
Gadi Taub

The question of the Jewishness of the State of Israel does not elicit an especially fiery response among Israelis today. The reason, I believe, is that the state's Jewish character is no longer in doubt; or, if it is, then only in those who approach the topic on the theoretical, intellectual level. Without drawing a careful line between nationalism and religion, between Israeliness and Jewishness, most of Israel's Jews feel that the fact of their Jewishness is self-evident. Now that Israeli Jews have their language and territory, the Jewish-Israeli stance—that is, the cumulative symbols of Jewish-Israeli identity—has grown to resemble the national identity we recognize in other countries: We do not wake up in the morning and ask ourselves whether we are still Jewish-Israelis, for the same reasons that a Frenchman does not question his Frenchness.

If this intuitive feeling has been undermined to some degree in any stratum in Israeli society—and here too, in my opinion, only to a limited extent—it is mostly among leftist intellectuals, who are uncomfortable with the notion of national sentiment. This is not a coincidence, but part of a broader issue which remains, for now, unresolved: That is, not whether the State of Israel will remain a Jewish state, but rather what kind of Jewish state it will be. More specifically, of what will its Judaism—the content of the national sentiment upon which the state is built—be comprised.

The alienation of Israel's intelligentsia from the state's Jewish and national symbols has come about primarily because both Judaism as a religion and Israeliness as a national sentiment have taken on an extreme nationalistic color. Since 1967, the delicate equilibrium between the two components of the Zionist movement—Jewish nationalism, on the one hand, and the vision of a democratic and just society, on the other—has been ruptured.

The national-Jewish component has come to threaten the democratic character of Israel. Until 1967, even if in theory nationalism and democracy were at odds, it was possible, at least in practice, to take a pragmatic approach towards the question. Thus, for example, one could grant equal civil status to Arab citizens—in real terms, not just theoretically—even though they could not fully share our national sentiment. In an optimal arrangement, they could live as Jewish minorities do in the Netherlands, England or the United States. Cultural autonomy could compensate them for what Israel’s nationalism could not provide.

As the issue of the occupation continues to erode the common base of Israeli life, however, the possibility of maintaining a balance between nationalism and democracy recedes. Most Israelis feel they must choose—in practice, by supporting a political party, if not in theory—between nationalism and the vision of a just, democratic society. Here, as well, instincts, emotions, associations and stereotypes play a considerable role. When the Orthodox, who for most of us are still the authoritative representatives of Judaism, rallied around the “national” camp, the Israeli collective consciousness began to identify the Jewish religion with the nationalist Right. When an overwhelming majority of the religious population mobilized against returning the occupied territories, many Israelis felt not only that extreme nationalism was a threat to their fundamental humanist values, but that the Jewish religion itself led inexorably to violence and oppression.

What happened to Jewish theology—or at least what the public at large, both secular and traditional, understood to be happening—played a significant role in this process. It is not a coincidence that a large segment of the secular intelligentsia perceive the Haredim and the settlers, the two major groups automatically identified with the Jewish religion, as representing the forces of darkness.

In the case of the settlers, this is not difficult to understand. The disciples of R. Kook established the territorial integrity of the Land of Israel as a theological tenet that forced aside other aspects of Judaism, especially its humanistic face. Critics within Gush Emunim say on occasion that

commandments dealing with the relationship between man and God have come to override those that deal with the relationship between man and man. But it is only a tamed, partial description of the extreme, violent doctrine of redemption that has painted religion in bold shades of nationalist frenzy. The Haredim, on the other hand, have always been perceived as reactionary remnants of the ghetto-world, members of a community that does not share in the progressive, democratic worldview. All this has made it tempting for the leftist to pair Judaism with anti-democratic beliefs, to connect religion with discrimination, injustice and xenophobia.

Gradually, the opposing camps dug in their positions and the boundaries hardened. The stronger the link between Judaism and the occupation became (symbolized most conspicuously by the knitted *kippa*), the more the secular intelligentsia distanced itself from the “religious.” The more intense the peace camp’s attacks on religion became, the further the religious groups moved into the political Right, where they felt, and rightly so, that the potential for protecting religion was greater. On both sides the bonds joining Judaism with extreme nationalism, and religion with occupation and anti-humanism, were reinforced.

Recently both the religious and the secular have begun to show signs of rebellion against this tendency. The desire of the educated among the Left to “return to the Jewish bookshelf,” although at times a superficial sentiment, expresses something much more profound: It shows an awareness that we were wrong to accept the views of Gush Emunim, Habad and R. Shach as the final word on what Judaism is. From the religious side emerged groups such as Meimad, which also refuses to identify Judaism with the occupation. These are the first buds and, though still tender, they seem to be the result of profound forces that will exert greater influence in the future. Judaism possesses profound humanistic elements, and nothing necessarily binds it to extreme nationalism. It is therefore inevitable that we will eventually acknowledge the errors which the heated emotions of Israel’s political debate have embedded in our consciousness.

There are reasons and even a need to encourage these beginnings. As a leftist I suggest to my peers—for reasons both pragmatic (if they ever want

to return to power) and ideological—that they work on reconstructing the spiritual world of Zionism, not deconstructing it. Given that Jewish nationhood is an established fact, the prettified alienation of intellectuals from Judaism and nationalism is no more than an empty arrogance which renders them irrelevant, cutting them off from both Israeli politics and the spirit of the Israeli public. As a supporter of territorial compromise who is sympathetic to the goals of the Palestinian national movement, it seems that acknowledging the Palestinians' national sentiment while denying the parallel, Jewish-Israeli sensibility amounts to self-deception.

I know this self-deception from my own experience—and emotionally, not just in the realm of ideas. It begins with falsely identifying Judaism with the occupation, and confusing patriotism with extreme nationalism. If the Left truly wants to return to the political and societal arena, it must devote at least some of its intellectual energy to uprooting these notions. The reconstruction of the spiritual world of Jewish nationalism must begin with understanding that Judaism is not necessarily what R. Ovadia Yosef or Hanan Porat says it is. They do not have a monopoly on the Jewish bookshelf, and there is no reason to accept their extreme and distorted interpretation of the books on it. By the same token, nationalism is not necessarily what Benjamin Netanyahu and Ariel Sharon say it is.

We can now return to the question I posed at the outset: What kind of country will Israel be, and based on what type of Judaism? The answer seems to depend on the nature of the connection between Judaism and democracy. If the Left does not want to hand Israel over to Jewish fundamentalism, it must work toward offering another interpretation of Judaism. Because in the end, reconstructing a shared spiritual world will require a renewed synthesis of national sentiment with the democratic impulse. Democracy must therefore build upon the Jewish identity, and not try to uproot it.

Gadi Taub is an author and cultural critic living in New York City. His most recent book is A Dispirited Rebellion: Essays on Contemporary Israeli Culture (Hakibbutz Hame'uhad, 1997).