

Why do we insist on a 'Jewish' state?

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Let's pretend that in May 1948, when David Ben Gurion and his friends announced the establishment of the state of Israel, there was not one person within the brand new sovereign Israeli territory who did not define him or herself as Jewish. No Palestinian Arabs, no Druze or Circassian. What would we have called this newborn state then ?

Things were said clearly and correctly in Israel's Proclamation of Independence. "We hereby declare the establishment of a Jewish state in Eretz-Israel, to be known as the State of Israel," reads the proclamation. The declaration clearly names the new state and calls it Israel - after the name of the territory "Eretz Israel," which is the original name of the people - the people of Israel - a name given to the people by God himself and which has been used exclusively by this very people for hundreds of years before the name "Jewish people" was added, but did not replace it .

Even then, for thousands of years, the name "Israel" or "People of Israel" remained dominant, if not exclusive, in the prayer books and many canonical texts. If Moses, Shmuel or Shaul were to rise from the grave and we were to ask them to identify themselves, they would say: We are Israelites, or we are the sons of Israel. If we were to persist and ask: What about your Jewish identity? They would say: We don't understand what you mean .

Those who think that the name Israel, or Israeli, has a Canaanite element that cancels out the essence and the culture of thousands of years of exile in the Diaspora are wrong. On the contrary, "Israel" is a name that holds within it more history and culture than the name "Jewish." Israel is the original and universal name used by all the peoples of the world in their religious texts, while the term "Jewish" is not uniform, and changes from language to language, even among Jews who speak different languages .

In many cases, the word for "Jewish" depends on the interaction, usually negative in nature, with other peoples. (The memory of Judas Iscariot still resonates within it). This in stark contrast with the original name of the people, as it defined itself in Eretz Israel but also during the long exile .

Therefore, even if there was not one non-Jew within Israel's territory in 1948, it would not have occurred to anyone to name the new state "Jewland, or Judea, and certainly not Zion (another name for Jerusalem). Furthermore, the name "Jew" comes from the tribe of Judah, which pertains to one of twelve sections of the land that was populated by Jews during the time of the second temple, but for some reason this partial name came to describe the entire people .

Therefore, the decision in 1948 to name the new state "Israel" was natural and right. Was it necessary to name it the "state of Israel" and not just Israel? It is safe to assume that the term derives from Herzl's original name "state of the Jews." But logically, there was no reason not to declare in the Proclamation of Independence the establishment of Jewish state in Eretz-Israel, to be known as "Israel" rather than the "state of Israel." To this day we use both terms interchangeably, proving there is no real difference .

And again, if we go back to that hypothetical scenario where only Jews live in the country, would we still need to obsessively repeat the term "democratic Jewish state"? I think not. No Dane, no Italian, no Irishman, and no one belonging to any other people feel the need to repeat over and over like some kind of oath "democratic Danish state" or "democratic Italian state" or "democratic American state." The prefix "democratic" is completely superfluous .

And another question arises: does the exclusive name of Israel or the state of Israel still maintain the country's Zionist values - meaning the law of return which is the only legal manifestation of the Zionist ideology? Absolutely! There is no need to insist on saying "Jewish state" or "state of the Jewish people" in order to express the validity of the law of return (which grants any Jew who wants to live in Israel automatic citizenship). On the contrary, when we say that Israel is also a Zionist state, we clearly articulate the standing offer to Diaspora Jews to transform from Jews into Israelis, and to return to their original and total Jewishness ? in territory, in history and in the experience of living within a community that obligates them. The term "Israel" is very prominent in the Jewish experience in the Diaspora, even today, and the question remains: how do we transform its power into practice ?

By the way, the law of return is the moral foundation behind the 1947 decision to establish a sovereign Israeli state within Palestine, not just for the 600,000 Jews who lived there already but for any Jew who would want to come. From a moral standpoint, that rule is observed today as well, because no Jew who entered Israel on the principle of the law of return would then proceed to close the door that was opened to him, or his parents. Incidentally, any future Palestinian state would have a similar law of return, and rightfully so, to collect all the Palestinians scattered around the world .

In recent years, however, Israel has seen the instigation of a process that contradicts the spirit of the Declaration of Independence. Why has the phrase "we hereby declare the establishment of a Jewish state in Eretz-Israel" come to mean "we hereby declare that Israel is a Jewish state" or that "Israel is a Jewish democratic state"? This change of direction stems from several reasons, but first and foremost it is due to the ever growing national Palestinian minority within the state of Israel. In order to "protect" our identity from the Arab-Palestinian minority in Israel we have invented a phrase that has become a sort of magic incantation ? "democratic Jewish state". Jewish, to protect our identity versus the Palestinian identity within us, and democratic, to assure the Arabs that their rights are not being violated .

But is this phrase really beneficial to both sides? Or has it become detrimental to everyone ? Jews, Israelis and Arabs? In the spirit of the ironic remark made by MK Ahmed Tibi "the state of Israel is Jewish for the Arabs and democratic for the Jews" is the ever growing discrepancy between the term "Israeli" and the terms "Jew" and "Palestinian" a positive change for Israeli Jews as well as for the Palestinian-Arab Israelis ?

The problems that arise from the phrase "Jewish democratic state" are many, and therefore the attempts to soften or circumvent it have been extensive, with countless articles and conferences. The first problem has to do with the word "Jewish" which holds within it a basic ambiguity that is a source of confusion. The term "Jewish" is a term that signifies national identity rather than religious identity. Even in the Halakha (Jewish law), it is said that a Jew is anyone who was born to a Jewish mother, and nowhere does it require a Jew to believe in the Torah to be considered a Jew .

Therefore, if we want to be logically accurate, the word Jew can't be listed among the words Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, but rather one would have to say "religious Jew" or "practicing Jew" to put it among the same ranks. Logically, the word Jew belongs much more among terms like French, Chinese or English. The Jewish faith is an optional part of being a Jew, just as Catholicism or Christianity is an optional part of being an Italian or English, or the way Islam is optional for Egyptians. This has been absolutely proven over the last 200 years of Jewish secularism .

The moment you begin to overuse the phrase "democratic Jewish state" you automatically put the religious factor into a national issue, but that is not the case here. The state of Israel is governed by its citizens, and not by any religious body. Any power that religious bodies have in Israel, they were given by the civilian government, of its own volition, on the basis of this or that coalition consideration. And that which is given can just as easily be taken away .

State backing of religious institutions exists in many places around the world. Israel is not exceptional in its incorporation of religious elements, such as holidays, in its national experience. Therefore, the combination "Jewish state" - even alongside its insurance policy "democratic" sounds hostile and offensive to the non-Jewish citizens of the country. They hear in this combination - whether we intend it or not - the same thing we hear in the phrase "Muslim state". Because even if the word "democratic" was added to the phrase "Muslim state" it would fail to neutralize the basic alienation inherent in the phrase for non-Muslims .

Furthermore, the phrase "Jewish state" and the religious association it evokes forces the non-Jewish citizens to emphasize their own religion in protest, be it Islam or Christianity, in order to establish their own separate identity. While the name "Israeli state", whether accompanied by the word "democratic" or not, evokes a closeness and partnership with this country .

The word "democratic" is weak and problematic and incapable of protecting the rights of the minority against, say, the discriminatory land sale laws of the JNF. However, if the word was linked to the phrase "Israeli state" it would naturally have more power in protecting the rights of all Israelis, as it would not be the job of the "Jews" to protect the "democracy" of the Arabs. Instead, it would be all the Israelis standing guard to protect the democracy that complies with universal civilian criteria .

On the surface, it appears we're dealing with a mere linguistic issue, which by itself could not resolve existential issues that have only been deteriorating at the hand of the nationalistic right recently. However, it creates a joint foundation, on which it would be easier to begin the repairs .