

## Toward a state of all Jews

**No less than the Diaspora serves as an important strategic asset of Israel, Israel has to behave as a main strategic asset of the Diaspora.**

By Yehezkel Dror

Shlomo Avineri's opinion piece offers a sharp presentation of the significance of Israel as a sovereign state, in contrast to its role as the state of the Jewish people. This, indeed, is a question with many implications for the future of the Jewish people as a whole and of Israel in particular, one that demands in-depth examination.

The issue touches upon the very nature of the Jewish people and its relationship with the State of Israel.

Prof. Avineri comes out against the proposal of Jewish Agency chairman Natan Sharansky, that his organization, and not the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, should have the authority to confirm the legitimacy of conversions for the purpose of aliyah according to Israel's Law of Return. His claim is that doing so would violate the sovereignty of Israel. With all respect to Prof. Avineri, it seems to me that his position is mistaken.

It is not formal concepts such as "sovereignty" (which itself is undergoing change, as illustrated by its erosion in the European Union) that provide the answer about the nature of Israel. Instead, normative-ideological clarification is needed.

I would submit that Israel's *raison d'être* is largely based on its nature and its functions as the core state of the Jewish people. Its principal mission is to assure the Jewish people's long-term thriving, while strengthening its physical security, on the one hand, and increasing its global moral-spiritual significance as a civilizational-cultural (and in part religious) social entity, on the other.

For this reason, the Jewish leaders of Israel should regard themselves to a significant extent as leaders of the Jewish people as a whole, and as such acquire the required understanding of the dynamics of Jewish communities worldwide, which at present most of them lack. No less than the Diaspora serves as an important strategic asset of Israel, Israel has to behave as a main strategic asset of the Diaspora.

Israeli statecraft must increasingly take into account the implications of its choices for the future of all of the parts of the Jewish people. The Diaspora should therefore participate in an institutionalized way – initially with a consultative role – in decisions of the state that have crucial implications for the Jewish people as a whole, such as in determining the status of Jerusalem. Such decisions, after all, will have impact on coming generations of Diaspora Jews no less than on Jews living in Israel.

The Jewish Agency has to be redesigned so as to make it the "Jewish People Agency," in which both Israeli Jews and Diaspora communities will be represented equally. At the same time the role of Israeli political parties in determining the representation of Israel in the agency should be reduced, as should that of philanthropists in determining the representation of the Diaspora.

It should be understood that putting the "sovereignty of the State of Israel" at the center, without ensuring that it is truly the state of the Jewish people, will result in increasing the distance between Israel, as a state that will continue to become more and more "normal," and Diaspora Jews, as citizens of their countries. This is all the more so a serious danger in view of an approaching crisis in Israeli-Diaspora relations, with the coming-of-age of a generation that experienced neither the Holocaust nor the establishment of the state – something that will have grave consequences for Judaism and the Jewish people as a whole.

Thus, in a bitter irony of history, the tremendous achievements of Zionism in bringing about the State of Israel may cause the withering of the Jewish people as an exceptional social-civilizational entity of unique significance.

I have not commented here on the proposal to authorize Jewish Agency bodies to judge the validity of various forms of conversion, a process that requires expertise and care. But the main key to consideration of this problem, as well as of many other, even more critical issues, lies in the choice between regarding Israel as a "sovereign state" in the usual meanings of that term, and the contrary proposition to regarding it as also, and in many respects primarily, the state of the Jewish people (together with being the democratic state of all its citizens).

This overriding issue should be on the agenda of public discourse in Israel, as it is no less critical for the future than the peace process.

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