

Blog Post on Jews as a People

My grandmother, a gifted and fastidious knitter, would have been distressed: so many dangling threads. Not that everything in re Israel can ever be entirely neat, all wrapped and ready to go -- but our correspondents raise real and often provocative issues, not all of which can be addressed. (Not, in any case, in one coherent response.) Herewith, an effort to add some detail to one of the dangling threads.

Back in mid-September, in the context of a discussion of how Israel can be both a Jewish and a democratic state, given that 20 percent of its citizens are Arabs, several correspondents wrestled with the idea of the Arabs as a “national minority” – and with the Jews as “a nation.”

The terms here seem to me to complicate at least as much as they clarify. We understand that “Judaism” is a religion. We accept, most of us, that the Jews are “a people.” We know that some members of the Jewish people practice Judaism, the Jewish religion, but we know as well that membership in the people does not depend on religious practice. Membership in the peoplehood depends, in the first instance, on descent – on biology, that is. Practice of the religion depends upon consent – on personal choice. (Curiously, if one not born into the peoplehood begins to practice the religion, he or she is welcomed into the peoplehood; a convert to Judaism becomes a member of the Jewish people. That, and birth, are the only paths of entry into the peoplehood. Yossi Beilin, in his always interesting and often provocative way, recently suggested that one ought to be able to join the Jewish people in some secular fashion, without a religious requirement, but so far, his suggestion seems to have elicited no great interest.)

So we have a religion and we have a peoplehood, whatever that means. I say “whatever that means” and I use the somewhat cumbersome word “peoplehood” because I think what we mean by “peoplehood” goes well beyond what is intended by “ethnic group.” An ethnic group is generally understood as a collection of folkways, of customs and ceremonies and, more broadly, culture, sometimes including language, offering its members a point of location on the sociological map. Jewish peoplehood, however, suggests an ideological stance, even a mission. And, to complicate matters still more, that stance, that mission, are almost invariably put forward in religious terms. For example, the idea of “tikkun olam,” of repairing the fractured universe, as a core motive of the Jewish people, derives directly from religious language and from religious perceptions. That is a matter of fact, independent of whether the Jew who is devoted to tikkun olam is religiously observant.

Which brings us, in a round-about manner, to the question of “nationality.” Here the confusion is dramatically compounded. If by “nationality” we mean a synonym for peoplehood, no problem. But if by “nationality” we imply “nation,” we’re in trouble. The idea of the nation – more precisely, of the nation state – is a modern idea. It goes back no farther, really, than the 18th century. (One wonders, in these days of globalization, on the one hand, and tribalization, on the other, about the long-term prospects of the nation state.) In that important sense, there is a difference between the

Jews as a nation and the nation-state of the Jews, the State of Israel. The Jews were a nationality (or a people) before they had a nation.

If there were perfect overlap between the Jewish state and the Jewish people – if the only residents of the Jewish state were members of the Jewish people – there'd be no political problem, no challenge to the fundamental ground-rules of democracy. But that is not the case. The overlap is imperfect. What, then, shall the status of non-members of the Jewish people who dwell within the Jewish state be?

Generally speaking, and surely here in the United States, the common understanding is that the nation state is the state of all its citizens. There may be a dominant culture, but there is equal protection of the law for all citizens. It is true that Israel's Arabs have many protections – but even a cursory examination of the formal rules of the Israeli political game as well as of the meat and potatoes of politics, budgetary allocations, immediately reveals vast areas where such equal protection is not accorded them. That is why the debate on these matters within Israel is often framed as a debate between advocates of Israel as a Jewish state and advocates of Israel as the state of all its citizens. "A state of all its citizens" is code language for truly equal rights and equal treatment for Israel's one million Arab citizens.

We are not dealing here with a dominant culture, as, for example, Christianity is America's dominant culture. We are dealing here with a privileged culture, with a Jewish state that is quite self-conscious in its insistence on its Jewish identity. That is why there is no groundswell of support, for example, for changing the very Jewish lyrics of Israel's anthem, Hatikvah.

All that makes the discussion of these issues quite thorny. I well recall almost falling off my chair when a senior sociologist at one of Israel's leading universities, an ardent advocate of "a state for all its citizens," suggested (actually, insisted) that Israel's name be changed to something that did not instantly imply a special Jewish purpose to the state. But those who reject such extreme solutions, those for whom there is great value in the idea of a Jewish state – and in its reality – are then required to better than muddling through. Again, and again, they have to find ways to demonstrate that a Jewish state is truly democratic, which means that it is inclusive.

Even without the chronic conflict between Israel and its Arab neighbors, and most especially with the Palestinians, the tension would remain. It is, of course, dramatically deepened by the fact of the conflict. That is why the separation wall is not merely an aspect of Israel's security problem. It is also a metaphor for the hopes (fantasies?) of many Israelis – many, but far from all – that somehow or another, there can be a real separation, that the Jews will be left alone to mind their own business. That is why some speak of expulsion of Israel's own Arabs, as also of those on the West Bank. That is why there are those who propose that in a final peace agreement, Israel can hold on to the large settlement blocs in return for ceding some of the regions within Israel that are overwhelmingly populated by Arabs. But all these proposals, understandable though they may be, are evasions. The serious (and growing) challenge is whether Israel can be,

simultaneously, a state of all its citizens and a Jewish state. An adequate response to that challenge will require considerably more effort than has so far been invested in meeting it.