Must a Jewish State Be Zionist?

Modern western states are slowly adapting to the idea that no one religion should dominate and all religions within them should be treated with equality and respect. Too often modern states fail not in the theory as much as the practice. There is a powerful reactionary move in parts of Europe and the Middle East to drag everyone backwards towards medievalism by tolerating no-go areas controlled by religious and usually fanatical authorities. Even what is laughably called "mild" Islam in Turkey is failing to protect its secular and other religious minorities.

A state that defines itself as a religious state, rarely gives absolutely equal standing to all its citizens. The only way they will is if religion plays no formal part in the running of the state and its legislature, full stop.

Israel is an example of a hybrid. It is officially secular and democratic and gives equal rights to all its citizens regardless of religion. But it does also give preference to Judaism as a religion and people of Jewish origin. This inevitably has consequences for secular Jews as well as other religions. The compromise worked for many for a while. But it is not working now if most secular Jews, most Christians, and most Arabs feel the state is not protecting or validating them sufficiently.

What is the solution? Recently Israel has allowed Muslim recruits to its army to swear on the Koran. Arab Israelis have equal civil and legal rights; yet it is also true that because they are regarded (sometimes very unfairly) as not fully loyal, they are often discriminated against, not by law as much as convention. To equate this inconsistency with Apartheid, where state legislated discrimination was the rule and interracial sex was a crime, is of course just the stupidity of ignorant or prejudiced idiots. Nevertheless, there is a problem that needs to be addressed. How?

Many Israeli intellectuals seem still caught up in an outdated debate about their identity caused both by their secularism and their left-wing ideology. It's as if they still lived in the nineteenth century. Currently there's a fascinating debate about what kind of state Israel should be as two secular Israelis battle it out in the pages of Haaretz. Shlomo Sand, a secular Israeli professor at Tel Aviv University, is notorious for his banal theory that Jews today have no connection with the Land of Israel because they are descended from non-Jewish Khazars who converted a thousand years ago in the Caucasus. No unbiased academic takes this seriously.

But he has a point in challenging the concept of a Jewish Nation as opposed to Religion. In his latest book, *How and When I Stopped Being Jewish*, he says he wants to be an Israeli but not a Jew. Of course he is welcome and entitled and I would say "bloody good riddance." But that will not solve the problem of Jews who want to live in a state that supports Jewish values (however one wants to define them). Sand's arguments have sparked a lively response from other secular Israelis.

Vladimir Shumsky has argued in Haaretz that most Israelis, Jews and Palestinians, feel a Jewish or a Palestinian national identity. This national identity is connected in both cases to a wider community beyond the borders of the state: Jews with world Jewry and Arab Palestinians with world Islam. To substitute an "Israeli nationalism" for this reality makes no sense to those who care about their Judaism of Islam. The only way Israel can truly be a more equitable state of all its citizens is not by eliminating identities but by negotiating rights for both national groups in an Israeli federation, he argues. Plausible, but it evades the question of the relationship between Israeli Palestinians and Palestinian Palestinians within the state.

Secular Israelis and religious Jews can now, if they choose, live safely in many countries outside the state of Israel. Yet many from both camps insist that they have as much right to live in Israel as any other religio-ethnic group that has qualified for a seat in the United Nations. Religious Israelis argue furthermore that whereas a secular Israeli could live the same lifestyle anywhere else in the free world, only in a Jewish state could a religious Jew live where Shabbat is Shabbat and work stops on Jewish festivals. If there are states for Christians and Muslims, where their religions are state-supported and enforced, what moral argument could possibly deny Jews a similar right?

What does the term "Zionism" add to a Judaism that wishes to express itself within a Jewish state? Is it anything more that Jewish Nationalism? Before Zionism was created in the nineteenth century what was the nature of Judaism's relationship to the land? Was it not simply the wish to live within a community of practicing Jews on its historical territory? Did that require a political movement? There was no political movement when thousands of Jews moved to Safed under the Ottomans in the sixteenth century. So why add this controversial notion of Zionism to Jewish proactive dynamism? And why not recognize secular Jews in the way, once upon a time, both Jewish commonwealths did, by including everyone, religious or not?

Zionism is a product of its limited time. Judaism has been around for thousands of years. Trying to conflate a nineteenth century nationalist ideology with a millennial religious tradition just cannot work. It's like trying to fit a fat man into a thin man's diving suit.

This is why many Israeli politicians now realize that if Israel is to be a Jewish state as opposed to a state for Jews, it must define itself as a Jewish state and support Jewish identity within its mission. The Palestinians should indeed also have a Palestinian state of their own which will define itself in any way it sees fit. Palestinian Israelis and Jewish Israelis, be they secular or religious, should be free to choose which state they want to live in and make whatever adjustments or compromises will be required. This is the fair solution. In theory. Sadly, we know it's not that simple.

Given the unlikelihood of reaching an agreed solution with the Palestinians for two states, a single state looks a possibility. Under the Ottomans, a government bureaucracy ran the country, and each religion, millet, ran its own affairs. That would be the ideal solution if only the external threat was removed. But it won't be as long as militant Islam exists and so long a

militant Judaism wants to defend itself with maximal demands. Or as long as both sides have political leaders with limited imagination and no stomach for risk taking.

Therefore sadly I see no solution. There is only an unsatisfactory status quo, both externally and internally. That being so we have an obligation to make it as livable, as fair, and as ethical as we possibly can. But ask politicians to achieve that (anywhere) and you're dreaming!!!!