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A state is one type of organization. The life expectancy of organizations depends upon their ability to adapt to changing circumstances. Those which fossilize are doomed to fail. If we carefully examine our basic assumptions about the nature of our situation, Israel will not become a fossil. The Zionist ideology generated a diverse political movement and equipped us with a worldview that proved its effectiveness, but it is now obsolete, and adherence to it puts our future at risk.

Different interpretations are given to the term “ideology.” I rely upon one formulated by the critic Lionel Trilling, who suggested that ideology is a type of formulaic observance, a means of expressing and honoring a complex of deeply held beliefs that derive from our emotional need for security. Ideology is a practical tool upon which we rely for our sense of stability:

It describes us to ourselves, explains to us our place in the world, and guides us in our path to the future.

Since ideology is embedded in the patterns of our soul, it frequently works against us without our being aware. This happens when the assumptions upon which our ideology is based have been eroded by reality, but the need for emotional security impels us to adhere to it even after it has outlived its usefulness. Reliance on harmful ideologies commonly involves a measure of cognitive dissonance: The tortured consciousness refuses to see the situation as it really is, and clings to its own picture of reality; the ingrained ideology, fighting for its life, rejects the creation of an alternative belief.

Most Israelis seem to be in this situation. We are already stricken with doubts about our founding ideology, but we have not yet agreed upon a replacement. In the meantime, we engage in patchwork: Each sector comes up with its own “true meaning” of Zionist ideology, and every group is convinced that its interpretation, and no other, is the correct one. I am certainly not immune to such a failing.

To summarize my understanding of Zionism: Its purpose was to rescue the Jewish people. We survived for thousands of years without our own territory, but the changing circumstances in which the majority of our people lived threatened our physical and cultural survival. The blossoming of nationalism intensified anti-Semitism and dangerously altered its nature, as the weakening of religious belief led to a flood of assimilation. Thus, Herzl’s formula was meant to overcome two dangers: As masters in our own state, we could both defend ourselves against physical threats and ensure our people’s continuity, despite our children’s alienation from the religious elements of their culture.

I am not blind to the contradiction apparent in this view: Zionism, indeed, is built upon memories implanted in a religious understanding of our history. The contradiction, however, is easily resolved: The circumstances attending the birth of historical movements do not obligate the present or the future. To determine what we must do now, we have no objective need to reconstruct the circumstances that led to our current condition. Zionism

created a new reality, and we are obligated only to this reality, not to the mother who gave birth to it.

But there is a second problem, more troublesome than the first: Zionism was formulated in the wake of the European national liberation movements, but by the time it was fulfilled, nationalist sentiment had already lost much of its significance. Nationalism and the desire to express it in political terms will not disappear quickly, but in the progressive reaches of the world, the nation-state has been superseded by the state of citizens, the formula for success in the current chapter of human history. This formula has triumphed because it befits a world of wide-open borders, in which information, goods and people move about freely.

It is worth mentioning that the Jews were not always considered a “people,” even by themselves. For despite our pretensions to memory and our tendency to remind, we frequently disregard memories that do not suit our ideology; we have forgotten the counterclaim to Zionism: That we are not a people at all, but rather adherents to one of the three revealed religions. This latter was the prevailing view in the nineteenth century among the Jews of Central and Western Europe. I say this in order to illustrate the point that categories such as “people” depend upon consciousness and intention, while what is “self-evident” depends upon circumstance.

After the decisive victory of our claim to peoplehood, we struggled and sacrificed many Jewish lives until we actualized our right to a national territory. Because of this, we will not easily admit to dissolution of the national sentiment. We blame our weakness on the failures of education, while attempting to rekindle religious longings. This effort bears fruit among minority groups, but its success exacts a heavy price in encouraging isolation, xenophobia, anti-democratic views and, frequently, restrictions on general education. This price is inevitable, and whoever thinks it worth paying would do well to understand its full import. To be a part of the dominant historical trend, we cannot maintain a state led by a Jewish tribe whose religion—and, specifically, its most conservative version—defines its nationality, and where this definition of Jewish nationality, in turn, determines civil status.

No, the Zionist ideology has not been dethroned because the national sentiment has become weak, but because the historical role of Zionism has come to an end. The majority of Jews in the world have not taken advantage of the opportunity history has offered them: They choose to be Jews at home, and American, or French, or British when they go out. Put more precisely: Many choose not to be Jews at all, in practice, because in the open market of ideas, the Jewish option has been dealt a severe blow. All the demographers agree that within the next two or three generations the number of Jews in the diaspora will diminish greatly, and the overwhelming majority of Jews will live in Israel. There are no Jewish communities left in need of rescue—or, to be honest, by whose rescue we may rescue ourselves—and unless we decide to bring to Israel the six million Pathans living in Afghanistan, the mission of Aliya will have come to an end.

Any other missions we may call “Zionist” are really no different from what every country takes upon itself. Adorning them with the adjective “Zionist” is no more than a public relations ploy, undertaken by those seeking to take advantage of the word’s fading charm. The settlements in Judea and Samaria, for example, are not a manifestation of Zionism but rather of colonization, like that of the Italians in Alto Adige, the German-speaking region in the northern cuff of the Italian boot, or the Cossack settlements in Asian Russia. I say this neither to praise nor to condemn, merely to maintain that clinging to “Zionism” blurs our vision.

As the Zionist chapter in our annals comes to an end, we find ourselves in possession of a bizarre country, dominated by a ridiculous Zionist rhetoric which alienates much of the public, possibly even the majority of our citizens. About one-fifth of Israel’s population are Arabs, and another seven percent foreign workers. The majority of each group, given the opportunity, would choose to integrate into the fabric of Israeli life, but “Zionism” does not leave them room. Hundreds of thousands among the immigrants from Russia are not Jews and do not share in the collective historical memory. In other words, at least a third of the population adheres to Israeliness, but cannot formulate its civic consciousness via the Jewish,

Zionist narrative. A considerable number of the Jews born in Israel have difficulty doing so, as well.

I have not been granted the ability to foresee this country's character after another half-century, and I prefer not to make do with standard wishes for "peace, progress, prosperity, unity and the Return to Zion." I therefore have chosen to express my concrete desire, the result of a sober analysis of the future relationship between the citizens of Israel and their state. For this to be a relationship based on genuine feeling and not false convention, the bond between citizen and state—both the emotional tie and the formal commitment—must be based on a democratic constitution, not on a national-religious myth. Zionism will be replaced by Israeliness, and the laws of religion will give way to the religion of law. Obviously, the Law of Return will be one victim of this approach, but the importance of this law will wane in any event, for want of candidates for Aliya.

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