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## Cynthia Ozick

Reflections on the State of Israel have no weight, it seems to me, if the writer is not a voting citizen of that state. Sovereignty, if it is to mean anything at all, must be answerable to the will of voters, not to meditations of diaspora intellectuals, no matter how impassioned, well-intended or “committed” they may be. Opinion from abroad remains exactly that—opinion from abroad, a surrounding buzz, sometimes importuning, sometimes demanding, but always irrelevant to the voting citizens who are subject to the risks of any irrevocable national decision. Sovereign states have the right to make their own decisions about the future, based partly on the mandate of the ballot box and partly on the independent thinking of those they have elected. So whatever I say here is, after all, no more than buzz and

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chaff. If I don't live in Israel and have no vote, why should any Israeli care what I think? And this stricture applies not only to a private scribbler like myself, but also to the relentless pressures of the heads of significant diaspora institutions.

Nevertheless, since this is a contribution to a symposium, not to a political pressure group, I am glad to note that time has failed to erode a single syllable of David Ben-Gurion's vision as it is articulated in Israel's Declaration of Independence. Those who currently agitate for "a state of its citizens" (a phrase I first heard from the Arab-Israeli novelist Anton Shammas, now a resident of Michigan) already have it. No member of a minority population is prevented from casting a vote or participating in parliament—the touchstones of political equality—and the fundamental political condition of Arab citizens of Israel is no different from the fundamental political condition of Jewish citizens of Great Britain. In Britain, Jews certainly have the vote, but just as certainly they are expected not to undermine the official Christianity on which the state is based (nor would they dream of doing it). Christianity is the dominant culture of all Western democracies (sometimes officially, sometimes not), and Jews who are otherwise at home in these democracies must, and do, accommodate to living in a religious culture not their own. Amos Oz likes to say that as a socialist he may not be sympathetic to nationalism, but he would prefer Israel not to be the first country to divest itself of the sin of nationalism. And it seems to me that in the matter of divestment of cultural and religious symbols, it would be preferable for Israel to permit England to go first.

"Hatikva," with its reference to the "Jewish soul," is inappropriate for an Israeli Arab child to sing? There may be truth in that; but there is no law that compels an Arab to sing words he dislikes, just as there is no law that compels me to sing the verse of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" declaring that "in the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea." Granted, "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" is not a national anthem. Yet I doubt very much that it is a crime in Israel not to sing the national anthem. As for the cultural discomfort of minorities—the sense of feeling "left out"—if

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they are not harassed, if their religious institutions and schools are free to express what they wish, that is all that is required; the highest standard has been met. It is not the responsibility of governments to grant full and complete psychological comfort at all times and at every season to all their citizens (ask any American Jew at Christmastime).

Israel was founded as a Jewish state. That is its purpose, its mission, its meaning. All of these—purpose, mission, meaning—would be augmented, however, if there were instituted a separation of religion and state. The symbols of Jewish culture and religion and peoplehood will be retained and surely enhanced with the removal of clergy from the political arena. Rabbis should be rabbis; they should not be politicians. And as long as most young Israelis are subject to conscription, all young Israelis, including Arabs and yeshiva students, should be subject to some kind of suitable and usefully participatory national service. Not all national service need be military.

And if Israel were to be stripped of its uniquely Jewish character, what would its purpose be? It was not established in the negative, solely as a “haven,” though it gratefully serves that purpose too (hence the Law of Return); on the contrary, it was established as a national revolution toward Jewish freedom of self-expression—a freedom that can be found nowhere else in the world. Christianity and Islam have scores of countries offering Christian and Islamic self-expression; the Jewish people have only one country, still precarious, still under ferocious threat, still tender in years, still a sapling in need of nurture. Whether or not one believes in the idea of soul, to throw out “Hatikva” because it speaks of the “Jewish soul” is to mock and betray those dozens of generations who survived the savagery of massacres or resisted the easy escapes of conversion or self-propelled vanishing. It is, besides, a suppression of history; and, when all is said and done, a kind of autolobotomy.

Nowadays, when one dares to describe the State of Israel as a precarious sapling, one may be assaulted by hoots. What, Israel precarious? A sapling? Is this the country that is the greatest military power in the Middle East, and the greatest economic success? But military might and economic flourishing

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cannot stand against a fiery idea that forges the minds of generations of schoolchildren. That idea is a ferociously hostile and grotesque vision—an anti-version—of Zionism, with “Palestine” presented as an ancient heritage and culture and Jews and Jewish historical sites everywhere absent, and it is promulgated in the schoolbooks officially published (since the beginning of Oslo) under the aegis of the Palestinian Authority’s Ministry of Education. Israeli military force and a risen economy are, in the long run, frail barriers against *Modern Arab History and Contemporary Problems for Tenth Grade*, which teaches that Jews are merely a religious group “who deluded themselves that their religious faith was sufficient to turn them into one nation”; or against an eighth-grade text offering a definition of racism that reads, “Mankind has suffered from this evil both in ancient as in modern times, for, indeed, Satan has made their evil actions appear beautiful. Such people are the Jews.” From grades one to twelve, no map shows Israel, and students in fifth grade learn that “the Palestinian people are descended from the Canaanites.” From *Our Arabic Language for Fourth Grade*: “If you look towards the city of Jerusalem, you will see the Dome of the Rock with its beautiful golden color, and you will feel you have the responsibility to free the captive Mosque and the mourning Dome from the thieving conquerors.” In the fourth grade also, children are asked to memorize a poem: “Death pleases us, and we refuse to be humbled. How sweet is death for Allah,” and by seventh grade this peroration becomes explicit: “The jihad fighter sacrifices himself in accordance with Allah’s way for the sake of his religion and to defend his nation.”

Citations such as these instantly (and distastefully) mark one as “right-wing,” while the PA’s use of textbooks that teach the illegitimacy of the State of Israel, and take for granted its imminent physical destruction, has never been deemed worthy of note in the Newspaper of Record. Yet no army can crush hateful thinking, and no computer economy can delete propaganda that has been assimilated as belief. Finally, it remains to be seen whether Oslo’s land-for-peace blueprint, under the administration of either Labor or Likud (or, as some suggest, a unity government), can

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diminish and finally eradicate murderous hatred radically inculcated in schoolchildren.

But if Israeli society ceases to be overtly and emphatically Jewish in the name of slogans like “a state of its citizens,” what will differentiate the rational and democratic purveyors of these slogans from the PA schoolbooks that declare the idea of a Jewish nation to be no more than a delusion? Don’t both impulses intend, as a matter of principle, to delegitimize Israel as a country of the Jews?

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