

Let our Zionism remain free of racism

THE RABBI'S TURN RABBI ARTHUR GREEN

Congratulations, world! You've finally learned it: Zionism is not racism. We Jews seem to have known this for a long time. We're glad to have the rest of you join us.

Zionism is the national liberation movement of the Jewish people. That means that Zionism means to us what liberation movements have meant to various groups all over the world. It should be seen alongside such great movements as the fight against apartheid in South Africa, the movement for racial equality in the United States, the many movements that gave national identity and territorial freedom to such people as the Poles, the Czechs and lots of others in the course of this transforming century.

Zionism has first and foremost meant safety for the Jewish people. It means that we have an ultimate home, a place that we know is ours and a recognized, legitimate government that will speak for Jews throughout the world if they are persecuted or needy. Our greatest collective regret is that no such country yet existed in the 1930s, and we shudder to think what the rate of Soviet — and other — Jews would be today were it not for Israel.

As our national home, Israel is a source of infinite pride to the Jewish people, and that pride has caused us to raise our heads higher and to renew Jewish life in many different ways throughout the world.

The return of Jews to the land of Israel and the return of many American Jews to Judaism are deeply related to one another. Zionism has also meant the renewal of Jewish culture and especially of the Hebrew language, surely one of the great miracles of Jewish existence in modern times. To say it simply, the establishment of a Jewish state is the greatest accomplishment of the Jewish people in our century.

But all this has nothing to do with racism. Of course, Zionism is not racism. How could they ever have gotten that idea? Here we may have to ask some tough questions and face some issues that may be painful for us.

Israel is conceived as a Jewish state. This means that Jews, their language, their culture and so forth have a privileged position in Israel. This is the same as it is in most countries: the Hungarian government underwrites Hungarian theater; the English government sponsors research into English history; and so forth. Minorities are protected, but their cultural cause does not ordinarily receive government sponsorship.

Multiethnic societies, like Canada and the United States, work hard to be quite different in this way. Non-Jews in Israel, almost exclusively Arabs, are a minority group. They have protected rights, such as freedom of religion, schools in their own language, etc., and these are supported, to some degree, by the Israeli government.

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But this does not mean that Arabs are treated precisely as equals. There are several ways in which equality is lacking in Israeli society. It is important that these be rectified, partly for the sake of justice, but also because these facts have been used by Israel's enemies to create the impression that it is a racist society.

Benefits given to Jewish settlements through funds collected abroad are not given to Arab villages and settlements. That makes sense in its own terms, but the government needs to seek alternative funding to raise the level of Arab village life in Israel so there does not exist a terrible discrepancy between the standards of living of the two communities.

Such matters as sanitation, water availability, educational standards and so forth must rise quickly to avoid the presence of an ever-increasing gap between the way these two peoples live.

Alouph Hareven, a well-known Israeli scholar, writes: "Jewish local authorities receive from the government development budgets which are proportionately five times as large as the development budgets accorded to Arab local authorities. Government assistance to the current budgets of Jewish local authorities is, proportionately, three times as large as the budget accorded to Arab local authorities. The net result is that, in comparison with most of their Jewish neighbors, most Israeli Arab communities are economically and socially underdeveloped. Of the Israelis who live under the poverty line, 64 percent are Arabs, more than three times their ration in the population."

Even more disturbing are questions of attitude. I have just read a rather frightening study on hatred toward Arabs among Israeli high school students.

This survey was conducted by the Israeli Institute for Military Studies, a highly respected research institute. It found that some 40 percent of Israeli high school students said they hate either "all" or "most" Arabs. Another 32 percent said they hate "some" Arabs. Only 8 percent of Israeli youth said they did not hate Arabs at all. Compared to prior surveys, this one showed an increase in such feelings and also a disturbing correlation between high Jewish commitment/religious observance and this negative view of Arabs.

While I do not know of any surveys on American Jewish attitudes, my guess is that here the figures might be even higher. Our strong Zionist commitment, combined with many of the truly terrible things done by Arab terrorists, can lead us to a dangerous stereotyping.

While the fears that underlie such stereotyping are understandable, we have to struggle against this sort of thinking. We Jews have strong political differences with many Arabs and are properly horrified and outraged by the means that have been used by the Palestine Liberation Organization and others to make their case.

We are also terribly concerned that

such behavior is largely condoned in the Arab world and that no one has had the courage to speak out strongly against it. But this still does not mean that all Arabs are terrorists, that all Arabs eternally hate Jews or that Arabs, as such, are deserving of our hatred or disdain.

Quite the contrary. Only when we Jews, both in Israel and elsewhere, are able to appreciate realistically the Palestinian Arabs and their needs, and when they see us in the same way, will we be capable of true peace.

Many agencies exist in Israel that work for Jewish-Arab cooperation

and understanding "on the ground." They work in all kinds of areas: community development, medical care, joint sports leagues, education, social services and all the rest. All of these deserve our support. They will help break down stereotypes and will replace hatred with human understanding.

As the negotiators try their hand at the peace table, all of us Jews and Zionists can also do our bit to support their efforts. We can do this best by making sure that *our* Zionism is kept far away from racism.

After all, the United Nations must be right: Zionism is not racism. ■