

September 2007: "Gentlemen, Bow Your Heads"

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"Gentlemen, bow your heads." Thirty-five years after I used to hear that phrase in Assembly each eighth-grade morning, I still remember the scene clearly. Several hundred of us Middle School and High School students, boys more than gentlemen, in our coats and ties, beginning our day at the private school I attended for a couple of years in Baltimore. The school day started with Assembly, which, in turn, always ended with the Lord's Prayer. And just before the Prayer, the Headmaster would say, sternly but not unkindly, "Gentlemen, bow your heads."

I didn't bow my head. In the two years that I spent at that (quite excellent) school, I experimented with a few alternatives. At first, I tried the "slump," which allowed me to keep my head up, but to have it no higher than anyone else's bowed head, so I wouldn't be terribly conspicuous. That worked for a while. But the simplest mode, I eventually discovered, was simply to sit in my chair, and not bow my head. That, after all, my parents had told me, was the deal they'd cut on my behalf with the School when I'd been admitted.

That latter pose, which worked well in some ways, did, however, succeed in getting me summoned to a conversation with the Chaplain. He was a nice fellow, collar and all, and took me aside one day to explain that there was really nothing Christian about the Lord's Prayer. "Thy Kingdom come," he assured me, was nothing that Jews didn't also pray for. It might not be a bad idea, he came close to suggesting, just to say the prayer.

I was a pretty timid eighth grader, just back from two years of living in Israel. Now enrolled in this very palpably not-terribly-Jewish school, I was quite conscious of the fact that I was not the typical student there. Still, somehow, timidity notwithstanding, I made it clear that the Lord's Prayer was not for me. I seem to recall mentioning, in what was undoubtedly a quivering stammer, that given that it came from Matthew and Luke, it wasn't *really* all that ecumenical.

Father Whoever-He-Was was very nice, and let the matter drop.

I've been thinking of those Assemblies and Father Whoever-He-Was lately. Not because I've suddenly decided to make the Lord's Prayer part of my morning liturgy, but because I have come to admire what that school did in those Assemblies. They never forced me to say the Prayer. Nor did they really pressure me. They'd admitted me (and a number of other Jews) to the school,

and we were treated with extraordinary respect. But, at the same time, what was then the pervasive Christian character of the school (my impression is that the School's changed a bit since) was never something that they felt they had to hide just because we Jews were enrolled there. They were who they were; we were welcome to study there, but what the School stood for wasn't up for grabs.

It was, I thought, eminently fair.

So, why have Assembles and Father Whoever-He-Was suddenly re-entered my consciousness? Actually, it has nothing to do with Baltimore, or Middle School, or even Christianity. Rather, it has everything to do with Israeli Arabs and some documents that they've recent published on the kind of state that they'd like Israel to become. And I've begun wondering if Jewish Israelis have the courage of the convictions that that school had about its Christianity – to know what it stood for, to state it with pride, and not to pretend otherwise even for those who weren't Christians.

Four of these documents have appeared in the last nine months or so. Even before I read them, it was clear that these were not going to paeans to the Jewish State, overflowing with gratitude and with Zionist passion. There's no reason that they should be. One would have to be either blind or callous not to recognize that Israeli Arabs have not gotten the sort of treatment in Israel that they should. They have full citizenship, but no one would deny that there's been discrimination in housing, employment and a host of other areas. They are infinitely better off both economically and in terms of civil liberties in Israel than they would be in the Palestinian Authority (or an eventual Palestine, one assumes), but they earn less than Jews on average and live under a watchful governmental eye. They have their own school system, in Arabic, funded by the Israeli government, but it's not funded at the level that it should be. The infrastructure in their towns is not as developed as it should be, and they are, quite understandably, frustrated, to put matters mildly.

But for the record: these Israeli Arabs have absolutely no interest in becoming citizens of Palestine, of course. As angry as they sometimes are, they know that second-class status in Israel is still highly preferable to ostensible first-class status on the other side of the border.

But still, they're not the "happy campers" of whom Dan Quayle once spoke (about the Samoans) so memorably. Having grown up in one of those pretty typical Democratic, liberal, American Jewish households of the 60's and 70's, in which civil rights was a major concern, I read these documents as they appeared, not only prepared for some hard-core critique, but feeling that we deserved it. Maybe it would help us make progress, I imagined.

But even my deeply ingrained civil rights dispositions didn't prepare me for what I found in "[The Future Vision of the Palestinian Arabs in Israel](#)." True, the sections about ending discrimination and guaranteeing equal rights were all there, as I'd expected they would be. But there was also some history. What did they choose to say to us potentially positively predisposed Jewish Israelis?

Israel is the outcome of a settlement process initiated by the Zionist-Jewish elite in Europe and the west and realized by Colonial countries contributing to it and by promoting Jewish immigration to Palestine, in light of the results of the Second World War and the Holocaust. After the creation of the State in 1948, Israel ... continued conflicting with its neighbors.

OK, I'll admit, I didn't love the "colonial" word. It's loaded, and it's not intended to make Israel look too great in this ostensibly post-colonial era. But I could live with it, really. After all, if Ze'ev Jabotinsky could use that language about the Zionist project, who am I to object?

What disturbed me wasn't so much what the document *does* say as much as what it doesn't. For while accusing Europe and the Jews of colonialism, the document makes no mention of *why* the Jews might have chosen Palestine. What, we chose it because of its temperate summer climate? The abundant waterfalls throughout the Judean hills? The plentiful oil wells that dot the Negev? The idyllic neighbors on all sides?

It wasn't a fortuitous beginning, I thought, that in outlining the future of Jewish-Arab relations in Israel, Israel's Arabs couldn't bring themselves to acknowledge that we have some historic, national, emotional, religious – take your pick – connection to this land. But, they couldn't. As far as their document is concerned, we have as much business being here as the British did being in India.

And we know how *that* story concluded.

So, not terribly happily, I plowed ahead. But the going didn't get any better. "Defining the Israeli State as a Jewish State," the document continues, "excludes us. ... Therefore, we call for a Consensual Democratic system that enables us to be fully active in the decision-making process."

So, the proposed solution is the end of the Jewish State, as such. Israel can exist, but not as a Jewish State. *This* is the future vision of the Palestinian Arabs in Israel?

It didn't take long for things to get even more complicated. A few months later, in March 2007, not long after the appearance of "The Future vision," another

Israeli-Arab organization, Adalah, proposed a [constitution](#) for Israel. And again, the clear agenda was the end of the Jewish State as we know it:

The State of Israel must recognize its responsibility for past injustices suffered by the Palestinian people [and] recognize the right of return of the Palestinian refugees based on UN Resolution 194.

That the return of the refugees would immediately make Jews a demographic minority in Israel goes unstated, but it's obvious. That, of course, has always been the real issue with Palestinian refugees. When Arab countries evicted approximately 700,000 Jews in the early years of the State, Israel took them in and made them citizens. The Arab countries to which a similar number of Arabs fled (or were forced out, or were frightened out – all important issues, but not our concern here) during the War of Independence did nothing of the sort. Because the agenda was never to help the Palestinians – it was to let the problem fester, hoping that one day it could be used to undermine the Jewish state. And here it is, once again, being used exactly for this purpose – except that this time, the demand is being made not by Arafat, but by Israeli citizens.

A few months later, a third document, "[An Equal Constitution for All?](#)" Its tone struck me as much more genial and less adversarial than the others, but read carefully, it's clear that the agenda is the same. The mere claim that the State of Israel is "that of the Jewish people" is tantamount to telling "16% of the general citizens of the State of Israel that they have no country at all." And Hatikva, by the way, has to go – "This is an exclusive Jewish-Zionist anthem, and it is clear to all that it cannot serve as the anthem for Arab citizens."

And finally, the [Haifa Declaration](#) of May 2007. Here, too, a history lesson:

Towards the end of the 19th century, the Zionist movement initiated its colonial-settler project in Palestine ... which aimed at occupying our homeland and transforming it into a state for the Jews. ... The Zionist movement committed massacres against our people, turned most of us into refugees, totally erased hundreds of our villages, and drove out most of our inhabitants out of our cities.

And when it comes to relationships with the Palestinians outside of Israel (let's not forget those four years of Intifada, by the way, or the fact that Hamas and Hezbollah are still sworn on Israel's destruction), it's hard to tell what distinguishes the attitudes of this group of Israeli citizens from the hard-core Palestinians across the border:

Reconciliation requires the State of Israel to recognize the historical injustice that it committed against the Palestinian people through its

establishment, to accept responsibility for the *Nakba*. ... Reconciliation also requires recognizing the Right of Return and acting to implement it in accordance with United Nations Resolution 194, ending the Occupation and removing the settlements from all Arab territory occupied since 1967, recognizing the rights of the Palestinian people to self-determination and to an independent and sovereign State."

And again, the document explicitly calls for a "change in the constitutional structure and a change in the definition of the State of Israel from a Jewish state to a democratic state established on national and civil equality between the two national groups."

In the context of American liberal democracy, of course, nothing could sound more just. I'm sure that in one of those eighth grade Assemblies, had someone made this case, all the little "gentlemen" in coats and ties would have nodded their heads in solemn assent. But this isn't Baltimore, and the challenges here are someone different from those faced by the great State of Maryland. The "Green Line" isn't quite the historical footnote that the "Mason-Dixon Line" is. The question, it seems to me, is not whether the arguments of these documents would get a solemn nod of the head in liberal, peaceful, secure America, but rather, how decent, thoughtful Zionists ought to respond. Is there really nothing we can say in response to collective demands for our national suicide?

Amazingly, though, very few people with whom I work, or socialize, said very much about these documents. The critique sounded vaguely legitimate to many of them, I know. And even though most of my colleagues viscerally didn't want to give up on the idea of a Jewish State, they didn't really know how to respond. How *do* we balance the Jewish and the democratic? Is the Israeli-Arab population really a fifth column bent on the end of the Jewish State? As bright and intellectually sophisticated as they are, nothing about the educations that many of my colleagues received in Israel prepared them to have this conversation. So they read the documents, and said nothing, to anyone.

But I wanted to talk to *somebody* about all this. One Israeli-Arab associate came to mind. We're good friends, and have been for years. My wife and I were at her wedding in the Sheikh Jarakh neighborhood of East Jerusalem. I've been to her parents' house, and even during the Intifada, took my kids with me, so they'd see that in the midst of the violence, there were very decent people on both sides of the national-religious divide. She's been to our house for Shabbat meals, we've socialized as couples, etc.

And she and I have never had trouble talking politics. She's an ardent feminist, which makes her thoroughly disinterested in religious Islam. But she's also a

proud Palestinian, and refers to herself not as an Israeli Arab, but as an Israeli-Palestinian. And she's smart, Ph.D. from the Hebrew University and all. So she's fun to talk to. And on more than one occasion, she'd said to me that she had "no problem" with Israel being a Jewish State, so long as the Arab minority was given its due. She was, in short, one person who I thought might actually level with me – is what these documents demand *really* what the Israeli Arab population wants?

She's been living abroad for a while, so I wrote her a quick email. Long time no speak, I told her. What's new? And what do you make of all these manifestos and documents coming out of the Israeli-Arab community? I got an answer in ten minutes. "Hi! So glad that you wrote. It's been way too long. So much to tell you." She filled me in on her life, her work, her research. "Be in touch," she said, and we'll get together when she gets back to Israel.

But no mention of the question I'd asked her. So I wrote back right away, something like "and what about the question I asked you?" This time, nothing. I didn't get a response then, and not later. I waited a month, and wrote again. Still, nothing. And to this day, nothing.

I'd crossed the line. The friendship, I guess, was predicated on my not "outing" her, my not forcing her to say what she really thinks about the future of this state. The silence, I imagine, is her way of saying "You *really* don't want to know what I think."

But I actually do. Not because we'll agree, obviously, but because the attitude of my colleagues – read the documents, wrinkle your brow, and close your browser – isn't really going to guarantee the future of anything here. There were moments when I wanted to say to them, "Why is nobody talking about this?" Do you really have nothing to say about why we insist on the survival of a distinctly Jewish State? Does the young generation of Israeli intelligentsia no longer believe anything about why a purely American-style liberal democracy, in which Jews are nothing but a significant minority, will not do? Have we become so intoxicated with the desire to be American-like in everything we do that a commitment to liberal democracy has trumped our belief in what Herzl – and countless others who followed him – had in mind? Has America's unbridled multiculturalism vitiated our ability to say anything about why this place matters to the Jews?

But too few people here want to talk about that. Like many American Jews, they want to believe that everything will be OK if we just don't raise the hard questions. But that doesn't strike me as a terribly fruitful strategy in parenting, or in marriage. Or, for that matter, in State-building.

I'm sorry that my (erstwhile?) friend never wrote back. I really am. I'd have preferred her anger to her silence. That, actually, would probably have made it easier for me to be honest with her. And had I been that honest, I would have said something like this:

Listen, no one here with half a brain thinks this is simple. Of course, the creation of Israel has been very hard on the people who were once the majority here. Who could deny that? And yes, this place is (so far) Jewish to its core, and I realize that that marginalizes you. And Israeli Arabs are now about 20% of the population, but that number's growing, so the challenge is going to become more acute. And yes, on the more micro level, the Hatikva is problematic for Israeli Arabs. Of course a flag designed to look like a *tallit* is a bit of a loaded symbol. All of that's granted.

But with all the problematics that a distinctly Jewish state raises, you need to understand that it's simply not up for discussion. The reasons are terribly complex, but if you want to boil them down to a few succinct sentences, they would be about the fact that there's simply nowhere else on the planet for Jewish civilization to flourish. There's nowhere else where Hebrew could have been revived, where three-year-olds can speak the language of the Bible. There's nowhere else where questions about borders and immigration (such as Israel now faces with the Sudanese refugees – the subject of the next “dispatch”) can become *Jewish* questions, where *Jewish* law, *Jewish* ethics and *Jewish* history and memory need to get factored in. There's nowhere else where the Jewish people can re-imagine what Jewishness ought to be about, and have the tools to make that happen.

Yes, it may be, in some ways, more dangerous to be a Jew here than it is anywhere else in the world, but there's also nowhere else where Jews get to chart the course of their own destiny. There's nowhere else, in short, where the Jews can have what every other “normal” nation has at least somewhere. How can a people that wants to survive in a meaningful way just give up on that? It can't.

So, fully cognizant of how hard this is for you, and your family, and your village ... one thing needs to be clear. That school in Baltimore, to its credit, knew what it stood for, and was proud of it. I still hope that one day, more Israelis will feel the same way about the project we call the Jewish State. And – as awkward and uncomfortable as it was back then, I didn't bow my head during Assembly, and we're surely not going to start bowing our heads here.

Now, how do we make a life together?

That, I think, could be the beginning of a conversation. Not an easy one, but a productive one. But the biggest challenge, perhaps, is to get another generation of Israelis to want to have it.