

The Jewish religion is indeed intertwined with Zionism

A response to AB Yehoshua's views on Jewish nationalism

• GOL KALEV

A fascinating debate occurred last month in Jerusalem during the launch event of Dr. Asaf Malach's book *From the Bible to the Jewish State – The Cycles of Jewish Nationalism and the Israeli Polemic*.

Responding to Malach's analysis that shows how Jewish nationalism was always core to Judaism itself, famed Israeli author AB Yehoshua argued that the linkage with the Jewish religion has been detrimental to Jewish nationalism, and that it has downgraded the "homeland gene," which according to Yehoshua is the basis of every nationality. A nation should be based on territory, and not on religion, he argued.

But Yehoshua's argument fails both historical and contemporary realities.

Historically, nearly all nations that existed during the Greek and Roman invasions of the Middle East have vanished. This, to a great part, is because they were over-connected to a territory. Once the territory was gone, the national ethos was too weak to keep it as a distinct group in exile or under occupation. After a few generations, those nations evaporated.

This was not the case with the Jews, who were able to respond to their new state of exile by transforming. The architecture that bound Judaism since its inception – physical presence in Judea and Jerusalem, as well as the Temple and the ritual of the sacrifices – were all gone. Yet the Jewish nation-religion persevered by adapting a new architecture: Halacha (Jewish law), rituals, Oral Torah, learning, yearning to return, and indeed, religiosity. The transformation from Biblical Judaism (Judaism 1.0) to Rabbinical Judaism (Judaism 2.0) enabled Jewish survivability.

Religion did not hurt the Jewish nation, as AB Yehoshua claims; religion was the glue that kept the Jewish nation-religion intact during 18 centuries of exile. Jews prayed at the same time, celebrated Shabbat in an identical manner, marked the holiday in a similar fashion and proclaimed, "All Israel are friends" once a month on the same day.

THEODOR HERZL, the father of modern Zionism, understood this unique survival trait: the ability of Jews and of Judaism to adjust to changing circumstances. He compared Jews to seals, who happened to be thrown into the sea, and therefore adapted the traits of fish, even though they are not.

Just as Yehoshua's argument fails historical context, it also fails contemporary global realities. Yehoshua seems to use outdated models of national absolutism. "There are no French without France," he declares. But this simplification fails to take into account the current state of a multi-identity world on one hand, and the rapid migration to cloud mentality and shared economy on the other.

The package deal has been long broken. In the United States, patriotic Americans are proud of their Irish, Mexican, or Italian ethnological national affiliation. Celebrating Cinco de Mayo is not in conflict with being a proud American; it is an expression of American patriotism. Similarly, two Cuban-American candidates who ran for president in the 2016 Republican primary repeatedly argued which one of them is more Cuban. One of them (Marco Rubio) even accused the other (Ted Cruz) of not speaking Spanish. No one accused those Senators of being unAmerican.

Indeed, political national affiliation (where you vote, which passport you hold, which flag you wave), is just one element of a person's composite of identities. One's profession, university, social circles, sexual orientation and club affiliations are other components of identity, and indeed so is religion, ethnicity and

ethnological national affiliation. Each individual places those and other values at different positions in his or her own personal hierarchy of identities.

Yehoshua is correct that "there are no French without France," but this need not be a physical France. It could be on a cloud. There are certainly Francophiles without French citizenship, just as there are French citizens today who care nothing for French culture.

Nowhere is this multi-identity reality more prevalent than with the American Jews. While the vast majority of American Jews have never been to Israel, there is a clear trend of cultural Israelization of the American Jewish experience. Old Jewish connectors, such as Yiddish culture are becoming irrelevant, and so is the previous connection through the Holocaust, as the survivors' generation passes. At the same time, Israeli-related connectors – innovation, entrepreneurship, Israeli wine, Israeli cuisine, Israeli soldiers, Israeli culture – all are sources of Jewish pride, and are increasingly incorporated into the American Jewish experience.

For American Jews, connection to Judaism through want is replacing connecting through duty; happiness is replacing sadness; the shuk is replacing Carnegie Deli; Wonder Woman is replacing Yentel; and strength is replacing victimhood. Even the passionate political debates and criticism of Israel by a significant portion of American Jewry are a form of connection to one's Judaism through Zionism. Moreover, for many young liberal and progressive Jews, Zionism has rapidly become the primary arena in which they meet their Judaism.

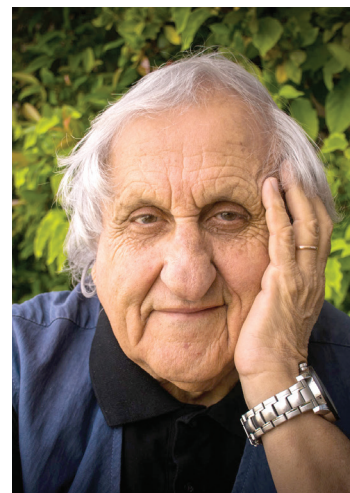
THIS IS a reversal of a trend: For decades, Judaism has been descending in the hierarchy of identities of the American Jew. Zionism now allows Jews to elevate Judaism in that hierarchy. This is exactly what Chaim Weizmann predicted over a century ago: "Zionism is Judaizing the Jewish communities."

Indeed, the seal in Herzl's analogy is evolving again. With secularization, removal of external walls and integration into the broader global society, the architecture of Rabbinical Judaism (Judaism 2.0) that enabled Jewish survivability for 18 centuries is fading. But another architecture has emerged: Zionism. This is enabled not only by the reestablishment of the Jewish state, but also by its astonishing success in recent years, as well as by the disassociation of Zionism from secularism. Such disassociation is a product of the increased democratization of Israeli society – the gradual shift of power and Zionist ethos from the secular minority to the religious/traditional majority, as well as of the growing interest of secular Israeli Jews in the Jewish religion, while staying secular.

Therefore, we are in the midst of a historic transformation of Judaism: from Rabbinical Judaism (the religious aspect being its organizing principle), to Zionism: its national aspect serving this role (Judaism 3.0). This transformation is occurring without any compromises to the religious aspect of Judaism, just as in 18 centuries when the Jewish religion was the organizing principle of Judaism, the national element of Judaism remained a core aspect of Judaism.

Indeed, Yehoshua's novels and insightful essays are not just Israeli heritage assets, they are also Jewish heritage assets, and along with Malach's new book have their rightful place in the library of Jewish texts. Herzl noted that once the seals return to dry land, "they will turn their fins into feet again." The pluralism of thoughts and fierce debate in Israel is a celebration of Zionism and of the return: Return to the homeland, return to Judaism. ■

*The writer analyzes trends in Zionism, Europe and global affairs. He is chairman of the AIFL think tank and author of upcoming book *Judaism 3.0*. For more of his analysis visit: Europeandjerusalem.com. For comments: gol@europeandjerusalem.com*



FAMED AUTHOR AB Yehoshua.
(Wikimedia Commons)

There is a clear trend of cultural Israelization of the American Jewish experience