

Yossi Beilin, there's no such thing as a Jewish state

Avraham Burg | Mar. 15, 2020 | 11:30 AM | 5

Yossi Beilin is almost everything to me – teacher and partner, beloved friend and challenging opponent. His last article in Israel Hayom outlines the core of the argument between us – the watershed between the broad Zionist camp and what is yet to be the new Israeli left.

He blasts Joint List leader Ayman Odeh's position that a Jewish majority is a racist term, stating that "if a Jewish majority is a racist term, then a Jewish state is also a racist term, and Zionism is racism as well." Is that what this rational, pragmatic man thinks?

I don't know what Odeh thinks, but I, as one of tens of thousands of people who voted for the Joint List, say to Beilin explicitly – yes. What for you is a rhetorical question for me is a painful, penetrating reply – Zionism in Israel today means only one thing: racism!

And here it is: There's no such thing as a Jewish state. Have you ever seen the sticker that reads: "A Sabbath observing taxi"? Did you smile? Rightly so. What, does the taxi set aside a portion of dough before baking a challah? Does it go to the mikveh, light candles? Of course not. The taxi is only a tool. It does not operate on Saturday because the driver observes the Sabbath. Like it, the state is just a tool in the public's hands. It must not have a Jewish-religious, existential or national nature. Present day Israel is at most a country in which many Jews have decided to live, a Jews' state that belongs to all its citizens.

The Zionism you cling to with such zealousness is an unnecessary definition. Every Israeli has at least three names. The family name is – person, like all human beings; the middle name is Israeli; the private name can be Jewish, Muslim, Christian, vegan or nature preserver. You don't need a fourth definition. What does Zionism have that humanism, Israeli citizenship or private-faith identity that each one of us has, doesn't? Nothing!

Zionism was the scaffolding that enabled the Jewish nation's transition from a scattered Diaspora structure to a sovereign centralist structure. In May 1948, it was crowned with great success for the Jews and with a horrific tragedy for the Palestinians, and by so doing finished its job. The state structure was set up, Israeliness was on its way. But someone forgot to remove the scaffolding and since then, Zionism within Israel has been used only for distinctions,

exclusion and discrimination: Eli Yishai and Miri Regev against the foreign workers, Avigdor Lieberman against the ultra-Orthodox, Benjamin Netanyahu and Benny Gantz against the Arabs. What are you doing in that unworthy group?

One can argue about the depth of your political desire for a “Jewish majority” as a “willingness to significantly restrict the sphere of Israeli rule” and what better way “to ensure that never will there be Jews without a home ... and Palestinians without a home” between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, but you know you’re being misleading. The political discussion that you, Odeh and I are having isn’t happening in the occupied territories and doesn’t deal with the one-state vision. It’s taking place inside Israel proper, where there’s no threat to the Jewish majority and where every citizen is supposed to be equal in his vote and influence. In any case, the demand for a Jewish majority means one thing: a government with no Arabs. And if that’s not tribal racism, what is?

Yossi, my teacher and mentor, don’t call the kettle black. One of the next election campaigns will have a new left-wing federation contending in it. It will consist of Zionists like you and citizens like Odeh. It will fight for civil and constitutional equality for all, for secularizing the public sphere and for decency in the distribution of public resources. It will be a difficult, uphill struggle – an overall confrontation between the chauvinism that was created here and the vision of what should and could be. We need your ideological and political courage. You once told me, “Go with your heart and be a leader.” I tell you today – come with your heart, Israel needs you. And so do I.