

Joseph Agassi, Liberal Nationalism for Israel
Jerusalem and New York: Gefen, 1999.

Preface to the first English-language Edition, 1999.

The Hebrew versions of this book appeared in 1984 and in 1993. This is my fairly literal, sentence-by-sentence translation. It offers an unusual solution to Israel's political problems (normalization; separation of church and state) from the viewpoint of an unusual political philosophy (a consistent liberal nationalism). This book has a dual character. It is a presentation of a theory of liberal nationalism, with Israel as a case study. It is also a study of Israel's ailments from a liberal viewpoint that is as sympathetic as possible, but also as critical and hard-nosed as possible.

A variety of books appeared since then on the question, how, if at all, is liberal nationalism possible? This is so perhaps because of the great influence on the study of nationalism in the fairly recent book Nations and Nationalism (London, 1983), by the leading social philosopher and scientist Ernest Gellner, that presents the history of nationalism as initially a liberal movement. Perhaps it is because of the dreadful new phenomenon of ethnic cleansing. Some books follow the tradition of individualist liberal philosophy, whose rejection of nationalism is uncompromising. One of them is For Love of Country: An Essay on Patriotism and Nationalism (Oxford, 1997), by Maurizio Viroli, a professor of politics at Princeton University. He contrasts nationalism with patriotism and advocates only the latter; I share with him the view that for two centuries now popular nationalism is illiberal and so also unpatriotic; but in my view it is important to support patriotic, liberal nationalism. Of the recent books which advocate this, let me single out The Construction of nationhood: Ethnic, Religion and Nationalism (Cambridge, 1997), by Adrian Hastings, an English historian of

religion. He rightly dwells on the importance of the distinction between nationality and ethnicity. My appreciation of this book, however, does not take away from my stress on the value and originality of Hillel Kook's idea, here developed and advocated. He has suggested that a nation is liberal only to the extent that membership in it is a matter of choice — of both the nation and the individual citizen. This choice is constrained, and so is the liberalism that stands behind it: we must learn to present theories of the world that take into account its unavoidable imperfections.

Though I am a philosopher, as an Israeli patriot concerned with the future of my country, I express in this book care more about the case study than the theory. My initial aim in writing this book was to contribute to local politics: my hope was (and still is) that it contribute to widening the debate about the political and legal structure of my country, a debate that so far is damagingly narrow, as it is conducted within the confine of a myth. (A myth is inherently vague: taken literally it is obviously absurd.) It is the New Zionist Myth that (contrary to Zionist doctrine) equates being Israeli with being Jewish. The damage is self-inflicted due to the corruption of public administration and of political life in general, and is rooted in the narrowness of Israeli politics, international relations, and state of mind (bewilderment and frustration).

An offshoot of this myth is the view, popular here (in Israel), that some rabbis impose religious practices on an unwilling population. The situation is represented as a complex matter of power politics. It obviously is not the full story, since countries where religious parties have full parliamentary support may, nonetheless, be quite liberal. Religious life there is run by religious establishments in religious communities separately from political

life, which is run by political establishments in political arenas where religious freedom is defended. In Israel religious life is run by the state, and the people argue about religious freedom and support laws that force rabbis to impose religious practices on a reluctantly acquiescent population.

The source of the trouble seems to me to be national discrimination in the guise of religious differentiation. The western model of a normal country is that of a nation-state: one nation ruled by one national state. There are alternative models, bi-national and multi-national. Their merits and defects will not be discussed here, except to say that they are preferable on all counts to the model of a nation-state with a national minority. This invites a comment. There is all the difference in the world between a cultural minority that belongs to the same nation and the national minority that does not. The national minority is discriminated against, often under the guise of being granted cultural autonomy. This is the situation in Israel. The non-Jews here are not members of the nation. They may be elected to office but not to bear arms. So it is obvious that in Israel an armed man is stronger than a legislator. This is an endless source of demoralization. Also, the Israeli non-Jews who are exempt from military service, are not officially exempt: they are only not called to serve. This makes the law something to circumvent by understandings. Also, exemption from military service is not desired, as it leads to discrimination: many job advertisements include the clause: people with no military record need not apply. Non-Jews live in ghettos not by choice but by a myriad of regulations that trap them there. This is very dangerous.

My effort in raising a public discussion here has met with little success. Local discussions concerning basics are scant and superficial, overlooking

the flagrant, prevalent discrimination against non-Jews and against women. These are legally sanctified, though they are unconstitutional. (Israel has no constitution, but its Declaration of Independence and fundamental laws have quasi-constitutional force.) Israeli law is thus a farce and will remain so until basic changes are enacted. To this end, we should separate state and church. A discussion of the distinction between nation and congregation may facilitate this. Israel rejects the distinction and officially judges the nationality of most Israeli citizens to be Jewish and that of most of the rest to be Arab. This renders citizenship an administrative fiction. Consequently, the official aim of the State of Israel is not to serve her citizens, but rather the ingathering of the exiles. Since the Diaspora is here to stay, the claim that it is our aim to eliminate it is sheer propaganda. Yet it is taken seriously here; it is an axiom of the national consensus.

The Israeli national consensus is steadily weakening, due to deep disagreements about the peace process, which is the center of the political scene, at least today. The country is at risk of disintegration. The risk is met with efforts to strengthen the uncontested items in the national consensus, chiefly the New Zionist Myth and its corollary, the idea that the task of Israel is to facilitate the ingathering of the exiles and to show hostility to any criticism of the national consensus, especially to any criticism of the New Zionist Myth.

Criticism is allowed to be vicious here, as long as it is kept within the consensus and prevented from leaking out. Most English-language studies on Israel that have come my way, pro or con, are highly misleading, in that they quietly endorse the consensus. The consensus is that descriptions of our country intended for outside consumption must be idealized. We may admit

that she suffers from small defects, but only if we stress that they will be remedied soon. We also admit our dire need for clothing and shelter for our new immigrants, and for state-of-the-art weapons for our armed forces. But nothing more. In a recent Tel Aviv University public meeting in memory of Premier Yitzhak Rabin, Henry Kissinger reported what Abba Eban, Israel's most famous foreign minister ever, had told him when both were in office: "What we mean by objectivity is one-hundred percent agreement with us" Kissinger quoted him to say. "I thought he was kidding", he added, raising nervous laughter.

While trying to prevent internal criticism from leaking out, we listen keenly to external criticism, trusting it to be unfair. Criticism from foreign Jews we repudiate as covert excuses for defection. We do not expect immediate massive immigration of millions of Jews; so we reluctantly permit them to stay out, on condition that they extend to us lavish financial aid and unqualified political support. Criticism from non-Jews we treat here as covert anti-Semitism. We still expect the international community to help us, despite our regular misconduct and inept propaganda, and the constant flow of hostile propaganda (anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli). Our expectation that the West will indulge us rests on the Allies' disgraceful heartless indifference to the tragedy of the Holocaust when rescue was possible.

The New Zionist Myth is spreading a deep mistrust of democracy.

Democracy is inherently vulnerable. This is illustrated by the failure of the inter-war (Weimar) German democracy. Most Israelis take this case as proof of the innate inability of democracy to curb anti-Semitism. This blocks cooperation between Israeli and western Jews, as they are patriotic defenders of democracy, and Israelis judge this as a defection that they will

regret only when the next Holocaust arrives. When challenged, this judgment is dismissed as excessively bluntly stated, but with the insistence that the world is against us. This is the Masada Complex.

The Law of Return that keeps Israel's gates open to all Jews is thus considered here to be her *raison d'être*, the justification for her very existence as an independent state. This is dangerous, as independence never invites justification. The justification is endorsed here, because it provides an excuse for religious discrimination against non-Jews (Israeli and Palestinian in particular). A counter-proposal is made here, not to repeal the Law of Return but to reword it, with the intent to remove from it reference to religion, and to affirm instead our readiness to provide refuge to those persecuted as Jews and our preference for immigrants of Jewish heritage.

This book depicts two obvious distinctions: between nation and congregation, and between liberal and illiberal nationalism (the version of nationalism as taken for granted in the West versus the chauvinist versions). To confuse these is to allow or even condone the religious discrimination practiced in most trouble spots, including Northern Ireland, the Balkans, the Middle East, the former Soviet Union and the Indian sub-continent. (01)

The expression "separation of state and church" does not translate comfortably into Hebrew. The Hebrew word for church is reserved to denote the Christian house of prayer. The expression may then be translated as "separation of state and synagogue", or "separation of state and rabbinate". This does not reflect the applicability of the expression to all religious authority. A better translation is, "separation of secular and religious authorities", yet it harbors another difficulty. The word "secular" refers to what lies outside the religious dimension. It was used by some atheists to

denote hostility to religion and this usage became standard in modern Hebrew. So the usual translation here is "separation of faith and state". This separation, almost all Israeli Jews agree, is inapplicable to Judaism; since a Jew is affiliated to a creed as well as to a nation. As the Jewish people is ancient and nationality is modern, it is absurd to view the Jews as affiliated to a distinct nation. Only Israel supports this absurdity; no trend in modern Judaism does. Of the non-practicing Jews, some view being Jewish as an ethnic and cultural characteristic; others, such as the Russian Jews, who constitute a national minority, view themselves as such, regardless of any matter of faith. All organized Jewish congregations reject it. The various conservative and reform congregations characterize themselves as a creed and a sub-culture. Orthodox Judaism, as developed in Europe in the last two centuries, ignores the modern world. Its leaders in Israel have managed to convey contempt for all versions of Judaism except for the orthodox, though they unwittingly increase the unpopularity of orthodox Judaism too. They hardly mind this, as their extremely conservative attitude makes them disregard all criticism.

The illiberal New Zionist Myth is operative. For example, it has allowed Israel to request the United States to block migration of Russian Jews to America. She still pretends that all Jewish communities are Orthodox. Objection to her conduct is understandably restrained, partly due to indifference, partly due to a reluctance to embarrass her. On occasion some foreign celebrities, some of them Jewish, have objected to her harshness to Palestinians. Non-orthodox Jewish leaders are now slowly showing readiness to censure her hostility to their congregations. They still refrain from demanding that she should cease adjudicating and speaking on behalf

of all Jews on matters religious and political. Though Judaism is a very low church, the Israeli Orthodox establishment is a government agency; this forces it to behave increasingly like an authoritative center of a high church; in this it has much popular support here, though an increasingly reluctant one, since most Israeli Jews are non-practicing. This is confusing. I was myself confused about this before I met Hillel Kook (Peter Bergson), whose tenets this book describes. He has helped me see the damage due to Israel's view of her nation as a congregation: it is a damage to her political independence.

This book addresses the Israeli Jewish majority. As our politics involves religion, most of us express our frustration by developing contempt for our tradition and more so for its parliamentary defenders. The distinction between congregation and nation should lead to the separation of church and state, and thus to the improvement of attitudes to our heritage, and to the reduction of our sense of frustration.

The political situation here is explosive. The efforts to overcome frustration by appeals to goodwill and to the love of peace that will lead to no improvement, cannot but increase frustration. The instability of the situation guarantees a deadlock. Even were Israel and the Palestinians able to find a stable settlement, Israel's discrimination against her non-Jews is sure to destabilize it. The experience of confessional strife in other countries should serve as a warning: Israel cannot be stable while openly discriminating against a substantial national minority. Even without discrimination, as long as aspirations of non-Jews are regularly frustrated, as they are here, it is only a matter of time before this will lead to outbursts of destabilizing activities.

This book does not address Israeli non-Jews. The idea of a secular state should appeal to them, as the status of second-class citizens is not exactly to their taste. It does appeal to them, as I saw on occasion. (Encounters between Jewish and non-Jewish citizens are uncommon in my country, as it is officially ghettoized: sales of most of the land is restricted to Jews, and so non-Jews live in separate villages or small towns. Consequently, Jerusalem is divided, as Hebron is, despite all declarations to the contrary. So, almost only a peace-activist meets regularly individuals who are members of the other community.) Israeli non-Jews are unable to do much to alter their political situation, though; initiative must come from the responsible among the Jewish majority here.

This book does not address Palestinians, and refers to them only to report their having the start of a national movement. After a long delay we officially admit this, though feebly and intermittently, and without respecting it. We should respect this movement. Instead we hardly converse with her representatives. This is hard, because of segregation and of a tremendous cultural and educational gulf, and, poignantly, because of bitterness: their situation is much more desperate than ours. (Even financial aid faces many obstacles on its way to their suffering population.) Their leadership is that of the Palestine Liberation Organization, which was not democratically elected: it was very weak after the collapse of the Communist block and more so after the Gulf War — which is why the Israeli leadership agreed to cooperate with them, despite their inability to revoke their charter, the Palestine Covenant, which declares the destruction of Israel a part of its target, before the United States of America exerted a tremendous pressure on them to omit from it expressions of the desire to destroy Israel. (The Palestine Covenant still stands, though perhaps in modification, and it still claims ownership over the whole territory of formerly British Palestine, east and west of the River Jordan.

Extravagant claims are politically legitimate, and should be met with reasonable offers, such as the one to exchange them for Israel's recognition of their right to have a territory of their own.)

Local elections legitimized their leadership somewhat. It is not for outsiders to advise them on their leaders. What one can say from the outside about the predicament of the Palestinians is not very different from what this book says of the Israeli predicament, only more emphatically: a nation must come to terms with its past and choose leaders who are not afraid to face basic challenges and conduct public debate on a master-plan concerning the national future, dwelling on more than the immediate future and less on the very distant one. This is even harder for the Palestinians to do than for the Israelis: even the admission that in 1948 they missed a golden opportunity as their leaders refused to declare independence and enter into a peace treaty with their newly-founded neighbor. It is, of course, no good crying over spilt milk, but it is also no use pretending that it was not spilled. As long as the Palestinians are not ready for this admission, they are and will remain handicapped until the twentieth century will recede well into the historical background.

Israel is torn over the Palestinian problem. Is there a Palestinian national movement? If yes, what right might it claim? Unfortunately, this is examined here in Israel not politically but philosophically, or more precisely, theologically. This reduces the hope for peace. We should admit, instead, to a boundary dispute between nations: experience shows that compromise over land is more likely than over religion. Though the Palestinians are becoming increasingly a nation, their situation is no less confused than ours. This is partly due our confusion, partly due to different

factors, including a Palestinian Diaspora in the not too liberal Middle East, an Arab nationalism that curbs the growth of local national movements, and a confusion between legitimate struggle for national liberation and terrorism, a confusion enhanced by the erstwhile terrorist character of the Palestine Liberation Organization. This confusion promotes terrorism. As a precondition for effective peace negotiations, Israel demands that terrorism should be eliminated. This demand is reasonable but not realistic.

The view of the Palestine Liberation Organization as a terrorist organization gives repeated cause for annoyance and distraction. It is countered by an erroneous claim and by a correct observation. The erroneous claim is that as heir to the Irgun National Military Organization, the present Israeli government also has a terrorist ancestry. The correct observation is that the view of the Palestine Liberation Organization as a terrorist organization is used as an excuse for Israel's own terrorist activities. It is a pity that complaints about terrorist activities are linked to a historical allegation, particularly a false one, since history is no excuse for Israel's present (official) use of torture and of death squads and of occasional terrorist activities abroad, not to mention her segregation and closure of the Palestinian population that seeks employment in menial work here.

This is not to condone guerilla warfare: at most, it is legitimate after all peaceful avenues were tried without success. Nor is it to deny that, almost inevitably, guerilla warfare involves terrorism. Nevertheless, the distinction between guerilla warfare and terrorist activities is imperative, as they differ significantly: terrorism is directed chiefly against civilians, and guerrilla warfare is directed chiefly against military targets. The view of both the Irgun National Military Organization and the Palestine Liberation

Organization as terrorist is thus misleading: The Palestine Liberation Organization regularly practiced terrorism in addition to its guerilla warfare and officially as a part of it. Public sentiment in the West concerning violence changed radically twice, with the rise and with the decline of the popularity of the New Left, which condoned terrorism in academic publications and in the mass media, including popular novels and movies (like the acclaimed movie The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum, based on the novel by Nobel laureate Heinrich Böll).

Unlike terrorist activities, guerilla warfare should be recognized, particularly when it is a war of independence. The Palestinian Uprising, the intifada (a corruption of “independence”), is justified as a struggle for independence: in general, not in detail. Particularly not its religious character nor its terrorism, even though they are admittedly dictated by the religious character of Israel's political establishment and by Israeli terrorism against Palestinians. Compromise is only possible between nations ready to respect each other, not between religious doctrines, nor between parties ready to exercise torture. This fact is shamelessly employed by some Jewish settlers in Judea and Samaria (territories claimed by the Palestinian Authority), who justify their terrorist activities (clandestine and open) by messianic arguments. Were a separation of church and state instituted here, it would be possible to arrange for the settlers to become Jewish Palestinians and thus cease to be the major stumbling block to the peace process that they (intentionally) are: their success is due to the ambiguity of their legal status that puts them above the law. They can be forced to choose one or another legal status and to be law-abiding.

The peace process is lame. The Camp David, the Oslo and the Wye accords

or any other move contemplated within the present framework will not be the start of a new era. A successful resolution of a deep-seated conflict needs ample grass roots support from the populations of both sides. This is precluded by the widespread, semi-official discrimination according to religious affiliation.

Early in the twentieth century Jewish workers here were troubled by the incongruity between socialism and nationalism. Muslims (the few locals and the immigrant Transjordanians) competed with Jews for work for a pittance in the few new Jewish plantations. Jewish leaders asked Jewish workers to forego all struggle for better pay. The incongruity was never resolved. To date, Israel sustains scars that this left on her few pioneers nearly a century ago: chauvinist arguments are still used to justify exploitation, and exploitation is the unspoken motive for much of the folly of Israeli politics, though this time it hits the non-Jewish workers. Low-status Jews find it hard to utilize the scant avenues for social mobility or to fight for more; so they naturally tend to support the status quo that keeps their socioeconomic advantage over non-Jews.

Western observers deem Israel normal; this confuses them. They do notice the odd, semi-official status of Judaism here, yet they fail to notice its import. Church is not separate from state as in France and in the United States, and it is not a state church as in England and in Denmark. The status of Judaism here is vague. This hinders democratic control and enhances all sorts of underhand discrimination. Vagueness invites clashes regarding the power of the rabbinate and this maintains the status quo. The more liberal politicians seek religious reform; their wish must be frustrated, as they cannot use parliament to give vent to their frustration: it is no religious synod. Constitutional laws (legislated in lieu of a constitution) are openly sabotaged by (legally instituted) religious courts. The popular reluctance to discuss basic issues prevents directing the state to leave religious practices to the

communities and to keep them out of politics. So religious coercion is recognized by all political parties, and this blocks debate on basics. The urgent need must be met, if not for a constitution, then for a debate on constitutional matters, especially on the inconsistency between democracy and religious coercion. The best way to do this is to reconvene the Israeli Constituent Assembly that refused to do its duty and declared itself Israel's first parliament instead.

Western confusion regarding Israel rests on inconsistent Western attitudes to nationalism: democrats and individualists tend to undermine nationalism; liberals and anti-imperialists tend to support it. Although the democratic nation-state is traditional, no consistent traditional philosophy supports it. Tracts devoted to any combination of liberalism and nationalism are scarce and hardly ever consistent. This is achieved in this book. Liberalism and nationalism are presented here as matters of degree, rather than in the usual abstract (utopian) manner, and also as matters of some choice. Though the traditional Social Contract Theory is an idealization, it points in the right direction: the desirability of freedom of choice, and the greater the better. Since all this is commonsense, discussion of it is rather academic for successful democracies; but countries which struggle in efforts to evolve into smoothly functioning democracies may benefit from a consistent liberal nationalism, such as the one which this book advocates.

This is of some concern even in the developed countries of the world, since every national agenda is increasingly dominated by the global agenda. This agenda requires world peace and security; it should be coordinated by some powerful central authority compatible with national sovereignty. I have discussed this in some detail in my Technology: Philosophical and Social Aspects (1984). However problematic the coordination between the rich

nations is, it is rendered more problematic by the poor nations. Soon after World War II, in the early days of foreign aid, Sir Arthur Lewis observed that aid rescued tottering corrupt regimes, causing untold damage. It was irresponsible, however unintentionally so. Offering aid on reasonable conditions improves matters, but it demands that benefactors learn about their intended beneficiaries. Ignorance keeps the peace process in the Middle East in a fragile situation; better results demand the neutralizing of the causes of instability, chief among them are the abject living conditions in parts of the Arab world and Israel's impolitic discrimination against her minorities. The discrimination is an unspoken major item in Israeli politics, and it lowers the general level of politics to the point of paralysis. Yet we are content to observe that ours is the best political system in the region.

Unfortunately, the region is backward. The chief obstacle to peace and prosperity is the heartbreaking backwardness of the whole region, educational, socioeconomic, and political. Israel must then undertake a political initiative with the intent of advancing the region as much as possible without violating international conventions. Thus far Israel is indifferent to the region's problems, that she carelessly even aggravates. The only exception is the suggestion of one Israeli political leader, Shimon Peres, that the developed countries should contribute to a regional economic recovery plan akin to the Marshall Plan. This is a slogan, not even an outline for a preliminary proposal. It is in everybody's interest to declare a switch from the waste of local resources on weaponry to economic investment. At the very least, an international declaration of intent is required, perhaps also the intent to devise a global Marshall Plan financed by savings due to disarmament. There is no escape from responsibility to one's

neighbor, even though responsibility to one's own people comes first: one can do little for one's neighbor as long as one's home is in poor shape. And the house of Israel is in poor shape, as she discriminates against her own citizens, on the tacit excuse that they prosper by comparison to all other populations across her border. As long as non-Jewish Israelis have the right to be elected to her legislature but not to bear arms, Israel tacitly endorses the view that weapons are more powerful than words. This is a dangerous philosophy. An example is the Gulf War. The temptation and the excuse for Iraq's dictator to invade Kuwait rested on the discrimination against Kuwaiti Palestinians. This is why so many of them supported the invasion, this is why so many of them had to flee for their lives after the Kuwaiti government was reinstated by the Coalition, and this is why so many of them have demonstrated in favor of Iraq during Operation Desert Wolf — contrary to their own interest. The Palestine Liberation Organization lost its prestige during the Gulf War and yet the Palestinian Authority still has no choice but to support Iraq. At the time the Israeli government came to their rescue; today they are taking greater risks, as the Israeli government is looking for excuses to break obligations that were accepted at the Wye conference.

As this book is going to the press things look bleak. Yet we must keep trying. My aim is to raise a public debate concerning the desirability and necessity for Israel to normalize and become a Western-style nation-state. The peace process is frustrated, and Israel cannot activate it, as she does not recognize her own nation, confusing nation with creed, hoping to house practically all and only Jews. This will be learned sooner or later, but the cost of the lesson is constantly on the rise. I wish that the transition to

normal life will be not too painful, that we will soon proceed with the important real tasks that our abnormal situation is blocking. To normalize Israel would not solve any of her problems but will ease the process of tackling them and enable us to move on to newer and more exciting tasks. Is this too much to hope for?

- Herzlia, Hanukkah, 1998.

P. S. This book is full of loose ends. Some of them are taken up in other works of mine; see Notes below; see also my "The Nation of the Modern Nation-State: The Case of Israel", in Ian Jarvie and Sandra Pralong, editors, Popper's Open Society After Fifty Years. London: Routledge, 1999, pp. 182-96, my review of Israeli Judaism: the Sociology of Religion in Israel in Philosophy of the Social Sciences, 28, 1988, and my "The Impact of Auschwitz and Hiroshima on Scientific Culture", in the forthcoming Imre Toth Festschrift. It should be noted, however, that that Kook's tremendous impact is rooted in the dreadful blunder that was the opposition of the Zionist leadership to mass immigration, a blunder that persisted despite the approaching Holocaust. See Hava Eshkol, Silence: Mapai [Palestine Labor Party] and the Holocaust, 1939-1942. Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi, in Hebrew, pp. 18 and 363-4/ See also Louis Rapaport, Shake heaven and Earth: Peter Bergson and the Struggle to Rescue the Jews of Europe, Jerusalem and New York: Gefen, 1999. Hopefully, Hillel Kook's influence on post-war political life will soon raise public attention. His march on Washington links with the initiation and character of later marches. His mass appeals to public opinion prodded the United States to recognize lobbies, thus boosting pluralism. It also replaced the traditional partiality for secrecy with the publicity that accompanied the trail-blazing affair of the illegal immigrant boat "Exodus".

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