
Avraham Ravitz

The survival of the State of Israel is important to me, but it is the survival of the Jewish people that heads my list of priorities; this is a necessary function of my worldview as a Haredi Jew. That a value higher than the state's survival is my top priority does not mean that my attitude toward the state is less positive than the attitudes of those who do not hold the survival of the Jewish people to be supremely important.

I view the State of Israel as a positive organizational tool, despite my many problems with this instrument as it exists today. The continued survival of the Jewish state, however, is not necessarily included in the divine promise of the Jewish people's perpetual existence. As I see it, the survival of the Jewish people is the product of the divine assurance: "Since it [the Tora] will never be lost from the mouth of their offspring." (Deuteronomy 31:21) If the Jewish people does not forget the Tora, the Almighty promises that this people will continue to exist.

The people of Israel in this generation do not meet all the conditions specified in the Tora for dwelling peacefully in the Land of Israel: "If you follow my laws and faithfully observe my commandments.... you shall dwell securely in your land. I will grant peace in the land.... But if you reject my laws...." (Leviticus 26:3-6, 15) Israeli society today is complex and, unlike in the past, neither identifies with nor is committed to the continued survival of the Jewish people. In light of this, one cannot predict that Israelis fifty years from now will still see themselves as part of the Jewish people. There are only two possibilities: One is the loss of Jewish identity, the other an increase in Orthodox influence.

In present-day Israel we may discern a number of opposing tendencies. Part of society draws increasing strength from Judaism, while other segments are alienated from religion as never before. We cannot know which of these

trends will prevail, or what the State of Israel will look like in the coming half-century. The only thing that can be stated with certainty is that in the year 2048, it will be noted that the State of Israel was established a century earlier.

I am especially disturbed by conversations I have had with public figures in Israel who give the impression that in this generation, the break with Jewish tradition is intensifying, and that to many secular Israelis this constitutes a victory over tradition and religion. There are numerous examples of this: According to the Central Bureau of Statistics, the institution of Jewish marriage is on the wane, with many couples joined instead by some form of civil contract; the general populace evinces hatred for the religious public, especially the Haredim; increasing numbers do not observe kashrut and the Sabbath. Without Tora or the commandments, what remains? Only a historical memory, and even this may not interest someone who is already distanced from Judaism.

Moreover, a considerable portion of Israel's population today are not Jews at all: The Arab minority, thousands of foreign workers and the non-Jews who have immigrated to Israel under the Law of Return. These non-Jews are joined by increasing numbers who are full Jews but want to sever ties with Judaism and the Jewish people, and to build in Israel a "state of all its citizens." The situation is liable to get worse with the outbreak of peace: Security concerns will no longer justify Israel's isolation, and open borders will lead to the mingling of the Jewish population with others. In fifty years, in light of these trends, I fear that broad segments of the Israeli public will deny any type of affiliation with the Jewish people.

In addition to the danger of the loss of Jewish identity, we may anticipate the undermining of our relations with the Jews of the world. Because we are becoming a wealthy country, we may stop receiving economic support from the diaspora. In peacetime, Israel will no longer find its security threatened, and it may no longer get help from the Jewish lobby on Capitol Hill. Those Jews who severed their ties with Jewish tradition but maintained links with Israel out of concern for its survival will have lost all connection with the State of Israel.

As if all this were not enough, hostility toward the religious public in Israel is on the rise. In recent years, secular spokesmen have claimed time and again that religious coercion has intensified, but in fact the opposite is true: The social arrangement between the religious and the secular communities has begun to collapse. For example, cafés and movie theaters in Jerusalem have begun opening on the Sabbath—something that never happened in the past; the great majority of roads in Israel are open on the Sabbath, except for those in Haredi neighborhoods; shopping malls and commercial areas throughout the country operate on the Sabbath; stores selling pork are springing up everywhere; the status of the rabbinical courts has deteriorated, and their powers have been transferred to the civil courts. From one day to the next, Israel is becoming a secular state whose institutions function on the Sabbath, and which has no connection to Jewish tradition.

These things are happening in plain view, and I wonder: *What do people want from Orthodox and Haredi Jews?* That we cease to exist? That we cease to observe the commandments? The Gentiles did not succeed in this, nor has anything else brought about our annihilation. We have no desire to change our way of life, our clothing or the education of our children.

In my estimation, the problem is that the very existence of Haredi Jews bothers the secular public. We are strangers, we behave and dress differently, and our presence reminds them of the Jewish people, with which they do not want to be affiliated. The secular public wants to belong to a state that imposes no restrictions; they regard Judaism as something obsolete and antiquated.

This may all change with the advent of peace. Many more Jews in Israel may feel the need to fill their lives with Jewish spiritual content, for if there is no longer a need to fight for our survival as a state, it will not be worth our while to disappear via assimilation. Opening the borders, with the concomitant danger of losing Jewish identity, may actually bring about a return to Jewish sources. In Israel today, there are more students of Tora than at any time in history, with thousands more drawing closer to Judaism. As such, the vigor of the Jewish religious community may prove capable of overcoming

foreign influences, and fifty years from now the State of Israel may be better off than it is today.

The observant population is growing, and it will be this community that sets the tone for the state's continued existence as a Jewish state. But I do not have the scientific tools to determine demographic or cultural trends. And from the standpoint of values, the divine assurance of the continued survival of the Jewish people, the Tora and the commandments, offers no guarantee that the State of Israel will remain a Jewish state.

I hope that the Jewish people will be tolerant enough to preserve its unity as a people, because above all we must learn to live together. We, the Haredim, are the last to want to go to war with the secular population, because of our desire to focus on internal, spiritual endeavors in our own world. Nonetheless, tolerance will not be enough to preserve Israel as a Jewish state.

For the state to remain Jewish, something must set the people of Israel apart from the rest of the world. Since we have no culture other than the Jewish one, only close links with the religious Jewish sources that have accompanied this people's existence throughout history can set us apart. Historical memory alone cannot suffice to convince a person to shoulder the burden of affiliation with the Jewish people.

It is not essential that everyone be righteous and observe the 613 commandments; if the people respect Judaism, and continue to see it as the heritage of the Jewish people, that will be enough. For if Judaism becomes worthless in our estimation, then nothing will remain of Jewish identity.

The Jewish people will continue to exist, whether or not the state exists. The lack of a Jewish identity for the state, however, will preclude a bond between the State of Israel and diaspora Jewry, for the justification for this bond lies solely in Israel's Jewish identity. The danger, then, is that for lack of a connection to the Jews of the world and to Jewish tradition, the State of Israel will cease to be Jewish. And then, what will it be?

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