

Hatikva

*For as long as deep in the innermost heart
A Jewish soul stirs
It is towards the East and to Zion that the eye longingly looks.
We have not yet lost our hope
The hope of two thousand years
To be a free nation in our land
In the Land of Zion and Jerusalem.*

These are the English words of the Hatikvah (blame me for the translation). Originally a poem by Naftali Herz Imber published in 1886 and set to music by one Samuel Cohen (a bowdlerized version of Smetana's Moldau), it became the official song of the Zionist movement in 1897 and, after several modifications, the National Anthem of the State of Israel. At this time of the year it is sung with added gusto as Israel celebrates its 59th birthday, another milestone in its fraught, insecure, yet miraculous, history.

The Hatikvah is now de rigueur at most Jewish events, communal or personal. In England we have toasts at banquets at which some pompous toastmaster dressed in red hunting jacket with a gilded chain of counterfeit honor around his neck, bangs with his gavel and proclaims, "My Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen." Or a press-ganged relative of the bride or bar mitzvah asks us to be "upstanding" (Upstanding? Upended? Uptight? Where do they get these mock ceremonial archaisms from, I wonder—perhaps the Masons or even the Knights of the Round Table?) to drink the "Loyal Toast" to the health of the Queen (and some rheumy eyed veterans add, "God Bless Her"). We raise our glasses and either drink or wait for the band to finish its perfunctory rendition of the English National Anthem.

Then a semi-inebriated guest rises with difficulty, glass in hand, to toast the President and, or, together with, or in addition to, the State of Israel. Then, if there's a band that knows its stuff, off it goes with a rendition of the Hatikva, during which about 5% actually sing the words, 5% stagger through half of them, 80% stand looking stupid as they pretend to mouth words they haven't the faintest idea of, and another 10% stand or sit looking choleric either because they object on principle or simply because they resent having to interrupt their meal.

One of the benefits of going to a Charedi simcha is that you are spared all of this rigmarole. But then the price you have to pay is listening to a whole lot more rabbis trying to speak above the chatter.

Hatikva is not without its controversies. I have a cousin who when forced to sing it because of his public position, has difficulty with the phrase "to be a free nation" because free (Chofshi) is also current Hebrew usage for "irreligious", free of obligations. So he sings "to be a religious people (Am Dati) in our land." Of course those pious whackos who cozy up to Ahamdinejad won't sing it at all, on principle.

I am very fond of it. It does pull on my emotions and recalls the momentous events in my young life when the whole question of the Jewish State hung in the balance and then opened up unimagined vistas and experiences. But, in truth, as the novelty has worn off, and perhaps as my cynicism has increased, the whole business of nationalism and flags and petty state paraphernalia has soured. Britain, Europe, and the rest of the world have come closer together and yet fragmented at the same time. The Balkans have split into endless mini-states, and just like Europe after the First World War each one puffs up its own supposed identity by marginalizing and alienating anyone else of different ethnic or religious background. Proud nationalism becomes divisive, ridiculous, and bloody. You may say that this is symptomatic of the British disease, and besides look at America with its National Pride and singing its anthem the drop of a hat or a fat lady. But there's another issue here.

I confess I can sympathize with an Arab Member of the Knesset who doesn't like singing Hatikvah. Of course, I believe that if we are to have a state it should be a Jewish State. There are plenty enough Christian and Muslim and other denomination states around the world—why shouldn't we have one too? But that doesn't mean we cannot recognize that there are others living in the state of different religions and affiliation. How can one ask an Israeli Muslim or Christian to sing about having a Jewish soul? It doesn't make sense.

Here are two verses of the British National Anthem:

*God save our gracious Queen
Long live our noble Queen
God save the Queen!
Send her victorious
Happy and glorious
Long to reign over us
God save the Queen!*

One realm of races four
Blest more and ever more
God save our land!
Home of the brave and free
Set in the silver sea
True nurse of chivalry
God save our land!

Would I be happy to sing it if instead of describing us as “the nurse of chivalry” it said the “nurse of Christianity”? Britain is a Christian State but it does not require its non-Christian citizens to sing about it. In truth, I don't take the British National Anthem too seriously. After all, do I really believe Britain is the home of the Brave and the Free or that the Queen should always be victorious? Surely it depends! Besides, having heard the way crowds of hooligans at football matches boo and hiss the others anthems, I think they should all be scrapped!

The sort of state that Israel is, or aspires to be, does not depend on a Nineteenth Century poem. I really hope Israel continues to have other

religions and denominations within its rich mix of citizenship, just as I hope it will continue to give preference to Jewish refugees. And, despite my religious commitment, I'd be uncomfortable with a state made up exclusively of Jewish fundamentalists. But if we insist on an anthem, let it be one that incorporates all its citizens. It's not a text that is hallowed by religion or tradition. If it is inappropriate, let's change it. It has been changed before.

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