

## DESPITE EVERYTHING, A JEWISH NATION-STATE

Shlomo Avineri, published in *Haaretz*, June 14, 2009

### A RESPONSE TO A.B. YEHOSHUA

Towards the end of A.B. Yehoshua's beautiful novel *The Lover*, there appears one of the more allegorical scenes of the book. As the Jewish friend of the Arab boy Naim tries to bring him back to his village in the Galilee, they stumble upon a Border Police patrol which checks their identity. The Arab – so Yehoshua writes – immediately produces his ID card, “while I am still searching for mine”. The fact that the encounter takes place near Peki'in – according to Zionist ethos the one village in the Land of Israel where the continuity of Jewish presence has never been severed – only underlines what is the core of the novel's theme: the search for self-identity. This is also the subject of Yehoshua's important and fascinating article in last week's *Ha'aretz*.

This search for identity occurs on two levels: that of the author's personal one, and that of the Jewish collectivity. As a reader I am always thrilled by the literary and psychological depth of Yehoshua's novels; but when he tries to delineate the contours of Jewish collective identity, I am afraid that he gets straight into a dead end.

The historical examples provided by him (whether Moses viewed himself as “Jewish” or “Israeli”) are irrelevant. What is relevant is not what did, or did not, happen 3,000 years ago or what would have happened hypothetically if on May 14<sup>th</sup>, 1948, there would have been no non-Jews on Israel's territory. What is relevant is how the public which is today's Israel majority – the Jewish public – views himself.

I am saying this carefully, precisely because of my deep admiration to Yehoshua and our personal friendship: I feel that somehow Yehoshua is not comfortable with his Jewish identity. Even the fact that in the term “Jew” he hears “echoes of Judas Iscariot” and therefore one should, perhaps, distance itself from it, constitutes a rather shocking internalization of Christian images, which I fail to see what they have to do with Jewish self-identity. Moreover, anyone reading Yehoshua's article must reach the conclusion that while he is aware of the fact that the term “Jew” is fundamentally a national one, in practice he regards it as if has only a religious connotation and therefore he wishes to distance himself from it. Paradoxically, this amounts to accepting the Jewish Orthodox view, which maintains that the term “Jewish” has only a religious meaning.

Yehoshua is equally wrong when he says that “the Jewish religion is only an optional ingredient in the definition of being Jewish, just as Catholicism or Christianity is only an optional ingredient in the definition of being Italian”. The fact of the matter is that while the term “Jew” is wider than its religious connotation, most Jews, and this includes most Israeli Jews, would agree with that statement that a Jewish person who converts to another religion ceases to be Jewish in the national sense as well. This is also the gist of the secular Israeli legislation as incorporated in the Law of Return in the wake of the Supreme Court's decision in the case of Brother Daniel (aka Oswald Ruffeisen).

We may not be comfortable with it, but an Israeli Jew who would convert to Islam would be considered by most Israeli Jews – including the secular ones – as having become not

only a Moslem, but also an “Arab”. It was Herzl, a secular Jew is there ever was one, who recognized this when he said “we are a nation determined by our religion”, meaning that while religion is not the *substance* of Jewish identity, it is its *boundary*.

All this also points to Yehoshua’s wish to cut himself off from Diaspora Jewry, a theme discussed by him on several other occasions. But again the fact of the matter is that despite all the difference, and despite the common citizenship with Israeli Arabs, most Jews in Israel feel themselves closer – in terms of identity, historical memory and self-consciousness - to American Jews than to Israeli Arabs.

Yehoshua is right in maintaining that Israel as a Jewish nation-state poses difficulties for the Arab minority in the country: but then this is so in the case of every nation-state. To this one should add that this is not made easier by the fact that Israel is also surrounded by Arab countries and because of the continuing enmity expressed towards Israel by most of the Arab world (despite the peace treaty with Egypt and Jordan). But it is a grave mistake on his part to assume that if Israel denudes itself of its Jewish identity, Israel’s Arab citizen would cut themselves off from their cultural, linguistic and ideological links with the Arab world and would become overnight merely “Israelis”. It would also be an immoral demand to ask of an ethnic minority to give up its own identity.

This is exactly the reason why Israel – the Jewish nation-state – decreed Arabic to be the second official language of the country and provides state-funded education in Arabic to its Arab citizens. One would only wish that democratic Britain or France would consent to allow a similar status to the languages of the minorities within their boundaries.

Similarly, I cannot see how one could continue to justify the Israeli Law of Return if one cuts oneself off from viewing Israel as a Jewish nation-state. Yehoshua is right in expressing the hope that once a Palestinian state will be established, it should enact a similar law allowing the Palestinian Diaspora to return to the independent Palestinian state. But the Israeli Law of Return can be justified only on Jewish and Zionist grounds.

Yehoshua does not explicitly say so, but if Israel cuts itself off from its Jewish identity, the next step would be to call for the abolition of the current flag, state emblem and national anthem: they are, after all, very clearly Jewish and Zionist symbols. I do not know if Yehoshua would support such a move, but it would follow logically – and politically – from what he is advocating.

Yehoshua gives many examples from Jewish history, but it is the Zionist narrative which is sorely missing from his account. This account is not really “Cana’anite”, but it seems that he feels closer to the mythological Moses than to the historical Herzl – or to all of Jewish history in the Diaspora as well as to Zionism itself, which emerged, after all, in the Diaspora. This aspect of Jewish history is somewhat missing from his account. I certainly do not support viewing the Shoah as a central and essential ingredient in the establishment of the State of Israel: Zionism, and the immigration of hundreds of thousands of Jews to the country, preceded the Shoah. But one cannot overlook this aspect of contemporary Jewish self-identity: it is totally missing from Yehoshua’s account. All his identity is purely territorial – to the Land of Israel, not to the People of Israel.

Last and not least: the issues raised by Yehoshua are real, but his solutions are totally unrealistic. In the past there have been Jewish individuals and communities which tried to mollify Gentile hate of the Jews by distancing themselves from being “Jewish” (he himself mentions Judas Iscariot!) by calling themselves “Israelites” – in Germany or France. It did not change a bit the attitude of the majority populations to them.

One of the characteristics of the modern world is multiplicity of identities: you could be Jewish, Israeli, secular – or Arab, Israeli and Muslim. These multiple identities are an enriching and empowering factor, though it is clear that they can also give rise to internal tensions and conflicts – personal and collective. It is precisely from a writer blessed with such intellectual and psychological gifts as Yehoshua that I would have expected the ability to live in peace with such multiple identities, rather than to limit himself to one identity – Israeli – which more than solving problems, just complicates and obfuscates them.