

A Document with a Mission

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WHEN DAVID BEN-GURION READ out Israel's declaration of independence (officially: "Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel") on May 14, 1948, I was in Kibbutz Hulda.

My company of the (still unnamed) Israeli army was ordered to make a night attack on the Arab village of al-Kubab, near the town of Ramleh. It was expected to be a hard fight, and I was busy checking my equipment and cleaning my (Czech) rifle, when somebody said that Ben-Gurion was making a speech which was being broadcast on the Kibbutz dining-room radio.

I was not really interested. We were all convinced that what some politicians in Tel Aviv might be babbling was quite immaterial to our future. Whether our state would survive or not would be decided on the battlefield. The regular armies of the neighboring Arab states were about to enter the war, there would be bloody battles, and the outcome would decide our lives. Literally.

However, there was one detail which aroused our curiosity: What would our new state be called? There were some rumors in the air. We wanted to know.

So I betook myself to the kibbutz dining room—which we soldiers were not allowed to enter on ordinary days—and sure enough, I could hear the very peculiar high-pitched voice of Ben-Gurion reading the document. When he came to the passage "(we) hereby declare the establishment of a Jewish state in Eretz Israel, to be known as the State of Israel", I left.

I remember that outside the hall I met the brother of a girl-friend, who was scheduled to attack another village that very night. We exchanged a few words. I never saw him again. He was killed.

ALL THIS crossed my mind when I was called upon three days ago, on the eve of "Independence Day", to take part in a ceremony in the very hall where the original text had been read out by Ben-Gurion. I was one of the persons chosen to read it out again on the 68th anniversary.

For this occasion I read the entire text of the declaration for the first time. I was not impressed.

The original version was first drafted by some officials, then re-written by Moshe Sharett (who became Foreign Minister on that day). He was a stickler for the Hebrew lan-

guage, so the text is linguistically impeccable. Ben-Gurion was not satisfied with the text, so he took it and rewrote it completely. It bears all the hallmarks of his unmistakable style. Also, he had the Chutzpah to put his signature above all the others, which appear in alphabetical order.

The writers of the declaration had obviously read the American Declaration of Independence before drafting their own. They copied the general outline. It is not written in the edifying style of an historical document, but as a document with a mission: to convince the nations of the world to recognize our state.

THE INTRODUCTION is a reiteration of Zionist slogans. It purports to set out the historical facts, and very dubious facts they are.

For example, it starts with the words "Eretz Israel was the birthplace of the Jewish people. Here their spiritual, religious, and political identity was shaped."

Well, not quite. I was taught at school that God promised Abraham the land while still in Mesopotamia. The 10 Commandments were given to us by God personally on Mount Sinai, which is in Egypt. The more important of the two Talmuds was written in Babylon. True, the Hebrew Bible was composed in the country, but most of the religious texts of Judaism were written in "exile".

"Jews strove in every successive generation to reestablish themselves in their ancient homeland. . . ." Nonsense. They most certainly did not. For example, when the Jews were expelled from Catholic Spain in 1492, the vast majority of them went to the countries of the Muslim world, with none but a handful settling in Palestine.

Zionism, the movement to establish a Jewish nation in Palestine, was founded only at the end of the 19th century, when anti-Semitism became a powerful political force all over Europe, and the founders foresaw the calamities to come.

THE DECLARATION emphasized, of course, recent history: "On the 29th of November 1947 the United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution calling for the establishment of a Jewish State in Eretz-Israel. . . ."

That is a major falsification. The UN resolution called for the establishment of TWO states: an Arab and a Jewish one (and a separate zone of Jerusalem). Omitting the call for an Arab state changes the entire character of the

resolution.

This was, of course, intentional. Ben-Gurion was already in secret contact with King Abdullah of Jordan, who wanted to annex the West Bank to his Transjordan kingdom. Ben-Gurion approved.

Ben-Gurion saw it as a major aim to eliminate any trace of a separate Arab Palestinian nation. The annexation of the West Bank by King Abdullah was tacitly approved—even before the first Jordanian soldier entered the country, ostensibly to save the Arabs from the Jewish State.

HERE IS the place to tackle these two fateful words: “Jewish State”.

Before the creation of Israel, when speaking about our future state, nearly all of us here used the words “Hebrew State”. This is what we shouted in innumerable street demonstrations, this is what was written in the newspapers and demanded in political speeches.

This was not an ideological decision. True, there was a tiny group of young writers and artists, nicknamed “Canaanites”, which was proclaiming the birth of a new “Hebrew Nation” and wanted nothing to do with the Jews in the Diaspora. Some other groups, including one founded by me, expressed similar ideas without reaching such absurd conclusions.

But in colloquial speech, too, people made a clear distinction between “Hebrew” (things in the country, like Hebrew agriculture, Hebrew defense forces etc.) and “Jewish” (like Jewish religion, Jewish tradition and such).

So, why “Jewish State”? Quite simple: for the British administration, the population of Palestine consisted of Jews and Arabs. The UN partition plan spoke about a Jewish and an Arab state. The “Declaration of Independence” took great pains to emphasize that we were only fulfilling the UN decision. Hence: “We hereby declare the establishment of a Jewish state, to be known as the State

of Israel”.¹

These innocent words have been quoted a million times to justify the contention that Israel is a “Jewish” state, in which Jews have special rights and privileges. This is accepted today without question.

However, it is generally overlooked that in one of the paragraphs, while “extending our hand to all neighboring states” it asks—in the Hebrew original—for cooperation with “the sovereign Hebrew people”. This is flagrantly falsified in the official translation into “the sovereign Jewish people”.

In the main sentence in the Hebrew original, the signers identify themselves as “. . . representatives of the Hebrew community in Eretz Israel. . .” The official translation says “the Jewish community in Eretz Israel”.

One has to thank Ben-Gurion for the fact that God does not appear in the document at all. After a strenuous fight with the then small religious Zionist faction, the only religious allusion is to “the Rock of Israel”, which is one of the appellations of God, but which can also be understood differently.

ONE GLARING omission is the stark fact that the declaration does not make one mention of the borders of the new state.

The UN partition plan drew very clear borders. In the course of the 1948 war, our side conquered considerably more territory. In the end the so-called Green Line was established.

The Declaration mentions no borders, and up to now Israel remains the only state in the world which has no official borders.

In this, as in almost all other matters, Ben-Gurion laid down the track along which Israel has been moving to this very day.

¹Note: “A” Jewish state, not “the” Jewish state.