The Place of Politics

The Notion of Consciousness in Rabbi Yitzchak Ginsburgh’s Political Thought

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ABSTRACT: The notion of consciousness change as a political concept has re-emerged as a central issue in recent Israeli political discourse in diverse and seemingly remote groups. The following is a study of some of the contexts and implications of according primacy to consciousness change in political thought, through the tensions between the highly individualistic character of this discourse and its collective language and aims. I focus on one study case, Rabbi Yitzchak Ginsburgh, a key figure in both extreme settler groups and current New Age Hasidic revival. Analyzing his political writings, I explore his notion of consciousness as the true place of politics. Finally, I return to the question of the context in which Rabbi Ginsburgh’s binding of the political to consciousness should be read, and propose liberal individualism, and the direct line it draws between the individual’s consciousness and that of the state, as an alternative hermeneutical perspective.

KEYWORDS: consciousness, Ginsburgh, kabbalah, liberalism, New Age, politics, religious Zionism, romanticism

During one of the last mass demonstrations of the Israeli 2011 protest summer, as it was beginning to weaken, Daphni Leef (2011), perhaps the figure most identified with the protest movement, exclaimed from the podium: “They say that the consciousness change is the greatest achievement of the protest so far. That’s true! That is our first step.” One might explain Leef’s emphasis on consciousness as deriving from the gap between the intensity and force of the protest and the difficulty in showing actual results through changes in state policy. However, this rhetoric was not
rare among activists and commentators throughout that period. Thus, for example, another activist wrote in an opinion column:

[A] mature protest does not require proof. The protest does not have to repeat its success in drawing hundreds of thousands to demonstrations and prolonged stays in tents. In order to prove that the struggle is alive [the protest] repositions itself in different kinds of squares, substituting the square of the state … and most importantly—at the square of the consciousness. (Tzfadia 2011)

The focus on a “change of consciousness” as a political concept and the primacy accorded to it as the ‘most important’ site of politics, are the subjects of this study. The notion of political consciousness is, of course, a concept laden with complex cultural and historical baggage, some of which I address below. In the context of New Age culture, however, the turn to consciousness and the focus upon it are almost self-explicatory. The turn inward, to the self, is one of the key characteristics of the New Age movement. Thus, one of the pioneers of its academic study, Paul Heelas (1996: 2), convincingly claimed that the lingua franca of this highly varied and heterogeneous phenomenon is that of “self-spirituality.” To be sure, though New Agers may well seek a large scale transformation of the human (and planetary) condition, they “would also agree that the initial task is to make contact with the spirituality which lies within the person” (ibid.). Indeed, the focus on and primacy of the mind has been proclaimed one of the “central and indispensible pillars for understanding New Age religion” (Hanegraaff 1998: 204).

The highly individualistic character of this discourse involves an inherent distrust of the social and political and their effect on the self, denying it access to its authentic, “natural,” truth, which is waiting to be revealed within it (Simchai 2009: 10). The strong ethos of “unmediated individualism”—‘I’m my own authority’—accompanying this discourse, also entails a strong sense of “self-ethic”: One should rely only on himself and his own experience to achieve change, and accordingly, refrain from laying the responsibility for his state on society (Heelas 1996: 21–26). Moreover, frequently this ethos means that one should not take responsibility for others (Simchai 2009: 10).

These individualistic tendencies, among others, led many to view New Age culture as characterized by a disinterest in the social sphere, and as expressing and even promoting a de-politicization of human life. This criticism was heightened by the widespread claim that more than New Age culture poses an alternative to the dominant Western social and ideological structures, that is, to late capitalism and the neo-liberal order, it is incorporated within them or perceived as a symptom of them (Carrette and King 2005; Simchai 2009; cf. Heelas 2008).
Yet, in the context of the Israeli social protest movement, the consciousness referred to is not that of the individual, but that of the many, i.e., “our” consciousness. The questions thus arise: To what extent does this liberal and even neo-liberal individualistic framework allow us to discuss a collective change of consciousness, or better, a change of the collective’s consciousness? To what extent can we read it in the context of New Age culture’s preoccupation with consciousness, and in what sense can such a claim for a consciousness change be seen as part of a de-politicizing trend?

The leap from the individual to the many is far from absent from New Age cultural phenomena. First, it is visible in its millenarian and utopian contexts, which were substantial in its rise (Hanegraaff 1998: 98–103), but also in the widespread notion of collective consciousness or mind (ibid.: 204–210). Even so, these collective aspects are still conceptualized deep within the individualistic self-oriented perspective and the place where the “collective” is sought is one’s interiority (ibid.: 204–205).

Consciousness has a long history of consideration in political theory, which can be traced back at least to Plato and his famous analogy between the self and the Polis. In modern political theory, however, the preoccupation with consciousness is associated mainly with the Marxian tradition and its roots in German idealism. It is in this context that the term “political consciousness,” to a great extent as an extension of class consciousness (and as the negation of false consciousness), became widespread (Morris 1992; Thompson 1968). Indeed, consciousness change became a common element in many revolutionary discourses, from Zionism to feminism. Interestingly, in the context of Anglo-American political theory, discussions of the notion of consciousness are scarce, and this concept plays a marginal role.

Despite the classical Marxian tradition’s emphasis on the collective dimension of political consciousness, or the plausible possibility that Leef’s use of the term is drawn, knowingly or unknowingly, from this tradition, I propose here that current notions of collective change of consciousness could well be read in the framework of the liberal (and indeed neo-liberal) political tradition. Moreover, I suggest that this interpretive framework, with its emphasis on individuality, may allow us to see the common conceptual or, rather, discursive infrastructure binding together seemingly very different phenomena in Israeli society.

The 2011 Israeli protest itself was, of course, far from a display of classic “revolutionary” collectivity, both in its practices and in its discourse. The tension between the collective and the individualistic was prominent throughout it (Handel et al. 2012). On the one hand, there was an extensive use of “we” and “the people,” as well as a pronounced wish to transcend liberal individualistic discourse, but on the other, there was a great deal
of mistrust towards this collectivity, perceived as denying either the specificity of different sectors and agents, or of the autonomy of individuals, as the source for change. More generally, various commentators noted the stress on the grassroots character of the protest, with its emphasis on immediacy, spontaneity, and rejection of hierarchy, as well as the protest’s inherent ambiguities, and its “deep disappointment with the existing regime and with ‘old politics’” (ibid.: 80).

At the basis of my analysis, thus, lies the tension between the consciousness of the individual and that of the collective. I suggest that we may go further than the romantic and idealistic hermeneutic framework that has been central to the interpretation of collective consciousness and consider the inseparability of collectivity and the individual’s relation to and integration into it from the context of the liberal state. In what follows, I discuss some effects of the notion of consciousness on the concept of politics and the political sphere in the Israeli context, as they arise from one case study: that of Rabbi Yitzchak Ginsburgh.

Situating Rabbi Yitzchak Ginsburgh in a New Age Context

At first glance, the choice of Rabbi Ginsburgh for this analysis may seem peculiar, in light of the context presented above. Rabbi Ginsburgh’s name has become well known in Israel in recent years due to his visibility on the extreme margins of the Israeli religious right wing: as the president of the Od Yosef Chai (Joseph Still Lives) Yeshiva in Yitzhar, a key figure in the world of the settler “Hilltop Youth” (no’ar ha-geva’ot) and “Price Tag” (tag mechir) groups, and the infamous author of Barukh Ha-Gever (Ginsburgh 1995), a booklet praising, in theological-political terms, Baruch Goldstein, the perpetrator of the 1994 Hebron massacre. In other words, Rabbi Ginsburgh functions in many respects as the “other” of Israeli liberal politics, i.e. as the figure located furthest from secular, liberal, leftist Tel Aviv and its protests.

However, as I show, Rabbi Ginsburgh may be much closer than he initially appears. Not only is he situated in a cultural intersection that may prove highly relevant for our present concerns, he is also deeply rooted in the Western political context, the same tradition that accounts, I propose, for the centrality of the concept “consciousness” in such diverse social and political phenomena.

Rabbi Ginsburgh (b. 1944) can be located at a somewhat blurry border line between Chabad Hasidism and radical religious Zionism² (Fischer 2007b: 435–453; 2011: 295–303; Garb 2009: 48–50; Inbari 2009; Sagi 2009; Seeman 2005). Though born in Cleveland, Ohio, to a liberal, non-religious,
Jewish American family, Ginsburgh became a *ba’al teshuvah*—that is turned to Orthodoxy—during the 1960s, and soon grew very close to Chabad circles, until over the course of time, he even became a renowned, though very controversial, figure in this Hasidic milieu, especially in recent years (Garb 2009: 49). Indeed, Ginsburgh’s thought is embedded in Chabad’s doctrines and terminology, and is inseparable from and incomprehensible without them. Though he himself resides in Kfar Chabad, Chabad’s traditional center in Israel, his main context of activity—his audience and students—are primarily adherents of radical religious Zionism, such as the Od Yosef Chai Yeshiva in the militant Yitzhar settlement in the heart of Samaria, which he heads.

As might be expected, the radical religious Zionist context within which Ginsburgh operates has left a considerable imprint on his thought as well, and crucial elements stemming from Kookist ideology can be found in his political theology (though he himself refrains from any acknowledgment of this influence) (Fischer 2007b; cf. Seeman 2005). He is thus both a key example of and an important contributor to the rise of “*Hardali*” (acronym for Haredi-National) culture in radical religious Zionism, that is, to the rise of new lifestyles in those communities drawing closer to ultra-orthodox models and doctrines, while also thoroughly changing them (Cohen 2005; Sheleg 2000: 34–36; cf. Fischer 2007a: 40–41).

However, Ginsburgh’s influence goes far beyond the intra-Orthodox context in Israel. In recent decades he has functioned as a key figure in the field of Kabbalistic-Hasidic New Age spiritual renewal, not only with religious Zionist audiences, but in a much wider context. Indeed, his lectures were (and to a lesser extent still are) crowded by seekers of spiritual renewal who are not exclusively from among the religious population, but also include liberal and secular Jews, looking for spiritual meaning in a New Age context. Thus, it is no wonder that he enjoys considerable popularity among *ba’alei teshuvah*, such as those that reside in the extremist Bat ‘Ayin settlement, a center for alternative New Age lifestyles among settlers (Schwartzmann 2013: 54). Moreover, his books are sold in mainstream bookstores, and even published by the Yedioth Ahronoth publishing house, one of the largest in the country (Ginsburgh 2012).

The New Age aspect of his activity is apparent in the work of the institute he founded and heads, *Gal Einai* (Open my Eyes), in its website (inner.org), and in his voluminous literary activity. Thus, its mission is described as opening “the world’s eyes to Divine consciousness, spreading it to every household, classroom, and community on earth” (*Gal Einai* 2013a; Myers, 2011: 197), which bears a distinct New Age mark. These are not mere abstract intentions: Ginsburgh directs his teachings to a very wide audience, using, among other means, active blogs in no less than four
languages, e-lessons, and a Twitter account, as well as a school for Hasidic psychology. As Myers (ibid.) notes, the institute’s aspirations are indicated clearly by its claim that “Inner.org caters to over 1500 unique visitors from almost every country in the world, daily, and is consistently ranked in the top 10 Kabbalah sites on Google” (Gal Einai 2013b).

How deeply Ginsburgh’s discourse is embedded in Israeli New Age culture is perhaps most apparent in any survey of the titles (as well as the design) of his enormous literary corpus (see Gal Einai 2013c for a comprehensive list). Many of these books are Jewish adaptations of familiar New Age themes, with the characteristic emphasis on psychology, a preoccupation with the individual and its self-improvement, a special interest in meditation practices, healing, etc. Many of the titles would easily blend into any New Age library, e.g. A Sense of the Supernatural: Interpretation of Dreams and Paranormal Experiences (Ginsburgh 2008) or The Dynamic Corporation: Involvement, Quality and Flow: a Jewish Approach to Business Management Based on Kabbalah and Chasidut (Ginsburgh n.d.).

Ginsburgh’s unique position as a cultural intersection is especially reflected in the multiplicity of discourses he utilizes, depending partially on his different target audiences, but attesting something more fundamental to his position. I am referring here primarily to the mixture of “traditional” language, or better the language of tradition, i.e. Chabad’s intricate kabbalistic terminology, and language and rhetoric of a distinct New Age nature, which at times even seems self-aware, such as: “The phases of coming out from enslavement to freedom—the annulment of slavery, the exodus from Egypt, the splitting of the red sea, and the giving of the Torah—symbolize four stages of an inner release from behavioral patterns, the negative emotions and thoughts to which we are enslaved” (Giladi 2012).

Beyond the Fundamentalist and Romantic Frameworks

Two trajectories dominate current scholarship on Ginsburgh’s political thought. On the one hand we find a strong tendency, the major proponent of which is Motti Inbari (2009; 2012), to focus on Ginsburgh’s “messianic” politics. These are understood primarily in terms of a “theocratic messianism,” aspiring to erect not merely a state whose laws are founded on halakha, but malkhut Yisrael—the true and pure Kingdom of Israel of the age of redemption. Since, in the spirit of the fundamentalist paradigm, Ginsburgh’s “theocratic approach” is conceived as drawing “extensively on the worldview of political messianism,” (Inbari 2009: 143) it is no wonder that in this trajectory Ginsburgh’s politics are depicted, at least to a certain extent, as an almost mirror image of liberal politics.
The second trajectory, characteristic of Fischer’s (2007b) work, reveals the opposite tendency: to focus on Ginsburgh’s anti-statist (anti-mamlakhti) aspects, that is on the radical, antinomian, avant-gardist, and bohemian elements of his doctrines, those that offer a concrete and actual alternative to ‘politics’, such as what the Hilltop Youth embody in their lifestyle and actions (and thus sociologically as a phenomenon of rebellion against the radical religious Zionist bourgeoisie no less than against the secular state).

To a great degree, these two (complementary, as I later claim) trajectories outline the tension between the individual and the collective, the personal and the general, with which we are concerned here. However, they also both situate Ginsburgh and his thought outside of “our” camp, the liberal camp, reading theocracy simply as the negation or opposite of liberal democracy and demarcating his activity as “religious zealotry” or “holy terror” (Inbari 2009: 133, 137). More generally, then, much of the analysis of Ginsburgh is in the context of reading resurgent political religion through the lenses of the fundamentalist paradigm (Inbari 2012: 118–125).

However, the study of radical religious Zionism, Ginsburgh included, in the context of this paradigm has its price. As Fischer (2007a: 7–43) has shown extensively, it meant the use of a dichotomy in which “Irrational, absolutist, rigid and totalistic, fundamentalists … are the polar opposites of the enlightened, rational, empirical modern West” (ibid.: 14). He argues further that “The total picture then that emerges both from their religiosity and their modernity is that of the ‘repugnant Other’ … a discourse that at least to some degree is Orientalizing,” (ibid.: 13–14). This critique paved the way to a reading of Ginsburgh’s political project in the context of the modern Western political tradition. However, whereas Fischer (2007b; 2011) has suggested romantic nationalism as its primary context, I situate his thought in some of the elementary presuppositions at the basis of the modern liberal state. In other words, I attempt to bring Ginsburgh a little closer to Tel Aviv.

“We Must Understand”—Internalizing Politics

Our discussion of the function of the concept of consciousness in Ginsburgh’s political doctrine shall focus on one of his central political compositions (2002; 2005a), in which, as its title suggests, he introduces his political plan of action: Rectifying the State of Israel: A Political Platform Based on Kabbalah. The book, according to its editors, “sets forth a conceptual and practical program for healing the ills of the present state of reality in the state of Israel” (2002: 1). This plan is described as a path set in phases corresponding to the kabbalistic ten sefirot (emanations). The book’s editors stress that, unlike other compositions by Ginsburgh that are centered
on the future vision of the whole and rectified Kingdom of Israel (*Malkhut Yisra’el*), this book “deals more with the way to mend and elevate the state from its present condition” (2005a: 14). Indeed, despite its ample use of kabbalistic parlance, it attempts to reach a wider audience, and so the extent of kabbalistic intricacy in it is somewhat reduced.

Two important questions for our present concerns arise from this treatise. First, who is the imagined political addressee of this composition? Second, what, and no less important, where is political action, that is, where does it take place? By these questions I mean to suggest that one of the first things to strike the reader upon reading this political plan is the fact that most (though not all) of the concrete content of political change is addressed to the individual and, more precisely, to the individual’s consciousness. The true and central means to gain external change is entirely dependent upon inner change. “[W]e must understand that the darkness of the reality outside reflects our own inner state of darkness,” explains Ginsburgh (2002: 29).

The principle here is that of a clear primacy of the inward “our own inner state” over the outward, which is that of politics or the public sphere. Whereas the composition’s title places the state as the object of change, much of its actual content designates inner consciousness as the main locus of that change (ibid.: 28). The phrase “we must understand,” should thus be taken quite seriously, since understanding becomes the true mode of change: “All the steps of its [the ideal political party’s] platform take place in the light of darkness breaking through the darkness of night. Out of a change of the mind from an external, opaque consciousness … to a divine consciousness that believes that everything is for the good” (ibid.: 87) (cf. Schwartzmann 2013: 55).

We may thus proceed to claim that for Ginsburgh the psychological is the model for the political. Ginsburgh’s political treatises are in deep dialogue with his voluminous literature of kabbalistic-hasidic psychology, for which he gained his fame, and one finds extensive discursive parallels, thematic and formal, between them. (Garb 2009: 49; Huss 2007: 113; Sagi 2009; passim) Put differently: there exists in his teaching a profound relation between the conceptualization of the individual’s internal dynamics and that of the processes occurring in the political sphere. It is not merely an internalization of the political but a psychologization of the public.

The emotional world functions as a key to understanding and generating political change. Ginsburgh (2009: 3) explains, for example, that the return of the Kingdom of the North—representing secular Zionism—to the Kingdom of Israel can only begin from a sense of revulsion towards the separateness and alienation of the modern humanistic world with its emphasis on human achievement. In many other places love is emphasized
as a means of change: “A pure rectified heart loves everything that God creates … Thus, the actual stages of the rectification process begin with an act that most reflects the love of the Jewish people, innate in the heart of every Jew” (ibid.: 75). The emotional world functions not merely as a means of encouraging or stimulating correct change, but also as an indicator that the direction of change is indeed correct. If you feel the right emotions, you can identify yourself as proceeding in the right direction.

The turn to consciousness as the place of politics implies an almost inherent distrust towards the public sphere, identified in Ginsburgh’s (2002: 181; 2005a: 179) thought as the realm of speech: “Politics in general is an invention of people living in the ‘desert’, who are subject to the illusion of false mirages, and rely on the power of speech.” The infamous biblical figure of Korah is invoked as “[t]he first politician, the first person in the Torah to rally people around a ‘party line’ (in the name of democracy, of course),” using “the power of his soft and alluring speech.”

By disqualifying the intermediate realm of speech, Ginsburgh leaves us only with the extremes: the consciousness of the individual and the consciousness of the many, i.e. the collective. Earlier we heard Ginsburgh’s claim that “we must understand that the darkness of the reality outside reflects our own inner state of darkness” (2002: 29). Though Ginsburgh is addressing the reader here, as an individual who “must understand,” the latter is addressed not in the singular but in the plural. This duplication of addressee is one of the critical discursive characteristics in Ginsburgh’s political writing for the issues at hand. The interchangeability of plural and singular here—as well as throughout the book—implies that while the turn is to the individual reader, who is required to change, the standard, a transcendental and unified state of consciousness, is already rhetorically posed. Therefore, the address attempts essentially to form one shared consciousness and not a multiplicity of consciousnesses: Our own inner darkness is an inner darkness that is found in each and every one of us in a similar manner, or in all of us as one unit. The consciousness of the individual and that of the many thus bear a similar structure, and the trajectory is of their amalgamation.

Situating the political in these extremes does not end with constituting an identity between the imagined I and We. The analogous structure is expectedly extended to the rectification of the individual’s consciousness and the rectification of the state. Ginsburgh follows here a well-founded tradition: the use of the organic metaphoric to discuss the collective is embedded deeply in the Western political heritage, Plato being perhaps its best-known example. This metaphor endured well into the Middle Ages and on as a central metaphor for political organization and its presence is apparent in Jewish sources as well, and especially so in modern kabbalistic literature.
In the case of Ginsburgh, this model is not only very common, but is at the heart of his political thought. Naturally, Ginsburgh’s use of this model is quite modern, in the sense that the psychologization of the individual and his consciousness is projected on the state and discussed in terms of what might be dubbed “developmental psychology.” One of the clearest expressions of the state’s psychologization can be found in Ginsburgh’s important treatise, *The Shell Preceded the Fruit* (2005b), based on discourses given throughout the year of the disengagement plan from Gaza (2004–2005), experienced as a great trauma by his audience. This treatise deals primarily with the status of the state following the events of that year. Trying to address the gap between the current Zionist state and the true and ideal Jewish state as he conceives it, Ginsburgh explains:

> The development of this vision of a redeemed nation living under the light of the Torah, with God’s Messiah in its head, is not a simple novelty that the external world can accept with ease … [I]n order to rise up and stand on its own the congregation of Israel (*Knesset Yisrael*) must renew in itself imper Amunence and insolence, just as any healthy process of maturation necessarily entails a cultivation of a separate entity and a sense of ownership and possessiveness (the growth of the “I” and “mine”). (ibid.: 24–25)

The path of rectification of the state, the path of redemption, is thus essentially that of the collective undergoing individualistic psychological growth, articulated in the same terminology used to discuss the individual’s change: “An inner process, such that takes place within man and within the chosen people” (Ginsburgh 2005a: 70).

This reading of the collective in the individual’s terms has an additional important aspect. It entails a striving towards, or better, a constant fantasy of totality, expressed in Ginsburgh’s writings primarily through the concept of wholeness (*shleimut*). It is a fantasy of everything and everybody, presented as both aim and condition, consciousness-wise as well as in the imagined reality to come.

> [T]he general needs the specific … every general principle … requires the unfolding of the full multiplicity of details included within it, without which it cannot exist. As in the innate nature of a mother’s womb, *binah* (understanding) recognizes that every limb and cell of the body must develop in full. In our context, clarity of *binah* means our profound awareness of the necessity that all be whole and complete. (Ginsburgh 2002: 55; 2005a: 60)

Understanding the relation between the general and its specifics, in the plural, becomes an ethical decree and a political necessity, without which progression in the rectification plan is impossible: “that all be whole and
complete.” The ideal for the collective is for it to become “as one man with one heart” (Ginsburgh 2005a: 87). But how can the collective become as one man? Through the aspired completeness of each one of its members, who will finally all cultivate a unity of consciousnesses. To put it in Ginsburgh’s words:

[T]he approach emphasizing the individuals (ḥa-ḥe-ra-ti), since it sees in them necessary stages of consciousness, refers to each and every individual in the process of redemption as well—each individual reflects the collective in its entirety and redemption must begin with him, each and every Jew must be in its interiority with the redemption and be truly redeemed along with the redemption of the collective. The redemption of the collective is comprised of all the individuals. (2003: 38–39)

In other words the identity between the individual and the collective allows for the “leap” from individual consciousness to the collective one, a leap dependent upon the process of unification of all the individual consciousnesses, allowing the collective to become in itself an individual. It is hardly surprising then that Ginsburgh’s political plan emphasizes individual consciousness change, since in his view every corrected consciousness is an agent of the correction and completion of the entire collective body’s redemption: “a single individual from the people can reflect and express in perfection the experience of the collective as a whole. It is true to say that this individual is the sensitive organ guiding and orienting the entire body towards the unification of redemption with God” (ibid.: 40; See also Sagi 2009: 237).

The same is true in the case of the opposite horizon, that of political threat, characterized by the logic of the symptom, according to which a correct change of consciousness attests the proper “connectedness” of the subject to its source. Here too we find an analogous structure between the inner struggle occurring within the individual and the struggles within the nation (e.g. Ginsburgh 2002: 68; 2005a: 70).

This analogous nature is extended to the question, Who belongs here? i.e. to the purification of the individual and collective bodies from unwanted elements (Ginsburgh 2005a: 103). Once again we find consciousness as a key: “When the internality of the land lights in the consciousness, one becomes more sensitive to the question who belongs to it and who does not” (ibid.: 104). Consciousness flaws weaken the Land of Israel’s immune system, making it more difficult to repel “bacterial invaders … and diseased cells” (Ginsburgh 2002: 106). However, unlike other discourses found in radical religious Zionism, Ginsburgh (2005: 104–105) is careful to point at gentiles, particularly Arabs, alone as the elements to be excluded, whereas Jews with a consciousness flaw “merely” need to be mended (Tamari 2010: 54).
“Only a Matter of a Change in the Head”: Consciousness and Action

What then of the place of action in Ginsburgh’s doctrines, and the relation between action and consciousness? Both Inbari (2009: 143–144) and Fischer (2007b: 445–449; 2011: 105) have rightly stressed the immense importance of spontaneous action in his thought (and in his students’ deeds). Fischer has placed Ginsburgh’s perception of action in the context of the romantic discourse of self-expression, self-realization, and the authentic and self-defining subject (2007b: 422; and more generally 2007a: 21). Indeed, this context serves as a key to the relation between consciousness and action. As Fischer shows in his analysis of Ginsburgh’s infamous discussion and justification of the Hebron massacre, Ginsburgh perceives Goldstein’s act of martyrdom as an irrational deed that is the cause of a union of the soul with the divine in its deepest realms; “In contrast with this natural, free and spontaneous act, bringing man into harmony with nature and the depth of his soul, Rabbi Ginsburgh posits the small-minded rationality and the pettiness of calculated planning” (2007b: 446). As Ginsburgh (1995: 47) stresses, the ability to perform this deed demanded “being freed from the suffocating grip of the ‘calculations of the many’ (heshbonot rabim).”

The resemblance to his criticism of the realm of speech, discussed above, is striking and far from coincidental. It is a result of the fact that the concepts of spontaneity and authenticity employed here form a continuum between the consciousness (the inward) and action (the external) stemming from it. Action thus becomes an inevitable outcome of a state of consciousness, almost a byproduct thereof. That is, within this framework consciousness gains clear ontological precedence over action. This consciousness-action continuum is a crucial point for my claim, since it explains the underlying assumption, found everywhere in Ginsburgh’s (2001: 8) writings that, truly, “it is only a matter of a change in the head.” Change in the world, the rectification of society’s faults, indeed complete redemption are entirely dependent upon change in the mind, and therefore consciousness is the field to which the demand for change should be addressed. Concrete, actual, change in the political reality will follow automatically, inevitably, naturally, and spontaneously, “until critical mass is reached and then the ball rolls as a snowball and bursts by itself” (ibid.: 9).

True, essential action becomes the proper development of the ideal figure of the state, in the consciousness of each and every subject. That is perhaps the reason why the greater part of Ginsburgh’s “practical platform based on kabbalah” includes content referring to the consciousness change, without contradicting in any way its practicality.
The “Artificial Man”: Re-contextualizing Political Consciousness

In the final part of this article, I return to the question of the historical and ideological context in which Ginsburgh’s binding of the political to consciousness should be read, and offer a conceptual framework for interpreting the relation between the consciousness of the individual and that of the collective, which we have seen throughout the analysis so far. This contextualization will also allow us to return to Leef and the Israeli social protest, and its emphasis on consciousness change.

Undoubtedly, any attempt to reduce Ginsburgh’s thought to one context will fail. Indeed, one may point to several significant contexts through which to read this problematic. One important context I choose to avoid here almost entirely is that of Chabad and Kookist thought. Though these are surely central to Ginsburgh’s thought, I wish to point here to a context allowing for a high degree of continuity between different phenomena in Israeli society, such as social protest activists, New Agers, and Hilltop Youth. Locating the shared context within dominant ideological traditions may provide an important key to some of the presuppositions of a shared political tradition.

The main context discussed in the scholarly literature is that of the rise of nationalism and romantic thought, with its roots in the eighteenth century. Both Fischer (2011: 94; and more generally 2007a: 215–270) and Inbari (2009: 146) situate the Rousseauian legacy and its concept of the general will as a crucial notion for our issues. The latter interpreted Ginsburgh’s theocratic vision in the terms of Talmon’s Totalitarian Democracy (1955):

The complete integration of the individual and the collective, ostensibly on the basis of the individual will of each person to become part of the great machine of the nation, is one of the founding concepts of totalitarian thought. It is in this field that the influence of nationalist rhetoric on Ginsburgh may be seen. (Inbari 2009: 146)

Yet, it seems that the Rousseauian-romantic context, fruitful as it is, does not explain sufficiently the salient gap in Ginsburgh’s thought between its highly individualistic aspect, emphasizing the individual as addressee and as agent, and the idealistic aspect expressed by the notion of the general will. Especially so when one considers that for Rousseau the general will always presupposes a renunciation of the private will by the individual, in the name of a mythical event of a collective concession, when (each) society was first formed.

How then can we tackle this tension between the desired absorption of the individual into the collective and the apparent individualistic tendency? Sensitive to this tension, Fischer (2011) offers the compelling
distinction between two different models of individualism: the Lutheran notion and the Calvinist one. The first represents romantic individualism, characterized by the search for the “inner man” for the personal and intimate, a quest for one’s inner sources and inner self. The latter, on the other hand, is identified with Western liberal individualism and “locates the individual in autonomous action in the world ... One is autonomous because one can shape one’s life and one’s projects as they are acted out in the external world” (ibid.: 304–305).

Based on this typology, Fischer suggests that “the radical religious Zionist notion of the individual is not a liberal notion, but rather a Lutheran one” (ibid.: 303). Undoubtedly the turn inward which sees self realization in the (re)found unity with God and the nation, characteristic of German nationalism, can indeed be found amply in Ginsburgh’s thought, for example in his doctrine of bittul and hitkalelut (self abnegation and integration) (Ginsburgh 1999: 269–271).

But we should also not separate Ginsburgh’s individualism from liberal individualism. After all, as we have seen above, Ginsburgh’s individualistic notions are immersed in New Age individualistic discourse, and as much as the latter can be read in a romantic light (Heelas 2008), it is also deeply rooted in liberal (and indeed neo-liberal) thought. Moreover, Lutheran individualism is said to be established on a strong distinction between the inside and the outside, as well as on a rigid separation between the expressive and authentic self and the public realm in which “passive acceptance and commitment to the existing order” are demanded (Fischer 2011: 304). The only political relation between inside and outside allowed for in this model is in the aspect of determining the supremacy of the collective as the sole political principle in the root of the authentic self. I believe this description can hardly qualify as adequate for Ginsburgh and his students with their activist imperative, clearly demanding a realization of their authenticity in the public sphere, often even and perhaps especially when they contravene the existing order.

I suggest here that the shared and analogous discourse regarding the individual’s and the collective’s consciousness may enable us to acknowledge an elementary collectivist aspect that lies at the basis of liberal individualism as well. An important fantasy seems to function at the foundation of the notion of consciousness as a political concept, the fantasy of the will. “All these [the first stages of rectification] must precede a major shift in the orientation of the Jewish people in Israel to desire to live their civilian lives in accordance with Torah values” (Ginsburgh 2002: 98; emphasis added).

As seen above, consciousness change is conceived as the key to political change, meaning that the content of that change becomes secondary to the
content of the consciousness. Consciousness then becomes a central political instrument, in which the content of political change—the re-formation of social arrangements and power relations within the political body—is understood as a natural outcome. When politics is conceptualized in this manner, the fantasy that everyone will want—of their own will—what currently perhaps only you want is inherent.

Such a fantasy indeed arises from the “romantic” demand of total identification with the collective goal, which “negates the need to impose ideas on the individual by force, since they will emerge internally” (Inbari 2009: 146). In addition, this gap between the “objective general will” and the actual will of people in the political field was and still is an important generator of a “revolutionary” political theology within the context of radical religious Zionism (Fischer 2009: 96–97; Tamari 2010: 60–62).

However, this fantasy is also crucial to the relations between liberal individualism and the state. An essential component of liberal individualism is the expression of authenticity in the world, primarily through action, and “do as you feel” is perhaps the epitome of its consciousness-oriented ideology. Thus, it is hardly surprising that when consciousness becomes the place where the political will be decided, where feeling will be translated into action, it becomes the object of much effort and attention, especially so by the state itself.

Let us return to one the formative moments in the rise of the state in early modernity: Hobbes’s Leviathan. Hobbes’s (1996: 48) discussion of the concept of the conscience offers a telling reversal: The conscience is not “the knowledge of their own secret facts, and secret thoughts,” let alone the opinions of “men vehemently in love with their own new opinions.” Rather, building on the etymology of the word indicating shared knowledge or consciousness, Hobbes explains: “When two, or more men, know of one and the same fact, they are said to be CONSCIOUS of it one to another; which is as much as to know it together.” This subtle inversion, in which the legitimacy of the conscience becomes dependent on a shared consciousness, gains its importance when viewed in the Leviathan’s general context, enabling us to see it as casting the theoretical infrastructure for the incorporation of the individual’s internality into the logic of the state.

The picture is thus more than that of a pre-existing state “discovering” and becoming heavily invested in the consciousness of the individual as a place for politics. Both historically and conceptually the process that situated the consciousness, the individual’s internality, as the place of the political has much to do with the rise of the centralized state in the modern era and with the diverse confessional background so critical to it (Gorski 2003). Accordingly, this process cannot be understood outside of the processes of unification, surveillance, and discipline that the rise of
the modern state involved, as Foucault describes them in relation to the emergence of governmental and biopolitics.

As part of his famous discussion of the “technologies of the self” (Foucault 1988: 15–48), and seeing governmentality as that “contact between the technologies of domination of others and, those of the self” (ibid.: 19), Foucault wished to examine “the way by which, through some political technology of individuals, we have been led to recognize ourselves as a society, as a part of a social entity, as a part of a nation or of a state” (ibid.: 146). He claimed that this formation cannot be understood outside the emergence of the state as an independent figure, and with the development of the “reason of the state.” Hence, in the modern state:

the art of governing people is rational on the condition that it observes the nature of what is governed, that is, the state itself … reason of state refers neither to the wisdom of God nor to the strategies of the prince … the aim of a government is [now] to strengthen the state itself. (ibid.: 149–150)

The state, as we know it, has become its own end. According to Foucault, one of the key ideas implied by this shift is the integration of the individual into the logic of the state, in the sense that the individual’s meaning is reduced to his benefit to the state’s prosperity. Indeed, human happiness has become a political object of governments, but no longer in the sense that it is “the result or the effect of a really good government … Happiness of individuals is a requirement for the survival and development of the state. It is a condition, it is an instrument, and not simply a consequence” (ibid.: 158). Hence, we find a movement toward governing not (only) through law, but “by a specific, a permanent, and a positive intervention in the behavior of individuals” (ibid.: 159). At this point Foucault makes an observation, which sheds important light on our discussion:

The main characteristic of our modern rationality in this perspective is neither the constitution of the state, the coldest of all cold monsters, nor the rise of bourgeois individualism. I won’t even say it is a constant effort to integrate individuals into the political totality. I think that the main characteristic of our political rationality is the fact that this integration of the individuals in a community or in a totality results from a constant correlation between an increasing individualization and a reinforcement of this totality. (ibid.: 161–162)

This correlation is at the heart of my claim, since it means that the liberal individualism we have discussed above, the self-fashioning project of the ‘designed self’, is to a great degree nothing but a mode through which the individual is harnessed to be his own supervisor on the state’s behalf.
Needless to say, a crucial field for this permanent “positive intervention in the behavior of individuals” is that of the individual’s consciousness. Moreover, while current sociology of modernity tends to position individuality and collectivity in inverse proportion—“the widespread current liberal assumption that individualist commitments come at the expense of collective ones” (Fischer 2011: 307–308)—what Foucault, and Rabbi Ginsburg, suggest is quite the opposite. There exists a strong and inherent connection between the focus on the individual and its integration, even unification, with the state.

Keeping in mind the legacy of Hobbes (1996: 9) and his Leviathan, drawing a direct line between the individual, man, and the state, being the “Artificial Man,” we can now understand more easily why in Ginsburgh’s thought the consciousness of the individual and that of the many are given the same language. Differently put, why in our shared political tradition the consciousness of the many appears—must appear—in the figure of the individual.

**Conclusion**

What then did Daphni Leef mean when she dubbed consciousness change as the social protest movement’s greatest achievement and first step? And is this indeed the same kind of consciousness change that Rabbi Ginsburgh places as the center of politics, perhaps its sole legitimate place? I do not suggest that the many differences between social activists, New Agers, and avant-garde radical religious Zionists inspired by Rabbi Ginsburgh should simply be papered over, not even in the premises of the consciousness discourse itself. However, the distance between them is far smaller than it is usually depicted as in both Israeli public discourse and in the scholarship. Differences, I believe, would also become clearer, once the common grounds are located more properly, but—at least in the Israeli context—this common ground is more often than not repressed and in need of exposure.

More importantly, I suggest that the analysis of Rabbi Ginsburgh’s notions of political consciousness enable us to uncover some of the presuppositions informing and forming this shared discourse, and to locate it well within the context of liberal individualism. It also allowed us to point (as others have already done) to the intimate connection between this pervasive mode of individualism, with all its diverse political expressions, and the modern state.

Much is left to be done. The wider scope of the discussion is perhaps a problem situated at the heart of politics. In a sense, my discussion here
is but a cautious touch to one of our political tradition’s open nerves, i.e., the question of persuasion, of the ability to move others in the direction that you think is better, of questions of freedom and coercion. Perhaps the fantasy of the will, discussed above, is not only unavoidable, but even desirable, better than that of forceful coercion. Perhaps. But I believe that the deep suspicion towards the realm of politics—“Politics in general is an invention of people living in the ‘desert’, who are subject to the illusion of false mirages, and rely on the power of speech,” in Rabbi Ginsburgh’s words—is far from coincidental in this discourse, and deserves careful critique, lest, in the words of Hanna Arendt, we shall be faced with “The modern ... withering away of everything between us ... the spread of the desert” (2005: 201), with the danger “that politics may vanish entirely from the world” (ibid.: 96).

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NOTES

1. All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.
2. I follow here Shlomo Fischer’s (2007a: 3) terminology referring to “the stream of religious Zionism which initiated and led the settlement movement in the West Bank and Gaza in the years 1968–2005. It is the stream whose leadership has been associated with Gush Emunim and (especially in the 1970s and 1980s) with Yeshivat Merkaz HaRav,” a stream that is today considered hegemonic in religious Zionist society.


5. English altered here and in the next quote in accordance with the Hebrew version, italics in the original. Rabbi Ginsburgh plays here on the linguistic similarity in Hebrew between desert (midbar) and speech (dibur).

6. I thank Professor Menachem Lorberbaum for referring me to Hobbes’s discussion.

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