

A Jewish State

Is Israel a Jewish state or not? If there are avowedly Christian and Muslim states, why shouldn't Jews have a Jewish state? Clearly there are some people in Israel have not considered Israel to be enough of a Jewish state up to now, for they have pushed hard for a recent bill in the Knesset to declare that Israel is a Jewish state.

We are a funny lot. We can't even agree on "who is a Jew", let alone how to describe a Jewish state. The truth is that this bill is just another example of politicians putting politics above common sense. You know sometimes things are best left vague!

This bill will achieve nothing positive. It will neither help security nor make anyone more Jewish, and it will only create more tension. It will make no difference, either to life in Israel or to the implacable, irrational antagonism towards Israel. So what is it for?

We have been here before. In the past the Knesset passed a "Basic Law" declaring Jerusalem the capital of Israel. Did anyone pay attention? Did it change anything? Are there any foreign embassies in Jerusalem today? Did it make the Palestinians any more inclined to negotiate? No. It was more than a completely pointless exercise, and the UN promptly adopted a resolution calling for its annulment (though frankly I am in favor of anything that pisses off the UN).

The 1948 Declaration of Independence describes Israel not as a Jewish state but as a state for all its citizens, regardless. But it also declares it a homeland for the Jews. The Law of Return opens the state's gates exclusively and of right to any one that Hitler would have described as a Jew. And there are the laws establishing the flag, emblem, and anthem enacted in 1949 immediately after the state's establishment. In addition there are laws allowing for Jewish legal courts, the state rabbinate, and laws of personal status and marriage according to Judaism.

This unnecessary declaration will not add or solve anything. It will not decide who is part of the Jewish people, or whether the state of Israel is also the state of a person born to a Jewish father and non-Jewish mother or of a person who underwent a Reform or Conservative conversion. Anyway it is the Supreme Court that will ultimately decide such issues, if ever we ourselves can agree on how to solve them.

In truth the law is aimed at explaining to the Arabs that Israel will never be their state. But wait, what about the Druze and the many Christian Israelis whose men and women serve in the army and the police? At the horrific "Massacre of the Innocents" in Har Nof, a Druze policeman gave his life protect Israel, as have many other non-Jews over the years. Can it not be their state, too?

In today's explosive situation, the law only has the power to cause damage

and worsen our relations with minorities. If in the end Israel annexes the territories with all their residents, Israel will become a bi-national state and will probably concede to Arab areas autonomy regardless of what the current Knesset writes in one law or another. With this law we are regressing to nineteenth century Europe, where if you weren't a Christian in a Christian country you were regarded as a second-class citizen. We know what that does to one. The greatness of Israel was that it tried to separate religion from state as far as the political negotiations would allow. Not enough in my opinion, but some.

The fact is that the USA separated the two but it still managed to evolve into a state where both religious and secular, Jewish and non-Jewish, communities and individuals could coexist and thrive. It has not been perfect and lot needs to be done. Where doesn't it? But a separation of State and religion, individual freedom without coercion in matters of conscience, this is still my preferred vision for Israel. And yet Israel is a state where priority is given to Judaism. Just as in Britain priority is given to the Church of England, or in most of Europe to Catholicism.

I am not a big fan of democracy. I am with Winston Churchill when he said, "Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried." The reason is because in principle democracy upholds the rights of all citizens. Israel has its Supreme Court and, although some argue it is too protective of Israel's security needs, it still protects the civil rights of all its citizens to the best of its ability.

The Torah is neither for nor against any political system, so long as it is just and fair to all its citizens and legal residents. There is nothing in Torah opposed to democracy for running civil affairs. As a religious Jew I would, in theory, like to see Israel run according to Jewish law, working with a democratic system (not that the present democratic system in Israel is so good, but then tell me please where it is any better or less dysfunctional). The trouble is I don't have confidence in much of our present religious leadership. I just don't see the tolerance and broadmindedness to follow the spirit of Torah as opposed to its letter.

That is why such tokenism and tinkering does nothing for Judaism. It strikes me as simply one in the face to Abbas, who wants a Palestinian state free of Jews. Do we really have to descend to his level? (And I don't even mention the abomination that is Hamas's charter.)

Israel needs to focus on security and meeting the social needs of its people, whatever their religion. And if we Jews want Judaism to flourish, we must do it by persuasion not legislation. If I thought this would help all that in any way, I'd be for it. Otherwise it looks to me like little boys throwing stones at each other and trying to teach a lesson that no one wants to learn.