

Who the Hell Are We?

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August 4, 2018

YEARS AGO I had a friendly discussion with Ariel Sharon.

I told him: "I am first of all an Israeli. After that I am a Jew."

He responded heatedly: "I am first of all a Jew, and only after that an Israeli!"

That may look like an abstract debate. But in reality, this is the question that lies at the heart of all our basic problems. It is the core of the crisis which is now rending Israel apart.

THE IMMEDIATE cause of this crisis is the law that was adopted in great haste last week by the rightist Knesset majority. It is entitled "Basic Law: Israel the Nation State of the Jewish People".

This is a constitutional law. When Israel was founded during the war of 1948, it did not adopt a constitution. There was a problem with the Orthodox religious community, which made an agreed formula impossible. Instead David Ben-Gurion read out a "Declaration of Independence", which announced that "we are founding the Jewish State, namely the State of Israel".

The declaration did not become law. The Supreme Court adopted its principles without a legal basis. The new document, however, is a binding law.

So what is new about the new law, which at a first glance looks like a copy of the declaration? It contains two important omissions: the declaration spoke of a "Jewish and Democratic" state, and promised full equality between all its citizens, without regard to religion, ethnicity or sex.

All this has disappeared. No democracy. No equality. A state of the Jews, for the Jews, by the Jews.

THE FIRST to cry out were the Druze.

The Druze are a small and close-knit minority. They send their sons to serve in the Israeli army and police and consider themselves "blood brothers". Suddenly they have been robbed of all their legal rights and sense of belonging.

Are they Arabs or not? Muslims or not? That depends on who is speaking, where and what for. They threaten to demonstrate, to leave the army and generally rebel. Binyamin Netanyahu tries to bribe them, but they are a proud community.

However, the Druze are not the main point. The new law completely ignores the 1.8 million Arabs who are Israeli citizens, including the Bedouin and Christians.¹

The Arabic language with all its splendor, which until now was one of the two official languages, was demoted to a mere "special status", whatever that means.²

Netanyahu is defending this law like a lion against mounting criticism from within. He has publicly declared that all the Jewish critics of the law are leftists and traitors (synonyms), "who have forgotten what it is to be Jewish".

AND THAT is really the point.

Years ago, my friends and I asked the Supreme Court to change the "nationality" entry in our identity cards, from "Jewish" to "Israeli". The courts refused, stating that there is no Israeli nation. The official register recognizes almost a hundred nations, but not an Israeli one.

This curious situation started with the birth of Zionism in the late 19th century. It was a Jewish movement, designed to solve the Jewish Question. The settlers in Palestine were Jewish. The whole project was closely connected with Jewish tradition.

But once a second generation of settlers grew up, they felt uneasy about being just Jewish, like Jews in Brooklyn or Krakow. They felt that they were something new, different, special.

The most extreme were a small group of young poets and artists, who in 1941 formed an organization nicknamed "the Canaanites", who proclaimed that we were a new nation, a Hebrew one. In their enthusiasm they went to extremes, declaring that we have nothing to do with Jews abroad, and that there was no Arab nation—Arabs were just Hebrews who had adopted Islam.

Then there came the news of the Holocaust, the Canaanites were forgotten and everybody became remorseful super-Jews.

But not really. Without a conscious decision, the popular language of my generation adopted a clear distinction: Jewish Diaspora and Hebrew agriculture, Jewish history and Hebrew battalions, Jewish religion and Hebrew language.

When the British were here, I took part in dozens

¹No one even thinks about the hundreds of thousands of European Christians, who immigrated with their Jewish spouses and other relatives, mainly from Russia.

²All this applies to Israel proper, not to the 5 million or so Arabs in the occupied West Bank and the Gaza Strip, who have no rights at all.

of demonstrations shouting “Free Immigration! Hebrew State!”. I don't remember a single demonstration where anyone shouted “Jewish State!”

So why does the Declaration of Independence speak of a “Jewish State”? Simple: it was alluding to the UN resolution which decreed the partition of Palestine into an Arab and a Jewish state. The founders simply stated that we are now setting up this Jewish state.

Vladimir Jabotinsky, the legendary forefather of the Likud, wrote an anthem declaring “A Hebrew is the son of a prince”.

ACTUALLY THIS is a natural process. A nation is a territorial unit. It is conditioned by its landscape, climate, history, neighbors.

When the British settled in America, they felt after some time that they were different from the British they had left behind in their island. They became Americans. The British convicts sent to the Far East became Australians. In two World Wars, Australians rushed to the rescue of Britain, but they are not British. They are a proud new nation. So are Canadians, New Zealanders, and Argentinians. And so are we.

Or would have been, if official ideology had allowed it. What has happened?

First of all, there was the huge immigration from the Arab world and Eastern Europe in the early fifties—for every one Hebrew there were two, three, four new immigrants, who considered themselves Jews.

Then there was the need for money and political support from the Jews abroad, especially in the US. These, while considering themselves full and true Americans (try and say they are not, you bloody anti-Semite!) are proud to have a Jewish State somewhere.

And then there was (and is!) a rigorous government

policy of Judaization of everything. The present government has reached new heights. Active—even frantic—government actions try to Judaize education, culture, even sports. Orthodox Jews, a small minority in Israel, exert immense influence. Their votes in the Knesset are essential to the Netanyahu government.

WHEN THE State of Israel was founded, the term Hebrew was exchanged for the term Israeli. Hebrew is now only a language.

So is there an Israeli nation? Of course there is. Is there a Jewish nation? Of course there isn't.

Jews are members of an ethnic-religious people, dispersed throughout the world and belonging to many nations, with a strong feeling of affinity with Israel. We, in this country, belong to the Israeli nation, whose Hebrew members are part of the Jewish people.

It is crucial that we recognize this. It decides our outlook. Quite literally. Are we looking towards Jewish centers like New York, London, Paris and Berlin, or are we looking towards our neighbors, Damascus, Beirut and Cairo? Are we part of a region inhabited by Arabs? Do we realize that making peace with these Arabs, and especially the Palestinians, is the main task of this generation?

We are not temporary tenants in this country, ready at any moment to go and join our brother and sister Jews around the globe. We belong to this country and are going to live here for many generations to come, and therefore we must become peaceful neighbors in this region, which I called, 75 years ago, “the Semitic Region”.

The new Nation Law, by its clearly semi-fascist nature, shows us how urgent this debate is. We must decide who we are, what we want, where we belong. Otherwise we will be condemned to a permanent state of impermanence.