Ruth R. Wisse

While I share the concerns of Azure's editors about the kind of country the Jews require and deserve, I see from the symposium question just how much they still have in common with their opponents. They write: "After half a century of independent statehood in which the material basis of the Jewish state has been largely secured, it now seems that the most important task is to secure the cultural, philosophical and moral basis for the country…." The secularists they deplore write: After half a century of independent statehood in which the material basis of the Jewish state has been largely secured, it now seems we can afford to take the risks for peace; or, we can develop our individuality instead of our collective ethos; or, we feel ready to challenge the status quo, etc. Both relegate the political reality of Israel to a subordinate clause, one that substitutes the wish for the fact. But the most obvious fact about Israel is that after half a century, the "material basis" of the Jewish state has not been assured by even formal recognition from some of its closest neighbors, which is the minimal precondition for the security they both claim. Palestinian Arabs flaunt a map of "Greater Palestine" (which includes all of present-day Israel) as a result of their perception that the political momentum in the region is moving solidly in their direction. Just consider how long Israel would likely remain independent if its citizens began to function on the assumption that the material basis of their country has been "largely secured." There is reflected here a desire to get past the mere scaffolding of politics, so that we can all return to the more interesting internal arguments over Jewish values.

Never again. The scaffolding of politics is now the locus of Jewish values.

I would begin by reformulating the statement: Since, after half a century of cultural, philosophical and moral creativity (not to mention many other spectacular achievements), the independence of Israel has *not* been conceded

by its enemies, and hence the material basis of the Jewish state has *not* been secured, the most important task facing the Jewish people is the development of the next stage of Jewish statecraft, so that the gains of the past fifty years should not be squandered. Politics is now the area of our moral and spiritual testing. The requirement of government, the talents of governing, the habits of a citizenship—these take precedence over every other personal or communal Jewish concern. I pray as a Jew that the greatest geniuses of the next generation will surface not in the Rubin Academy, the Weizmann Institute, the yeshivas of Bnai Brak and the Gush, or the Institute of Advanced Studies at Givat Ram, but in the Knesset and in the political system that consolidates the achievements of the state. I would give a dozen Einsteins for one Churchill, I would give all the refined intelligences of Brit Shalom for a single Margaret Thatcher. At issue today, as fifty years ago, is not the Jewishness but the stateness of the Jewish state.

The Jewish people stands historically between two political catastrophes: Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel was destroyed in 70 C.E. because the polity was not strong enough to fight off Rome. The Jews had not developed the political maturity, the political institutions, intelligence, alliances, the functional solidarity or the armed might to outlast an imperial power. In flight from their devastated polity, the Jews devised an ingenious alternative to statehood, and launched an experiment as unique in the arena of politics as the idea of monotheism was unique in the sphere of religion. Under the leadership of the rabbis, Jews became the first people in history to determine to live and thrive among other nations without the three bases of national existence—without land, without central political authority and without means of self-defense. Jews suspended their return to sovereignty not until such time as they would be ready to recover it, but until such time as God would declare them ready to recover it, making God the guarantor of their political power. Jews developed a Politics of Accommodation which has been mistaken by many historians as a form of spirituality, or a "non-political" existence. In fact, the Politics of Accommodation worked in complementarity with other forms of power.

The Politics of Accommodation had many advantages. Jews tried to compensate through economic ingenuity for political dependency. Seeking shelter under the wings of power, they tried to provide whatever was lacking, excelling in intellectual property, portable professions and assets, risk-management. They often became visibly wealthy and prominent, reaping the rewards of their success. But the absence of their own central political authority with their own means of self-defense meant the Jews could never protect what they amassed. This made them the ideal target, a no-fail enemy, for any aggressor, whether the mob or authority, foreign invader or native insurgent.

One of these days I hope to describe the Politics of Accommodation in all its genius and fatality. For now, let me note that the Jews and Gentiles drew different conclusions from the same pattern of evidence. Convinced that they were protected by God's sovereign power (which trumped mere human power), Jews rebounded from every successive expulsion, massacre and pogrom, pointing to the miracle of their survival. But the Gentiles inferred that the Jews could be destroyed, their assets seized, their properties confiscated, with absolute impunity. The Jews had invented a strategy of postponed political autonomy to avoid another great destruction such as that of the Second Commonwealth. But in our century, the Politics of Accommodation reached its apotheosis in the destruction of European Jewry.

Zionism's diagnosis of the Jewish danger in Europe preceded the Holocaust. Ever larger factions within the Zionist movement tried to recover Jewish territorial sovereignty, to establish central Jewish political authority and to ensure means of national self-defense. When the State of Israel was established, the Law of Return became the foundation of a revitalized autonomous nation. But the Arabs know the Jews through their history of exile, and they remain convinced that Jews lack the political experience, resolve and organization to maintain their national sovereignty in the centuries ahead. The example of the Holocaust inspires Arab elites to insist that "time is on their side." They know us Jews as the idiot savant of politics.

We Jews stand between two catastrophic political alternatives, lacking any models of political endurance. The odds against us are overwhelming—as our enemies know better than we. The greatest single error in the short history of modern Israel—greater, because more essential, than the Oslo accords—was Ben-Gurion's accommodation to Jewishness when he exempted yeshiva students from national service. Allowing an exception to citizenship made a travesty of citizenship, as well as of Judaism, since it pretended that Tora study would exceed military study as a religious value in Israel. The Jewish people's "right" to sovereignty can only be seized, not granted, and it depends on a process of self-emancipation that has barely begun. A sovereign Jewish people will have to reevaluate all considerations of "Jewishness" according to the priorities of Jewish statecraft, unless we are to fail yet again, and again, and again.

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