

A scion of Zionist aristocracy wants to quit the Jewish people. Will Israel let him?

Why Avraham Burg, who has served as Knesset speaker, interim president and head of the Jewish Agency, is asking Israel to annul his registration as a Jew

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Avraham Burg has been a man of many titles. A scion of one of the aristocratic families of the religious-Zionist movement, he was Speaker of the 15th Knesset (1999-2003), a leading member of the Labor Party's left-leaning "group of eight" in the late 1980s and early '90s, chairman of the Jewish Agency (1995-1999) and, as per protocol, during his tenure as Knesset Speaker, he served as Israel's acting president, between the resignation of Ezer Weizman and the election of Moshe Katsav to that post. No resumé could be more Zionist and Jewish.

Now, though, "Avrum," as he's widely known, is out to discard one title: his designation as a Jew according to the population registry of the Interior Ministry. In an affidavit he will submit to the Jerusalem District Court, Burg writes that he no longer considers himself as belonging to the Jewish nationality. He adds that his conscience does not allow him to be classified as a member of that nation, because it implies "belonging to the group of the masters." In simple, clear words, he asserts, "I can no longer feel identification with this collective."

This extraordinary act, which seems light-years away from most of Burg's well-known public activity, comes in the wake of the enactment in 2018 of the Basic Law: Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People.

"The meaning of that law is that a citizen of Israel who is not Jewish will suffer from having an inferior status, similar to what the Jews suffered for untold generations," Burg states in his affidavit. "What is abhorrent to us, we are now doing to our non-Jewish citizens."

This is not an extreme step, Burg maintains – on the contrary, it is a necessary and logical one. "I ask myself what the citizen who wasn't happy about the law is supposed to do," he tells Haaretz in an interview. "It's not some sort of law about traffic offenses – for me, this law constitutes a change in my existential definition. Because my assumption is that the High Court of Justice will not touch this law, I am moving to the next stage."

Two weeks ago, the High Court in an expanded panel of 11 justices considered a challenge to the law, in the form of a large number of petitions filed against its constitutionality. Comments made by the justices during the hearings suggest that Burg's premise is correct. He will submit his request after the bench hands down its decision. "I am not asking for radical things," he says. "I am not asking to be registered as an Arab, or as I don't know what. My request states: You [i.e., the state] redefined the sense of the collective. I am not a part of the collective under that definition. Erase me."

A bridge too far

Burg, 65, was always a dove, even in the Labor Party and certainly within religious-Zionist circles. However, the journey he has made in the past few years to the fringes of the left is quite distinct. On one occasion, at a social gathering at which this writer was present, which included some participants from the religious-Zionist movement, Burg's name came up in the course of a political argument. One person present noted that Burg was lost to that movement – to which his partner replied, "Lost his mind, you mean."

But religious Zionists are not the only ones who can't figure Burg out. Since leaving the political arena, more than 15 years ago, he has increasingly distanced himself from his mother ship, the Labor Party, and has even accused it of responsibility for crimes of the occupation. The positions he espouses today are considered radical by most of the Israeli public, including those who call themselves left-wing.

But if you ask him, he will say that his views have remained constant over the years – it's the country that has changed.

"When I entered politics, in the 1980s, I saw myself as a clear-cut disciple of Yeshayahu Leibowitz," he says, referring the late, left-wing Orthodox intellectual and scientist. "I espoused two principles: separation of religion and state, and ending the occupation. Decades have gone by since then, and I still want separation of religion and state and the end of the occupation. I haven't changed – you are the ones who have changed. You have become more right-wing, nationalist, fundamentalist. You are less democratic. I'm in the same place."

For him, the nation-state law was a bridge too far.

Burg: "I don't know what the nation-state of the Jewish people is, according to that law. I do know that if you were to take the law as it stands and change the

words, and enact it in a place where there's a Jewish minority – you would term it antisemitic and declare all-out war against it.”

In his declaration to the court, he writes that he does not “accept the distorted and discriminatory definition of the state as belonging to the Jewish nation” and that he is no longer willing for his "nationality" to be listed as "Jewish" in the Interior Ministry's records, as reasons behind his symbolic act.

In a sense, you're realizing the fantasy of the right wing. Benjamin Netanyahu said that the leftists forgot what it is to be Jewish, and now you're saying: I don't want to be a Jew.

Burg: “You’re asking me a political question. I am dealing with philosophical concepts and the issue of identity. Whether it makes them [i.e., rightists] feel good or doesn’t make them feel good is of no interest to me. If they think they can force me to be part of the collective as they define it, that I will be a patriot of the nationalist collective – they are wrong. They need to understand that the price of unnecessary legislation is the dismantlement of the Israeli collective. I will continue to live my historic Jewish identity in the way that my parents and my forefathers and my foremothers lived. But not this.”

It’s hard to predict how the court will contend with the request of the former Knesset Speaker. The courts here have dealt on many occasions with the issue of identity classification in the population registry, including that of religious affiliation. One of the best-known cases was that of writer Yoram Kaniuk, who sought to change his affiliation from “Jewish” to “without religion,” a request the court granted in 2011.

Burg’s request is different, because it refers to the issue of nationality, an anomalous category in the Israeli population registry that’s not found in the documentation in parallel institutions in most other countries, where nationality is the same as citizenship. Attorney Michael Sfard, who represents Burg, explains that this subject was actually debated by the High Court in the past, when the question arose of why one’s nationality in the Population Registry should not be listed as “Israeli” instead of “Jewish.” The court ruled then that there is no such thing as “Israeli nationality” and that it’s impossible to register fictitiously something that does not exist.

Still, Burg does not want a different nationality to appear in the registry’s records, but to erase what already appears there. “There was a case in the 1970s that we are basing everything on,” Sfard explains. “It was about a person who said he was a cosmopolitan, and didn’t consider himself as being a

member of any nation – and the court erased his classification. According to the judgments, the test that has to be met is the sincerity of the claim.”

Burg has a great many complaints, referring to almost every sentence in the nation-state law. But even before considering them, the biggest problem for him lies in what the legislation omits: the principle of equality and the need to prevent discrimination. “It was specifically that point was done away with, and what was left was granting the priority of one group over others,” he says.

Burg’s objections to the law itself begin with its very first article, which defines the Land of Israel as the historical homeland of the Jewish people. “The patriarch Abraham discovered God outside the boundaries of the Land of Israel, the tribes became a people outside the Land of Israel, the Torah was given outside the Land of Israel, and the Babylonian Talmud, which is more important than the Jerusalem Talmud, was written outside the Land of Israel,” he asserts. “The past 2,000 years, which shaped the Judaism of this generation, happened outside Israel. The present Jewish people was not born in Israel.”

The law also defines the symbols of the state: name, flag and anthem. Is that problematic? Is a different anthem preferable?

“Of course. How can a person whose origins lie in Baghdad sing about looking ‘onward, to edges of the East,’ when Israel is to the west? It’s a colonialist anthem. It’s not problematic only because it says, ‘the Jewish soul yearns,’ but because of other things. I think that the moment the Israeli entity was established, with people from all corners of the planet, with all types of identity, ‘Hatikva’ could be the anthem of the Jewish community or even only of its Ashkenazi part, from the West. But if we want it to be the anthem of all the country’s citizens, it requires adaptation. If our ancient sages succeeded in adapting commandments from God – we don’t stone people, we don’t cut off hands, we don’t gouge out eyes anymore – can’t we revise the words of Naftali Herz Imber [on whose poem the anthem is based]?”

In favor of an Arab PM

What about the article in the law stating, “Jerusalem, complete and united, is the capital of Israel”?

“Here my criticism is actually aimed at the Palestinians. Run for mayor of Jerusalem. What are you waiting for?”

Would you like to see a Palestinian mayor of Jerusalem?

“If I can entrust the Palestinians to treat me medically and to administer my medications, and with the brakes of my car – can’t I entrust them with the sewer system of Jerusalem?” And Burg adds that naturally he would also be very happy to see an Arab prime minister in Israel.

We come to the article that I was curious to talk to you about, because you were the chairman of the Jewish Agency – the article in the nation-state law that talks about ingathering of the exiles and aliyah. You are attacking the nation-state law now, but the Law of Return has discriminated between citizens here for years. Where were you all that time?

“I’m ready to deal with the Law of Return, to argue with it,” Burg says, adding that he supports a “very considerable annulment” of its stipulations. “I want all the people who come to Israel to do so by means of some sort of general citizenship law, not through the Law of Return. The Law of Return will remain as a clause: If a person and a community are persecuted for their Jewishness, they will have a fast track” to citizenship.

Burg says he doesn’t regret serving as chairman of the Jewish Agency (“I would not have arrived at these conclusions if I hadn’t pass through that place and done that work”). And he believes that Jewish existence in the Diaspora is a model from which to draw inspiration, mentally and spiritually: “One of the things that was done away with when the state was established is the power and benefits of the Diaspora structure. In the Diaspora we had different types of responsibility, involvement, enrichment vis-a-vis the surrounding community – a feeling of what it means to be a minority. What is missing here is not more nationalism, but more communalism.”

For this reason he is convinced that Jews in Israel can learn from Jews in the Diaspora. “When I look at the [people attending] non-Orthodox synagogues in the United States, I think that they didn’t grow up the way I did, but that is where the next corpus of the Jewish people was created,” he explains. “Instead of sending our [Israeli] children in large numbers to the death camps, they should be sent on Birthright trips to the Jewish communities [abroad].”

Reform Jews in the United States complain that their children are becoming estranged from the Jewish people.

“Your question assumes that the Jewish people is numbers and genetics, and I think that the Jewish people is ideas and values. If the Jewish people is 14 million Rabbi [Meir] Kahanes, then that people should be eliminated. If the Jewish people is one Nelson Mandela or one Dalai Lama, let UNESCO

enshrine it in perpetuity. My patriotism is not for numbers. One of the spectacular things that Zionism did was to take a train and get it to travel backward – back to the language, to the places and to certain stations in history. But I’m not certain that I want to stop at that exact station. Why not stop at the station of the patriarch Abraham who had another, non-Jewish, wife? Why not stop in the kingdom ruled by David, who had wives from all over the region? Why not go back to the period in which marriage was actually the place in which fruitful relations between us and our surroundings were created?”

In other words, as opposed to what the majority of traditionalist and religious people feel in this country, you believe that “marriages of assimilation” are desirable?

“I am in favor of preserving ideas and values, and not engaging with sex and genetics. Imagine that world peace extends from the Emirates and Gaza to the outskirts of New York. No one wants to annihilate us anymore – a situation, by the way, that has existed for 30-40 years, only it’s being concealed from us. And then, for the first time, the Jewish people would face the question: Does it know how to survive without an external enemy? We can survive only when there is an enemy. Give me a war, a holocaust or a pogrom – I know what to do. I say that we need to develop a completely different language, a non-contrarian language, where some members of other communities come and marry us and some of us marry them. I also want to assume that the communities that intermarry kill each other less.”

‘Religious-chosen’ supremacy

The bottom line is that Burg is certain the nation-state law has a far deeper aim, which goes beyond discriminating against the Arab community in Israel. “My assumption is that deep down, the people who are behind the law want to ground Israel in a different constitutional basis than that intimated in the Declaration of Independence – to base the country far more on the values of religious Zionism and on the supremacy of one group that derives from various kinds of authority, the central one being that of the ‘religious chosen.’”

For this reason he is convinced that the law will also end up encouraging discriminatory practices among the Jews. “With Basic Laws, in places where a lacuna exists in Israeli law, you turn to Hebrew law – and Hebrew law turns to God. Just like other legal systems [in countries] around us, where sharia law is decisive. That is the deep ambition.”

So in your opinion, the nation-state law is one more apparatus on the road to the creation of a state based on halakha [traditional Jewish law]?

“The road is being paved before our eyes. Go out into the street and ask Jews whether the Jewish people is a chosen people. Seventy percent will reply yes. Ask them what ‘chosen’ means, and 10 percent will tell you that we have greater missions, such as humanism and world reform – things that go down well in the north, at a place like [anthroposophic kibbutz] Harduf. The rest will tell you that it’s all about genetics, the Jewish brain, that God chose us – things that are blood. And now we come to the question of questions, which Israel has never addressed, of whether a ‘chosen people’ can make fair and egalitarian choices, or conduct a truly democratic election process, involving those who are not among those chosen. The answer is no.”

So maybe you have a problem with the people?

“In the Jewish sources there’s a struggle between two worldviews. One is that of the Jews’ supremacy over the other peoples, and the other is a universalist approach in which we are equal to all human beings. I am connected to the Jewish artery in which all human beings are equal but different. One of the tasks of establishing independent Jewish sovereignty was supposed to be to break this feeling of inferiority/superiority, which is a Diaspora complex. In this exactly we failed.”

What’s your take on the religious-Zionist movement today?

“You think that religious Zionism is just settlers, so let’s stop for a minute and take a look at the status of women, for example. Let’s say I’m a religious-Zionist woman like that: I went to high school and I want higher education, so I don’t get married at 19 but closer to 30. That means there are 10 years in which I live alone at home and make kiddush [the blessing over wine] by myself; maybe I attend an egalitarian minyan (prayer quorum). And when I get married, I want to continue making the kiddush in the house, so there’s feminism in the family. What do you do with that? In contrast to my mother, who thought there were no Jewish gays, today there are many religious families whose children are from the LGBTQ community and still preserve their identity.”

Still, the messianic dialogue is very present.

“Of course the dialogue exists. Just as on the Tel Aviv secular side, you hear kibbutznik talk from the 1940s. The grammar of the old language still speaks,

but its worlds of content are no longer there. [Yamina party leader] Naftali Bennett is not Hanan Porat [the late National Religious Party MK, and one of the founding fathers of the settlement enterprise]. He may speak the same words, but he's already the secularization of the messianic dream. Hanan Porat was ecstasy; Bennett is a politician who does politics. So I tell myself: Fine, the terms have changed. Where does that put me?"

Do you still wear a kippa?

"No. I am doing exactly what my father [Yosef Burg, a founder of the National Religious Party, MK and government minister] did when he taught at Gymnasia Herzliya [high school]. He taught Talmud with a kippa and history without a kippa. Look at the photographs of all the Knessets from 1948 to 1967. My father was an Orthodox rabbi, the leader of the National Religious Party, a cabinet minister on its behalf, and he was without a kippa. I do go to the synagogue with a kippa."

But you used to wear a kippa in your daily life.

"For years I was the genetically engineered fruit of the system, and I didn't connect with my inner persona. My latest book has dozens of pages, about the kippa. Socks are pulled on, shoes are laced, a belt is looped and a kippa is 'coerced.' I think I answered you."

Do you still keep kosher?

"I'm vegan."

Do you uphold the Jewish commandments?

"Of course. I respect everyone. I honor my father and my mother. I love humanity. I do not murder."

But you don't have separate sinks for dairy and meat.

"I'm not into religious bureaucracy."

Are you still a believer?

"I never believed. God is not part of my equations. I wrote five books about why I don't occupy myself with him."

Burg observes that his alternative approach to Judaism stirs criticism, but also identification and positive reactions. "I get dozens of requests from couples to

marry them,” he says. “It’s because I present an alternative – Judaism that doesn’t traffic in women. Because the traditional Orthodox marriage ceremony is traffic in women, and I believe in equality between man and woman.” His books are even read in ultra-Orthodox circles, he says, “by anyone who has a free mind,” as he puts it.

‘Avrum went bonkers’

Burg will be the first to admit that his ideas are not easily palatable for most Israelis.

“The immediate feedback I get in all comments is ‘Avrum went bonkers,’” he says. “No one who’s in their comfort zone likes being told, ‘In another 20 years you’ll be in a different place, in a non-comfort zone.’ I’ve done that a number of times in the public discourse. In 1992, I stated at the Labor Party conference that religion and state should be separated, otherwise we will regret it. They didn’t listen. A decade and a half ago I warned against the rise of racism in Israel, and people wouldn’t talk to me. Today I say that in another 20 years there will be all kinds of groups in the Israeli totality. But the central group will be the one that’s defined by civil life, in which all human beings are equal. No Israeli is worth more than any other.”

In the past few years, Burg has been occupied with establishing a Jewish-Arab political party within the framework of the Brit (Covenant) group, and he serves on the international board of the New Israel Fund. Asked what he thinks about the situation of the Labor Party, once his political home, Burg replies that he isn’t able “to think about things that don’t exist.” Left-wing Meretz, too, needs to change direction, he says. “The former politics in the left-wing camp, which was also organized – with the exception of a fig leaf here and there – on a national basis, needs to shift to politics organized on a civil basis. There needs to be a joint Jewish-Arab party of which Meretz is a part.”

He’s unfazed by the claim of left-wingers that his idea is an electoral dud. “That sort of true equality hasn’t yet been tried,” he says. “We have a moment of grace now. None of us believes that at this very moment anyone among us can replace the right. So maybe we’ll take advantage of this moment for renewal, so that one day we will be able to replace it?”

Burg’s reference to a Jewish-Arab partnership does not stop at the Green Line. “The validity of the two-state solution has expired,” he says. Today he advocates a single state for Palestinians and Jews: Because there is no

possibility of achieving two states, the millions of Palestinians who live in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip need to be granted, at the very least, the right to vote for the Israeli parliament.

Do you think that would be a guarantee of a successful democracy?

“If you had asked me in June 1967 how many years it would take until we got out of the Palestinians’ life, I would have said two months, maybe half a year. It’s been 53 years. So I say to you, give me [another] 53 years to forge the relations between the nations. Can we reconstruct foundations of trust in 53 years? Maybe we can. I am asking for the same amount of time it took to spoil things, in order to fix them.”

Doesn’t your position reflect someone whose heart was broken by the Israeli project?

“On the contrary, it’s a suggestion for an alternative. I say that the project is stuck. And I am not stuck in more-of-the-same. It’s optimistic thinking.”