

Deny! Deny!

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I AM fed up with all this nonsense about recognizing Israel as the “Jewish State”.

It is based on a collection of hollow phrases and vague definitions, devoid of any real content. It serves many different purposes, almost all of them malign.

Binyamin Netanyahu uses it as a trick to obstruct the establishment of the Palestinian state. This week he declared that the conflict just has no solution. Why? Because the Palestinians do not agree to recognize etc. etc.

Four rightist Members of the Knesset have just submitted a bill empowering the government to refuse to register new NGOs and to dissolve existing ones if they “deny the Jewish character of the state”.

This new bill is only one of a series designed to curtail the civil rights of Arab citizens, as well as those of leftists.

If the late Dr. Samuel Johnson were living in present-day Israel, he would phrase his famous dictum about patriotism differently: “Recognition of the Jewish Character of the state is the last refuge of a scoundrel.”

IN ISRAELI parlance, denying the “Jewish Character” of the state is tantamount to the worst of all political felonies: to claim that Israel is a “State of all its Citizens”.

To a foreigner, this may sound a bit weird. In a democracy, the state clearly belongs to all its citizens. Mention this in the United States, and you are stating the obvious. Mention this in Israel, and you are treading dangerously close to treason. (So much for our much-vaunted “common” values”.)

As a matter of fact, Israel is indeed a state of all its citizens. All adult Israeli citizens – and only they – have the right to vote for the Knesset. The Knesset appoints the government and determines the laws. It has enacted many laws declaring that Israel is a “Jewish and democratic state”. In ten or in a hundred years, the Knesset could hoist the flag of Catholicism, Buddhism or Islam. In a democracy, it is the citizens who are sovereign, not a verbal formula.

WHAT FORMULA? - one may well ask.

The courts favor the words “Jewish and democratic state”. But that is far from being the only definition around.

The most widely used is just “Jewish State”. But that is not enough for Netanyahu and Co., who speak about “the nation-state of the Jewish people”, which has a nice 19th century ring. The “state of the Jewish people” is also quite popular.

The one thing that all these brand-names have in common is that they are perfectly imprecise. What does “Jewish” mean? A nationality, a religion, a tribe? Who are the “Jewish people”? Or, even more vague, the “Jewish nation”? Does this include the Congressmen who enact the laws of the United States? Or the cohorts of Jews who are in charge of US Middle East policy? Which country does the Jewish ambassador of the UK in Tel Aviv represent?

The courts have been wrestling with the question: where is the border between “Jewish” and “democratic”? What does “democratic” mean in this context? Can a “Jewish” state really be “democratic”, or, for that matter, can a “democratic” state really be “Jewish”? All the answers given by learned judges and renowned professors are contrived, or, as we say in Hebrew, they “stand on chickens’ legs”.

LETS GO back to the beginning: the book written in German by Theodor Herzl, the founding father of Zionism, and published in 1896. He called it “Der Judenstaat”.

Unfortunately, this is a typical German word that is untranslatable. It is generally rendered in English as “The Jewish State” or “The State of the Jews”. Both are quite false. The nearest approximation would be “The Jewstate”.

If this sounds slightly anti-Semitic, this is not by accident. It may come as a shock to many, but the word was not invented by Herzl. It was first used by a Prussian nobleman with an impressive name - Friedrich August Ludwig von der Marwitz, - who died 23 years before Herzl was even born. He was a dedicated anti-Semite long before another German invented the term “anti-Semitism” as an expression of the healthy German spirit.

Marwitz, an ultra-conservative general, objected to the liberal reforms proposed at the time. In 1811 he warned that these reforms would turn Prussia into a “Judenstaat”, a Jewstate. He did not mean that Jews were about to become a majority in Prussia, God forbid, but that moneylenders and other shady Jewish dealers would corrupt the character of the country and wipe out the good old Prussian virtues.

Herzl himself did not dream of a state that belongs to all the Jews in the world. Quite the contrary - his vision was that all real Jews would go to the Judenstaat (whether in Argentina or Palestine, he had not yet decided). They – and only they - would thenceforth remain “Jews”. All the others would become assimilated in their host nations and cease altogether to be Jews.

Far, far indeed from the notion of a “nation-state of the Jewish people” as envisioned by many of today’s Zionists, including those millions who do not dream of immigrating to Israel.

WHEN I was a boy, I took part in dozens of demonstrations against the British government of Palestine. In all of them, we chanted in unison “Free immigration! Hebrew State!” I don’t remember a single demonstration with the slogan “Jewish State”.

That was quite natural. Without anyone decreeing it, we made a clear distinction between us Hebrew-speaking people in Palestine and the Jews in the Diaspora. Some of us turned this into an ideology, but for most people it was just a natural expression of reality: Hebrew agriculture and Jewish tradition, Hebrew underground and Jewish Religion, Hebrew kibbutz and Jewish Shtetl. Hebrew Yishuv (the new community in the coun-

try) and Jewish Diaspora. To be called a “Diaspora Jew” was the ultimate insult.

For us this was not anti-Zionist by any means. Quite the contrary: Zionism wanted to create an old-new nation in Eretz Israel (as Palestine is called in Hebrew), and this nation was of course quite distinct from the Jews elsewhere. It was only the Holocaust, with its huge emotional impact, which changed the verbal rules.

So how did the formula “Jewish State” creep in? In 1917, in the middle of World War I, the British government issued the so-called Balfour Declaration, which proclaimed that “His Majesty’s Government views with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people. . .”

Every word was carefully chosen, after months of negotiations with Zionist leaders. One of the main British objects was to win American and Russian Jews for the Allied cause. Revolutionary Russia was about to get out of the war, and the entry of isolationist America was essential.

(By the way, the British rejected the words “the turning of Palestine into a national home for the Jewish people”, insisting on “in Palestine” – thus foreshadowing the partition of the country.)

IN 1947 the UN did decide to partition Palestine between its Arab and Jewish populations. This said nothing about the character of the two future states – it just used the current definitions of the two warring parties. About 40% of the population in the territory allocated to the “Jewish” state was Arab.

The advocates of the “Jewish state” make much of the sentence in the “Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel” (generally called the “Declaration of Independence”) which indeed includes the words “Jewish State”. After quoting the UN resolution which called for a Jewish and an Arab state, the declaration continues: “Accordingly we . . . on the strength of the resolution of the United Nations General Assembly, hereby declare the establishment of a Jewish state in Eretz Israel, to be known as the State of Israel.”

This sentence says nothing at all about the character of the new state, and the context is purely formal.

One of the paragraphs of the declaration (in its original Hebrew version) speaks about the “Hebrew people”: “We extend our hands to all neighboring states and their peoples in an offer of peace and good neighborliness, and appeal to them to establish bonds of cooperation and mutual help with the independent Hebrew people in its land.” This sentence is blatantly falsified in the official English translation, which changed the last words into “the sovereign Jewish people settled in its own land.”

As a matter of fact, it would have been quite impossible to reach agreement on any ideological formula, since the declaration was signed by the leaders of all factions, from the anti-Zionist ultra-Orthodox to the Moscow-oriented Communist Party.

ANY TALK about the Jewish State leads inevitably to the question: What are the Jews – a nation or a religion?

Official Israeli doctrine says that “Jewish” is both a national and a religious definition. The Jewish collective, unlike any other, is both national and religious. With us, nation and religion are one and the same.

The only door of entry to this collective is religious. There is no national door.

Hundreds of thousands of non-Jewish Russian immigrants have come to Israel under the Law of Return with their Jewish relatives. This law is very broad. In order to attract the Jews, it allows even distant non-Jewish relatives to come with them, including the spouse of the grandchild of a Jew. Many of these non-Jews want to be Jews in order to be considered full Israelis, but have tried in vain to be accepted. Under Israeli law, a Jew is a person “born to a Jewish mother or converted, who has not adopted another religion”. This is a purely religious definition. Jewish religious law says that for this purpose, only the mother, not the father, counts.

It is extremely difficult to be converted in Israel. The rabbis demand that the convert fulfill all 613 commandments of the Jewish religion – which only very few recognized Israelis do. But one cannot become an official member of the stipulated Jewish “nation” by any other door. One becomes a part of the American nation by accepting US citizenship. Nothing like that exists here.

We have an ongoing battle about this in Israel. Some of us want Israel to be an Israeli state, belonging to the Israeli people, indeed a “State of all its Citizens”. Some want to impose on us the religious law supposedly fixed by God for all times on Mount Sinai some 3200 years ago, and abolish all contrary laws of the democratically elected Knesset. Many don’t want any change at all.

But how, in God’s name (sorry), does this concern the Palestinians? Or the Icelanders, for that matter?

THE DEMAND that the Palestinians recognize Israel as “the Jewish State” or as “the Nation-State of the Jewish people” is preposterous.

As the British would put it, it’s none of their bloody business. It would be tantamount to an intervention in the internal affairs of another country.

But a friend of mine has suggested a simple way out: the Knesset can simply resolve to change the name of the state into something like “The Jewish Republic of Israel”, so that any peace agreement between Israel and the Arab State of Palestine will automatically include the demanded recognition.

This would also bring Israel into line with the state it most resembles: “The Islamic Republic of Pakistan”, which came into being almost at the same time, after the partition of India, after a gruesome mutual massacre, after the creation of a huge refugee problem and with a perpetual border war in Kashmir. And the nuclear bomb, of course.

Many Israelis would be shocked by the comparison. What, us? Similar to a theocratic state? Are we getting closer to the Pakistani model and further from the American one?

What the hell, let’s simply deny it!