Israel Wrestles With Nationalism and Freedom

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COMMENTARY

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TEL AVIV — In mid-July, by a vote of 62-55, with two abstentions, the Knesset passed the Basic Law on Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People. The legislation — Basic Laws in Israel enjoy constitutional status although only a simple parliamentary majority is needed to pass or repeal them — reaffirmed principles set forth in the country's May 1948 Declaration of Independence. Nevertheless, the nation-state law has occasioned bitter controversy here. With a nationalist-infused populism roiling the United States, Britain, and Europe, the Israeli debate over the aspiration, inscribed in the country's founding, to combine nationalism and liberal democracy has implications that transcend the Jewish state.

On Aug. 13, Haaretz contributor Uzi Baram excoriated the new law and its architects. "The nation-state law is not only an unnecessary law, it is an abhorrent law," he stated, speaking for many on the left. It "was the product of an ultranationalist government, led by the religious right," and was intended "to divide the public, exclude minorities and undermine the Arabic language."

On Aug. 16 in Haaretz, Haim Ramon, a man of the center-left, published a sharp reply that gave expression to a Zionist sensibility that extends beyond Israel's center-right. A former vice prime minister and minister of justice, he emphasized that Israel's 1992 Basic Law on Human Dignity and Liberty "granted equal rights to every person in the state of Israel in the spirit of Israel's values as a Jewish and democratic state." But it was incomplete: "whereas the law on human dignity and liberty elaborated the individual's rights in a democratic state, it did not elaborate the practical significance of the state's Jewish character." The nation-state law remedies that deficiency. It "does not come to bury the Basic Law on Human Dignity and Liberty but to complete it."

Whatever the actual legislative intentions and legal implications, the new Basic Law aggravated a sense of second-class citizenship among Israel's minorities. This month Arabs, who constitute a little over 20 percent of the citizenry and who rarely serve in the army, and Druze, who represent about 1.5 percent and generally serve, attracted tens of thousands of protesters (pictured) to separate political rallies in downtown Tel Aviv's Rabin Square — the country's premier venue for demonstrations— to decry the law.

The tiny Druze minority accepts Israel as a Jewish nation-state but condemned the nation-state law for undercutting equality. They were supported at their rally by many Jewish citizens devoted to Israel as both a Jewish and democratic state. In contrast, according to Member of Knesset for the Zionist Union Tzipi Livni (who joined the Druze gathering in Rabin Square but not the Arabs') many organizers of the Arab rally opposed the very idea of Israel as a Jewish nation-state. Their attack on the new law seemed to imply the injustice not merely of Jewish nationalism, but of nationalism itself.

Israeli scholar and political commentator Yoram Hazony could not disagree more. In "The Virtue of Nationalism," which will be published on Sept. 4, he argues that the independent national state surpasses all rivals in securing justice. Throughout, he criticizes the "educated elites" who indiscriminately accuse nationalism of underpinning a "primitive" politics composed of "war-mongering and racism," and who instead aspire to unite all countries under a single liberal-internationalist regime. To the contrary, argues Hazony: "the best political order known to mankind is, in fact, an order of independent national states."

Hazony finds in nationalism the most fertile soil for virtually all political goods. Knit together by citizens' shared history, religion, language, and sense of political destiny, the national state is rooted, according to Hazony, in the irreducible human realities of family, clan, tribe, and "the bonds of mutual loyalty" nurtured by these traditional associations. Despite an ambiguous historical record, nationalism, Hazony optimistically argues, creates "a protected space in which peace and prosperity can take hold." It also "inculcates an aversion to adventures of conquest in distant lands," and supplies "the state with the only known basis for the development of free institutions and individual liberties."

In a discordant echo of democratic-peace arguments associated with the liberal internationalism he rejects, Hazony asserts that independent national states have an interest in promoting an international order of independent national states. Such an order, he insists, "offers the greatest possibility for the collective self-determination" and "establishes a life of productive competition among nations, each striving to attain the maximal development of its abilities and those of its individual members." But Hazony has little to say about the alignments, legal arrangements, and political institutions that would undergird it. And he declines to examine the circumstances under which national competition turns counterproductive, vicious, and indeed a threat to life on the planet.

By promoting awareness of differences among nations, the virtue of nationalism nurtures other virtues, maintains Hazony. These include a healthy humility, skepticism, and toleration. Depending on the traditions to which it is devoted, of course, nationalism could beget arrogance, self-righteousness, and belligerence just as easily as it could beget the generally liberal virtues Hazony credits it with cultivating.

President of the Herzl Institute in Jerusalem and director of the John Templeton Foundation's Project in Jewish Philosophical Theology, Hazony traces nationalism back to the Hebrew Bible's account of Jewish nationhood and sees the early-modern Protestant recovery of biblical nationalism as a model for today. Despite his tendency to idealize nationalism's virtues and downplay its vices, his historical reconstruction of nationalism's moral and sociological premises and his analysis of its practical implications are subtle and instructive. They represent a genuine contribution to contemporary debates about citizenship, government, and relations among states.

In contrast to his generous reading of biblically based nationalism, Hazony again adopts an adversarial approach toward John Locke's liberalism and the modern tradition of freedom it helped launch. To depict them as nationalism's inveterate enemy, he exaggerates liberalism's vices and obscures its virtues. His caricature ill-serves his salutary defense of nationalism.

On the assumption underlying liberal democracy that human beings are by nature free and equal, Locke argues that consent makes political power legitimate. Since the largest viable political unit to which citizens can plausibly consent — even tacitly — is a state characterized by shared traditions, language, and political hopes, the modern tradition of freedom reinforces the case for nationalism.

While providing a welcome corrective to the "educated elites" who deplore nationalist pride in Israel, the United States and other countries determined to preserve their independence and chart their own course, Hazony introduces a one-sidedness of his own. He unwittingly perpetuates the progressive error of equating the modern tradition of freedom with the dream of global government. This impels him to reject liberalism in the large sense as a species of world-conquering imperialism and to rely solely on the biblical tradition as a guide

to contemporary politics. To vindicate the nationalism and freedom Hazony cherishes, however, the wisdom embodied in the biblical tradition and the wisdom embodied in the modern tradition of freedom must be woven together.

The two traditions converged in Israel's founding, as they did in the founding of the United States. Israel's dual heritage illuminates the country's public interest.

For example, the Jewish tradition's imperative to treat neighbors and strangers justly and the liberal and democratic dedication to individual freedom for all often reinforce one another. Together, they commit Israel to fulfilling the state's promise of equal opportunity for its minority populations, which would enhance bonds of mutual loyalty. The Jewish state could take an excellent next step by directing additional state resources to the renovation of physical infrastructure in Arab and Druze communities and to the improvement of their educational systems.

The best hope for the country's minorities — as for its Jewish majority — is for Israel to honor the mix of principles inscribed in its Declaration of Independence and reaffirmed through the Basic Laws on human dignity and liberty and on Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people.

Correction: An earlier version of this article inaccurately characterized the views of those at the Rabin Square protests of the nation-state law.

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