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## Tom Bethell

To ask the question is to answer it. The Jewish people does have the right to be “master of its own fate in its own sovereign state.” What sort of a state should this be, and with what institutions? Since its founding, Israel has repeatedly appealed to the world on the basis of its democracy. In this there has been an implicit, sometimes an explicit, comparison with the surrounding Arab nations, which are decidedly non-democratic. But the idea that Israel is to be admired and defended because it is a democracy is not in the end persuasive. It cannot stir the people. The claim made by the new code of ethics for the Israel Defense Forces, that “democracy” is what the forces are defending, is an absurdity and ultimately an insult to those

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who died in the country's wars. (The code also rejects all references to the Land of Israel and to the Jewish state.)

Democracy is merely a principle of succession for office-holders. It puts its supporters in thrall to demography. If Jews are not in the majority, how can a Jewish nation be democratic? Plainly, a rigid adherence to democracy will put the country in peril in the years ahead. Setting aside the West Bank and Gaza, the Arabs of pre-1967 Israel have increased more rapidly than the Jews since 1948, even with five decades of Jewish immigration. In the first Knesset there were two Arab members. Today there are eleven. At the time of the 1967 war, Arab Israelis constituted ten percent of the population. Now they are closer to twenty percent. One doesn't have to spell out the consequences if this continues.

To be sure, democracy has in some respects benefited Israel. Without a majoritarian check on their power, the nation's secular elites would have given most of the country to the Arabs by now. Dangerous as he was in office, Shimon Peres respected democracy as the *summum bonum* of civilization and submitted to its verdicts. At the same time, democracy has also taken its toll. Arab Knesset members supported the Oslo "peace" agreement; without their support, Rabin and Peres would have lacked their majority. If the question "Who is a Jew?" is ever put in the lap of the Knesset, it is possible that it will be decided by Arabs—another absurdity.

The restoration of the Jews to the Holy Land after two thousand years was no everyday event, and it was not brought about for the mundane purpose of lifting up one more democracy as a Light unto the Nations. Countries too humdrum to list are already doing an excellent job of that. Israel was recreated with a more elevated mission in mind.

If it is to prosper, Israel must attract more Jews from around the world. The principal discouragement to further immigration—and the most important reason why 350,000 Israelis live in the United States—is the country's still intensely regulated and socialistic economy. The older generation of Likud leaders proved incapable of doing anything about this—if they tried at all. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu recognizes the problem,

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but has made little headway to date. Somehow, a younger generation of politicians must find a way to prevail over the Histadrut, the high level of taxation and the privileged beneficiaries of state-regulated monopolies.

Government has increased even as the socialist faith of the founding generation has waned, even as a new generation of Russians disillusioned with socialism has flooded into the country. The economist Alvin Rabushka has convincingly argued that it is the inflow of U.S. aid and diaspora giving (coming to more than \$7 billion a year) that allows the inefficiencies of the redistributive state to flourish. This brings us to foreign aid. One hopes that Israelis will come to see its hazards. It gives the State Department leverage to pressure Israel to conform to the Arab negotiating position. “Land for peace” has been destructive, above all because it has convinced the world that the absence of peace can be blamed on Israel’s reluctance to give away the land. If Israel’s prime minister and foreign minister thought so, why should London, Paris and Washington disagree?

It is impossible to believe that the rebirth of Israel after so long a hiatus, and the revival of Hebrew when it was on the verge of extinction, were not miraculous events, showing the hand of God in history more plainly than perhaps any other historical event. But this is not necessarily reassuring. Gifts from God, surely, come with strings attached. If God can reward, so he can punish. That is why the recent political turn of events—the attempt by the “post-Zionists” to return the gift of the land to another address—is so disturbing. “Our people has long since tired of bearing Zionism on its shoulders, generation after generation,” a leftist columnist wrote recently. “Israel is ready to withdraw lightly from the lands that were the cradle of Judaism” in exchange for “personal safety and a normal life.”

I doubt if that will be possible. Secular Jews who repudiate any claim to chosenness and seek comfort and refuge in normalness—in democracy, one might say—strive after the impossible. To the extent that they succeed, they go out of existence. They do not reproduce. It seems now that only believers heed the injunction “Be fruitful and multiply.” The disciples of the Enlightenment are dwindling away, destined only for absorption. (This

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suggests that the secular Left may itself soon tire of democracy. If present demographic trends persist, they will be utterly overrun by the Haredim in two generations.)

It is understandable that chosenness should engender discomfort. Nothing could be more opposed to the egalitarian ethos of our time. Also, chosenness attracts persecution, does it not? It is so much easier to blend in, to opt for a bit part in history. But if those who aspire to normality think that the Holy Land can be reinvented as Club Med, we may expect that there will be a price to pay for so singular an irreverence.

In looking to the future, all we can do is extrapolate. It almost always yields misleading conclusions, and perhaps that is a good thing where Israel is concerned. For it is difficult to foresee anything but disturbance, conflict and upheaval in the years ahead. The old consensus has given way to a division between secular and religious elements which are extremist in character and which view each other with hatred and contempt. The old elites, if they live long enough, may look back on Israel's first fifty years, with all its disruptions and external wars, as a time of tranquility, a moment of rest and recreation for Europe's weary in the pastoral retreats of the kibbutzim.

Meanwhile, in its struggle with the Arab world, Israel is becoming more isolated in world opinion. In the press, one sees descriptions of the Netanyahu position as the "pro-Israel" position—implicitly acknowledging that the Arafat position is the "anti-Israel" position. Israel seems to be increasingly unpopular in Europe, so much so that the French president barely observed diplomatic niceties in the course of his 1996 visit. One guesses that we will see more of this, and it is not impossible that in the end Israel will stand alone against the world. Maybe that is what God has in mind. If that happens, we may hope that the prayers and observance of the Orthodox will have sufficiently atoned for the post-Zionists on the secular side who, discomforted by their own birthright, took the perilous course of repudiating the faith of their fathers.

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