

Thou Shalt Not Kill (Thyself)

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February 18, 2012

AFTER THE FOUNDING of Israel, God appeared to David Ben-Gurion and told him: *"You have created a state for my chosen people in my holy land. This merits a great reward. Tell me what you wish, and I will grant it."*

Ben-Gurion answered: *"Almighty God, I wish that every person in Israel shall be wise, honest and a member of the Labor Party."*

"Dear me," said God, *"That is too much even for the Almighty. But I decree that every Israeli shall be two of the three."*

Since then, if a wise Israeli is a member of the Labor party, he is not honest. If an honest Israeli is a member of the Labor party, he is not wise. If he is wise and honest, he is not a member of the Labor Party.

THIS JOKE was popular in the 1950s. After 1967, another much less funny formula took its place.

It goes like this: many Israelis ask God for their state to be Jewish and democratic, and that it will include the entire country between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. That is too much even for the Almighty. So he asks them to choose between a state that is Jewish and democratic but only in part of the country, or a state in all the country that is Jewish but not democratic, or a state in the entire country that is democratic but not Jewish. To which I would add a fourth option: A Jewish and democratic state in the entire country, but only after driving out all the Arabs – some 5.5 million at this point, and growing quickly.

This is the choice facing us today as it did almost 45 years ago. It has only become more sharply defined.

For any foreseeable future, the fourth alternative can be excluded. The circumstances which led, in 1948, to the expulsion of more than half the Palestinian people from the territory that became Israel were unique, and not likely to return in the coming decades. So we must deal with the present demographic reality.

The current government is determined to prevent any peace that would compel it to give up any part of the occupied territories (22% of pre-1948 Palestine). There is no one around who would compel them to do so.

What remains?

A state that is either non-democratic or non-Jewish.

As things stand, the first possibility is certain to be realized, or, rather, to realize itself. This needs no conscious decision, since it is the default situation that already exists de facto.

This means, to use the popular catch phrase, an apartheid state: a state in which every instrument of power is in the hands of the Jewish-Israeli majority (some 6.5 million people), with limited rights for the 1.5 million Palestinians with Israeli citizenship. The Palestinians in the occupied West Bank, East

Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip, some four million, are granted no rights whatsoever - neither national, nor human nor civil.

The present state of "temporary" occupation can last forever, and is therefore ideal for this purpose. However, a future Israeli government, an even more nationalist one, could change the formal situation by annexing these territories to Israel. That would make, in practice, no difference.

As many Israelis see it, this situation could go on forever. The official slogan is: "We have no partner for peace".

But can it really last? The Palestinian population throughout the country is growing rapidly, soon enough it will constitute the majority. The idealists who embrace this as the "One-state Solution" believe that the Apartheid State will slowly turn into a "state of all its citizens".

If, after decades of oppression, civil war, atrocities and other plagues this really came into being, it would quickly turn into a Palestinian state, with a Jewish minority, like the Whites in present South Africa. It would be a negation of the whole Zionist enterprise, whose core purpose was to have one place in the world where Jews would be a majority. Most Jewish Israelis would probably emigrate.

For an Israeli, this would mean national suicide. Yet it is the inevitable outcome if the state continues on its present course.

IF A person wants to kill himself, as is his right, he has many ways to do so: poisoning, shooting, hanging, jumping from the roof etc. As a state, Israel also has several options.

Apart from the external ticking bomb (the "One-state Solution"), Israel also has an internal ticking bomb, which may be even more dangerous. Like the first option, the second one is already well on its way. If the first option depends at least partly on outside factors, the second is entirely self-made.

When Israel came into being, Orthodox Jews were a small minority. Since Ben-Gurion needed them for his coalition, he gave them some privileges which looked cheap to him. The Orthodox got their own education system, financed by the state, and were exempted from army service.

Some 60 years later, these privileges have grown to gigantic dimensions. To compensate for the lives lost in the Holocaust, and to increase the Jewish population, the Israeli government has encouraged natural increase by generous children's subsidies. Since the religious of all shades have reproduced much more than any other Israelis (except Muslim Arabs), their part in the population has grown by leaps and bounds.

Orthodox families generally have 8-10 children. All these go to religious schools, where they study exclusively religious texts and don't acquire any skills useful for working in a modern society. They don't need them, since they do not work at all, devoting their entire lives to the study of the Talmud. They don't need to interrupt their studying of the dead texts, because they don't serve in the army.

If these were marginal phenomena in the early days of the state, they are now rapidly leading to a national emergency. Right from the beginning, almost all government coalitions have relied on the religious parties, because no party has ever won an overall majority in the Knesset. Almost all governing parties had to bribe their religious partners with ever increasing subsidies for children and adults, thus encouraging the growth of a population which neither serves in the army nor does any work.

The absence of the Orthodox from the labor force has severe effects on the economy, attested to by world financial institutions. Their absence from the army – as well as the absence of the Arab citizens, who are not drafted for obvious reasons – means that soon almost half the male population will not serve. This compels all the others to serve three full years, and then to do reserve duty for many more years.

Also, very soon, half the first grade pupils in Israel will be religious children, destined for a life without work, without paying taxes or serving in the army – all this paid for by the taxes of the diminishing number of the non-Orthodox.

Recently, after deepening unrest between religious and non-religious in Bet Shemesh, 25 km west of Jerusalem, the secularists demanded that the town be divided into two, one half Orthodox and the other secular. The Interior Minister, himself a leader of an Orthodox party, rejected this outright. As he candidly explained, since the Orthodox do not work and cannot pay municipal taxes, they cannot sustain a town of their own. They need the secular to work and pay.

This grotesque situation exists throughout the state. One can calculate when the whole edifice will come crashing down. International financial institutions as well as Israeli experts foretell disaster. Yet our political system does not make any change possible. The hold of the religious parties is as strong as ever.

Another method of suicide.

A THIRD method is less dramatic. Israel is rapidly be-

coming a state in which normal people just may not want to live.

In his monumental opus on the Crusades, the late British historian Steven Runciman maintained that the Crusader state did not collapse because of its military defeat, but because too many of its inhabitants just packed up and went back to Europe. Though many of them belonged to the 4th and even 8th generation of crusaders, the Crusader state had lost its attraction for them. The state of perpetual war and inner stagnation drove them out. The state collapsed when many more went away than came to join.

The Crusaders felt a stronger sense of belonging to Christendom than to the local Kingdom of Jerusalem. Today, many Israelis feel themselves first of all as Jews, belonging to a worldwide people, and only in second place Israelis.

That makes emigration easier.

A state without democracy, without equality, condemned by itself to an endless war, dominated by religious fanatics, with the gap between the abject poor and a handful of immensely rich growing from year to year – such a state will look less and less attractive to bright young people, who can easily find a better life elsewhere, while retaining their Jewish identity.

That, too, is a kind of national suicide.

I AM not, by nature, a prophet of doom. Quite the contrary.

We can easily avert all these dangers. But first of all we must recognize them and see where they are leading us.

I believe that the people of Israel – the Israeli nation – have the will to survive. But in order to survive, they must wake up from their apathetic stupor and change course – turning towards peace based on the two-state solution, separating the state from religion and building a new social order.

In the Jewish religion, suicide is a sin. It would be ironic if future historians were to conclude that the “Jewish State” committed suicide.