

Who's more harmful than a yeshiva boy?

The settlers and the ultra-Orthodox are the two most energetic and determined groups among the complacent and somnolent Jewish populace.

By [Gideon Levy](#)

The similarity is striking: two insular and arrogant population groups, different and at times peculiar, powerful minorities with authoritative leaders, both with their own laws and norms. The settlers and the ultra-Orthodox - the former is some 300,000 strong, not counting settlers in East Jerusalem, and the latter numbers about 700,000, including Haredi settlers.

In the Israel of 2010, these are the two most energetic and determined groups among the complacent and somnolent Jewish populace. Both wreak ruinous damage to the state, and both cost it vast amounts of money. And, lo and behold, while the campaign against the Haredim is gathering momentum - a campaign that is just in principle but is accompanied by ugly hatred and racism - the attitude toward the settlers fluctuates between apathy and sympathy, and even compassion.

Compassion? A member of the panel investigating how Israel handled evacuees of the disengagement from Gaza, Yedidya Stern, this week described them as no less than the victims of "the gravest infringement of human rights in the history of the State of Israel." Not Israel's poor, not the immigrants who were dumped in development towns, not the children at risk, not the children of migrant workers, not the Arabs who were driven out in 1948 and 1967, and not the Palestinians under occupation, but settlers who were evacuated and compensated, according to Prof. Stern's remarkable ethical code.

Unlike the settlers, the Haredim are an easy target. There is no greater consensus in secular Israeli society than hatred for them. Criticizing the settlers is controversial, it has a price and it takes courage. Populist politicians build careers on spreading hatred of Haredim, but it is the courts rather than the country's leaders that are taking the lead in changing the norms regarding them.

Without having made any previous attempt to draw closer to them, the courts laying down one ruling after another. The Supreme Court ruled that state-funded stipends for yeshiva students are unfair; it ruled there is intolerable racism in Immanuel; and the army wants to conscript thousands more yeshiva students. All these decisions were right and they were inevitable, but what in tarnation about that other recalcitrant group?

Racism? The settlers are more racist. Violence? The settlers are far more violent. Blatant disregard for the law of the land and maintenance of a separate legal system? More so among the settlers. Enormous budgets? The settlers cost us more, and the Haredim are poorer. Damage to society and state? That caused by the settlers is much more catastrophic, a weeping for generations to quote the Talmud and Ben-Gurion.

The self-isolation of the Haredim within their own world at the state's expense is indeed something in need of change, and manifestations of racism among them must be eradicated. But where are public opinion and the state and its courts, when it comes to the settlers? The Haredim milk the budget, as we so often complain, and the settlers don't?

According to Peace Now, the settlers cost us NIS 2.5 billion per year. For what? For their efforts at thwarting all prospects of peace. That's not more harmful than a yeshiva boy? That's not more dangerous than a Torah student?

The Ashkenazi Haredim treat the Mizrahim abominably. It is racism. But at least it is not violent, like the racism of the settlers toward Palestinians. The Haredim put their women at the back of the bus; the settlers not only bar Palestinians from their buses, but from the entire road at times. The Haredim erect barriers between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim in their schools; the settlers carry out ethnic cleansing under the state's aegis, like that of 25,000 residents of Hebron.

So who's the real racist here? Compared to the settlers' hilltop youth, the yeshiva boys are models of morality. But who gets castigated? The Haredi of course. When will the courts come out against settler racism as they have against Haredi racism? They themselves maintain different systems for penalizing Jews and Arabs. When will we hear about the thousands of fictitious civil service positions held by settlers - a salaried security official in every mobile home - in the same way that we hear about the Haredi parasites? And what about the thousands of soldiers who have to guard the settlers, the superfluous roads that have been built to serve them, the electricity and water supplies laid for illegal outposts? All of it, everything, paid by us, more than we pay for Torah study as a Haredi occupation.

So let's call this evil by its true name: a double standard. Cowardice works too.