

When God Despairs

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RIGHT AFTER THE FOUNDATION of Israel, God appeared to David Ben-Gurion and told him: “You have done good by my people. Utter a wish and I shall grant it!”

“I wish that Israel shall be Jewish, democratic and encompass all the country between the Mediterranean and the Jordan,” Ben-Gurion replied.

“That is too much even for me!” God exclaimed. “But I will grant you two of the three. You can choose between a Jewish and democratic Israel in a part of the country, a democratic state in all of the country that will not be Jewish or a Jewish Israel in all of the country that will not be democratic.”

God has not changed his mind.

WHILE I am writing this, Binyamin Netanyahu is totally absorbed in enacting a new law, a law that would be a watershed in the history of Israel. The public looks on in a bemused way, as if it were happening in Kamchatka.

This law would (I might say “will”) enable 90 of the 120 Knesset members to evict any or all the other members from the Knesset altogether. The grounds for such a decision are nebulous: supporting “terrorism”—by speech as well as by deed, denying the Jewish character of the state, and such.

Who decides? The majority, of course.

The immediate impetus for proposing this bill was provided by the three Arab Knesset members who visited the parents of Arab “terrorists” in annexed East Jerusalem. I have already mentioned this in my last article. They had a good pretext—to help them to obtain the bodies of their sons, who had been shot dead on the spot. But the obvious reason was to pay their condolences.

Now, it may be argued that a bereaved mother is a bereaved mother, irrespective of the cause of her son's death, and that to offer condolences is a human virtue. But that may be too humanistic for Likud members.

In the good old times, when we were the “terrorists” and the British were the occupiers, I would certainly have paid my condolences to a neighbor whose son had been shot during an Irgun raid. I don't think the British would have arrested me for that.

¹It's a bit complicated. The “Arab” faction includes a Jewish member, who is much respected. The “Jewish” factions include some token Arab members, who dare not open their mouth on serious matters.

By law, Knesset members are immune from prosecution for any act committed in the line of their duties. For Knesset members to visit their voters in such circumstances may be such an act. Therefore, a new law is necessary.

And what a law!

“IMAGINE SUCH a thing happening in England or the US,” Netanyahu thundered, “an MP or congressman supporting terrorists!”

“Imagine such a thing happening in Britain or the US,” I would reply, “a law allowing three quarters of Parliament or Congress to evict the others!”

Netanyahu was brought up in the US. He most surely has been taught there that democracy does not mean only the rule of the majority. Adolf Hitler was probably supported by the majority. Democracy means that the majority respects the rights of minorities. Including the right of free speech.

The right of free speech does not mean the right to express popular views. Popular views do not need any protection. Free speech means the right to utter views that are detested by almost everyone.

It certainly means the right of minorities to express their views by peaceful means. And that is the crux of the matter.

Everybody understands that the right of 90 to evict 30 is a threat to evict the Arabs from the Knesset. The “Arab” faction in the present Knesset comprises 13 members and will probably get larger in the next few elections.¹

This is not a law against “terrorist” sympathizers. This is a law against the Arab minority. The Knesset will be Jewish, pure and simple.

Going back to God's deal with Ben-Gurion, It will be a Jewish state in all of the country, without being democratic.

JEWES HAVE BEEN minorities since the Babylonian exile, some 2500 years ago. All Jews have been minorities for some thousands of years.

One would have believed that 80 generations are enough to learn how a state should behave towards minorities. Indeed, one could have believed that all the states of the world would be sending delegations to Israel to learn

how minorities should be treated. The founder of Zionism, Theodor Herzl, certainly thought so, and described the idyllic relations between the Jewish state and its Arab inhabitants in his futuristic novel "Altneuland" ("Old-New-Land").

Alas, this did not come to be. The times when a young and fresh Israel attracted progressives from all over the world to see the Kibbutzim and Moshavim (cooperative villages) are long gone.² Even before the proposed law is enacted, Israel is one of the least democratic countries in the Western World, to which Israel wants to belong.

In the West Bank, which is governed by Israel, there live about 2.5 million people who are devoid of any civil and human rights. Just this week Amira Hass, the courageous Israeli chronicler of the occupation, described how the comfortable home of a Palestinian bourgeois family was invaded in the middle of the night by an army squad and they were told to clear their living room, which became an army outpost. The soldiers brought with them a portable chemical WC, but relieved themselves freely from the balcony.

We believed for a time that Israel could remain "the only democracy in the Middle East" while holding large occupied territories. Didn't the British hold hundreds of millions of Indians in subjugation, while the home country remained the world's shining example of democracy? Sure, but an Englishman needed several weeks to sail from Liverpool to Bombay, time enough to change his personality, while one needs only five minutes to cross from Israel into the West Bank.

THE ARAB citizens of Israel proper constitute some 20% of the population. These were the remnants of a large majority, most of whom had fled or were evicted.

This percentage has remained so from the beginning of the state until now, a time in which the population of Israel has grown more than tenfold.

A miracle? Almost. The huge natural increase of the Arab population has been balanced by Jewish immigration, first from the Islamic countries, then from Russia, and lately from Ethiopia. They are still 20%, as God foresaw.

The first generation of "Israeli Arabs"—as Jews called them, much to their dismay—were meek and docile, still shocked by the immense catastrophe that had befallen their people. For safety's sake, they were subjected to a "military government", which restricted their movements. An Arab could not go from his village to the next, much less buy a tractor or send a son to study, without a written military permit. This system was abolished only after 17

years.

One may wonder why they were granted voting rights at all. Well, since they were so docile, Ben-Gurion, a party man through and through, decided that they would bolster his party's majority at the polls. This indeed did happen.

But now there is a third generation of Arab citizens. There are Arab university professors, chief physicians, entrepreneurs, even police commanders. There are Palestinian nationalists, Islamists, Communists. They have feelings, demands, even the chutzpah to demand full equality.

That would be a large enough problem in a normal situation. But the situation here is not normal. Israel's national minority is a part of the Palestinian people, whose entire territory the present Israeli leadership wants to take away.

IN THE back of my mind I have a script for a movie. I am ready to give it away for free.

Two Jewish boys, call them Abraham and David, escape Nazi Germany. David goes to the US, Abraham goes to Palestine.

David, of course, joins the movement of Martin Luther King, becomes a leading civil rights activist and is now a fervent campaigner for the rights of minorities. He also supports BDS, which calls for the boycott of Israel.

Abraham, who calls himself Rami, is a colonel in the Israeli army, a fervent nationalist and regular Likud voter, an admirer of Netanyahu. By sheer accident (this is a movie, after all) he once was a member of the kibbutz in which Bernie Sanders was a volunteer worker.

He is in charge of a large part of the West Bank, and happens to be responsible for the order under which Palestinians are thrown out of their homes for security purposes.

David heads an American human rights delegation that comes to investigate what's happening in the occupied territories, Rami has the task of preventing them getting there. And so on.

COMING BACK to God, He is shaking his head. These humans, He asks Himself, will they never learn?

No country has ever profited from throwing out its minorities. Nazi Germany threw out its Jewish scientists, some of whom went to the US and built the atomic bomb for America. Long before that, the Catholic kings of France threw out the Protestant Huguenots, who emigrated to Prussia and turned a small garrison town named Berlin into a world center of industry and culture. There are many more examples.

If two thousand years have not taught us anything, when will we ever learn?

²It now appears that Bernie Sanders, one of the US Democratic candidates for president, once was a volunteer worker in a kibbutz