settlers' Web mail that

> the settlements in Gaza are a holistic manifestation of Jewish life, of religion and work. On one hand, we have creative people who, despite all security and farming difficulties, find ways to export one quarter billion shekels annually! [Gaza is] a leading region in exporting different kinds of organic vegetables and flowers.... On the other hand, the settlements reflect Jewish belief and biblical learning. The area became an empire of religious institutions, which attracts 500 students annually from outside the Gaza Strip. People from all ethnicities, immigrants and veteran farmers together with scholars, take an active role in building the place. We settled a desolated place, transforming it into a Garden of Eden. This settlement project has taken the lead in defending the people of Israel for more than sixteen years.

The use of rational argumentation—instead of the zealot rhetoric of the Gush Emunim rabbis, who stress the urgency of the command to settle the land for religious ends—underscores a key fact: Religious motivation, important as it is, was secondary for many of the Gaza settlers. One religious settler of Oriental origin best articulated the relevance of the religious motivation: "If we put aside the religious aspect, because we can fulfill the commandment of settling the Holy Land anywhere, the Negev is crying for settlers, as are other places in the Holy Land.... I am mostly attached to the community we have developed here." The quotation emphasizes the flexible internalization of the Gush Emunim zealous demand to settle anywhere in the Holy Land. Even if religious motivation is a secondary factor in

decisions to live in Gaza, though, it strengthened the settlers who perceived all difficulties as a divine test.

## PLACE AS AN EMPOWERING FORCE

We now look at the roles that place played in shaping the settlers' identity. Each of the five dimensions of settler empowerment that emerged during our research expresses a different aspect of the settlers' mobility, of their relocation from the marginalized areas in the national periphery to what they considered the frontier in the Occupied Territories: an ideological move from a sectarian group that negotiated rights to secure their interests, to a group that claimed to lead a Zionist revival movement; a political move from marginality to the center of the political elite; a move from the working class to the upper-middle stratum; a change in self-image from a dependent marginal population to a self-made people who were proud of their achievements; and a move from life in fragmented communities to the establishment of high-quality communities that supported their new lifestyle.

Ideologically, the settlers of Gaza adopted the main argument of the settlers' council, which—in addition to the centrality of obeying the commandments to settle any inch of the Holy Land—stressed their criticism of secular society. The critique of secular life advanced by Rabbi Kook supplied the settlers in Gaza with a sense of ideological and moral superiority—a position adopted by elitist groups. One settler demonstrated the new attitude quoted in several brochures distributed in synagogues by saying, "Zionism without religion has become bankrupt of any meaning. Secularism has no limits, no moral framework. Without the Bible there is no sense of direction for any educational, military, and security system. Without religion there is no Zionism."

This quotation expresses some settlers' belief that their national religious-Zionist ideology may have provided the Jewish population inside Israel with a sense of direction and moral justification. They viewed themselves not just as a sector that campaigns for its own interest in the political system but also as an alternative to the fragmenting secular leadership that had lost its way and needed to be replenished and replaced. In this sense, the settlers thought that, by adopting the Gush Emunim ideology, they gained the prestige of belonging to new moral elite. Compared with their marginal position in the development towns of the southern periphery, in which they had been passive clients of the failing welfare state, their new location at the core of the national ethos, at least in their view, represented a move from the national periphery to the core of national integrity. In this sense, the settlers were new Zionist pioneers who borrowed the prestige of early Zionist pioneers. The settlers had made tremendous efforts to be born anew from the land as new heroic human beings who would lead the nation into a new phase of existence. Yair Sheleg points to the transition the national religious sector in Israeli society went through during the 1970s by articulating political goals for the nation at large (2004).

The Gaza settlers also adopted this new political sense of elitism: "We stopped being the service men in the buffet of Mapai [the nation-building labor party]. I

have a say now when it comes to who will drive the locomotive and determine the direction the train takes." A youngster from the settlements expressed the same idea in simpler words: "I am proud to know that I am serving the purpose of my people by living here. Other youngsters in Israel miss this empowering feeling."

Another settler repeated the Gush Emunim rhetoric concerning the mythical status of the place: "Israelis grew spiritually weary of the battle to conquer the wilderness. Many forgot the true Jewish mission in the world. They believe they can devote themselves to daily practices like [people in] any other nation. We cannot let the traditional leadership shatter the dreams of Jews. We have to take the lead in showing the Israeli people the true direction." The once-passive peripheral clients of the welfare state had accepted their responsibility for setting national goals and challenges to the public at large, and, self-assured in their legitimate role as leaders, they had replaced the messianic myth with a national one. But, as we have shown, their ideological empowerment does not lead to jeopardizing their everyday well-being for the sake of serving national goals.

Prior to the disengagement plan, the settlers became a source of inspiration for politicians who frequently met with them to discuss the problems and challenges of colonization and to be photographed with them in order to advance their political careers. The settlers even succeeded in sending several representatives to the Knesset, including one from Gaza—Zvi Handel—and in organizing a strong lobby among Knesset members. Despite those successes, the settlers were never willing to call for revolt against a democratically elected government, as did the leaders of Gush Emunim during the campaign against the evacuation. At this point, they distanced themselves from any such challenge initiated by the Gush Emunim leadership.

The settlers' social mobility is also manifested in economic terms. Most of them worked as craftsmen, manual laborers, or small farmers in the poor villages of south Israel. In the heavily subsidized settlements they found new opportunities for economic growth, as these statements attest:

> People here live in significantly better conditions than anytime in the past. We have big private houses built on the ground, as rich people usually build their homes.

> My parents looked for ownership of a farm on which they would be independent workers and which would supply them with a higher income relative to their home town.

> When you live in an urban block, you have a routine life with no open possibilities for progress. My wife became the manager of the community center here. In Jerusalem she couldn't even think about such a job—she would not have the necessary qualifications. I was a medicine dealer with a routine job. Here I have my business and I employ workers. So you see! Here we have better opportunities for socioeconomic mobility.

More than 30 percent of the settlers were wealthy farmers who had received large greenhouses, access to an agricultural research infrastructure, and subsidies that had enabled them to prosper by exporting organic products. The supply of

extremely inexpensive Palestinian labor—equivalent to u.s.$2.50 per hour—made this venture possible. Average settlers employed several dozen Palestinian workers, transforming themselves from manual laborers to capitalist employers. A similar number of settlers were able to find better jobs in the Gaza settlements as teachers, clerics, or other professionals.

The impact of ideological, political, and class mobility on the settlers' self-images and the role of the community in abetting this process was significant. One interviewee, commenting on his parent's move to the settlement more than twenty years earlier, stressed the importance of the settlers' motivation to construct a new self-image and identity: "My parents were motivated by the will to become new people, an identity divergent both from the image of the Diaspora Jew and the image of the marginal Oriental Jew in the development towns."

Considering Diaspora and Oriental Jews rootless people who passively react to external forces, the settlers derived their self-images from heroic images of the first generation of Zionist pioneers. Accordingly, the motive of self-made individuals is frequently repeated in their descriptions of their lives. A settler of Oriental origin noted: "We built everything here right from the beginning. Everything here is primary, a new beginning that gives us a sense of being part of a pioneering act. It gives me a lot of pride to be part of it."

In several of the interviews conducted in their 300-square-meter villas, settlers liked to show us the original trailer they had left in their backyard. They were proud to demonstrate to us their achievements from the nostalgic and heroic beginning to the villa on the sand dunes on one of the more exotic seashores of Israel/Palestine. They frequently stressed the fact that they had achieved this mobility with their own bare hands and with no help from anybody else. Thus they tended to forget the heavy public subsidies channeled to them as largesse: "We did all of it ourselves, with no help. So we worked hard, we lived modestly till we finally made it," said a forty-year-old man who had come from a development town.

But acquisition of a new self-image cannot be measured by material achievements. The experience of personal growth and the ability to rise from the lower classes to the upper-middle class and to move from a peripheral position to the national core are more important than everything else. These aspects became clear in our discussions with interviewees about how they were confronting the government's call to leave the settlements. One settler from the southern city of Ashkelon told us: "Even if I get a large compensation it will not help me. I know how life in Ashkelon looks. I lived there, and I know the routine, meaningless life in the new towns. I may be able to buy a nice house with the money, but my life's work will be destroyed. Everything I have achieved with my two hands will sink into the sand and be destroyed by the Palestinians."

The settlers understood that a return to inside the Green Line would return them to their peripheral position in society. They refused to accept this kind of humiliation from their right-wing government—a government they had politically supported up until that decision. But houses meant more to the settlers than mere

property; they were, in some way, the material manifestation of their identity, for they had invested their hearts and souls in designing their homes and building them according to their imagination and by investing affection, not just money. They therefore viewed destruction of their houses as a form of mutilation, removal of a limb or an organ from their bodies. One settler in his thirties who was originally from a village in the south described his experience: "We designed our places from the very beginning as we wished. We invested all the imagination and emotions in the house to make it our perfect dream home, with no limits. Every corner of it is invested with our love and care—and now we have to destroy it! I cannot believe such a cruel order will actually be carried out." The damage to the settlers' self-image and identities was so substantial that many of them were unable to overcome their trauma. One woman in her fifties told us: "We feel great fear. They even plan to take our personal memories from us. My husband is very distraught, so upset he had to be hospitalized. The doctor said his only problem is psychological—a trauma, loss of control over his life. Somebody else, who has now betrayed you, has the power to decide for you. I can compare the situation to the plight of the patient who suffers from a terminal illness."

## THE COLONY AS AN EMPOWERING PLACE

The example of the settlers of Gaza leads to three main conclusions. First, places do matter and succeed in becoming core sources of identity formation. In the case of the settlers, their difficulties in imagining continuity between their life in the settlements, the construction of those life-worlds, and the postevacuation reality demonstrate the depth of the identity crisis they were experiencing. The facts that a year after the evacuation more than 80 percent of them were still unemployed and that many still refused to accept any resettlement solution offered to them further demonstrate the depth of the identity crisis that sprang from loss of their sense of place. Second, places may empower human beings and give them new opportunities to re-create themselves. For the settlers, that empowerment was multidimensional: economic, political, class and communal, and in self-image. Third, because the settlers had been empowered they were able to build new social identities for themselves, moving from their marginal position as "Oriental Diaspora-type Jews," as one settler put it, into the core of the new Israeli nationalist identity formed in the Occupied Territories.

These three results lead to the conclusion that the two theoretical conceptualizations that focus, on one hand, on attachment to place and place-based identity and, on the other hand, on structural characteristics of a place complement each other. Under some structural conditions, places, as local entities, may become salient sources of social identity. Under other structural conditions, the role of places in stimulating social identities may remain marginal. In other words, given some structural constraints, people may be closely linked to locales, whereas, given other structural conditions, people may be totally or partially unbounded to any locale. In the same way, some people may depend on place to constitute their identities,

but others may use distant resources. The case of the settlers demonstrates the power of the particular risky environment of the so-called frontier to evoke a sense of place as a locally bounded entity. It remains an important task for geographers to identify types of places in terms of their power to constitute and form identities along the abscissa of access to the mythical and everyday-life senses of place.

Concerning the relationships between the Gaza settlers and their leaders, it seems that the colonists believed in the pioneering mission of which they were part. They gave up the passive orientation created in the periphery for an elite orientation that was willing to lead national change. Many of the settlers also identified with the national religious mission led by the Gush Emunim leaders. Nevertheless, they avoided any mystification of the place and if they glorified their places at all, they did so by using national rather than religious messianic rhetoric. Even their leading rabbis tended to use rational arguments rather than mythical ones in managing the campaign against their evacuation. These results highlight the complexity of the relationships: The settlers accepted the main ideas of Gush Emunim's leaders and viewed those leaders as the leaders of their political camp, but, at the same time, they did not internalize Gush Emunim rhetoric and mystification of place.

Even during the campaign against evacuation, the Gaza settlers refused to join any activity that challenged democratic authority in the name of a religious-messianic authority. This means that the differences in attitudes had a tremendous effect on their form of agency. Instead, even the religious settlers from Gaza mourned not so much the destruction of the dream of a Greater Israel as the loss of the personal empowerment the new places in Gaza gave them. Their real concerns related much more to matters of everyday life than to the destiny of the messianic myth. They focused on their project of transforming the place into a lever for escape from their peripheral position into an elitist status in Israeli society. In this way they failed to internalize the systematic agenda of sacralizing the biblical land in the Occupied Territories as a mythical "big place." The settler's statement that Eretz Israel is everywhere on both sides of the border between Israel and Palestine best demonstrates this failure.

With respect to the Palestinians in Gaza, the settlers pretended to live in a frontier in which the crowded refugee camps behind the fences around their settlements were perceived as part of savage nature. They learned to distance and estrange the Palestinians from their daily lives and "gaze," as the would-be groom best demonstrated when he asked his girlfriend to forget the view of the refugee camp and look at the wonderful landscape of sand dunes. By the same token, they were able to justify their reliance on the inexpensive Palestinian work force without losing their sense of justice. Palestinians as human beings were almost absent from their narratives except as faceless threats to be suppressed.

### NOTE

1. We conducted the interviews in Hebrew. All translations from Hebrew into English in this article are ours.

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