
Yitzhak Levy

That a small number of marginal figures in the country have departed from the nation's long-standing ideology in order to question the Jewishness of the Jewish state need not force us to re-examine our own values as set forth in the Declaration of Independence, nor to consider outrageous proposals to alter them.

Although I grant little weight to those few among us who have suddenly begun to question the need for a Jewish state, it would be wrong not to respond, or to refuse to address proposals to redefine the state as a "state of all its citizens," to repeal the Law of Return or, heaven forbid, to change the words of the national anthem.

Each time I read the Declaration of Independence, I rediscover a document that grants us (that is, those of us who do not seek to change the Declaration's contents) practical and moral assurance that there is no need to fear: Today, just as when David Ben-Gurion read the document aloud on May 14, 1948, the Declaration has a reason, a purpose and an abiding importance.

Yes, Israel is a Jewish national state which joined the nations of the world in order to impart to the Jewish people the right "to be masters of

its own fate ... in its own sovereign state,” as stated in the Declaration. This is the goal and purpose of a state that was established out of “the desire and courage to establish, on this basis, Hebrew independence in its full glory,” in the words of Itamar Ben-Avi in his book *At the Dawn of Our Independence*.

Today, after fifty years of national independence, we should not be looking to re-examine the values which underlay the Jewish people’s revival in its land. Instead we should be asking whether we have succeeded in creating a state that is not just a light unto the nations or even unto the diaspora, but first and foremost a light unto ourselves. Here, I must diverge somewhat from my congratulatory tone to present a few issues which have cast a shadow upon the Zionist enterprise as it stands today. I will not discuss security or foreign affairs, but will focus instead on whether we have not strayed from—or perhaps never attempted to fulfill—a number of the educational, social, cultural, philosophical and moral obligations which our founding fathers taught us.

Immigration. The first leaders of the state sought to realize a vision: To enable every Jew in the world to immigrate to Israel and acquire citizenship. From the six hundred thousand Jews who fought here for Israel’s independence, today almost five million Jews live in the Land of Israel, but the majority of the Jews in the world are still not with us. Moreover, fifty years after the Jewish state was founded, manifestations of anti-Semitism continue to appear throughout the world, even in the most democratic and enlightened of countries. This alone is reason enough to continue to urge diaspora Jewry to immigrate to Israel. Yet it seems that today’s Israel no longer offers Jews of the world the sort of challenge to immigrate which it once did.

Assimilation. Diaspora Jewry is grappling with the issue of Jewish continuity. This problem is not theirs alone, and must be of concern to any Jew. Despite the horror of the comparison, it must be said that after losing one-third of our people in the Holocaust, we are now losing generations of Jews who distance themselves from Judaism and assimilate into other peoples.

Again, it must be stressed, this painful problem is not the province of diaspora Jewry alone. In the State of Israel as well, Jews grow up distanced from Judaism, threatening not only themselves but all of us. And I am not referring here not to religious observance, but to a basic awareness of the values of Judaism, the Jewish bookshelf, the Jewish prayer book. If we do not succeed in passing these values on to the next generation of Israelis, we will have been willful accomplices in this tragic loss of Jewish values, a loss which is already upon us. Reversing this trend must be one of the central goals of the educational system in Israel, as it is in the diaspora, and as has already begun to be the case.

Democracy. Israel is a democratic state, but the democratic values of our people need to be strengthened. The assassination of Prime Minister Rabin demonstrates that much educational work must be done in order to inculcate values that will ensure the well-being and strength of the budding Israeli democracy. There are still those among us who have accepted neither the rights nor the obligations of democracy. Such must be an ongoing, permanent educational mission.

Tolerance. The fabric which joins the various sectors of Israeli society is still fragile and vulnerable. The ethnic tensions that in the past threatened social cohesiveness have virtually disappeared, but the tensions between religious and secular Israelis have grown and become more acute than ever. It is unfortunate that in the state's fiftieth year, these tensions have reached the level of a cultural war that is being waged in the streets. In the coming years, both the secular and the religious will have to distance themselves from the tribalist and isolationist elements that have come to the fore. Both sides will have to tear down the walls of separation and forge a pluralistic approach to relating to one another in a spirit of tolerance and mutual consideration. Along with others, I am currently engaged in formulating a new social covenant which will serve as a consensual basis for dialogue and coexistence between religious and secular Jews. I am convinced that, despite the periodic declarations of war from one group or another, we will all learn to live with what is often called "the right to respect, and the duty to respect."

Society. On the scale of national priorities, we have pushed social issues to the side; this is an un-Jewish, unjust and untrue message. In too many areas, our social sensitivity has virtually disappeared. I would want to see the State of Israel much more conscious of the social, educational and cultural needs of the weaker segments of the population; more attentive to the requirements of the elderly, in the spirit of the verse “do not forsake me in old age” (Psalms 71:9); more active in taking initiatives to reduce unemployment; and more assertive in combating problems such as the situation of children at risk, difficulties faced by the mentally and physically disabled and other disadvantaged populations, violence in the family and in society, and road fatalities, which have long assumed the proportions of a national tragedy.

Israeli Arabs. The founders of the State of Israel invited its non-Jewish residents to “participate in building the state, on the basis of full and equal citizenship.” This proclamation, to which we committed ourselves in the Declaration of Independence, has yet to be fully realized. We must work to improve the application of these words from the Declaration in all realms of life. The Education Ministry has already undertaken a new five-year plan to reduce inequalities between the Jewish and Arab educational systems. These principles also apply to Israel’s Druze citizens, who share with us in the defense of the state.

Fifty years after gaining independence, we have proven that the Jewish people has the right and ability “to be master of its own fate ... in its own sovereign state.” The State of Israel has indeed placed itself “on the map” in all spheres of life: Science, medicine, industry, communications, agriculture, education and culture. We may say proudly, and without a trace of cynicism, that we have built the strong infrastructure of an advanced, modern country that is up to the challenges of the twenty-first century. Now, at the beginning of our second fifty years, we must firmly establish a moral, spiritual and cultural infrastructure for the state and for Israeli society. We must fight any attempt to limit or negate, even to the smallest degree, the Jewish character of the state.

The State of Israel was not handed to us on a silver platter: For fifty years, we have been concerned primarily with building the state and all that that entails. Now, Jewish history challenges us to rejuvenate the people's spirit, its connection to its heritage and its identification with the country. The laws, symbols and national institutions we have created are strong enough to allow us to turn now to the problem of Jewish continuity, both here and in the diaspora. We are ready to set out on this venture, and we are equal to the challenge.

R. Yitzhak Levy is Minister of Education, Culture and Sport of the State of Israel.