

HaTikva Again

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

[I have written before](#) about the Israeli national anthem, Hatikva. I wrote about how difficult the words made it for an Israeli Arab, however positively committed and supportive of the State of Israel he might be, to sing a song about a Jewish people yearning to be free. This time I am coming at it from a very different position.

In the run up to Israel's Independence Day, a colorful Hungarian-American rebbetzin, [Esther Jungreis](#), has written in the Jewish Press a complaint that God's name does not occur in the Hatikva. She compared this unfavorably with America, where God gets invoked practically all the time.

In England we sing [God Save the Queen](#) all the time, even though religion is very much out of fashion with the vast majority, despite the technical fact that the Queen is the Head of the Church of England. I have no doubt that very soon it will be changed to "Allah save the Queen" so as not offend Muslim citizens. Don't get me wrong. That would not in itself be a problem for me. According to Maimonides a Jew may just as well take an oath by Allah as by God.

In the US, where religion plays a far more significant role despite the official separation of state and religion, those who get through the early verses of the [national anthem](#) will finally come across the phrase "[In God is our trust](#)". And of course a popular patriotic song is [God Bless America](#). God's name is even printed on the currency, which I find strange, not to say ironic.

Throughout the Muslim world the blood curdling cry, "[Allahu Akhbar](#)", is heard hourly. But in Israel even the Declaration of Independence only ambiguously mentions the "[Rock of Israel](#)" (which Ben Gurion later claimed referred to the Defense Forces).

This raises the hackles of the pious. As indeed does the line in Hatikvah about being "Am Chofshi" (a free people). In Israeli popular usage, Chofshi also means "secular", free from the shackles of religion. So a Charedi singing it might be implying he would rather be someone else. This issue is of course fatuous.

But what about God? Despite the significance to me personally, I oppose bringing God into it! Let me explain why.

People often assume that Judaism is simply a religion. In fact it is much broader than that. If being Jewish meant being religious, then one might understand the logic of including God as much as possible. But the reality is that the vast majority of Jews are not religious and certainly do not conform to Orthodox or conventional religious standards.

There are Jews who are not only uncomfortable with the idea of God but find

the concept offensive. I can completely empathize with a Holocaust survivor who finds the idea of a loving God totally irreconcilable with what happened to millions of innocents in Auschwitz. There is even room to debate whether one has to believe in God to be Jewish, but certainly the Israeli armed forces do not require religious commitment to enlist or die.

So on Jewish grounds, keeping as many Jews within the ranks of an ethnic culture that is essentially but not exclusively religious is something I desperately want to do. I recognize that my religious tradition insists on exclusions, but my ethnicity wants to be as inclusive as possible. It is in the interests of a small beleaguered minority to enlist as much support and as many fellow travelers as possible. So when we are in national or inclusive mode then we certainly need to minimize differences and tension points.

The truth is that even those who do believe in God accept or pay lip service to such a wide, often irreconcilable, range of concepts, ideas, and fantasies that to suggest we all believe in or accept the same thing is laughable. The rationalist considers God something that can be proved whereas the mystic relates to God as something to be experienced. The range is as wide as that between lust and love.

Hatikva is an anthem of a secular democratic state. A national anthem is not usually experienced as a religious moment. It is ["civil religious"](#) phenomenon, like a flag, which has no spiritual significance at all. These are devices for national social cohesion in a modern state which will include atheists and agnostics as well as believers. A state needs to be as inclusive as possible.

Now Israel has a big enough problem remaining a Jewish state in the widest sense of the term, what with all its conflicting cultures, religions, ethnicities, ideologies, even races. Why should it possibly want to alienate large sections of its Jewish populace? After all, it is a civil state, not a religion. Those who confuse states with religion are seeking to turn the clock back to a world before enlightenment when individuals were expected to obey and conform and not think for themselves, if doing so meant challenging authority.

Belief in or experience of God is very personal for those whose lives have been made fuller and more meaningful through it. But what works for me may not necessarily work for everyone and the last thing I want to do is to impose my own religious beliefs on others. Israel suffers too much from attempts to ram religion down people's throats. To thrive and survive as a nation state, we need to encourage and welcome, not try to impose.