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## Michel Abitbol

The State of Israel must be Jewish, liberal and democratic. It must boast a Jewish identity and a connection to the history of the Jewish people that are unshakable, together with the will to further Jewish creativity in Hebrew literature, as well as religious and halachic thought. In addition to its Jewish character, it must grant equal rights to all its citizens, and equal standing to the various streams of Judaism—along the lines of what has

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become familiar in many countries which see no contradiction between the idea of a “nation-state” and the reality of a “state of all its citizens.”

France, for example, is in reality a Christian country, even though its constitution makes no mention of this. Its Christian character is expressed in its adopting Christian holidays, and in the religious tradition from which much of its literature and art are derived; politically, however, the country maintains a strict separation of church and state, and every citizen lives and practices according to his chosen religious beliefs and rites. Other countries, such as the United States, openly proclaim an association with the Christian religion, but their constitutions ensure the complete separation of church and state, and grant freedom of religion to the adherents of all religions. The fundamental element that safeguards freedom of religion in these countries is a democratic form of government, which grants equal rights to all citizens and minorities regardless of religion, race or gender. Beyond this, any survey will show that the world’s most successful countries are, by and large, variegated liberal-democratic states, while the world’s backward countries are unvaried in their political regimes. Thus, Israel should adopt the successful model and maintain its democratic-universal character.

History also shows that socioeconomic prosperity is greater in social-democratic countries that are characterized by social justice and narrow socioeconomic gaps among the different strata. In Israel, the vacuum in discourse and action on this subject is being filled by political actors such as Shas. The national order of priorities should be changed, with greater investment in education and culture, as is common, for example, in Western European countries, which dedicate as much as one percent of GNP to cultural affairs. Education to strengthen and deepen social values, and to enrich the breadth of cultural activity, will help guarantee a liberal, democratic and creative Jewish state.

Another important issue is the relationship among the different streams of Jewish religious thought, belief and practice. A glaring fact of Jewish history is that the periods of Jewish independence in the Land of Israel have

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been few and brief. The Jewish monarchy fell due to deadly conflicts among rival factions, conflicts centered on theological and religious differences, which led to the destruction of the Second Temple. Given this, the separation of religion from politics in Israel, and the restoration of religion to the social realm, can only be seen as beneficial.

Jews in the diaspora show great tolerance for the various streams of Judaism. They are more sensitive to the importance of civil rights for minorities because they, too, are a minority in their countries. In Israel, however, where Jews are the majority, such sensitivity is all too rare.

Judaism has an open universal aspect, as well as a closed ethnic side. Only by adopting and expressing the universal face of Judaism will we be able to ensure democracy in Israel. Among other things, this will make possible equal rights for every religious movement in Judaism: Reform, Conservative and others. Religion in Israel has become more extreme in recent years, with marked intolerance from some quarters toward non-Orthodox movements. Despite this, I hope we will succeed in returning to a pluralistic view of Judaism.

While contending with the challenges of democracy and the relationship between religion and state, we must make a major, concerted effort to transform Israel into the center of Jewish-Israeli creativity. It was not in order to recreate the tribal life of old that we returned from exile. To strengthen Jewish identity in Israel and abroad, we must look to the future, not just the past.

The centers of spiritual creativity used to be in the diaspora, but now that diaspora Jews have acclimated to their countries of residence and are developing their local culture, the State of Israel must become the international center of Jewish creativity. This is especially so since diaspora Jews regard the State of Israel as the focus for nurturing those values that strengthen Jewish identity. Many young Jews come to Israel for periods of a few months or years in order to experience the Israeli environment and reality, in the belief that the State of Israel guarantees Jewish historical, cultural and religious continuity.

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Zionism in the past was dedicated primarily to the establishment of a Jewish state; of secondary importance was the cultural development of this state, the investment in education in values, and the effort to ensure that this state would be preserved for future generations. Now that Israel indubitably exists, the time has come to find the ways and means to make possible its continuation as a Jewish, liberal and democratic state.

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