
Zerah Warhaftig

Unfortunately, it is all too evident that no consensus exists today among the various segments of the Jewish people, not even about fundamental issues such as Zionism and the goals of the State of Israel. Undoubtedly, this lack of consensus is closely related to the profound and extreme changes the Jewish people have undergone over the past fifty years. It should be recalled, however, that long before the establishment of the state, profound differences of opinion existed. Many Jews in the diaspora chose to preserve the unique character of their people, while others believed they should assimilate. For example, an assimilated Polish Jew, whose diary was published in Pnina Meislich's book *Both Jew and Pole*, thought that the Jews of Poland should assimilate, even though they numbered some three-and-a-half-million, making up fully twelve percent of the country.

Against such a background, at a young age I was already dreaming about the Jews setting up their own state, an act that would bring about the "Return to Zion" and solve the existential problems of the Jewish people in the diaspora. This vision also accorded with the European reality I was born into and grew up in. Mine was a world of wars and pogroms, in which I was persecuted repeatedly as a Jewish refugee, in the wake of the Kishinev pogrom, the First World War, the Russo-Polish War and the Second World War. Educated in the teachings of R. Zvi Hirsch Kalischer and Theodor Herzl, I became an active Zionist. I participated in Zionist Congresses and volunteered in the Ha'noar V'hehalutz movement, which encouraged immigration to Palestine. I took part in the rescue of thousands of Jewish refugees from Vilna and Kovno during the Holocaust, and aided the immigration of displaced European Jews between 1945 and 1947. Then I immigrated in 1947, became a member of the National Committee and Israel's Provisional Government, and was fortunate enough to take part in formulating and

drafting Israel's Declaration of Independence. Finally, I was among the thirty-seven public representatives of Israel's diverse social and political sphere who were granted the historic honor of signing the Declaration of Independence of the new Jewish state. (At the time of the official signing, I was trapped in a besieged Jerusalem and had to confirm my consent to sign by telephone; it was another three weeks before I, along with five other Jerusalemites, made it to Tel Aviv and actually signed the Declaration.)

The Declaration of Independence is significant with respect to the current lack of consensus among the Jewish people on the fundamental issues, to which I alluded above, because it and the Law of Return are the only documents the first Knesset passed unanimously, with the overwhelming support of representatives from all segments of the population. From the Haredim and national-religious to avowed secularists, from Communists to those on the Right—thirty-seven individuals representing every segment of Israeli society signed the Declaration of Independence in concert. Attaining this unanimous approval required compromise from all sides and a willingness to dispense with controversial formulations. For example, in place of the phrase “placing our trust in God,” the Declaration reads, “placing our trust in the Rock of Israel,” to which the secular and the Communists could assent. This shows that at decisive moments on fundamental issues, across-the-board agreement can be attained, provided there is a common goal and mutual willingness to understand one another and make concessions.

As formulated by the Declaration of Independence, the State of Israel is a Jewish state, which respects all its citizens and aspires to peace. This accords with the words of the prophet Isaiah: “For the Teaching shall come forth from Zion, the word of the Eternal from Jerusalem ... and they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not take up sword against nation; they shall never again know war.” (Isaiah 2:3-4) The same prophecy is repeated in the book of Micah, with the added words: “But every man shall sit beneath his vine and fig tree.... Though all the peoples walk each in the name of its gods, we will walk in the name of the Eternal our God.” (Micah 4:4-5) Micah's addition teaches tolerance toward non-Jews.

Judaism is not a missionary religion, nor is it warlike against those holding other beliefs, but it will wage war against wicked idolatry.

The Declaration of Independence explicitly regards members of minority groups within Israel as citizens who enjoy equal rights, regardless of religion, race or gender—as the Tora states concerning “the stranger who dwells among you.” We never sought special privileges for the state’s Jewish citizens but instead, like most countries in the world (with the exception of the Arab states), chose to be a state of all its citizens. This does not undermine Israel’s explicit establishment from the beginning as the state of the Jews, within the context of national rights. Israel certainly seeks to maintain a Jewish majority, and to continue the Jewish spirit of its political community.

When statehood was proclaimed, many of my colleagues and I hoped that the Declaration of Independence would lead to an Israel that is more Jewish, national and religious than it is today. On the other hand, we were not blessed with the gift of prophecy, and could not have guessed how beautifully the young Jewish state would develop. The Sages relate that when Moses was forbidden to enter the Land of Israel after having led the people in the wilderness for forty years, he went to a high place to look out over Israel and in his mind’s eye saw it as it would be in the distant future. Lacking Moses’ ability, we could not imagine that within such a short time the State of Israel would grow from 600,000 Jews to five million; that it would develop agricultural methods that would be a model for all the peoples of the world, after the Jews in the diaspora had hardly worked in this area; that it would have such military and economic might, and more students of Tora than the diaspora has had in the past two centuries. Much remains to be improved, but in many respects Israel has exceeded all our prophecies.

I anticipate that this country will enjoy a great future in its next half-century. Spiritually, I still await the realization of my dream that Israel will be a biblical state, with a great Jewish treasure of good people striving to observe the commandments of the Tora to the greatest extent possible. Even when things are difficult, it is important to continue to hope and dream that

peace and good relations will yet reign among neighbors, among people, and between man and God. And I hope we continue to dream, since as long as we dream, hope is never lost.

On the subject of hope, I will end with a parable. After the Holocaust I helped organize the Tora Va'avoda conference in Cracow, Poland. Several young men and a young woman were on their way to this conference when a band of Polish Gentiles attacked them, killing a number of them. The girl was carrying papers attesting she was a Gentile, and her friends urged her to show her papers and save herself by telling the attackers that she wasn't Jewish. She refused, saying that during the Holocaust she had been forced to hide, but now she would no longer do this: She preferred to stand with her friends, whatever the price.

After the Holocaust, the sense that the Jews are the chosen people, for better or for worse, was firmly believed not only by the few remaining Jews of Poland, but by Jews the world over. Even the Communists—like my friend Meir Vilner, who also signed the Declaration of Independence—believed that something special in the Jewish people binds the fate of its sons and daughters together. It may be because of this that non-Jews regard the Jews in such a negative light.

This feeling of a shared fate led to a universal agreement to infuse the Declaration of Independence with Jewish principles. In the future, such an outlook could be useful again in building consensus and cooperation among all segments of the population on issues pertaining to our common fate. I am convinced that within every Jew resides this “Jewish spark,” which at times shows itself and at other times is hidden—but can never be extinguished completely. And I believe that this Jewish spark will shine forth once again.

Dr. Zerah Warhaftig was a signatory to Israel's Declaration of Independence, and has served as a government minister and Member of Knesset. This article is based on an interview with Dr. Warhaftig.