



MY HOPE IN ISRAEL IS A MATTER OF FAITH

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In some Israeli newspaper I recall seeing a headline that went something like: “Sometimes Israel can warm your heart. Other times Israel can make your blood boil.” This past summer was a perfect example. Israel deserved the commendation of the entire world for providing medical treatment and saving the lives of thousands of civilians wounded in the Syrian civil war. Then the Israeli government passed the nation-state law that troubled and dismayed many American Jews and Jewish communities around the world.

Let me put my cards on the table. I am a liberal Zionist. What makes me a Zionist is the belief that the Jews constitute a peoplehood and not only a religious faith. What makes me a Zionist is the belief that the Jewish people have the right to self-determination in the homeland from which they were forcibly expelled 2,000 years ago. What makes me a Zionist is the belief that every people, including the Jewish people, are entitled to a state, “a flag, a language, and a destiny” (Jarrod Tanny).

What makes me a liberal Zionist is an equal commitment to universal values, human rights, religious, racial, and gender equality. What makes me a liberal Zionist is the belief that the Jewish state must embrace democratic principles, guaranteeing equality to all its citizens. Israel is not just a “State for Jews” but “a Jewish State.” And by virtue of being a Jewish State, Israel must be informed by and practice Jewish moral values.

On this point, the Torah itself backs me up. We read in Deuteronomy Chapter 16, “Tzezek tzedek tirdof lema’an tichyeh veyarashatah et ha’aretz asher adonai elohekhah notain lakh: “Justice, justice you shall pursue that you may thrive and occupy the land that Adonai your God is giving you“(Deut 16:20). From our biblical roots, God has always expected the Jewish state to be just. Consequently, to quote Rabbi Eric Yoffie, the former president of the Reform Movement, “my love for Israel is unconditional but not uncritical.”

Of all the issues that came up this summer, I think the most crucial one to shed light upon tonight is the nation-state law. On July 18, the Israeli Knesset enacted Israel’s 15th basic law, the nation-state law. The law reads, “The State of Israel is the national home of the Jewish people, in which it fulfills its natural, cultural, religious, and historical right to self-determination.”

I have no problem with the effort to codify Israel’s Jewish character in its basic laws, to enshrine that Israel’s Jewishness is a manifestation of why Israel exists and what makes Israel unique. What’s wrong with the nation-state law is that it fails to define Israel as the state of all its citizens, regardless of whether or not they are Jews.

What’s most flawed about the nation-state law is what it doesn’t say. There is no reference to “democracy” or “equality.” Consequently, no matter how much proponents of the nation-state law defend it as necessary to protect Israel’s Jewish character or to push back against the international community’s never-ending delegitimation of a Jewish state, second class citizenship for all Israel’s minorities has been enshrined into law.

Nor can anyone deny the nation-state-law has unnecessarily antagonized Israel’s minority communities. Most especially aggrieved is Israel’s model minority, the Druse community, who serve and who hold high ranks in the Israeli army and whose loyalty to Israel has been unquestioned since the founding of the state.

Does the nation-state law spell the death knell of democracy in Israel? Far from it. Israelis are a famously argumentative people and Israel’s democracy is strong and vibrant. Beyond the fact that the law only narrowly passed the 120 member Knesset by a vote of 62-55, with two abstentions, almost 100,000 Israelis protested the nation-state law in two Tel Aviv demonstrations. Thousands of Israeli Jews came out to defend full equality for the Druse and Israeli Arab communities.

Furthermore, Israeli civil society – institutions including the Israel Democracy Institute, the Adalah Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights, The Van Leer Institute’s Center for Jewish-Arab Relations – have a long and commendable record of fighting for the rights of all Israel’s ethnic and religious minorities.

Far from being the one dimensional, right-wing and ultra-nationalist monolith that some portray Israel to be, Tel Aviv University and the Israel Democracy Institute report “there was no sweeping support for the new nation-state law” in Israel.

In an article discussing what Israelis really think about the nation-state law, Dr. Dahlia Scheindlin pointed to the bellwether significance of Israel’s political center. Scheindlin reported that 50% of Israel’s self-identified centrists opposed the nation-state law and 40% of all Israeli Jews thought there was no need for the nation-state law.

And the most significant finding of the peace index conducted by the Israel Democracy Institute and Tel Aviv University in Dr. Scheindlin’s view, was that 60% of Israeli Jews believe the nation-state law should have addressed equality in accordance with Israel’s Declaration of Independence that proclaims the Jewish state “will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race, or sex.”

All this goes to show that the character of the Israeli people and the soul of the State of Israel are not defined by the ultra-nationalist and ultra-orthodox policies of Israel’s current government or prime minister.

To the contrary, the humanistic and altruistic character of the Israeli people stands out in so many ways and especially through Israel’s NGO’s like Isra-AID, an organization that sends emergency first responders all over the world, and through Innovation Africa, an organization that brings solar energy, clean water, and agricultural innovations to many African nations.

Israel is a multi-dimensional society. A significant dimension of that society wants Israel to be tolerant and compassionate and to affirm the values of equality, democracy, and pluralism. My point is that we need to think about Israeli society in a different way. Because a significant portion of Israeli society embraces and welcomes the moral values of Reform Judaism.

The biggest challenge facing this segment of Israeli society will be to find the ways, without exposing the Israeli public to terrorism and violence, to bring an end to Israel’s 51 years of military control over the 4.5 million Palestinians living in the West Bank.

So what do we do? We heighten our engagement with Israel. We push for the democratic and Jewish state that we want Israel to be. As proposed by Harry Reis and Yoav Schaefer, we support those Israelis fighting on the ground for democratic values and ideals in Israel. We bring our collective moral, material, and political resources to bear...to secure Israeli democracy and bring about a just solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

When the Israeli government reneged a year ago on the agreement to create an egalitarian prayer plaza at the Western Wall, the Reform Movement decided that the best response was to strengthen Israeli Reform Judaism's stature within Israeli society and its political system.

The Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism (IMPJ) established the Campaign for Religious Equality to build more Reform congregations and schools, expand lobbying efforts at the Knesset, fund legal advocacy before the Israel Supreme Court, and embark on a massive PR campaign to win over the hearts and minds of the Israeli people.

Yeshar koach, bravo, to the Temple Sinai Board of Trustees for making a \$3,600 contribution to the Campaign for Religious Equality that will help grow an Israeli Reform Judaism that affirms Jewish moral values and democratic ideals.

Yeshar koach also to our board of trustees for endorsing a motion that Temple Sinai become a member congregation of ARZA, the Association of Reform Zionists of America.

ARZA represents the voice of liberal Zionism within our movement, seeks to connect every Reform Jew with Israel, supports all 50 Israeli Reform congregations, and helps fund both the IMPJ and the Israel Religious Action Center that brings cases before the Israel Supreme Court.

So that our congregation can become more informed about ARZA's crucial work, I have invited Rabbi Josh Weinberg, the national president of ARZA, to speak at Temple Sinai and he has accepted our invitation. Please save the date of Wednesday evening, October 3.

Connection to Israel is not just the province of the Orthodox Jew or the Conservative Jew. As I see it, an emotional attachment to Israel is just as much an indispensable ideal of Reform Jewish identity as the pursuit of social justice or working for tikkun olam. I am a Reform Jew and a progressive Jew and I believe in Israel. For me, my hope in Israel is a matter of faith.

Let us remember that the founding fathers of Israel envisioned the Jewish State as an ideal, utopian society. Israel can yet be the Jewish, democratic, and pluralistic state we want her to be. Theodor Herzl, the father of Political Zionism, famously said im tirtzu ein zo aggadah. "If you will it, it is no dream." Tonight, I call you to action with me. I call upon all of us to make the dream come true.