

“JEWISH” POLITICS OR THE POLITICS OF “JEWS”? ON ISRAELI NATION-STATEHOOD

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Abstract: This essay seeks to explicate a tension that lies at the very root of our discourse on Israel as a Jewish state. I argue that the academic and political fields tend to confuse and conflate two different, often contradictory understandings or constructions of the very meaning of Jewish politics. Schematically labelling these as Jewish politics versus the politics of Jews (and derived from these, the outlook of Israel as a “Jewish state” versus the notion of it being solely a “state of Jews”), I argue that the conflicting political and ideological constructions are nourished by different readings of Jewish identity and authenticity, which were first developed in Europe by leading (self-identified secular) Zionist ideologues, and later shaped mainstream readings of Israeli politics. The essay outlines the basic contours of this conceptual distinction, traces its roots in Zionist ideology (as developed in Eastern and Central Europe), and concludes with a consideration of the playing out of the tension at hand in contemporary Israeli politics.

Introduction

What do we mean when we refer to the State of Israel as “the Jewish State”? What does the designation “Jewish” amount to in the context of this sovereign nation-state? What does it mean for the politics of the state to be identified as “Jewish”? And what does it mean for an academic and intellectual field to study Israel *as* a Jewish state?

I would like to suggest here that there are two distinct, contesting, and even contradictory political projects or horizons that are often entangled and confused in the discourse on Israeli politics, Jewish politics, and the interplay between these terms (i.e., Israeli politics as or versus Jewish politics). It seems to me that many of us – students of the Middle East and specifically of the Israeli case, participants in Jewish and Israeli politics, people representing various groups and points of views in related debates, and so on – often bear in mind (a usually amorphous, sometimes inconsistent) sense of a core meaning related to these terms that is quite strikingly different from that held by our interlocutors, without this

difference being explicitly acknowledged. It might be of worth, then, to try and spell out some of the assumptions hidden behind our daily discourse and some of their implications.

We may begin this exercise by drawing a rather trivial terminological distinction between two closely related but not indistinct English words, both of which would usually be translated into Hebrew as *yehudi*: Jew and Jewish. I find the two contesting political outlooks or meanings (which are my main subject here) to be encapsulated in a certain distinction we sometimes employ when we use these English terms. (I must clarify that the following obviously does not claim to be an exhaustive genealogical, philological, etymological, or historical exploration of the terms. Nor is it a genuine attempt at exhaustively studying the varying, often conflicting meanings associated with each of these terms.¹ My concern here is primarily (and *only*) with a certain contemporaneous, common use of the terms, in a most specific context of politics.)

The Objective Jew and Jewish Normativity

"Jew" would be read in the context of the distinction I have in mind as a noun, a name. It alludes to one's "being" (*a Jew*). This, quite obviously, would suggest that the matter at hand – one's "being a Jew" – is a derivative of some so-called "objective" criteria, more often than not likely having to do with one's "natural" or "biological" ancestry or accident of birth. (We may prefer to call it "ethnicity" if we find this term to be clearer or less offensive.) This name tends to allude to some "impartial" measure, an ought-to-be-simple "definition" that would mark one as either a Jew or not a Jew. Crucially for the purpose of the distinction I have in mind here, this measure may be only remotely (and sometimes not at all) dependent on the choice, preference or behaviour, actions, ethics, outlook etc. of the individual: paradigmatically (again: *in the context of this narrow meaning I focus on here*, and only in this context), one is "born a Jew". Needless to say, one can also "become" a Jew, but this, too, would suggest the workings-in-the-background of the above-mentioned "objective" criteria, a line of demarcation, that the non-Jew has to cross in order to "become" – i.e., to now come and "be" – a "Jew." Note that this "being" is by definition individual and personal (as in having to do with a person): it cannot refer to ideas, objects, and other non-persons (they cannot be "Jews"). Only a person can pass the essential criterion – to have the "essence" – that would make one "a Jew". Obviously, we can also identify a relevant group identity here – that of Jews – but this would not necessarily amount to much more than many persons being each "a Jew". (Needless to say, a nationalist ideology would indeed tend to view this group as an entity in itself.)

The word “Jewish”, on the other hand, an adjective (that can also be inflected so as to be an adverb, i.e., when we mark a certain act as being done “Jewishly”), suggests a quality, a style, a content – and only remotely, if ever, a “being.” While it, too, might be seen as ultimately referring to a certain “essence” (this is an almost trivial fact of the way we identify things as having a certain quality; as Daniel Boyarin (2018: 40) puts it, we tend to be “closet Platonists”), it is of a different order from the existential matter of “being” (or not being) a “Jew”. In the usage I have in mind, “Jewish” is explicitly “subjective”, evaluative, judgemental even, as it designates certain things (people, ideas, ethics, law, philosophy, way-of-life, and so on) as corresponding positively to a certain quality – the exact nature of which is obviously a matter of interpretation and judgement, and given to debate and negotiation. (That is to say, it has to do with some sense of tradition, which is manifestly “an argument extended through time” (MacIntyre 1988: 12) regarding practice, meaning, boundaries, and so forth.)

In a narrower sense, “Jewish” may simply be the adjective from “Jew”, meaning that it only designates that which is “of a Jew”. In this case, one’s being a “Jew” would be the aforesaid quality which allows for one’s actions, beliefs, creations, ideas, etc. to be designated “Jewish”. Here, “Jewish” would simply mean “belongs to a Jew” (or Jews), “held by a Jew/Jews”, “practiced by a Jew/Jews”, etc. It is the subject or agent (“a Jew” or “Jews”) doing/owning/holding the object that renders the latter “Jewish”. In the context of this usage, there is practically no limit to what this container may contain, as anything done by Jews could be considered “Jewish”.

Needless to say, this narrow meaning of the adjective “Jewish” misses much of what we often refer to when we identify something as “Jewish”. While there are obviously many instances when “Jewish” is used exactly to allude to this narrow sense (including, I would hasten to mention here and will discuss in more detail later, instances in which we refer to “the Jewish State” and to “Jewish politics”), I nevertheless think it can be convincingly argued that more often than not we use “Jewish” to refer to a quality that is of a historical, socio-cultural, or traditional nature. And it is this usage I want to stress in the context of the duality of Jew versus Jewish. This usage of the term would suggest that there is some correspondence of *meaning* (and not just attribution) that justifies or demands that we identify something as “Jewish”. As such, it necessarily involves evaluation and judgement. It alludes to a (necessarily evasive, contested, and negotiated) sense of *authenticity*.

I should stress here that, in this thicker-in-meaning usage, “Jewish” can quite naturally refer to non-persons. Ideas, institutions, collectives, object, rules, attitudes, and so much more can all be identified as “Jewish” by virtue of their meaningful correspondence to horizons of significance that we may consider

(most probably building on and engaging in an ongoing debate or argument – i.e., tradition) as part of the “Jewish” universe. Note that this designation is also quite indifferent to the question of the acting agent’s identity as a Jew or non-Jew. In other words, for an idea or a “life-form” (to take just two obvious examples) to be Jewish, they do not have to come from the head of a Jew, or to be lived by Jews. Just as Jews can live by a Protestant ethic, so may non-Jews live by a Jewish ethic.

These two usages – the narrow one, by which “Jewish” means “of a Jew”, and the more expansive one, where it refers to a constructed and negotiated quality – are not necessarily mutually exclusive. We may conclude, if we are so inclined, that it is the mere fact that a certain attitude has been prevalent among people “who are Jews” that ultimately constructs it as a “Jewish attitude”. But these two usages are also not necessarily mutually dependent: as I just noted, for something to be “Jewish” (in the more expansive sense of the term), it does not have to be “of a Jew” or “of Jews”. Even if we insist on the validity of the notion of “a Jew” as having to do with some “objective” essence of being, we may conclude that “non-Jews” may be holding ideas that are Jewish, adhere to Jewish values, practice Jewish practices, etc. Similarly – and maybe more judgementsally – we may also conclude that people who “are Jews” (as in possessing this so-called objective trait) fail to adhere to Jewish values, ideas, practices, etc. In other words, both the notion of “Jewish non-Jews” and that of “non-Jewish Jews”² would make good sense in the context of this usage of the term.

Now, as I already noted, this all may be rather trivial. But I suspect that some of the more problematic *political* consequences of these two contesting understandings often go unnoticed, as a certain – problematic – reading of them has become a “taken for granted” assumption of many discussions on such notions as Jewish politics and Jewish collectivity, and especially on Zionist nationalism and Israeli nation-statehood.

A Jewish State Versus a Jews’ State

Applied to politics, or more specifically to nationalism and nation-statehood, which is my focus here, the distinction between “Jew” and “Jewish” ultimately holds (or even hides and confuses) at least two, very different, often conflicting ideas, outlooks, or programmes. One outlook may be described, following its spokespeople’s own self-understanding, as “objective”, while the other is explicitly “normative”. Needless to say, as I suspect my text already suggests, and as I shall expand later on, there is nothing normatively neutral in either of these two outlooks. In any event, one is “objective”, since it takes Jewishness to be an objective datum of one’s being. A “fact of nature” (or of history, if you like), of which one has no meaningful control. The other is normative, since it demands a loyal,

active, and practical commitment to a value-laden horizon as a precondition of the (authentic) “playing out” of this Jewishness.

Let us focus at this point on the modern nation-state and spell out the basic difference between these two outlooks via a more explicit distinction between a “Jewish State” (which would be the notion carrying an explicitly normative charge) and a “Jews’ State” (whose advocates would present it as objective and normatively neutral, reifying the nation-statist order of the world as a given element of our reality).

The notion of a (or the) “Jews’ State”³ would seem to be suggesting a simple, direct application of the so-called “objective” criteria of the person’s biological origin or descent (and the collective identity built upon it) to the politics of nation-statehood and of sovereignty. A (sovereign nation-)state of Jews would “simply” be defined or constituted by the “objective” fact of the biological/ethnic/racial/national/etc. makeup of the subjects represented by its sovereignty. If we follow the main fiction of modern sovereignty, that of the popular, national will constituting itself as sovereign via the nation-state, then we can describe the Jews’ state as the sovereign who is constituted by/on the collective will of “Jews”. Supposedly, the logic here is quite straightforward: a Jews’ state would be the simple, direct equivalent of the State of the French, or the German, or the Serbs, and so on. (I am inclined to use here European examples exclusively, since the conceptual and ideological bed of this reading feeds directly on the development of nation-statist ideology in Europe of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Indeed, as will become evident soon, my discussion, which follows the cue of dominant, triumphant Zionist readings of Jewish politics, is confined to a European frame of reference.⁴)

Looked at from a normatively concerned point of view, the notion of a Jews’ state would seem to be quite neutral, as – at least in principle – there is no normative or ethical directive immediately and explicitly imposed on such a state. (Needless to say, this idea only makes sense if we accept the nationalist, or nation-statist political order of the world, on its European, colonial, and imperial roots as normatively neutral; I do not suggest that we do so, but I would nevertheless not delve into this argument here. See, e.g.: Cohn and Dirks 1988; Dirlik 2002.) Once the God-like event of self-creation of modern sovereignty (of Jews, in this case) has taken place, the sovereign and its politics do not have to abide by any normative principle – *Jewish* or otherwise – to be authentically exercising their constitutive reason. The “Jews” (let us suspend for now the question of what this designation may mean, or how it is determined) can – rather: *should* – make of their state whatever they choose to. They can, of course, prefer a certain type of social or political “contract” to guide the state’s politics (a republican ethos versus a liberal one, for example), but there is no outside perspective that would

normatively judge the authenticity, ethics, or purpose of this politics. All that is required is that the collective body present (or rather represented) at the core of the fiction of the "popular will" (that allegedly constitutes the sovereign) is identified as a group of "Jews". (Needless to say, this necessarily forces the "Jews' state" to be preoccupied with "demography", or the preservation of an imbalance between a majority – of "Jews" – against a minority – of "non-Jews" – to uphold its constitutive reason; I shall return to this point later on.)

Note that this conceptualisation of the Jews' State or a State of Jews assumes as given and obvious matters that are in effect highly contested and far from clear – especially if we put them in a *Jewish* framework. Specifically, arguments for Israel's being "simply" (and "only"; see below) the Jews' State (and *not*, that is, a *Jewish* State) fail to – or maybe just prefer not to – seriously reflect upon the uneasy (to say the least) application of the modern, European, Christian-in-origin categories of nation, state, ethnos, race, religion, etc. to the case of "Jews". Probably the most obvious aspect of this neglect is the in effect highly contested matter of the alleged objective criteria that would determine who counts as a Jew and who does not.

The notion of a *Jewish* State, on the other hand, would suggest (at least in the framework of the distinction I outlined above) some normative, ethical, and constitutive worldview as determining the state's "identity" or constitution as Jewish. Looked at from this point of view, for politics, economics, diplomacy, social care, and many other such elements of the workings of the state to be considered (authentically) Jewish, they would have to positively, meaningfully correspond to what the historical conversation or argumentation would mark as "Jewish".

I must note that a Jewishly concerned point of view would most likely also question the idea of the modern, sovereign nation-state, and may very well arrive at the conclusion that a Jewish notion of ethics and the conduct of public life is simply incommensurable with the political configuration of the modern nation-state. In this regard, as in many others, Wael Hallaq's (2012) judgement, that traditional Islamic notions of governance, ethics, subjectivity, and law (among others) are so incompatible with the foundational notions of the sovereign, modern nation-state as to render the idea of an "Islamic State" an impossibility in principle, is highly informative to our discussion here.

Yet, in the context of the predominant political discourse I am considering here, most references to Israel's being a Jewish state do not address this fundamental question. They seem to take as given the basic "form" of the politics of the nation-state, and dwell exclusively on the question of the "contents" that would make such a state authentically Jewish. We would be encouraged, in the context of this discourse, to ask questions such as: what Jewish principles should guide the conduct of the state? In what sense is the conduct of a Jewish army and especially the

waging of war by such an army different than non-Jewish armies? What is – or should be – Jewish diplomacy? What are the principles of a Jewish economy? And so on. Much of the Israeli political debate has revolved around “second order” questions, such as: how should the public sphere in a Jewish state correspond to (a certain, limited interpretation of) Jewish “religion”? To what extent should the state nurture in its subjects a sense of Jewish tradition? and the like.

To reiterate: the discourse discussed here necessarily limits the scope of the discussion and focuses it on matters of the reality of the modern, sovereign nation-state. In other words, the argument for a *Jewish State* accepts as given (usually without acknowledging this) the basic premises of a political form or configuration of power that is borne out of a specific history (modern European, Christian, largely Protestant; see Cavanaugh 2009), and seeks to apply it to the Jewish case. The “Jewishness” (or the “content”) of the state is thus necessarily limited to an understanding of Jewish history, values, meanings, ethics, etc., that is not fundamentally incommensurable with this form.⁵ This leaves unexamined a whole range of questions that would amount to a Jewish critique of the idea of the modern nation-state. Questions that would draw on Jewish horizons to challenge the idea of sovereignty upon which the modern nation-state is constituted, for example.⁶

Note also that, in the case of the notion of a “Jews’ State”, it would seem that form alone is of relevance. As long as the configuration of power, or political form of the nation-state is seen as constructed by/for Jews, there is no point (or, in some formulation, it is nonsensical if not even illegitimate) to ask questions of “content,” such as what is “Jewish” about the economy, diplomacy, social care, etc. of the state. From this point of view, whatever Jews do with their economy, army, diplomacy, social welfare, etc. is, *ipso facto*, Jewish.

What is the State of Israel?

By way of exemplifying these two distinct and more often than not incompatible understandings of the very meaning of Israel’s “identity” and the politics derived from it, let us consider two not unrepresentative exemplars.

The first comes from Hamid Dabashi’s pioneering exposition of the intellectual and ideational infrastructure of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Dabashi ties the history of the 1979 revolution in Iran (with its roots in the events and developments surrounding the 1953 coup) and the formation of the Islamic Republic into a regional and global history in which the idea of a “Jewish State” plays a crucial role. As he puts it, in order to understand the events culminating in the establishment of the Islamic Republic,

it is imperative to consider the geopolitics of the region. The partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 created the first religiously bifurcated states in the region ... A

year later, in 1948, the establishment of the state of Israel created the first modern Jewish state in the region in specifically religious terms. The first Arab-Israeli war turned the Palestinian problem into the cornerstone of the regional conflicts – and the Jewish nature of the state of Israel was bound to intensify the Islamic disposition of opposition to it . . . [I]t is critically important to keep in mind that precisely at a time that both a Jewish state in Palestine and a Hindu-Muslim bifurcation in the Indian subcontinent was taking shape, Iran was experiencing the most momentous part of its modern history . . . (Dabashi 2006, p. xvi)

This suggests a very specific understanding of Israel’s being a Jewish State, and the way this impacts the Middle East at large. Specifically, as the erudite scholar puts it, Israel’s “Jewish nature”, which introduces into the geopolitics of the region “specifically religious terms”, such that are “bound to intensify the Islamic disposition of the opposition to it” and that put Israel on par also with a “Hindu-Muslim bifurcation” of the south Asian sub-continent, must necessarily be referring to a normatively laden, traditional (or, in Dabashi’s term: “religious”, regardless of the Zionist founders’ self-identification as fierce secularists) sense of Jewishness that guides the state’s conduct in the Middle East. Indeed, Dabashi seems to be suggesting a direct parallel between Iran’s Islamic “nature” or constitution and Israel’s “Jewish nature”. For this to make sense, the latter simply cannot amount only to the demographic makeup of the state’s population. This conceptualisation assumes that there is something foundational about the polity, that makes it *normatively* Jewish. This, of course, is not to suggest that Dabashi argues that this is a necessarily authentic or accurate political expression of Jewish normativity; Nor does he clearly explicate (interested primarily in the Iranian case as he is, the question clearly falls out of the bounds of his discussion) what this “something” would (or does) amount to. Yet the gist of the argument is clear: Israel’s Jewish identity refers to the same conceptual realm where Iran’s Islamic revolution is to be found. It clearly has to do with a political configuration that nourishes on traditional/religious normativity, and not “only” a matter of the genealogy (be it “ethno-national” or “biological”) of those in whose name the state is sovereign.

Other references to Israel’s Jewish identity/nature do, of course, dwell deeply into the matter of what this normativity or authenticity should or would amount to, and I will consider the matter in more detail below. But before I do so, let us compare or rather contrast the view suggested by Dabashi’s comments with a rather straightforward explication of a secularist, liberal Zionist proclamation. This was made by an unsigned editorial piece in Israel’s *Haaretz* newspaper (presumably representing the principled stance of the paper’s leadership, and in effect voicing a dominant tone among liberal, secularist Israeli Jews):

Zionism dreamed of a state for the Jews, not a Jewish state: a refuge for members of the Jewish people, not a state with an official religion like Muslim Saudi Arabia. The Balfour Declaration promised a national home, not a religious one. On Israeli identity cards, “Jewish” describes a nationality [that is, *not* a religion]. (*Haaretz* 2013b)

Coming in the context of decrying governmental initiatives to “strengthen” Israel’s (and Israeli Jews’) Jewish identity, which the editorial views as amounting to illiberal religious coercion, the thrust of the argument here goes directly against what could be deduced from Dabashi’s comments above: Israel is not (or rather – was never meant to be) a “Jewish State”. Any such designation that would put it on par with “state[s] with official religion like Muslim Saudi Arabia” would necessarily amount to a betrayal of the very founding *Zionist* notions of Israeli nation-statehood, or the statehood of Jews. Note also the implied affiliation of Israel with the “secular” West, in opposition to the “religious” East, in *Haaretz*’s statement; while Dabashi firmly positions Israel within a Middle Eastern context, *Haaretz*’s editorial makes a point of tying it to Western ideals of liberalism and secularity.⁷ According to this reading of the very meaning of the Israeli polity, the assumed religious identity of the state suggested (or rather explicated) in Dabashi’s comments is either a misreading or an outright, determined (especially when made by “religious” Jewish Israelis) distortion of the state’s *raison d’être*. The state is meant simply – and more importantly, *only* – to be defined as *medinat hayehudim*, the Jews’ State; that is to say: built on the datum of the genealogy of the people whose collective “will” constitutes its sovereignty. Any normatively Jewish prescription for the polity beyond this “objective” fact amounts to religious coercion and a distortion of the state’s founding principles.

“Demographics” is at the core of this argument, as it focuses almost exclusively on the (nation-statist) arithmetic of a majority versus minority. As it was separately reiterated by a resident *Haaretz* commentator:

Israel is a Jewish state only in the sense of it being a state in which a solid majority of people from a Jewish origin live, and not in any other sense . . . Israel shall be a Jewish state only if a majority of its citizens is of a Jewish origin, and not because of laws that dictate certain lifestyles. (Alpher 2018)

The argument entailed is clear enough. First, the designation “Jewish” is primarily – if not solely – a matter of “peoplehood” (or “nationality,” in the sense of being a member of a nation, as the latter is constructed by the nationalist ideology; the discourse here, clearly, is a (liberal-) nationalist, Zionist one, bound to the idea

of the nation-state). It has to do, in other words, with one’s “origin”: Given that Jewish peoplehood is seen as pertaining to *ethnonationality*, it is determined primarily by this matter of origin. Second, the State of Israel is understood here to be the nation-state of the Jews, that is: of the people who compose this peoplehood. Once a majority of Jews – as in “people of a Jewish origin” – come to constitute a polity, there is no need (if it is not outright illegitimate) to expect or demand that the polity, its citizens, its cultural producers and so on actively dialogue with and uphold what the outlook at hand considers as “religion”. Specifically, such a dialoguing with tradition or “religion” would be considered illegitimate if it is conducted in a manner that would have practical implications for the conduct of public and political life in the state. Any such initiative must ultimately amount to an encroaching of the religious realm (seen as by definition irrational or arational, private, and most often also as archaic) into the realm of (secular, rational) politics, and may well end up with the enforcing of a religious lifestyle on a “naïve” majority of secular Jews, who pay heed to the “religious” demand that the Israeli polity carries some Jewish “hues”.

Importantly, the latter suspicion highlights the high degree to which the discussion at hand is bound to a prevailing sense of a *kulturkampf* between secular and religious Jews as a founding feature of modern Jewry. More recently, this sense has motivated increased alarm, if not outright panic, regarding an alleged rapidly growing process of “religionization”, by which religious ideas, practices, worldviews etc. permeate into the otherwise secular (national, Zionist) spheres of education, culture, and politics.⁸

The overarching outlook from which this argument arises draws a distinction – which is clear and coherent in theory, but in practice is confused and inconsistent – between matters that are categorized as having to do with “religion” and others that have to do with culture, history, ethnicity, nationhood, folklore, and so on, which are seen as “secular” in essence. For this argument assumes as given that there are elements of Jewishness (or Jewish peoplehood) that are secular in nature and their presence in the public sphere, including the fundamental fact of their legitimising the configuration of power where Jews hold sovereignty, is fully justified, while other elements, which have to do with Judaism as “a religion”, are forbidden from shaping the Israeli polity. The problem, of course – as almost all spokespeople for this stance would usually readily admit – is that the theoretical distinction at hand is far from being clear and easy to employ in practice. In the vivid formulation of the author and essayist A. B. Yehoshua, a vocal proponent of this liberal, secularist Zionist stance, religion has “melted into” the national Jewish body; a clear-cut “amputation” of the religious member from the body, desired as it may be, cannot be easily achieved (Yehoshua 1988).

The Roots of the Tension: What is (Culturally, Spiritually) Jewish about the (Political) Judenstaat?

There is, then, a rather obvious tension between two competing understandings of the very meaning of Israel's "Jewishness". The roots of this tension can be found already at the formative stages of the Zionist idea, vividly captured in the bitter dispute between two of the most influential Zionist ideologues in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, Aḥad Ha'am (the penname of Asher Ginzburg) and Theodore Herzl, over the very meaning and nature of the Zionist vision or programme. This tension is lucidly captured in what Hillel Halkin (2016) titles "the most contentious Jewish book review of the [twentieth] century": Aḥad Ha'am's (1902)⁹ essay, a purported review of Herzl's *Altneuland* (a utopian tale, published earlier the same year, in which Herzl imagines a future return of the Jews to Palestine), which ultimately amounts to a "caustic attack" (Halkin 2016) on Herzl's vision or political programme for the Zionist movement.

This debate has indeed been discussed quite thoroughly in the past, most usually framed as expressing the contest between two outlooks for the Zionist project: Herzl's "political" brand of Zionism (i.e., Herzl's relentless insistence on a political solution to what was viewed in Europe of the time as "the Jewish problem", in the form of establishing an independent state for the Jews, preferably in Palestine) versus Aḥad Ha'am's "cultural" or "spiritual" brand (i.e., Aḥad Ha'am's insistence that the solution to this same purported "Jewish problem" must focus on a cultural rejuvenation of the people, prior to any attempt at establishing a state) (Goldshtein 2011). Another interpretation convincingly frames Aḥad Ha'am's critique of Herzl and the wider controversy surrounding it as drawing on the cultural differences between the "Eastern" and "Western" (European) worldviews the two men held (Conforti 2010, 2019: chap. 4). Aḥad Ha'am, a Russian Jew, formulated an "ethnacist" (Shimoni 1995: 270) view of Jewish nationalism, which drew on prevalent, "organic" or "Eastern" (Plamenatz 1976; as in East European) notions of nationalism. Herzl, a Viennese Jew, was influenced by Central and Western European readings of the nationalist imperative.

Without dismissing or disputing these convincing interpretations, I would suggest that the debate between the two ideologues can also be seen as capturing most vividly the sharply diverging understandings of a polity that is identified either as "of Jews" or as "Jewish". In other words, I would argue that Aḥad Ha'am's essay in question can be read as a normatively charged, "Jewish-polity" oriented critique of (Herzl's rendition of) a supposedly objective notion of a "Jew's polity". Importantly, these two conflicting visions both emerge from an allegedly *secular* perspective, complicated or contested as the meaning of this secularity may be.

Neither Aḥad Ha'am's "Jewish state" nor Herzl's "Jews' State" claims to be motivated by "religious" or theological considerations, and both visions are explicitly committed to what may be very crudely described as the (secular) tradition of the European Enlightenment (Shimoni 1995: chap. 7).

One way to understand what is at stake here is to frame the argument as a debate over *authenticity* – national, Jewish authenticity, to be precise. If we follow Aḥad Ha'am's cue, we would surely come to think that, in order for a polity's Jewishness to be meaningful, it must exhibit a rather "thick" cultural sense of Jewish authenticity. And it should come as no surprise that he does not see Herzl's envisioned polity as passing this basic test; Aḥad Ha'am judges Herzl's vision in *Altneuland* harshly exactly because his (Aḥad Ha'am's) vision of a Jewish polity renders Herzl's polity of Jews inauthentic. Moreover, seen from the point of view advocated by Aḥad Ha'am, the very concern for authenticity would not seem to be equally shared by both sides of the debate at hand: this concern emerges almost instinctively from the (admittedly normative) "Jewish polity" point of view, while the (allegedly objective) "polity of Jews" perspective would seem to be largely indifferent to this matter.

Not for nothing, the notion of "imitation" is dominant in Aḥad Ha'am's critique. He sees the main theme of Herzl's utopia as having to do with the Jew's imitation, adoption, and adaptation of the Gentile ways. From whatever angle we look at this "New Society" (the Jewish polity imagined by Herzl), Aḥad Ha'am summarizes, we see a similar image: "European people, European customs, and European inventions. Nowhere do we find any specific 'Jewish' impression." In Aḥad Ha'am's view, the overall image is necessarily one of inauthentic replication and lack of originality: "everything in the Land of Israel [Herzl's utopian New Society] was not originally created in the Land of Israel, but in England, America, France and Germany" (Aḥad Ha'am 5707: 316, 317, 319).

This lack of authenticity has to do primarily with the New Society's indifference toward (Jewish) tradition. In Aḥad Ha'am's understanding, there cannot be a genuine modern (*secular*) Jewish authenticity without a meaningful dialogue – reading, studying, knowing, and reinterpreting – of Jewish tradition, on the vastness of its scope and depth. Yet in Herzl's vision (as it is read by Aḥad Ha'am, of course), the Jews' imitations (or adoption) of and improvements on the European and more generally Western precedence are enabled exactly by the lack of a meaningful contact between the modern Jews and their past (Aḥad Ha'am 5707: 316).

What for Herzl is a foundation of the cosmopolitan nature of the New Society, Aḥad Ha'am sees as alienation from the collective selfhood. Take, as an example, "the question of language", which so preoccupied Aḥad Ha'am: for him, there can be no national Jewish authenticity that is not founded on a revived and renewed Hebrew as the national language; Yet for Herzl, it would seem, this is an irrelevant

matter altogether. As much as Aḥad Ha'am is searching for a clear answer, he cannot find Herzl dealing seriously with this question, leaving the reader with only an implied sense that

we may conclude from various hints here and there that the masses in the villages and also in the cities use the German jargon that it brought along from the exile [i.e., Yiddish], and the educated [use] the European languages, and especially German, which is the language of the leaders. (Aḥad Ha'am 5707: 317, 318)

Aḥad Ha'am's guiding question in judging matters of authenticity seems to be almost obvious yet fatally devastating, if we accept his basic point of view. Simply put, he asks, *what is Jewish* about Herzl's imagined New Society? More elaborately, the question he poses in relation to Herzl's depiction of a flourishing publishing industry (manifested in the proliferation of intellectual periodicals) in the New Society is paradigmatic to his overall critique: "Do these periodicals also have any Jewish quality? Is there a place in them for questions that are specific to Jews, since they are *Jewish*, and how do the periodicals in the Land of Israel relate to such questions[?]" Ultimately, Aḥad Ha'am's search for a consideration of any "internal question of Judaism" in *Altneuland* finds "not even a hint" (Aḥad Ha'am 5707: 317). Being a polity of Jews alone does not suffice; it is the Jewish consideration that demands attention.

Maybe the most interesting element, in this regard, is the sarcastic manner in which Aḥad Ha'am notes the cosmopolitan nature of the New Society. Herzl clearly celebrates the New Society's tolerance, expressed in its ability to freely build on diverse traditions and to appeal to people with various backgrounds, and he makes a point of stressing the New Society's liberal stance of being agnostic towards one's origins. Aḥad Ha'am, however, reads this liberal and cosmopolitan character as an outright expression of the lack of Jewish authenticity. He finds confounding, if not outright ridiculous, the fact (stressed with emphasised letters and an exclamation point) that "the fundamental principle of the New Society is this: *regardless of differences of religion and nationality!* [*beli hevdel dat ul'om*]"'. What liberal democracy would take to be a matter of the highest value is for Aḥad Ha'am almost laughable. Aḥad Ha'am incessantly notes the prominent presence of Gentiles in *Altneuland*, reading this as amounting to Jewish self-alienation (Aḥad Ha'am 5707: 316, 317).

This may indeed be perplexing, especially given Aḥad Ha'am's contemporary image as epitomizing a more "tolerant" and "sensitive" form of Zionism (especially credited to his early attentiveness to the problematic attitude of the Zionist settlers to the Arabs in Ottoman Palestine).¹⁰ His contempt – sometimes verging

on disgust – for Herzl’s notion that the state will be free and equal to all, regardless of difference of race, religion, and nationality, is apparent. It is here that Aḥad Ha’am’s readiness to challenge Herzl’s critical stance towards “national chauvinism” emerges most forcefully. Aḥad Ha’am does not hesitate to cynically suggest that what he himself is most concerned with can indeed be labelled as “chauvinistic”; or, at the very least, he is happy to note that this is how a Jewishly concerned point of view would be depicted by Herzl (Aḥad Ha’am 5707: 319).

Aḥad Ha’am’s rhetoric notwithstanding, it is rather apparent (a point made repeatedly by his critics; see the documents curated by Goldshtein 2011) that it would be wrong to assume (as Aḥad Ha’am clearly implies) that Herzl is wholly indifferent to the question of authenticity, or that he values imitation. Rather, Herzl represents another notion of “Jewish” authenticity, by which it suffices that Jews – specifically, working together as a national collective – are the active agents at play. The fact that Jews do/produce/run the matter (specifically in this case: the polity as a corporate society) at hand renders it authentically “Jewish”. Herzl expressed this logic quite straightforwardly when he sought to convince the 6th Zionist Congress (in 1903) to support what came to be known as the “Uganda plan”¹¹ by stressing that the proposed Jewish protectorate in British East Africa would be “an autonomous Jewish settlement . . . , with a Jewish administration, a Jewish local government, and a Jewish official at its head” (Herzl 1917: 36). The main question at hand is whether Jews become masters of their (political) history or not; whatever they may ultimately produce in such conditions of self-rule will necessarily be authentically Jewish, as it would be the product of Jewish agency, as in having “Jews” as its acting subjects.

Viewed from this point of view, what Aḥad Ha’am sees as “imitation” is indeed laudable, especially in a liberal-democratic frame of reference, and would make Herzl’s celebration of the eclectic European nature of his imagined New Society a sign of its strength and innovation, not of imitation and inauthenticity. This stance is forcefully articulated in a reaction by Max Nordau, one of Herzl’s staunchest allies, to Aḥad Ha’am’s critique of *Altneuland*.¹² Nordau’s passionate response suggests that Aḥad Ha’am’s normative concerns are misplaced, since what he seeks but fails to find in Herzl’s utopia (Hebrew spoken, Jewish culture taught and practiced, etc.), is simply “taken for granted”. However, more important is Aḥad Ha’am’s complaint that “Altneuland is too European”. Nordau answers this allegation by a resounding (in paraphrase) “Yes, indeed!” “It is true: Altneuland is a European section inside Asia”; this “Western-ness” is indeed, Nordau reaffirms, what the Zionist movement under Herzl’s leadership has been striving for. Yet Aḥad Ha’am’s accusation of imitation is wholly misplaced, since the European civilisation that Zionism nurtures in the New Society is equally a *Jewish* civilisation:

We imitate no nation; We only utilise and develop what is ours. We took part in the development of European culture, more than our numerical share; it is ours as much as it is the German's, the French's, the English's. We will not allow that someone will contrive an imaginary contradiction between a Jewish culture, our Jewish [culture], and European culture . . . We will never agree that the Jews' return to the land of their forefathers will be a retreat to barbarity, as our enemies and detractors argue. The Jewish people shall develop its special essence inside the general framework of Western culture, like any other civilized people, but not outside of it, not from a savage, philistine Asiatic-ness, as Aḥad Ha'am apparently wants. (Nordau 1960: 112)

This text, often quoted to highlight the sheer Orientalist outlook of Nordau's (and Herzl's) Zionism, is important for the matter under consideration here for its clear articulation of the sense of what we might term as "objective authenticity". According to Nordau's view, European culture and civilisation are as much "Jewish" as they are "European" since Jews – or rather agents who "*are* Jews" – have taken an active (and even numerically or demographically disproportionate) share in creating this culture or civilisation. The correspondence between this culture and any horizon that draws on a Jewish normativity is secondary in relevance, if it is relevant at all. What is relevant is that people "who are Jews" created it.

A most telling expression of this view is captured in an address Herzl delivered in 1896 under the heading of "Judentum". While the title of the address could suggest an engagement with Herzl's understanding or construction of the meaning of Judaism, which is a possible translation of "Judentum" ("Judaism" is indeed the title chosen by the English translator of this address: Herzl 1973: 44–58), Herzl clearly refers to a different usage of the term, meaning "Jewry" or "Jews as a collective" (Penslar 2020: 109). Ultimately, the address does not offer any clear sense of what Judaism is about, but instead outlines (in very rough lines) what Herzl's biographer terms a "functional" (Penslar 2020: p. 110) definition of what Jewry is or what the Jews "are".

Crucially, Herzl's sense of "Jews" as "*what they are*" is determined primarily by anti-Semitism. Thus, it is this "foe" or "common enemy" that emerges as definitive of Herzl's sense of Jewish *nationhood*:

we are a group, a historical group of people who clearly belong together and have a common enemy; this seems to me an adequate definition of a nation. I do not think a nation must speak only one language or show uniform racial characteristics. This quite moderate definition of nationhood is sufficient. We are a historical group held together by a common foe. This is what we are, whether we know it or not, and whether we desire it or not. (Herzl 1973: 51–2)

Note that matters of “content”, such as values, laws, traditions, ethics, culture, and so on are only secondary to the determinant of unity by force of common enemy. (Herzl fails to make any reference to such matters in the discussed address.) Whether one knows and/or desires it or not, it is beyond the individual’s choice; he or she, as members of the nation that is Jewry, are determined by an outsider’s hate and historical persecution. Herzl clearly subscribed to the idea that what Jews/Jewry do as a national group united by this force is authentically Jewish. It is the fact that the people involved do what they do “as Jews” that makes it authentically “Jewish” (Herzl 1973: 57).

It is not the case, then, that the Herzlian view is agnostic when it comes to the issue of Jewishness. Rather, Herzl and Nordau are taking a (leading) part in a discourse in which it seems quite clear and obvious – to them, to their audience, and to their supporters and distractors alike – who (or what) the Jews are, and their main focus is on envisioning this taken-for-granted Jewishness as transformed via its political self-realisation.

This necessarily paints the notion of cultural assimilation in a whole different colour. If in Aḥad Ha’am’s view the active adoption of contemporaneous European forms of life, values, etc. – what falls under and expansive reading of “culture” – by Jews, at the expense of their traditional lifestyles, values, and cultures, amounts to their assimilation and loss of authenticity, Herzl’s and Nordau’s sense of “objective authenticity” reverses the picture altogether. As put by one student of Zionist ideology:

According to Herzl, it was not the Jews who passively and obsequiously assimilated into the cultures of the European powers. Instead, the Jews actively absorbed the European cultures as a matter of collective choice, and these cultures thus became Jewish collective assets in precisely the same way that they belong to the European Christian nations ... In other words, though the participants of this collective social reality never defined it as a “national” Jewish one, it was nonetheless a collective experience “of Jews” on the objective sociological level. (Shumsky 2018: 71, 73)

The closing sentence in this quote captures the argument quite vividly: the focus of the Zionist view at hand is on the so-called “experience ‘of Jews,’” on the “objective sociological level” – read: anti-Semitism – which (pre)defines the actors/agents (individually and/or collectively) as “Jews”. Henceforth, their creation is rendered Jewish.

It may be not wholly redundant to note here also the taken-for-granted Eurocentric view at hand: all parties to this debate assume the European Jewish experience to be a “universal” Jewish feature, that necessarily also applies to

non-Europeans, disregarding not only the Jewish histories and experiences in Muslim and Arab countries, but also the role of the Islamic world – the “not-Europe” – in shaping Jewishness itself. This, indeed, is but one aspect of this Zionist view’s indebtedness to European, Christian epistemology, and worldview more generally.

In any event, the view at hand presupposes that there must be some “pre-definition”, a certain “something”, that defines the actor/agent as “a Jew” prior to our consideration whether this agent’s cultural creation is to be viewed as “Jewish”. Once the former – i.e., his/her Jewishness – is established, the latter – i.e., the “Jewish” nature of her creation – is a given, on an “objective sociological level”. Note: this cultural production is to be considered “Jewish” as in “of Jews” – even if it would not be judged as authentically “Jewish” from a point of view concerned with “Judaic” normativity. This is further complicated by the shifting of the focus away from the Jew and toward the anti-Semite whose hatred “interpellates” or fixates the Jew into his or her identity. To put it more crudely, given that as Herzl himself suggests it can be neither race nor language that defines the Jew, it is the enemy, the anti-Semite, who is granted the role of defining who is “a Jew”. The anti-Semite is granted the agency of determining Jewish authenticity.

Furthermore, this allegedly “objective” infrastructure (i.e., a given socio-historical condition) is exactly that which allows for a liberal tolerance of difference. To fully appreciate this, it may be worth reminding the reader that all parties to the debate at hand are taking part in it primarily as leading Zionist ideologues, as nationalists. Theirs is a debate over a political framework built primarily on Jewish agency, or the agency of Jews. I am stating here the obvious, because it is this taken-for-granted bed upon which a liberal tolerance of the other is debated. Herzl’s liberal vision “bears” tolerance exactly because it envisions an “objective” Jewish infrastructure (demographically determined) as its bedrock.

These, then, are two contesting notions of Jewish authenticity – and directly derived from it, Jewish politics – that draw on two rather incommensurable readings of Jewishness or Jewish identity. One, what I suggest we term the “politics/polity of Jews”, retraces the steps of European nation-statist liberalism, by assuming an alleged “given” (in effect: powerfully constructed and maintained) racial/national/ethnic uniformity as an “objective” infrastructure upon which a “colour/ethnic/nationality blind” polity is constructed. A certain cultural normativity “naturally” emerges out of this infrastructure, and it is taken to be an objective fact of reality, upon which a supposedly universalistic apparatus is being built. The “colour blindness” is enabled precisely by a presupposed “objective” fact of a dominant normativity, that would otherwise be seen as parochial (or “chauvinistic”) normativity.

Logically, this would demand a clear sense of a distinction between Jews and non-Jews, an a-priori definition, or pre-definition, upon which the liberal

inclusivity and tolerance of the other, which accompanies a perception of the (national) self as safe from assimilation, is built. In other words, if we accept the notion of objective authenticity entailed in the “polity of Jews”, we would necessarily need to first know who (or what) the Jews “are”. But Herzl, quite obviously adopting the essentialist notions of Jewishness prevalent in Europe of his time, pays little attention to this issue. So much so that a reading of Herzl’s utopia, especially in light of Aḥad Ha’am’s criticism,

force[s] us to ask whether Herzl even considered the distinction between Jews and non-Jews to be valid in the context of the relationship between the old-new Jewish nation and languages, cultures, and ethnic groups of Western Christian civilization. (Shumsky 2018: 70)

(To be clear, this lack of an explicit concern for a distinction between the Jew and the non-Jew only applies to the intra-European context. It is rather clear that the distinction is forcefully reiterated when the Jews are confronted with those others that are shaped by what Nordau terms “Asiatic barbarity”).

The choice to not give a clear definition of Jewishness is common to practically all main formulators of the Zionist ideology, including Aḥad Ha’am. They seem to all share a general sense by which Jewishness is something intrinsic to one’s being, which is impossible to define, but is nevertheless tangible and rather obvious.¹³ Yet, as the debate reviewed above shows, these ideologues differ dramatically on the question of whether this intrinsic quality alone suffices for a meaningful construction of a polity.

The second notion of authenticity, which I suggested we label as “Jewish politics/polity”, would demand a certain, not insignificant level of loyal dialoguing with a Jewish normativity or tradition in order for it to be judged as authentic. It expects the polity to be constituted on what it views as Jewish knowledge, and from there also values, ethics, etc. (Aḥad Ha’am 5690: 79–90 famously titled these the Jewish “national morals”). It would also expect the polity to be guided by this Jewish normative framework in its policies and actions. Needless to say, different thinkers have quite different, not infrequently conflicting ideas as to the exact contents of this normative framework; but they all share the same basic view, by which it is exactly such a framework that would enable the polity at hand to be judged as authentically Jewish.

The Jewishness of the Israeli Polity

Let us “jump forward,” as it were, and consider some of the ways in which these conflicting ideological outlooks have played out in the politics of the State of

Israel. Judged broadly, it seems almost trivial to assert that Herzl's political Zionism, with its focus on the establishment of a nation-state, has triumphed over Aḥad Ha'am's cultural vision. The latter would have demanded a much more gradual development, or "revival" if we follow more closely the spirit of this ideology, of Jewish cultural, spiritual, and social life before it would allow for a drive towards the establishment of a nation-state. Indeed, this gradual reformation of Jewish life is essential to Aḥad Ha'am's vision exactly because it is a precondition for the state-to-be to authentically claim a Jewish identity. The Zionist movement has instead put most of its efforts into achieving the political aim of establishing a sovereign state. This is not to say that the Zionist elite has not also dealt with questions of Jewish tradition, history, practice, and so on as part of its process of collective reinvention (Don-Yehiya 1980; Zeira 2002). But this elite was quite content with leaving some fundamental questions arising from this process of reinvention unanswered as it focused its resources and attention on achieving the political goal.

Yet, it is also quite clear – and maybe just as trivial – that this triumph of political Zionism was not accompanied by a decisive preference of the "polity of Jews" outlook. The "Jewish polity" concern for knowledge of and dialoguing with tradition has clearly lingered on. If Herzl's was the triumphant political outlook, Aḥad Ha'am's held strongly on a cultural level, with its insistence that the polity of Jews must also be of Jewish authenticity.

While these two outlooks could be seen as mutually exclusive, the Zionist movement, on its culmination in the State of Israel, tended to constitute itself on an uneasy combination of the two. As put by Aḥad Ha'am's first biographer, Moshe Glickson, himself a leading ideologue of the Zionist community in Mandatory Palestine, Herzl and Aḥad Ha'am have charted two unique paths that are nevertheless complementary. History, he writes (less than a quarter century after the publication of Aḥad Ha'am's critique of *Altneuland*) has reconciled these

two paths for the Jewish salvation, which are one: The redemption by action [i.e., Herzl's political Zionism, aimed at the establishment of a polity of Jews] and the redemption by wisdom and popular education [i.e., Aḥad Ha'am cultural Zionism, aimed at reviving Jewish tradition] . . . We are following Herzl's dream of kingdom by the shining light of Aḥad Ha'am's. (Glickson 1926: 176)

Regardless of the triumphalist, overly optimistic spirit of this proclamation, it still captures a foundational truth about the Zionist project in Palestine, also manifested later in the State of Israel, namely the continuous skipping between these two differing, often conflicting, readings of the very meaning of Zionism's and Israel's Jewishness and of Jewish politics more broadly. In the context of a budding

Zionist community under the sovereignty of the Ottoman Empire and the British Mandate this duality could prove to be an intellectual and socio-practical stimulus that may well encourage collective self-examination, innovation, and reformation. This is so specifically since, at that stage, the debate had been primarily cultural and intellectual – it did not bear upon the “identity” of the sovereign; it had not had, in other words, the apparatus of the nation-state at its disposal.

This has changed dramatically, of course, with the establishment of the state in 1948. From this point on, the question at hand has gained a unique importance, as it came to pertain to such matters as the legitimacy of the sovereign, the ways in which this sovereign shapes the public sphere, dictates elements of its subjects’ private and public lives, sets the borderlines of inclusion and exclusion under its rule and – most fundamentally – kills and demands the sacrifice of its subjects’ lives, all in the name of its (Jewish) sovereignty.

We may safely generalise and state that Israeli politics is determined by an uneasy upholding of both an “objective” sense that Israel is primarily a polity of Jews and a “normative” notion that it is (or rather: should act as) a Jewish polity. This combination is upheld regardless – or in spite – of the fact that, as we saw above, these two outlooks may end up directing the polity in different ways, not infrequently conflicting with each other. Maybe more importantly, as I argued earlier, the tension entailed by this uneasy combination is often overlooked or outright denied. While there is much talk (sometimes it seems like an endless discussion) on matters pertaining to the politics of Jewish identity in Israel, often labelled under “religion and politics”, much of this talk fails to address directly the tension between two differing understandings or outlooks of Israel’s Jewishness. I would argue that this tension itself is in effect a key to understanding Israeli politics, in the most extensive sense of this term (Yadgar 2020).

Put schematically, we may say that, while the state is founded – as a matter of its political constitution – on a Herzlian notion of a “polity of Jews”, important segments of the cultural, and especially the educational sphere within the state have been shaped by an Aḥad Ha’am-inspired notion of Jewish politics (a project overseen by the very same elite who led the foundation of the state along “Herzlian” lines).¹⁴ Importantly, both the state and the culture/education it has promoted have been viewed as “secular”. In other words, both the idea of an “objective” determinant of Jewishness and the “subjective” notion of Jewish culture are seen as independent – at least in principle – from “religion”. Yet the agreement seems to persist that much of the substance of Judaism as a culture, as well as the “essence” of a hereditary determinant of Jewishness, has been historically dominated by a “religious” tradition.¹⁵ This transforms the ascription of Jewishness and Jewish culture as secular into a self-professed revolutionary act.

The tension entailed herein shapes much of the actions, debates, and analysis of the matters at hand. To briefly mention but one obvious example, this tension is what lies at the basis of the legislation of the controversial “Nation State” law, and especially the continuous debate over it.¹⁶ This “Basic Law: Israel the Nation-State of the Jewish People”,¹⁷ a quasi-constitutional legislation that has been the focus of a continuous debate within Israel for over a decade, and since clearing the last legislative hurdles in July 2018 has also attracted much international attention, is the culmination of a heightened political tension surrounding Israel’s “Jewish identity”, which has come to dominate Israeli politics in the past couple of decades. I would argue that a key way to understand the history of this law, which allegedly aims to enshrine Israel’s identity as *the* Jewish nation-state, is to read it as an initiative motivated by concerns of the “State of Jews” kind (meaning, an attempt to reiterate or reinstate constitutionally the preferential status of the majority of Jews over Palestinian Arabs within the state), which was somewhat unintentionally transformed into an apparently confused debate over the meaning of a “Jewish State” (meaning, an attempt to explicate what a normative adherence to “Jewish heritage” may amount to).

The debate over the bill has offered a clear view of the essential tensions at the very roots of the Israeli polity; specifically, it highlighted the tension between Zionism’s rebellion against what it has viewed as Jewish “religion” and its (Zionism’s) foundational claim to a Jewish history and identity that are, by the Zionist own account, saturated with the same “religious” elements. More critically, it has exposed the Zionist inability to construct a full-fledged independent-from-religion (i.e., in Zionism’s own terminology, “national” and “secular”) positively *normative* sense of Jewish identity. Such an ideological construction could have been the source that would clearly identify Israel’s values as a “Jewish state”, hence, ultimately, the Israeli meaning of Jewish politics. Instead, the law directs much of its impetus toward a *negative* construction of Jewish-Zionist nationhood, by way of refuting the Palestinian claims to nationhood, and attempting to buttress the preference of Jews over non-Jews in Israel.

Two issues emerged almost instantaneously as the flash points attracting most commentators’ attention: the implied preference of Israel’s Jewish identity over the polity’s (liberal-)democratic principles when the two are understood to be in conflict, and the assertion of Jewish nationhood through the blunt negation of Palestinian nationhood.

In the critical liberal Zionist (oppositional) reading of the law – a reading that, as we saw above, is principally committed to a “state of Jews” framework – the main motive behind the law is an attempt – which the critics clearly see as racist – to firmly establish the collective inferiority of Palestinian-Arabs in

the nation-state of Jews. In this reading, the internationally accepted rightful affirmation of the Jewish majority’s determination of Israel’s “Jewish identity” masks a more sinister, less acceptable practice of “apartheid” (*Haaretz* 2013a), in which this affirmation is built primarily on the negation of the national “Other”.

The centrality of the Palestinian challenge to political Zionist nationhood is most clearly explicated in a draft proposal to the original legislative bill (first presented to the Israeli Parliament in 2011), published by the Institute for Zionist Strategies (IZS) in 2009 (Helman and Arbel 2009). This document’s authors justify the legislative initiative as a counter measure to what they decry as a gradual erosion – and ultimately a “perversion” – of the Zionist vision, entailed in the idea (which, the document bemoans, has clearly gained traction) that the preference of Jews over non-Jews in Israel is illegitimate. If left unopposed, they warn, this trend would lead to the transformation of Israel into the opposite of “a state of Jews”, namely “a state of all of its citizens”: a liberal-democratic state, where all citizens, regardless of their national(ist) belonging and aspirations, enjoy equal status not only in face of the law, but also in the allocation of material and symbolic resources. Doing so, they clearly expose the fundamental dependency of the “state of Jews” outlook on an a-priori “demographic” calculation of a privileged majority versus a tolerated minority. In this framework of nationalist political philosophy, the “Jewish character” of the nation-state must amount to an explicit preference of people who are Jews over those who are not, at least in collective terms.

The authors directly identify the liberal threat to the “state of Jews” outlook as they warn against a “radical liberal interpretation”, the “elevation of equality . . . to an exclusive supreme value in Israel” that “distorts the intention of the Founding Fathers of the State of Israel”. It “denies the Jewish People its right to self-determination” and “leads to the warped conclusion that all laws contributing to the Jewish character of Israel are undemocratic (except for now, the Law of Return) and must therefore be annulled” (Helman and Arbel 2009: 6).

As Avi Dichter (quoted in Bender 2018), who presented the bill to the Israeli parliament, has triumphantly put it, the Basic Law is aimed at “preventing even a shadow of a thought, not to mention an attempt, to transform Israel into a state of all of its citizens”. *Haaretz*’s editorial highlighted the impetus of this assertion:

The ugly, naked truth has been exposed: The nation-state law was meant to make it clear to Israeli Arabs that the state views them as second-class citizens. Admittedly, they have “equal rights just like the rest of us,” but they should know that the state doesn’t belong to “all its citizens.” Moreover, since Israel isn’t a state of all its citizens, any government that includes the Arab parties “would undermine the security of the state and its citizens.” (*Haaretz* 2019)

Other oppositions to the bill may also shed light on the matter at hand. Throughout the almost decade of debate over the bill, it has been insistently opposed by two groups who are usually considered to be on the side-lines of mainstream Israeli socio-politics: Palestinian-Arabs and Ultra-Orthodox Jews. As for the former, the reasons for rejecting the bill seem quite obvious: Palestinian-Arabs object to a political configuration of power that puts them in a precarious position of a tolerated minority which lacks equal protection of its rights. Yet in the context of the current discussion, it is the Ultra-Orthodox Jewish opposition to the bill that sheds light on what is at stake between the two readings of Jewish politics discussed here.

This opposition may indeed seem perplexing. Wouldn't a reaffirmation of Israel's "Jewish identity" be something naturally favoured by those who conservatively observe Jewish Law? Yet the wider Ultra-Orthodox discourse on the matter makes it clear that the opposition is not aimed at the law *per se*,¹⁸ but rather at the overall epistemology from which it is drawn. Simply put, the Ultra-Orthodox view rejects the very notion that Israel is a "Jewish" state, since in the Ultra-Orthodox view the Jewishness of the state must amount to more than the Zionist understanding of Jewish politics (i.e., mainly the "state of Jews" calculation of demographic imbalance). The challenge here is not against the intended "strengthening" of Israel's "Jewish character," but against the Zionist understanding or construction of this "character". In other words, the Ultra-Orthodox opposition suggests a (critical) "Jewish state" kind of view of the Israeli polity, judging it to be fundamentally lacking exactly in being indifferent, if not outright hostile, to what the nationalist view designates as "Jewish religion", and the Ultra-Orthodox critique sees as the very essence of Jewishness.

Conclusion

The debate over the "Nation-State" law and the discourse from which the law arises capture a foundational trait of the Israeli polity. This debate may be described as an "epistemological" argumentation over how to approach the very constitutive notion of Israel's "Jewish character". The unresolved nature of the Basic Law, the fact that it manages to be seen by critics and supporters alike both and at the same time as "obvious" or "redundant" and as "radical" or "dangerous",¹⁹ and its ultimate failure to positively instil this designation (i.e., "Jewish State") with explicitly positive meaning all reflect some of the foundational tensions in the Zionist ideology and the Israeli nation-state. They all touch upon the Zionist taken-for-granted claim for Jewish nation-statehood – that is, the reading of Jewish identity as pertaining to "nationality", in the ideological meaning of the term – and the just-as-obvious Zionist failure (or neglect) to construct

a positive meaning of a “secular” (as in not-related to what Zionist ideology would see as “religion”) Jewish identity. Instead, Zionism and the Israeli polity have shifted the discourse from “a Jewish State” to a “Jews’ State”; from asking “what makes someone or something Jewish?” to constructing a polity based on a majority of “Jews”.

The motivation propelling the legislative saga had very little to do with the “Jewish state” challenge, i.e., the need to positively construct the “Jewishness” of Israel or of Jewish politics. Indeed, the law does a manifestly muddled work in trying to assert Israel’s claim to “Jewish identity”. Instead, the bill has been motivated by the sense that the Zionist taken-for-granted understanding of Jewish nation-statehood – framed as “a state of Jews” – has been put in question, primarily due to its inconsistency with basic democratic principles of equality.

The debate over the law was thus transformed into a discussion that some of its primary spokespeople never attempted to have; it was forced on them by their wish to preserve the political Zionist taken-for-granted understanding of Jewish nationhood. In this, the crippled debate that has ensued echoes a foundational trait of the political Zionist ideology, which, confronted with the dilemma of its own Jewish identity, preferred to forego the discussion and focus instead on establishing a configuration of power in which “Jews” hold sovereignty. The fact that many participants in the debate, as well as many of those analysing, criticising, or celebrating it have not identified, acknowledged, or explicated the tension, if not outright contradiction, between these two outlooks has overshadowed our understanding of what may very well prove to be a momentous decade in the history not only of Israel, but of the Middle East at large, as Israel’s difficulty to account for its own claim to Jewish politics could precipitate a regional crisis.

Notes

- 1 For a comprehensive genealogical and cultural study of one of these terms see Baker (2017). See also Daniel Boyarin’s (2018) critical study of the notion of “Judaism”.
- 2 Mine is a much less sophisticated and less attentive usage of the terms here than that of Deutscher’s (2017).
- 3 This can be said to be the immediate, literal translation of Herzl’s *Der Judenstaat*. However, the German ease with using a noun where English speakers would use an adjective also renders “The Jewish State” a perfectly acceptable translation of the same title. I am grateful to Dr Kathrin Gowers for her help in clarifying this.
- 4 For a consideration of non-European readings of Jewish peoplehood and politics, which sometimes stand as oppositional alternatives to this dominant European Zionist framework, feeding on Jewish experiences in Arab and Muslim-dominated cultures and countries, see Behar and Benite 2013; Evri 2020.
- 5 See Julie Cooper’s (2016) review of the field of Jewish political thought, which highlights this field’s crippling commitment to the idea of the modern state.

- 6 Diasporic readings of Jewish politics, such as those by Boyarin and Boyarin (2002) and Butler (2012) stand out as examples of a Jewishly informed critique that is not bound by the logic of the state. Santiago Slabodsky (2015) offers an illuminating reading of de-colonial Jewish thought that has been informed by a dialogue with systems of thought developed in the Global South. See also Myers's (2009) analysis of Simon Rawidowicz's Jewish critique of Israel. Khaled Furani (yet to be published) has been developing a similar critique of the modern nation-state, which nourishes on Muslim horizons, and especially the notion of *khalifa*.
- 7 In this context see also Haggai Ram's (2009) discussion of what he terms the Israeli "Iranophobia", where a sharp contrast between a "benighted" Islamic Republic and an "enlightened" State of Israel is drawn in order to sustain Israel's self-image as belonging to the West.
- 8 For a comprehensive presentation of the "religionization" argument see Peled and Peled 2018. For a critical assessment of this discourse see Yadgar 2020.
- 9 The essay is reprinted in Aḥad Ha'am 5707: 313–20. Page numbers here refer to this later reprint. The essay is also reprinted, with a wealth of corresponding documents, in Goldshtein 2011.
- 10 For a thoughtful consideration of the relevance of Aḥad Ha'am's thought to contemporary Jewish politics see Brian Klug's introduction in Aḥad Ha'am 2015.
- 11 The "Uganda plan" was a proposal to establish a Jewish polity, under British colonial rule, in Eastern Africa instead of Palestine, causing a great rift within the Zionist movement. See Laqueur 1989: chap. 3; Shimoni 1995: chap. 7; Alroey 2016.
- 12 Nordau's essay was published simultaneously in both German (Max Nordau, "Achad-Ha'am über 'Altneuland'", *Die Welt*, 11, 13 March 1903) and Hebrew newspapers (in instalments, translated by N. Sokolov, *Hašefira*, 51–5, 13–17 March 1903, and *Hašofe*, 75, 20 March 1903). It is reprinted in Nordau's collected writings (Nordau 1960: 110–19). Also available in Goldshtein 2011: 75–83.
- 13 I have discussed this matter in detail in Yadgar 2017: 65–160.
- 14 See Zvi Zameret's (2006) convincing argument regarding the central role of Aḥad Ha'am's vision in shaping the Israeli "secular" education system.
- 15 See, e.g., A. B. Yehoshua's (2013) triumphally secular discussion of the question "who is a Jew?" where the author suggests that the exploration of the question must begin with the Halakhic definition, "because at base it provides most of the data essential for the rest of the discussion".
- 16 I have analysed the Basic Law in detail in Yadgar 2020: chap. 2. The following discussion builds upon my analysis there.
- 17 <https://knesset.gov.il/laws/special/eng/BasicLawNationState.pdf>.
- 18 Ultimately, parties representing the Ultra-Orthodox communities in Israel helped the bill pass its final legislative hurdles, most probably motivated by coalitional considerations.
- 19 See my analysis of this debate in Yadgar 2020: chap. 2.

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