

A Jewish Soul

Uri Avnery

March 10, 2012

ON THE FACE of it, it was a trivial incident. In the presence of the entire political and legal establishment, the liberal President of the Supreme Court, Dorit Beinisch, who has reached the age limit of 70, was replaced by the conservative Justice Asher Dan Grunis.

At the end of the ceremony, the national anthem was sung. The camera panned from face to face. For a moment, it framed the face of Justice Salim Jubran. He was standing respectfully, like everybody else, but his lips were not moving.

A country-wide uproar broke out. Justice Jubran is the first Arab citizen ever to serve as a regular judge on the Supreme Court.

The right-wing parties were livid with rage. How dare he! An insult to the symbols of the state! He must be dismissed at once! Better still, deport him to a country whose anthem he would deign to sing!

Others treated the judge with respect. He did not violate his conscience! If he had sung the anthem, it would have been sheer hypocrisy, if not mendacity! So he did the right thing!

THE NAME of the anthem, Hatikvah, means “hope” in Hebrew.

It was written in 1878, almost a decade before the founding of the Zionist movement, by a so-so poet, as the anthem of one of the new Jewish “colonies” in Palestine. It was later adopted as the official anthem of the Zionist movement, then by the new Jewish community in Palestine and finally by the State of Israel. The melody was adapted from a Romanian folk song, which in turn was probably adapted from an older Italian song.

The words reflect the spirit of the time:

As long as in the heart within / A Jewish soul still yearns /
And onwards towards the end of the East / An eye still gazes
towards Zion.

Our hope is not yet lost / The hope of two thousand years /
To be a free people in our land / The land of Zion and Jerusalem.

For a Jewish Israeli, the words are hopelessly outdated. For us, Israel is not in the “East”, our hope to be a free people in “our” land has already been fulfilled.

But for an Arab Israeli, these words are an affront. His is not a “Jewish soul”, his eyes never gazed towards “the end of the East”, his homeland is not “Zion” (a hill in Jerusalem). The only words that could appeal to him are the “hope to be a free people” in his land.

How can an Arab citizen, no matter how loyal he be to the state, sing these words without being ashamed of himself? Justice Jubran may be a perfect human being, but a “Jewish soul” he has not.

FOR ME personally, this incident awakened a very old memory. This caused me to sympathize deeply with the courageous

judge.

I was 9 years old when the Nazis came to power in Germany. I was a pupil in the first grade of high school, the only Jew in the entire school. One of the marks of the new regime was the frequency with which national events – such as victories of German arms throughout the centuries – were commemorated by ceremonies in which all the pupils were assembled to listen to patriotic speeches.

At the end of one of these events – I think it was to commemorate the conquest of Belgrade by Prince Eugene in 1717 – the entire student body stood up and began singing the two official anthems, that of Germany and that of the Nazi party. All the pupils raised their right arm in the Nazi salute.

I had to make a decision in a split second. I was probably the smallest boy in the hall, since I had started school a year younger than my classmates. I stood at attention, but did not raise my arm and did not sing the Nazi hymn. I think I was trembling with excitement.

When it was over, some boys threatened that if I did not raise my arm next time, they would break my bones. Fortunately, we left Germany a few days later.

I don’t know if the judge was trembling during the singing, but I know exactly how he felt.

MORE THAN a week later, the incident is still making waves in the media, even alongside the endless babbling about the Existential Danger of Iran, because of its profound significance.

If the most senior Arab judge cannot sing the national anthem, what about the attitude of the rest of the 1.5 million Arab citizens of Israel towards the “state symbols”, indeed, towards the “Jewish state” itself? Does it mean that they constitute a Trojan horse?

This is an old question, as old as the state itself. The contradiction has been papered over by the official formula of the “Jewish and democratic” state.¹ The Judge Jubran incident highlights the problem as never before. Here is a loyal citizen, who administers the law at the very highest level, and who cannot sing the national anthem. What to do?

The simplest answer is to change the anthem. For the first time, this is now being openly discussed by some commentators.

Disclosure: I never liked “Hatikvah”. The stolen melody is not bad, but it is not suitable for an anthem. An anthem should be uplifting, inspiring, while this one is as sad as Verdi’s song of the Hebrew slaves in Nabucco. As for the lyrics, they are, well, totally unfitting.

Many nations have silly anthems. What about the bloody hands of the German monsters in the French anthem? What about the glorious and victorious queen in the British one?²

¹Arabs lampoon it as “A democratic state for the Jews and a Jewish state for the Arabs”.

²The last recorded glorious victory of Her Majesty was against 15,000 Argentinians in the Falklands.

Or the totally inane Dutch anthem. Not to mention the present German anthem, in which the third verse has officially replaced the banned first one, the one which my schoolmates sang at that ceremony in 1933.

But the fact that “Hatikvah” is somewhat silly was not my main reason for wanting to change it. It’s the fact that one-fifth of Israel’s citizens, the Arabs, cannot sing it (another tenth or so, the Orthodox Jews, reject it anyway.)

It is a very unhealthy situation for a state when 20% of its citizens loathe its national symbols. For these very same reasons Canada changed its anthem not so long ago, exchanging the British anthem for one that French Canadians can sing with a clear conscience, without denying their own identity. “O Canada” enhances the unity of all citizens.

Changing anthems is not altogether unique. During World War II, when Stalin needed the West, he abruptly discarded the “Internationale” for a new anthem chosen by competition. The words of this anthem (but not the melody) were changed by the Russian Federation when the Soviet Union was dissolved.

So I grabbed the first opportunity to propose a new anthem. It was soon after the 1967 war. Naomi Shemer, a popular songwriter and composer, had written a song just before the war about “Jerusalem of Gold” which became the hymn of the war. I did not like all its lines, but here was a golden opportunity to get rid of Hatikvah. So I submitted a bill to adopt it as the new national anthem.

The Knesset speaker was sympathetic, but told me that he could not accept the bill without the agreement of the author. I

arranged to meet Naomi. She was a nice person, though she was a rightist by marriage. (She grew up in a left-wing Kibbutz, but became right-wing when she married.)

To my surprise, her reaction was far from enthusiastic. There was something cagey about it, I thought. But she agreed to allow me to submit the bill, which was duly voted down. At the time, Hatikvah was sacred.³

Hatikvah can remain as the anthem of the Jewish people everywhere if they so wish. A new song will be the anthem of the State of Israel and all its citizens.

THE REAL story behind the incident is, of course, the unresolved problem of Israel’s Arab minority. They are discriminated against in practically all spheres of life, a fact readily admitted by Israeli officials. There are no suggestions for how to remedy it.

The Arabs quite rightly feel rejected and respond with alienation from the state. Their leaders, vying for votes, become more and more extreme, while the Israeli right-wing parties become more and more anti-Arab. In a paradoxical way, Israeli Arabs are becoming more and more Israeli at the same time as they become more and more anti-Israeli.

This is a ticking time bomb, and some day it will explode, unless a real effort is made to allow an honest Arab citizen to feel like a real citizen of the Israeli state, and, yes, to sing a new national anthem.

As long as the Arabs are treated as a Trojan horse, why should they sing? Horses, as far as I know, do not excel in singing.

³Later I came to understand Naomi’s strange attitude at that meeting: shortly before her death, she confessed that the beautiful melody of that song was not hers at all, but really a Basque song. For many years she had been mortally afraid of this disclosure. But since the melody of Hatikvah is also stolen, it wouldn’t have made much difference.