

# The Judaization of Israel

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**O**N MY 16<sup>TH</sup> BIRTHDAY, in 1939, I rushed to the district registration office of the Government of Palestine to change my name officially.

I shed the German name I was given at birth and adopted the Hebrew first and surname I had chosen.

It was more than a mere change of names. It was a declaration: a divorce from my past in the Diaspora (“exile” in Zionist parlance), from the tradition of my German-Jewish forebears, from everything that was “exilic”. “Exilic” was the worst insult you could throw at anyone at the time.

It said: I am a Hebrew, a part of the great adventure of creating the new Hebrew nation, the new Hebrew culture, the future Hebrew state that was to come into being once we had driven the British colonial regime out of the country.

THIS WAS the normal thing to do. Almost all my friends and acquaintances did so the moment they legally could.

When the state was founded, it became official policy. You could not join the diplomatic service or obtain a senior commission in the army if you bore a foreign name.

And indeed, could one imagine an Israeli ambassador in Germany called Berliner? Or an Israeli ambassador in Poland called Polonsky? Or an Israeli Prime Minister called Grün (Ben-Gurion's former name)? A Chief of Staff of the army called Kitaigorodsky (the former name of Moshe Dayan?) Or an Israeli international soccer star called Ochs?

Ben-Gurion was a fanatic in this matter. It was, perhaps, the only matter on which we agreed.

THE CHANGING of names symbolized a basic ideological attitude. Zionism was based on a total negation of the Jewish Diaspora, its way of living, its traditions and expressions.

The Founding father of Zionism, Theodor Herzl, now officially designated here as “the Visionary of the State”, envisioned the total disappearance of the Diaspora. In his diary he foresaw that after the founding of the “Jewstate” (wrongly translated as the “Jewish State”), all the Jews who wished to do so would settle in Israel. They (and only they!) would henceforth be called Jews. All the others

would finally assimilate in their host nations and cease being Jews.<sup>1</sup>

In his diaries, which are of high literary value, Herzl did not hide his contempt for the Diaspora Jews. Some passages are positively anti-Semitic—a term that was invented in Germany after Herzl's birth.

As a pupil in an elementary school in Palestine I was imbued with this contemptuous attitude. Everything “exilic” was beneath contempt: the Jewish shtetl, Jewish religion, Jewish prejudices and superstitions. We learned that “exilic” Jews were engaged in “air businesses” – parasitical stock exchange deals that did not produce anything real, that Jews shunned physical work, that their social setup was a “reverse pyramid”, which we were to overturn by creating a healthy society of peasants and workers.

In my company in the Irgun underground, and later in the Israeli army, there was not a single kippah-wearing fighter, though some wore peaked caps. Religious people were objects of pity.

The prevalent doctrine was that religion had indeed played a useful role throughout the centuries in holding Jews together and enabling the survival of the Jewish people, but that now Hebrew nationalism had taken over that role, making religion redundant. Religion, it was felt, would soon die out.

Everything good and healthy was Hebrew—the Hebrew community, Hebrew agriculture, Hebrew kibbutzim, the “First Hebrew City” (Tel Aviv), the Hebrew underground military organizations, the future Hebrew state. Jewish were “exilic” things like religion, tradition and useless stuff like that.

Only when the full extent of the Holocaust became known, near the end of World War II, did this attitude turn into profound remorse. There was a feeling of guilt, of not having done enough for our persecuted relatives. The shtetl assumed the glow of infantile memories, people started to long for the warm Jewish home, the idyllic Jewish existence.

Even then, Ben-Gurion refused to accept the idea that Jews may live outside Israel. He refused to deal with Zionist leaders living abroad. Only when the new state was

<sup>1</sup>This part of Herzl's teachings is completely and deliberately obliterated in Israel. It is neither taught in the schools nor mentioned by politicians.

in dire economic straits and desperately needed Jewish money did he finally agree to go to the US and ask the Jewish leadership there to come to the aid of Israel.

SINCE THEN, Jewishness has made a huge comeback. The small group of religious Jews who had joined Zionism from the beginning is now a large and powerful “national-religious” movement, the core of the settlers and the extreme right, a pivotal party in the present government.

The anti-Zionist “God-fearing” (“haredim”) Orthodox community are an even bigger force. Though all their eminent rabbis at the time had condemned and cursed Herzl and his supporters, they now use their clout to extort immense sums of money from the state. Their main aim is to keep a separate, religious school system, in which their children don’t learn anything but scriptures. They prevent their young men from being drafted into the army, so as to avoid them from coming into any contact with ordinary youth, especially women. They live in a ghetto.

A recent alarmist TV documentary quoted demographers who forecast that in thirty years or so the haredim will constitute the majority of Jewish citizens in Israel, by virtue of their enormous birthrate. This would turn Israel into something similar to today’s Saudi Arabia or Iran.

Even now, certain towns and neighborhoods in Israel that are dominated by the Orthodox, are closed to any kind of traffic on Saturdays. Women wearing short sleeves—as all non-Orthodox women do in the hot Israeli summer—are spat upon and sometimes beaten. EL AL does not fly on Shabbat, nor are there any bus or train services throughout the country.

With an Orthodox majority in the state, this would become the general rule. No traffic of any kind on Saturdays, no shops open on religious holidays, no non-kosher food in the shops or in the restaurants (there is plenty now), no secular laws, no circumventing the laws forbidding marriage between Jews and non-Jews, a strict moral code enforced by the police.

The secular population, now in the majority, would probably escape from such a country to greener Jewish pastures in New York or Berlin.

All this was broadcast this week on Israeli TV.

A BILL now being debated in the Knesset would overturn the present doctrine of Israel being a “Jewish and democratic state” and replace it with the doctrine that Israel is “the nation-state of the Jewish people”.

That is presented as the fulfillment of Zionism, but is in fact the very negation of Zionism. The process has come around 360 degrees and arrived back where it started. Instead of the ghetto in the shtetl, Israel itself would become a large ghetto. Instead of negating the Diaspora, the entire Diaspora would become a part of Israel—without having a say in the matter. The state would no longer belong to its citizens (both Hebrew and Arab) but to Jews in Los

Angeles and Moscow.

The very idea is, of course, ridiculous. Jews are basically an ethnic-religious world-wide community which has existed for 2500 years without the need for a homeland. Even at the time of the Hasmonean kingdom, most Jews lived outside Palestine. Their abstract connection with Eretz Israel is like the connection of Indonesian and Malian Muslims with Mecca—a holy place to be mentioned in prayers and an object of pilgrimage, but not claimed as a sovereign earthly possession. Until the rise of European nationalism, Jews made no effort for all these centuries to settle there. Indeed, it was forbidden by Jewish Law to go to the Holy Land en masse.

Israeli nationalism, on the other hand, is rooted in a physical homeland, bound up with national sovereignty and citizenship—concepts foreign to religion.

Early Zionists were forced by circumstances to combine the two opposed concepts. There was no Jewish nation in existence, Palestine belonged to another people. By necessity they invented the formula that for Jews, unlike other people, nation and religion are one and the same. To justify their claim to the country, atheists argued—and still do – that God Almighty had promised the land to the Jews in a deal made some 3500 years ago.

The Israeli government now demands, as a condition for making peace, that the Palestinians officially recognize this formula - “Israel is the nation-state of the Jewish People”. If they refuse, it means that they are resolved to annihilate us, like Hitler, and therefore we won’t make peace with them.

For me, this is absurd. I want the Palestinians to recognize the State of Israel, pure and simple (in return for our recognition of the State of Palestine). It’s not their business how Israel defines itself (as it is not for us to decide how the Palestinian state will define itself.)

It’s for us—and us only—to decide whether our state will be Jewish or just Israeli.

THAT’S WHERE the matter of names come in.

Lately, only very few people have been adopting new Hebrew surnames. Most retain their German, Russian or Arab ones. I see this as a regression, sliding back into a ghetto.

When I was interviewed this week on the army radio network (strangely the most liberal outlet in the country), my young interviewers attacked me for holding this opinion. They see the semi-compulsory changing of names that was practiced in the early days of Israel as an act of oppression, a violation of privacy, almost a rape.

Most Israelis nowadays are content to retain the names of their Polish, Russian, Moroccan and Iraqi forebears. They are unaware that these names symbolize the re-Judaization of Israel.