
Hillel Halkin

Of course the Jewish people has the right to be “master of its own fate in its own sovereign state.” To think otherwise is to deny it what is extended as a matter of course to the Maltese and the Slovenians. Anyway you cut it, this is a rather nasty form of anti-Semitism, whether in its Gentile or its Jewish variety.

But this does not mean that there is any justification for the shameful way in which Israel has discriminated *de facto* against its Arab citizens since 1948 while granting them official equality, or that a Jewish state does not have the political and moral obligation to be the state of its Arab citizens as well. I see no contradiction here. There are dozens of countries in today’s world with significant ethnic minorities, some dealing with them more successfully than Israel and some less; but no one, to the best of my knowledge, has suggested that any of them must abandon its majority culture as part of the process. (Excepting, perhaps, the multiculturalists in the United States, who have created a problem where none previously existed.) Spain, for instance, has, since the end of the Franco era, given the Catalonians wide cultural and even political autonomy without endangering its territorial integrity or becoming a whit less Spanish. And although the situation with Spain’s Basques is more complicated, the solution to their problem clearly lies along the same lines.

Israel’s Arabs, needless to say, comprise even more of a problem than the Basques, one that reflects both the overall tensions of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the special nature of Jewish and Islamic ethnocentrism. Still, I am convinced that practical solutions could be found for most aspects of it if Jewish prejudice and indifference did not stand in their way. “Hatikva” happens to be an excellent example. Not only is it absurd for a

country to have a national anthem that a fifth of its citizens cannot sing; and not only could the whole problem be easily solved by changing a single word of this anthem and singing *nefesh yisra'eli* ("the Israeli soul") instead of *nefesh yehudi* ("the Jewish soul"); there is in addition not the slightest reason for such a change to offend Jewish sensibilities, since in traditional Jewish literature it is precisely a Jew that the word *yisra'eli* denotes. The fact that even such a small and symbolic step has been too much for the Jewish majority of Israel to take is a sign of its obtuseness in regard to the larger issue.

There are, it seems to me, two basic prerequisites for fully integrating Israel's Arab population into the country's life while allowing it to retain its sense of ethnic pride and identity. One is that we Jews stop thinking like a minority in our own country.

In a normal country, which we are not, the majority does not fear contact or even close intermingling with the minority, because it knows from long experience that this can only work in the majority's favor; when assimilation occurs under such circumstances, it is the minority that assimilates to the majority, not vice versa. And in a normal democratic country, which we also are not, the majority understands that it is responsible for creating the conditions of openness and equality that would enable those members of the minority who wish to assimilate to do so.

Haunted by our long history in the diaspora, we Jews in Israel still irrationally view assimilation as a process threatening us. To take but one example: In any open, Western society today, when members of the majority and a minority marry—French and Algerians, for example, or whites and blacks in the United States—the couple is almost always socially absorbed by the majority, or at least by a liberal subgroup of it. French-Algerian couples in France tend to live as French, black-white couples in the United States in white neighborhoods, and so on. It is only in Israel that this does not happen. Here Arab-Jewish couples, of which there are relatively few, invariably live among Arabs because even liberal Jewish society does not

accept them. Yet if it did, there is no doubt that their children would grow up with more of a majority—that is, a Jewish—identity than a minority one.

The second prerequisite is numerical. While the matter cannot be reduced to precise mathematical measurement, there is clearly a statistical point past which, when an ethnic minority grows too large, it can no longer be accommodated without severe friction, involving fears on the majority's part that it is about to lose its majority status and separatist demands on the part of the minority. Were the number of Catalonians in Spain double or triple what it is, this might well be the case there, too.

We in Israel today, within our 1967 borders including Jerusalem, have a twenty-percent Arab minority that is growing because of a high if dropping birthrate. This birthrate, the world's experience clearly shows, can only be reduced further by raising the target population's standard of living—which is to say, integrating Israeli Arabs more fully in the Jewish economy. (Aggressively pursued fair employment laws would be a good beginning.) And even twenty percent, I would suggest, is pushing things very close to the limit of the tolerance of any democratic society: Anything higher would be socially and politically unassimilable. Clearly, then, however painful or risky it may be, we will have to let the Palestinians have their own state and take the Arabs who will live in it off our hands. We will have enough on our hands even without them.

Hillel Halkin is a translator, journalist and author living in Zichron Ya'akov.