

A 'Democratic Secular' Israel

One propaganda attack on Israel will come to a head this year. It will be an attack on American Jewry as well.

The propaganda slogan will call for: "A democratic secular Israel." That slogan is not a matter of criticizing Israel; it is a matter of attacking the fundamental *idea* of Israel. It will appeal to many of those for whom the words "democratic" and "secular" are attractive, and for whom the term "nationalism" is anathema. But, in practice, what is really being proposed by this slogan is the end of any Jewish state. The Jews in Israel would become an ethnic minority, with somewhat less faith in "democratic guarantees" than they would have had under the Weimar Republic. And endangered Jews in other parts of the world, such as the Soviet Union, would be shut out.



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It is a persistent idea. Arafat, eyes rolled heavenwards, has proposed it. President Pompidou of France argued it with representatives of the San Francisco Jewish community when he met with them here. An American Assistant Secretary of State for the Near East once spoke for this position, significantly at an annual meeting of the American Council for Judaism.

The basic idea is this: "Individual Jews happen to have a different religious belief than Christians or Moslems. Their individual right of conscience should be protected; and they should not be discriminated against because of their belief. But there is no reason for them to stubbornly hold on to a separate communal identity."

Those who honestly propose this thought mistakenly equate Jews with Baptists, Lutherans or Methodists—whose only identity with each other is a common religious doctrine. The Jews have less of doctrine, more of a common history. The Jewish religion itself is more history than doctrine. Out of that history has come not only religious meaning, but communal (ethnic) identity, traditions, and institutions.

Israel is already — pound for pound, imperfection for imperfection, as democratic as any society in man's memory. It is not technically a secular society, since there are still religious rules relating to matters such as marriage and burial. But, in fact, these rules are more disabling to secular Jews than they are to religious Moslems and Christians, who can operate freely by their own religious rules, and whose religious institutions are supported by the government.

So, the slogan has to do not so much with improving the Israeli society, as with changing its fundamental nature. The basic attack is on the principle of Jewish ethnic identity itself. An attack on the idea of Jewish community in Israel is also an attack on the idea of Jewish community in America.

Of course these are two different situations. In a sense, there are two major experiments taking place in the survival of Jewish ethnic identity. In Israel, the test is whether the Jews can maintain a collective identity as a national enclave within a region of nations. Out of their European and Oriental experience, the Jews of Israel know that their individual democratic rights are not worth a hoot, if their right to collective identity is not recognized.

In American, the experiment has to do with whether a real cultural pluralism can endure within a single and heterogeneous national society. Both tests have a special meaning for history, and are independently worthwhile. Perhaps American Jews need to be more aware of the nature of the Jewish enterprise in America as well as the Jewish enterprise in Israel.

But for both, the slogan of a "democratic secular Israel", being an attack on the principle of Jewish communal identity, is a formula for demolition.