

Der Judenstaat

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

In 1896 Herzl published [Der Judenstaat](#), in which he set out a vision of a Jewish state. It would be a state in which all citizens, of whatever religion or race, would have equal rights and be encouraged to participate as fully as Jews could (in theory) in other modern states of Christian or Muslim character and origin.

I have never been a fan of states of any kind and I detest politics and politicians with a passion. Herzl was responding to a time and a tide in history in which it appeared on the surface that humans were becoming more enlightened and civilized. And yet the primitive crude passions of nationalism bubbled beneath the surface. He saw how hated Jews were in France, and he came to believe that only if Jews had a state of their own could they achieve any degree of normality in the world he saw around him.

Herzl was the prime mover of secular Zionism, a secular movement dedicated to Jewish rehabilitation or rather "normalization". The trouble is that we Jews are not, and probably never will be, "normal". Herzl had no time for, or even understanding of, a spiritual, religious dimension, and this has been one reason why the modern State of Israel so consistently mishandles religious relationships of all kinds.

Hatred of Jews, ironically, increased as modernity opened up new opportunities. Nationalism led to states defining their identities, and they did this largely by trying to exclude any "outsiders". Howard Sachar's [Dreamland](#) illustrates graphically how anti-Semitism all over the world got progressively worse AFTER World War I. Jews then, as now, were the canary in the mine, the test of human progress, or as in Europe, regression.

Through a series of political accidents (or perhaps Divine Intervention), Jews achieved a state that the UN at the time agreed would be a homeland for the Jews. Jews have, on the face of it, been normalized; Jewish gangsters, prostitutes, villains, and saints. Yet uniquely, the Jewish state is selected more than any other for vilification and delegitimization. Although Herzl's dream has come true, we are still regarded as being aliens. Normality remains a mirage. Although, to be fair, who wants to be normal?

Sovereign states all over the world define themselves culturally and religiously. No one thinks twice about it. So why the present fuss over Israel defining itself as a Jewish state and the Palestinians refusing to accept the idea? Other than, of course, the obvious issue of what it actually means to be Jewish and the fact that most Jews cannot agree, let alone anyone else.

Why can we have Muslims states, Christian states, Maoist states, Fascist states, tribal states, and failed states? Do away with them and I'll willingly join the club. What I object to is a state in which some citizens

have rights that others do not. I object to victimization, prejudice, and generalizations. These must be fought with all the tools at one's disposal, whether in Israel, Palestine, or anywhere else (though I hear deafening silence over the rest).

Many people do not want to accept an official Jewish presence in the Middle East. If Israel is merely defined as a secular democratic state, then in time, if there is a change in population, a majority can change the status and nature of the country and reclaim it as Muslim or whatever. But Israel was founded to provide a haven and a refuge for Jews suffering discrimination.

There are plenty of democratic states which constitutionally define and protect their religious or ethnic character. So long as the civil rights of all citizens are protected, no one seems to object. Only to Israel. Therefore it seems to me perfectly reasonable for the Peace Negotiations to require acceptance of the Jewish nature of a Jewish state (assuming we can define either).

A Jewish state with Jewish symbols imposes no more on one than crosses on the national flags or the Queen being head of the Church does on a British citizen. If I don't like it I can move. If Israel cannot be what other states can, does not this amount to anti-Semitism? And if the Palestinian state in the making wants to define itself as anti-Semitic, how can one possibly believe in genuine peace?

Another factor is the "Law of Return". This was passed by the Knesset and entitles any Jew (as defined by Hitler, no less) to claim Israeli citizenship. Originally it was necessary; Israel took it upon itself to ensure that no Jew would ever again be a victim, simply because he or she had nowhere to escape or go to.

Palestinians also claim a "Right of Return". They can and do emigrate, not only to other states in the area which often, sadly, treat them badly. Still many of them do not want to give up their "Right of Return" and choose to wait in poverty-ridden slums imposed on them by their Arab cousins in the hope of regaining their land. I would support their right of return, to a Jewish state no less, if the Arab world supported the right of Jews who were driven out of Muslim lands, and their possessions confiscated, to return to live where they once did too. Still, if the "Right of Return" were to be the final deal breaker, let's scrap both sides. I do not believe in political dogma. Peace is preferable.

But true peace is only possible when Jews are allowed to live amongst Muslims and Muslims amongst Jews, with equal rights and freedoms. And no Jew returning to Iraq or Morocco or Syria or Egypt would expect them to stop being Muslim states, even if the unimaginable happened and Jews became a majority.

The refusal of the PLO to recognize Israel as a Jewish state may just be a bargaining chip, together with others, like building beyond the Green Line. Two can play the same game. Except that peace is not a game.