

The State of Bla-Bla-Bla

WILL GERMANY enact a law that demands that every Turk aspiring to citizenship swear allegiance to the “German Federal Republic, the Nation-State of the German People”? Sounds like a ridiculous idea.

Will the US Senate adopt a law that would compel every candidate for citizenship to swear allegiance to “The United States of America, the Nation State of the...” Of whom? “The American People”? “The Anglo-Saxon People”? “The Christian People”? An absurd idea.

But the Knesset is about to enact a law that demands from every non-Jew who desires Israeli citizenship to swear allegiance to “The State of Israel, the Nation-State of the Jewish people”. It seems that our benighted law-makers do not see anything questionable about this.

And there already hovers in the air a bill that demands that all Israeli citizens, or perhaps only the non-Jewish ones, swear allegiance to this Nation-State of the Jewish People, or else.

Binyamin Netanyahu has proposed extending the building freeze in the settlements for two or three months - if the Palestinian leadership recognizes the State of Israel as the Nation-State etc. etc.

And one may well ask: what is the source of this obsession, this demand from near and far, strangers and non-strangers, to declare that Israel is the “Nation-State of the Jewish People”?

The State of Israel has already existed for 62 and a half years. It is a regional military power, a state with nuclear capabilities, with an economy that arouses envy in a world steeped in crisis, it has a dynamic cultural, scientific and social life. So why this obsessive need for confirmation of its existence and its ideological definition?

Why the fanfares accompanying the announcement of every second-rate artist who agrees to appear in Israel?

What do we have here? What is the reason for this gaping lack of self-confidence? This obsessive need for confirmation and for the respect of the entire world? A collective mental disturbance? A matter for political psychologists, or perhaps for political psychiatrists?

I CANNOT abstain from comparing this pathetic need to our mood when I was young.

In the middle of the 1940s, the Hebrew Yishuv (community) was about 600 thousand strong. But our self-confidence was enough for a nation of 60 million.

We had no state. We were still fighting against foreign rule. But a large number of ideological groups were hatching grandiose plans. The “Canaanites” were speaking about “the Hebrew Country” from the Mediterranean Sea to the Euphrates. Groups on the Right advocated the “Kingdom of Israel” from the Nile to the Euphrates. The “Bema'avak” (“In the Struggle”) group (to which I belonged) spoke about a united

“Semitic Region” that would include Palestine, all the Arab countries and perhaps also Turkey, Iran and Ethiopia. A local water expert published a plan for the rational division of the waters of all the region's rivers – Tigris and Euphrates, Orontes and Litani, Jordan and perhaps also the Nile – for the good of all the region's peoples. Nobody thought that these plans were an expression of megalomania.

And here we are now, 12 times larger. We have a state that most of the world's peoples can only envy. And we are begging to be recognized. We demand that the Palestinian people, which has no state yet, recognize our self-definition. That a bride from Ramallah, who wants to marry her cousin in Haifa, recognize the “Nation-State of the Jewish People”. Isn't that ridiculous?

NOW REALLY, cynics will say, why do you take this seriously? After all, it's only one of Binyamin Netanyahu's and/or Avigdor Lieberman's tricks to achieve personal gains.

That's true, of course.

Netanyahu uses this trick to sabotage the peace negotiations that haven't yet started. He wants to prevent negotiation that may, God forbid, lead towards peace – a peace that would compel us to evacuate the settlements and return the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem to the Palestinians.

The peace negotiations are the enemy. Better to kill an enemy while he is still small, preferably even before he sees the light of day. The demand to recognize the State of Bla-Bla-Bla is an instrument of abortion.

If Netanyahu believed that this aim could be achieved by the demand that the Palestinians recognize Israel as a Vegetarian State, he would propose that.

So why deal with it seriously and discuss it?

Avigdor Lieberman speaks to his potential voters, headed by one and a quarter million immigrants from the Soviet Union, who have not yet struck roots in this country. They were raised on a totalitarian cult of power, internal terror and the super-power arrogance of their former homeland, before its collapse. Lieberman's political ideas – an ideological oath of allegiance, the transfer of peoples and territories, and in future also gulags for the enemies of the regime – are taken from the mental world of Stalin.

For Lieberman, all this talk about an oath of allegiance to the Jewish Soviet is nothing but a means to gain the leadership of the Israeli Right, and from there to the leadership of all Israel. For this end he is ready to declare war on 20% of Israel's citizens – every fifth Israeli – something without precedent in a democratic country.

That's obvious. So why take it seriously?

For a simple reason: both Netanyahu and Lieberman are convinced that this demand will raise their popularity among Jewish Israelis by leaps and bounds.

How come?

Is this public in the grip of a deep inner anxiety? Does it need a daily dose of tranquilizers in the form of recognition of its state, the State of Bla-Bla-Bla?

If I were asked to swear allegiance to the "Nation-State of the Jewish People", I would have to respectfully decline. Perhaps by then a law will be in force that will cancel the citizenship of Israelis who refuse this demand, and I shall be demoted to the status of permanent resident devoid of civil rights.

I would have to refuse so as to avoid lying.

First of all, I don't know what the "Jewish people", to which the state of Israel supposedly belongs, is. Who is included? A Jew in Brooklyn, a citizen of the Nation-State of the American People, who served in the Marines and votes for the American president? Richard Goldstone, who is denounced by the leaders of Israel as a liar and self-hating traitor? Bernard Kouchner, the French Foreign Minister, who was told this week by Lieberman to solve the Burka problem in France instead of poking his (Jewish) nose into our affairs?

And how does the ownership of Israel by these Jews express itself? Will they be able to vote for our government (after this right has been taken away from a million and a half Arab citizens)? Will they determine the policy of our government – joining the Jewish billionaires, casino and brothel owners, who own our newspapers and TV stations and buy our politicians wholesale or retail?

No Israeli law has defined what the "Jewish people" is. A religious community? An ethnic group? A race? All these together? Does it include all those professing the Jewish religion? Everybody who has a Jewish mother? Does it include a non-Jew married to someone with one Jewish grandparent, who today enjoys the automatic right to come to Israel and become a citizen? If 100 thousand Arabs were to convert to Judaism tomorrow, would the state belong to them, too?

And what about the confusion between "Nation" and "People"? Does the Nation-State belong to the "Nation" or to the "People"? According to what scientific or juridical definition? Does the German "Nation-State" belong to the German "People" – which, according to some, also includes the Austrians and the German-speaking Swiss?

We have here a knot of concepts, terms and semantic confusions, a knot that cannot be unraveled.

THE FORMER Minister of Justice, the late Yaakov Shimshon Shapira, a Zionist through and through, told

me once that, as the Legal Advisor of the government, he had advised David Ben-Gurion not to enact the Law of Return – because he would never find an answer to the question "who is a Jew". It is even more difficult to answer the question "what is a Jewish State".

And indeed, what does it mean? A state in which there is a Jewish majority – something that may well change in time? A state whose language is Hebrew and whose official holidays are Jewish? A state that belongs to the Jews all over the world? A state all of whose citizens are Jews, and Jews only? A state of transfer and ethnic cleansing? And how do the words "Jewish" and "Democratic" go together?

Because of all these questions, Israel has no constitution. In the absence of such, all the confusion will land in the lap of the Supreme Court (after the Arab judge has been removed, of course.)

THIS WEEK I took part in the demonstration of writers, artists and intellectuals in Tel-Aviv's Rothschild Boulevard, in front of the building where Ben-Gurion announced on May 14, 1948, the founding of "a Jewish state in Eretz Israel – to be known as the State of Israel".

Why "a Jewish state"? For Ben-Gurion, this was not an ideological definition. He just quoted the resolution of the UN General Assembly, which partitioned the country between an "Arab state" and a "Jewish state". The framers of the resolution did not have any ideological character in mind. They simply took note of the fact that there were in the country two rival populations – the Jewish and the Arab – and decided pragmatically to divide the country between them.

The demonstration reached its climax when the queen of the Israeli stage, Hanna Meron, who had lost a leg in 1970 in an attack initiated by Issam Sartawi (before he became a peace activist and a close friend of mine) read out the Israeli Declaration of Independence. She reminded us that the declaration included the undertaking that the State of Israel would "foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; and will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations."

It was a sad demonstration indeed.