

RBK – Are we a Nation, a State or a Family?

Recent events have driven whatever interest we show in the Middle East towards the civil war in Syria and terrorism emanating from the Gaza strip, that small but significant strip of land bordering Egypt and the Mediterranean Sea from which Israel unilaterally withdrew in 2005. Since that time hundreds if not thousands of attacks have been launched upon Israel from tunnels dug underground, millions have been spent trying to solve the problems for the Peace Process emanating out of the Gaza Strip.

So yesterday, when another attack was carried out in a settlement closer to Jerusalem, many of us sighed a terrible sigh, as if to say, here we go again. We haven't seen a violent attack like this since almost a year ago. But hidden behind the news of this tragedy, lies yet another attack, this one much larger in scope, and with much greater implications for the Jewish state. You may not have even known it was happening.

Israel passed a simple new law, which states that Israel is "the nation-state of the Jewish people." It is what we were all taught as children in religious school. It is what we tell ourselves each and every time we visit. It should not be a big deal, it should be raise any concern or objection at all. But I tell you, that the reverberations of this new law will be felt for generations to come.

The basic equation works like this. Israel strives to be three things: 1) a Jewish state. Our history, our people, and our culture are all intricately linked to the State of Israel. 2) Israel also is committed to the principles of democracy, primarily the mandate of equal representation under the law. For most of Israel's brief modern history, it has followed a British

model of democracy, as opposed to an American one, which by the way, seems to often work better than our system, long live the Queen. Lastly, 3) Israel has long maintained a connection to a very specific piece of property in the Middle East. Bordered by the Mediterranean on one side, the Jordan on the other, and stretching from the Sinai to the Golan Heights. And although this territory is fiercely contested - archaeology, history and international law recognize the strength of our people's connection to this place, its ruins and its accomplishments today.

The problem with the math is that most of the past sixty years has proven that Israel can only choose two of those options, not all three. Israel can be a democracy, or a Jewish state, but it will be much harder for us to maintain both in our historic lands. Soon the Arab population will be larger than the Jewish population between the Jordan and the Mediterranean, and equal representation under the law will cease to be a viable option for a democratic, Jewish state. We will be forced to lose one or the other.

There are plenty who would argue we have already made that choice, and that we, the Jewish people, have rejected our commitment to democratic freedoms when we maintain any presence in the Occupied Territories. I don't think history is quite that simple. The territories, and the Jewish and Palestinian settlements which dot the landscape there, none of them are simple either.

I for one reject the premise of the choice. We simply cannot afford to lose either Israel's Jewish identity, nor its democratic policies. Both have shaped the Israel of today, and both simply must shape the Israel of tomorrow. Women must have equal rights. No religious minority should dominate sacred sites. LGBTQ must continue to be welcomed in Israel. And

liberal Judaism must be given its rightful place at the table when it comes to these, and every other issue facing the Jewish state. We are by far the largest world-wide Jewish presence, we simply cannot afford not to establish that presence firmly in Israel.

So this is the context in which the Israeli Parliament decided to push through this statement of Jewish sovereignty over the land. Israel is now formally and legal a Jewish state. In 1948, when the Declaration of Independence was written marking Israel's founding, the text included language which would ensure "complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race, or sex." And according to most commentaries, today Israel decided to abandon this effort. Israel, it would seem, no longer cares about the social or political rights of all its inhabitants, and will favor the rights of Jews over others. I do not need to remind you what this policy was called in South Africa. May we not allow our brothers and sisters in Israel to go too far down that road.

Prime Minister Netanyahu claims that the new legislation merely "determined into law the founding principle of our existence." In other words, the Knesset is simply stating a fact which everybody knows. But in reality, this new law rubs salt into some very old and well established wounds, which do date back to Israel's founding principles. When Israel was created in 1948, so too were the Arab Kingdoms of Jordan, and Lebanon, and Syria. The Arab populations have always far outnumbered the Jews, and any true democracy needed to address this fundamental injustice. In order for Israel to become a predominantly Jewish state in the first place, it was understood that the local Arab population, as well as the Christian and Druze and other populations would all have to be given their own chance at self-determination.

Israel's history and her fate are wholly tied up with these other communities – and their success or failure impacts our own.

There are those who will argue that American Jews, and liberal Jews specifically, do not have the right to voice an opinion on Israeli politics; that without staking our own personal claims on the land and moving there, we can never understand Israel's significance, nor its security and policy concerns. And yet in the words of the President of the Union for Reform Judaism, Rabbi Rick Jacobs, we believe that, "this is a sad and unnecessary day for Israeli democracy. The damage done by this new Nation-State Law to the legitimacy of the Zionist vision and to the values of the state of Israel as a democratic – and Jewish state is enormous."

Israel's leaders aren't hurting their legitimacy with American Jewry nearly as much as they are betraying the values, history and struggle which created the Jewish state in the first place. And they are also hurting the vital relationship which has always existed between Israel and American Jewry.

At the end of the day there is a single question we must ask ourselves when it comes to Israel. Do we imagine the Jewish people as a nation – like Russia, Germany, or France? Can you be Jewish like you can claim to be French? Or is there something more to being Jewish than what is written on your passport? Aren't we (Israeli Jews and American Jews) connected by something that comes from our mothers and fathers, and from the generations before them? Aren't we connected by belief, by ritual, by humor and by texts? Must we all live in Israel to be authentically Jewish in this world? Or can we at least recognize that we are all family, those who criticize and those who love; those who make Aliyah and those who strengthen Diaspora

Jewry in every place, establishing Jewish communities and Jewish values here in the US and Canada, those who rebuild Jewish communities in the former Soviet Union and those who maintain their heritage in South America and the Caribbean and Ethiopia and China? Can we not agree that those Israelis, the ones who are dismantling the democratic principles Israel once held dear, they are our cousins, our brothers and sisters, because we are family – the Jewish people.

We have talked a great deal in recent years about attacks on women's rights and the rights of liberal Judaism in Israel. We have followed closely the legal battles and the street fights. We have visited numerous times and we will be there again. But this new law strikes a mighty blow to our efforts to support an inclusive and welcoming Judaism in our Jewish state. It strains the welcome we feel, even as we visit our friends, relatives and partnership congregations. We hope and pray that our voices will be heard, that moderate voices will once again rise to power, and that with our influence, Israel and the Jewish people worldwide might fulfill the prophet's promise, that light will shine forth from Jerusalem, Torah will light up the city of Zion, as a shining example of justice and righteousness for the world.