
Elliott Abrams

As the century ends, Israeli elites are rushing to enlist as faithful children of the Enlightenment: Always ready to put universalism over particularism, avid to turn away from the demands of peoplehood, ashamed of the primitive religion practiced by too many of their kin. Here is new proof that Tel Aviv is behind the times; for in the main Western intellectual currents, the failure of the Enlightenment is clearer every day. The notion that mankind would “progress” away from religious faith and national loyalties toward a more advanced stage of existence is dead. Even intellectuals who lack religious faith acknowledge that both history and science are undermining the vision of the *philosophes* and reminding us of deeper verities.

The first thing to be said about Israel as a Jewish state is that this is the only firm and reliable foundation the state can have. No others exist. National identity, pride and loyalty will be built from this base, or they will

erode. Just as French schoolchildren must learn of “nos ancêtres les Gaulois” and Americans learn to venerate “our Founding Fathers,” Israelis must use the past they have rather than seeking to imagine a “new man” who would be beyond such atavistic attachments.

The role of religion in such a state will always give rise to argument. In part, this is because the Israeli reference point is too often America, where the state (via the courts, which are reflecting secular elite opinions) has tried for decades to marginalize religion. This interpretation of the American Constitution is false, and already the Supreme Court is changing it to reflect once again the centrality of religion to America. The increasingly fragile American “wall of separation” between religion and state is also unique: European models, even from “laicque” France, evince a far closer cooperation. The example of England demonstrates that a state church can be no threat at all to religious freedom—although it also shows that official support may be stultifying to that state church.

But the foreign models are only somewhat relevant, for there is no other religion just like Judaism, and no other people just like the Jews. In the next few decades, as American Jewry shrinks, Israel will become the home of the world’s largest Jewish population and should become the center of world Jewish life for the first time since the fall of the Second Temple. It has not filled this role in the period since 1948: Rather, in these decades it has been an object of worry, pity and charity, if also of curiosity and great pride. But with greater economic resources and a larger population, and the clear erosion in the size of the American Jewish population, Israel-diaspora relations may be transformed.

May. If Israelis begin to rely upon mere nationality as the basis of their identity, there will be nothing upon which to build relations with Jews using different passports. In the diaspora, the identity-continuity debate turns on whether to rely upon Jewish peoplehood or to embrace the religion of Judaism. And the answer is clear, for in the various melting pots where diaspora Jews live, a separate sense of peoplehood is impossible to maintain

without religion. But in Israel, lack of religiosity will not lead to assimilation and out-marriage. Here, the risk is not that people will become what one rabbi called “Hebrew-speaking Christians,” but rather Hebrew-speaking Israelis who are no longer Jews.

In the twenty-first century, Israel will be the center of world Jewish life. It could choose the path of secularism. Israelis could decide that the true vocation of the Jewish state, the true culmination of Zionism, is a homeland where Jews can in good conscience abandon their religion, trading it in for a less trying nationalism. They would be acting not out of convenience but out of “modern” and “enlightened” convictions, and their children would not actually become Christian. If this path were taken, the heart of world Jewish life would pump poison into the bloodstreams that feed other Jewish communities. World Jewry would become a frail body, consisting mostly of very small, tightly linked Orthodox communities.

In truth Israelis no more comprise a nation by blood than do Americans: Israel too is a melting pot, of Ethiopians, Germans, Moroccans, Poles, Russians and so forth, united by only one thing, their religion. If it does not need a state religion, it needs a civil religion as much as any multi-ethnic democracy; and that civil religion cannot be other than a version of Judaism. Without Judaism at the core of national life, Israel will lose its *raison d'être*, its ties to and leadership of the diaspora, and the cement that holds its society together.

We go back to basics. Was Zionism meant to be simply a secular movement, creating a physical refuge for Jews and no more, or a revival of the Jewish people and therefore a step toward redemption? Has Zionism anything to do with religion? The abstract struggle over these points was suspended when the need to form and defend the state was greatest, and has now returned with a vengeance. But it is not 1898, and the young idealists of the Haskala who sought to build a better world by jettisoning Judaism were the product of a time and place now long past. Neither is it 1948, and the “normalization” theory (substituting sovereignty for religious identity) of the secular Zionists is as outmoded as their socialist economics. Israel’s

future must be built upon its past: As a Jewish state with a Jewish culture; increasingly the center of world Jewish life; and providing the nations with a model of how a people may enjoy a modern economy and political freedom without losing their history, their heritage, their religion or their unique character.

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