
A.B. Yehoshua

The State of Israel was given by the world to the Jews, on the condition that it be the state of the Jewish people. The moral right to establish the state in 1948 via a United Nations charter followed from the determination that this state would solve both the problem of the six hundred thousand Jews resident in the land at the time, as well as the Jewish problem itself, by granting all the Jews of the world the possibility of a political haven (whose need was never as clear as after the Holocaust), thereby enabling every

Jew to live under his own sovereignty and in his own territory. The real goal was the normalization of the Jewish people.

In this sense, the Law of Return is not only a law of the State of Israel, nor even merely a Basic Law. Rather, it constitutes the moral basis for the establishment and existence of the state among nations—a contract between us and the world. Consequently, and despite the proposals for its cancellation that are raised from time to time, the Law of Return must remain in force in the future as well. (Of course, certain amendments could be introduced into the Law of Return, such as a waiting period of a number of years between immigration and the granting of citizenship, mainly because there are many people today who seek to take advantage of this law in order to move to Israel and to receive citizenship with no real effort, only to leave shortly thereafter.)

Just as the Law of Return is the fundamental basis for the existence of Israel, we should demand that the Palestinians apply a similar law to their state when it is established. Such a state could not make claims about refugees who should be allowed to return to the territory of the State of Israel, since it, as the Palestinian state, would be responsible for resolving the problem of the Palestinian people on its own, and within its territory. Practically speaking, I do not believe that a final status agreement between Israel and the Palestinians would have any chance of succeeding if the Palestinians did not expressly declare that their state would solve all the problems of the Palestinian refugees and of the Palestinian people.

Such a step would also be necessary for a proper relationship between the State of Israel and its Arab citizens. In principle, the existence of the Law of Return, and the fact that Israel is the state of the Jewish people, are not inconsistent with Israel's also being a state of all its citizens. The Israeli assumption always was, and must continue to be, that its Arab inhabitants are full citizens, entitled to full rights, including the right to vote and to hold office. In economic and social terms, Arabs have indeed suffered from discrimination, partly the result of war, partly by cruel people who seek to take

advantage of a weak population. It should be stated in no uncertain terms that this discrimination must be corrected. Most important, however, is to stress the fact that such prejudice has no basis in Israeli law. There is no law which states that less money will be transferred to the city of Um-el-Fahm than to Ra'anana or Kfar Saba. Moreover, legally, the Arab minority in our midst enjoys full civil rights in every sense of the term. Correcting discrimination is incumbent upon us, but as an ordinary political matter, like any other political reform in any other country.

Beyond this, the necessary reforms will be established upon firm ground, because on the whole the relationship between Jews and the Arab minority in Israel—and especially considering the smoldering volcano that is the Arab-Israeli conflict—has proven to be relatively good, particularly in comparison with other national conflicts in the world. This relationship has withstood very difficult tests, both from Arab and Jewish sides, and has weathered them well.

The need for a nation-state to come to terms with the presence of a national minority is not a new one, nor one unique to Israel. Many democratic nation-states have a resident national minority, and from their experience we can learn how to handle this problem in the best possible manner. The most successful method has been to grant the national minority the right to cultural self-expression in its language, its heritage and other related domains, in addition to normal civil rights. When the agreement between Israel and the Palestinians is reached, the time will have come to draw up a covenant between the Jewish majority and the Arab minority within Israel. In this covenant, the latter would accept the fact that Israel is a Jewish state, with a Jewish majority, that its symbols are Jewish, its anthem is Jewish, and so on. At the same time, the Arab minority would be granted special national rights, or, in other words, cultural autonomy (Israeli Arabs are not concentrated in a single region, and therefore this autonomy could not have a territorial dimension). One example would be the idea of a state educational system run in Arabic, in which the pupils also studied their own

heritage and anything else pertaining to their national identity and culture. Such a cultural autonomy, in addition to full rights as citizens, would compensate Israeli Arabs for their being a national minority within a majority composed of the members of another people. This model assumes the presence of a Palestinian state alongside Israel, since full expression of Palestinian nationalism will be given in the former: Israeli Arabs will be able to participate in this Palestinian national experience in some form or other, just as Jews throughout the world share in the national experience of the State of Israel.

In such a state of affairs, the correct balance could be struck between the rights of the Arab minority and Israel's identity as a Jewish nation-state. The national character of Israel, as a Jewish state, would be expressed in the Israeli ethos, and in those inalienable assets of Jewish heritage and culture. The character of such an ethos would be the product of our Jewishness, just as is the case for the French and English. What creates the Frenchness of France? It is made by the French people, by France's past, by French history, and also the buildings, eating habits, modes of dress and all the national and moral traditions that have accumulated over the course of time. In the same fashion, all that the Jews have done throughout three thousand years to the present will serve as raw materials for the making of an expanded Jewish identity for Israel.

Just as the king and queen in England must belong to the Anglican church, because of the place of the church in Britain's ceremonies and national symbols—and just as Englishmen who are atheists accept these particular symbols as part of the corpus of their national symbolism—so too will the Jewish religion occupy a similar position for us. As a result of our stay in the diaspora, the Jewish religion assumed that our national sentiment could not be expressed in architecture, in possessions, or even in language, as they are expressed for other peoples. For us, everything was concentrated within religious texts, and therefore religion is today one of the primary sources of Jewish culture, of Jewish history. As a result, even complete

atheists such as myself find in it a source for the components of their personal identity.

We should relate in similar fashion to an issue such as the Sabbath. The concept of the day of rest is fundamentally religious; in Sweden, for example, it was decided, following the Christian tradition, that work was not to be done on Sunday. This is the law of the land, even though Sweden is a completely secular country. In Israel, the Sabbath must be established as the day of rest on a similar basis, with all the significance that that entails. It must be defined by law as the day on which every person who so desires (and not necessarily for religious reasons) may rest from his labors. Yet at the same time, public transportation and recreational and cultural activities, for example, must be allowed, in order to enable everyone to spend their day of rest as they see fit.

All the things that I have mentioned—Jewish historical and cultural history, the place of religion in the state, the attitude toward the Sabbath—are subjects on which the Israeli public may reach a broad consensus. Under no circumstance is the “Israeli” to be placed in opposition to the “Jewish,” for this would be a grave error. The Israeli does not stand in opposition to the Jewish, and the two terms are not contradictory. In my opinion, the Israeli Jew contains within himself that which is Jewish. In a sense, the Israeli is the complete Jew.

The issue of Israel as a Jewish state frequently leads to the question regarding the “normality” or “abnormality” of Israel, a question that I reject out of hand. The term “normality” has no meaning when applied to countries. Norway is not Sweden, and Sweden is not Denmark; each country is a country, and, politically, they do not possess normality or abnormality. A country such as England was peaceful and tranquil at the beginning of the century, and then experienced two World Wars. When was it normal, and when was it not normal? In 1933, Germany was a different country from what it was in 1924, and a different country again in 1946, yet it was still Germany.

What is a normal country? One that is master of its fate. When speaking of the normalization of the Jews, the intent was that the Jews would be responsible for their actions, masters of their fate, directing themselves, and not dependent upon others. This is the only normality. Normality is not about the character or history of a country, but rather about the existence of a sovereign political framework. In this sense, Israel is a normal country, like any other.

Our being a normal country, however, does not mean that Israel cannot have a special message that it seeks to give to the world. Israel must be a light unto the nations, which I interpret to mean that it must make a substantial contribution to specific countries in the world, in the effort to contribute, together with others, to the narrowing of the divide between the first world and the third.

This must be a shared Jewish project led by Israel, with the aim of establishing an expeditionary corps composed of Israelis (Jews and Arabs) and diaspora Jews that will offer to needy third-world countries teachers in various fields, such as English, mathematics, chemistry, physics, music, and so forth, as their needs require. This will make an important contribution in the educational and intellectual realms, in which the Jewish world and Israel are blessed with experience and abundance.

Within the context of such a corps, we will make our contribution to the world and realize our purpose. It is crucial for a state to have a purpose, like the French who seek to disseminate their culture, like the Americans who are concerned with democracy throughout the world, like the Scandinavians who are heavily involved in advancing human rights in different countries. In general, it is important that nations take concrete measures throughout the world to advance values that are important for them and, of course, be willing to pay for them out of their own pocket.

The expeditionary corps will be an especially appropriate contribution for Israel, since its creation will bestow upon us a mix of honor and duty: Honor, that after the terrible, bloody century we have endured, we have not

despaired, and instead have chosen to spread progress and hope throughout the world; duty, that after having rehabilitated ourselves, thanks in no small measure to the help we received from the rest of the world, we will now begin to give to others.

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