

# Nationalism

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

New York Times columnist Ross Douthat wrote that Jewish nationalism versus Jewish liberalism is the crucial issue facing American Jewry today. He wondered how we can reconcile liberal politics, universal, humanist values, with the nationalism of Jewish identity? This is the fault-line that is troubling readers of the New York Times. He says and concludes with a question: If these two positions are so divergent, can this be “good for the Jews”? And adds, “that’s a question this Gentile columnist leaves to the chosen people to debate.”

To me, as a practicing Jew, yet intellectually and politically liberal, there is no question whatsoever that it is good for Jews to be committed to the Jewish people and its homeland—the Land of Israel, if not the state of Israel. At the same time, I believe in the importance of liberalism to counterbalance fanaticism. Indeed, seeming conflict of demands between citizenship and cultural commitment has always been a source of tension, often creative, ever since the first Israelite exiles nearly 3,000 years ago. And we have survived precisely because we (or at least some of us) chose to remain loyal to our people while also integrating other ideas.

We had this issue with the Greeks, the Romans, the Christians, and the Muslims. What comes first? Jewish identity or the values of the outside world? It’s a no-brainer, as the Americans like to say. From the time of Shmuel in the Persian Empire, we always accepted “the Law of the Land” in civil matters. But at the same time we retained our own Jewish value system.

One should not confuse citizenship with identity. After all, that was once the testing point in what I would call primitive, neanderthal nationalism. The sort I detest. That meant that to be a good Englishman, Frenchman, or German, you had to be a Christian of some denomination. Or in the Muslim world, a Muslim, otherwise you would be a second-class citizen. But now many of us in the West live in a post-nationalist world, where a variety of people of different religions and cultures share equal citizenship. Nationalism, in most cases (not all of course), has become less rigid and dogmatic. More a matter of personal choice. This is what Douthat calls soft nationalism. I do not think you can call yourself a committed Jew without some degree of soft nationalism as a Jew. Which, of course, never has been uncritical or self-satisfied or exclusionary. Ever since the prophets. No, ever since Moses. But at the same time one can be a proud citizen of non-Jewish State even if most of its citizens have different values.

We all have different ideas, literature, and cultures. Within these different loyalties we will disagree as well—sometimes acrimoniously. A free society allows for people to disagree. To argue. Even to despise each other. But we can all still be part of a whole. The USA does not have a state religion. That is one of the reasons why Jews of all shades have found it so comfortable. Britain does. The Queen is the Head of the Church. Bishops sit

in the House of Lords. France, though secular, recognizes a special relationship with Catholicism, Japan with Shintoism, and China with Maoism. Egypt and all the other Islamic states with Islam. To object to Jews or Israelis doing the same makes no sense. But then, prejudice never did.

The blind hatred towards nationalism espoused by the academic world and the idealistic left (except, it seems, when it comes to Palestinians or left-wing dictators and murderers) throws the baby out with the bathwater. It makes no distinction between positive nationalism and negative.

The Torah is my priority, even if I also include other views and cultures in my decision-making process, which I think is crucial to being "good and just", an oft-repeated theme in the Torah. I took a decision early on to dedicate myself to Jewish survival and to teaching the greatness and depth of our tradition. So you bet I am committed to keeping Judaism alive. Wherever I live. Even when Jews, religious and otherwise, deeply disappoint me with their failings. As indeed I do with my own.

On the other hand, I detest compulsion. This freedom of choice and practice is one reason that I so strongly believe in the separation of state and religion. But here comes the crunch: I believe the laws of a country should serve the whole country civilly, but in terms of one's own morality and loyalties, one gives priority to one's own, just as one does to one's own family. This is what is meant by soft nationalism.

The obvious, inescapable fact is that the only way to guarantee cultural survival is by being committed to it. If someone tells me that most American Jews cannot identify with a Jewish religious life anymore, or with the right of Jews to have a homeland of their own, I am sad. But they are usually far removed from Jewish practice and therefore peripheral to Judaism's survival. That's their choice, and good luck to them.

Douthat is worried that Jews such as Michael Chabon or Ayelet Waldman distance themselves from Jewish practice, or declare that supporting a Jewish homeland or Jews preferring to marry Jews are retrogressive or intellectually untenable pursuits, because they say that they can no longer feel comfortable being associated with such narrow perspectives. Well, good for them. They won't be the ones keeping Judaism alive. Jewish affiliation is indeed rapidly declining amongst those who eschew Jewish nationalism to the point of no return. Diaspora Jewry has always been divided between those who were Jews first and citizens second and those who were citizens first of the Jewish persuasion.

I do indeed combine liberalism with soft nationalism, as Douthat says, or nationalism lite. Unapologetically, because Judaism is not just a religion, it's a people. It's a living, holistic organism, not a cultural phenomenon or an evolutionary accident. Nevertheless, I was also brought up on Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Smith and Bentham. They too are part of my cultural make-up. Even so, as a committed Jew I turn to the Talmud and Jewish law for spiritual direction and inspiration.

There is a current fear of asserting a religious, cultural, national identity

in polite left-wing society. I regret this but it is the reality. This is why I am in favor of states asserting a nation's religious priorities, if that is the will of the majority. I have never been in favor of strong jingoistic, right-wing nationalism. But a softer one of loyalty is another matter. It is more cultural than political.

But it is Douthat's parting shot that contains a hint of prejudice and explains why I feel the need to defend my cultural, nationalist integrity. To refer to us as the "chosen people", almost tongue-in-cheek, imputes to the user of this phrase a certain disdain. How dare the Jews think they are better than anyone else? Of course, we don't (or if some do, they are betraying our holy texts). It is the trope of the anti-Semite who likes to imply we do.

We only claim that we have been privileged, or burdened, to have inherited a profound religious way of life, which if adhered to correctly should make us good, God-fearing people. But the same source constantly reminds us that we ourselves, stiff-necked as we are, have deserved nothing. The opportunities we have taken advantage of have been the failures of others. And our failures have been the failures of the rest of the world too. The response should not be to abandon what makes us different, but to reinforce it.

This will lead me to talk next week about the new State Law in Israel. So please hold your horses!