

Minister of Religious Affairs

Donniel Hartman

Zionism and the rebuilding of the State of Israel entail the decision of the Jewish people to build our collective lives together. By collective lives I do not mean a loose confederation of denominations that join together in a number of common enterprises, in particular at times of crisis. Rather, the Zionist dream is to build a common *public domain* where all join together, a domain that belongs to us all equally and is shared accordingly.

While this ideal lies at the foundation of the Zionist narrative, the reality of modern Israel has failed in its implementation. Instead of a shared public sphere, many, in particular my predecessors in this ministry, have spent too much energy on attempts to control it and to shape it in accordance with their particular ideological affiliation. They have seen success not in fostering tolerance of difference and the ability to share, but in the victory of their particular party and ideology. This must come to an end.

Some argue for a public domain that is religiously neutral, where religion is relegated to the private domain of individual life. While this solution will indeed remove some of the conflict, it is akin to a “successful operation” where the patient dies. If the only way for Jews to live together is to remove our Jewishness from our collective lives, then the Zionist endeavor is bankrupt.

We do not need a state to ensure the physical survival of Jews, and even if we did, Israel alone cannot provide that guarantee. The aim and telos of Zionism is to create a state for the Jewish people, a state where Jewish ideas and values lie at the core of our sensibilities and policies, a state where Jewish ideas and values shape our public, not merely private, lives. It is not the goal of Israel to ensure solidarity either by allowing the dominance of one ideology or by relinquishing our vision of a Jewish state.

Our task is to create a culture of respect for our differences and to educate all to the notion that a Jewish public space is not anyone’s private domain. As that which belongs to us all, we must learn to share it equally. We must learn to allow others, even those with whom we disagree, to function freely within the public domain.

As minister of religious affairs, I am the ad-


vocate of all Jews who participate in the rebuilding of the state. My task is to ensure that all have equal access to public funding and functions. Though this policy already functions with other religions in Israel, it must become the standard within Judaism as well. Just as Israel is the home of all Jews, so too must the ministry be the home for all Judaisms.

Citizenship in the state is not limited to a particular Jewish domination, and consequently, neither are the religious policies of the country, whether we are talking about

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marriage and divorce, conversion, funerals, or funds for the building of religious institutions. Under the auspices of the ministry, we will fund the creation of multiple rabbinate, men and women from all denominations, so each Jew can be guaranteed the right to religious ceremonies and services in accordance with his or her belief system. This will apply not only to the diverse religious denominations, but to secular Jews, as well, whose rights to perform Jewish and civil ceremonies in accordance with their Jewish sensibilities must be protected.

The ultimate aim of my ministry is not only to ensure that the religious life of Israel reflects and represents the diversity of ideologies among the Jewish people, but also to be the chief advocate for maintaining the quality and content of Jewish life in Israel. What we have learned over the centuries is that whenever someone wants to control the access points to Judaism, the result is neither the furthering of Jewish life nor Jewish unity, but rather the creation of a reality in which most Jews stay outside, alienated from their own tradition and identity.

We cannot afford to allow Israel to continue to be the primary catalyst for the alienation of Jews from their heritage. Rather, we need an Israel that serves as the catalyst for a new Jewish renaissance — an Israel that nurtures an array of access points into our tradition. This is the challenge and aspiration of Zionism and the charter of my ministry. 

Rabbi Dr. Donniel Hartman is co-director of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem and has founded some of the most extensive education and training programs for educators and rabbis in Israel and North America. He is the author of The Boundaries of Judaism and the editor of the anthology, Judaism and the Challenges of Modernity, both from Continuum Press.

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