

Plenary Session

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Nationalisms and Their Effects on Jewish-Christian Relations

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Nationalism and Jewish-Christian Relations in Israel

In Hebrew we use two very similar words: לאומיות and לאומנות – “leumiut” and “leumanut”. The first (leumiut) has a positive association, it reflects a feeling of nationhood, being part of a group, a nation. If you change one letter (in Hebrew), you get the second word (leumanut), which represents an extreme expression of nationhood – nationalism.

There is no “nationalists detector”, and since the transition between nationhood and nationalism can be fluid and vague, it is not always easy to tell the difference. It won’t be totally wrong to say that in Israel today there is a growing tendency towards nationalist aspirations. It is reflected in the agenda of political parties and the government, it can be traced in the public discourse in the media, and we witness it also in our work at the Rossing Center for Education and Dialogue.

The rise of nationalism occurs when national identity is at risk. The identification of the individual with nationality enables him to be part of a group, to identify with it, to be part of a collective identity that unites the group, strengthens it and creates a commitment for it. When there is a threat to the group and therefore to the individuals, the protection of the community is achieved by removing the threat – that is, the foreigners, those who do not belong to the group. When this feeling of insecurity and fear is expressed violently, be it as a physical or verbal attack, it is nationalism.

The Jewish society in Israel feels that it is in a constant state of instability, of threat. A security threat that is the result of an ongoing war with its neighbors. Threats to the legitimacy of the state and its right to exist. Since its establishment, Israel has struggled to have its legitimacy recognized, but in reality there are still individuals, groups and countries that do not recognize Israel's right to exist as an independent nation-state. This puts Israel in a state of protracted defense and leads certain groups in society to express a nationalist agenda.

The purpose of my presentation is to examine how the rise of Jewish nationalism in Israel affects the attitude towards Christians in Israel, in light of the unique situation we find in Israel where a Christian minority lives within a Jewish majority. For the first time in history we experience such a reality, which brings unique challenges for both Christians and Jews. These challenges are rooted in the complex history of Jewish-Christian relations and the theological gaps between them.

In the following I would like to present two examples which have a growing impact on Jewish-Christian relations in Israel. The first refers to Zionist Christians from around the world and the second to local Palestinian Christians who are citizens of the State of Israel

Zionist Christians

On the occasion of the transfer of the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem on May 14, 2018, the newspaper Makor Rishon, a newspaper associated with the religious right-wing settlers (although it has many non-religious writers), published an article about the event:

"The speeches of the two American pastors at the inauguration ceremony of the US Embassy in Jerusalem attracted much attention this week. A mixture of suspicion, malice and deep ignorance about the true motives of the two allowed leftists, who by nature are against anyone who stands up for our full right to the land, to stain this wonderful moment."ⁱ

The reporter of Makor Rishon did not criticize the event because of the Christian evangelical preachers who expressed messianic messages. He did not mention (as other newspapers) that one of the speakers in the past claimed that Hitler was part of God's plan to return Jews to Israel, and the other mentioned that Jews would go to hell.ⁱⁱ

The expected Israeli-Jewish rejection of the speeches of these two pastors did not occur. Instead, the anxiety that was based on the murky relationship between Jews and Christians throughout history and the fear of proselytization was replaced by admiration. And the critics of the event from the left of the political map were marked as enemies.

Why was it surprising? Because in our work at the Rossing Center for Education and Dialogue we experience along with great curiosity on the part of many Israeli Jews, we also find antagonism, prejudice, fear and hostility towards Christians and Christianity.

In 2009 we conducted a survey in Israel with the question "Should Christianity and the New Testament be taught in schools in Israel?". 54% of Israeli Jews said yes, but 44% said no. Regarding the question of teaching the New Testament, a higher percentage said no (59%) and only 37% said yes. 21% of Israeli Jews think all Christians are missionaries and 37% of Jews think that Jews should not enter churches (although only 29% declared that they avoid entering churches).ⁱⁱⁱ Articles and "shuts" (Q&A of rabbis now given online) present similar attitudes.^{iv}

An article by Rabbi Eliezer Melamed, rabbi of the Har Bracha settlement near Nablus, from 2011, also shows great sympathy for Christian Zionism. He defines evangelical Zionist Christians as "righteous among the nations" who no longer want to convert the Jews. All the hard things that were said about Christians in the past (from Maimonides/Rambam to Rabbi Aviner of Jerusalem) do not apply to them. Rather, these Christians would make a "Great Tikkun" (repair).

ⁱ Ariel Shanbel, Makor Rishon, 18.5.2018: <https://www.makorrishon.co.il/opinion/47679/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/14/world/middleeast/robert-jeffress-embassy-jerusalem-us.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3675464,00.html>. The survey will also appear in the book of Amnon Ramon "Christianity and Christians in the Jewish State" which will be published in 2020 in English: <https://jerusalemstitute.org.il/publications/%D7%A0%D7%A6%D7%A8%D7%95%D7%AA-%D7%95%D7%A0%D7%95%D7%A6%D7%A8%D7%99%D7%9D-%D7%91%D7%9E%D7%93%D7%99%D7%A0%D7%AA-%D7%94%D7%99%D7%94%D7%95%D7%93%D7%99%D7%9D-%D7%94%D7%9E%D7%93%D7%99%D7%A0%D7%99%D7%95/>

^{iv} Some examples can be found here: <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4195898,00.html>, [http://shlomo-aviner.net/index.php?title=%D7%A9%D7%9E%D7%99%D7%A8%D7%94_%D7%9E%D7%A0%D7%A6%D7%A8%D7%95%D7%AA_\(%D7%A9%D7%95%22%D7%AA\)](http://shlomo-aviner.net/index.php?title=%D7%A9%D7%9E%D7%99%D7%A8%D7%94_%D7%9E%D7%A0%D7%A6%D7%A8%D7%95%D7%AA_(%D7%A9%D7%95%22%D7%AA))

The cordial relations between evangelical Christians and Israelis began after the Six-Day War, when Christians enthusiastically supported the State of Israel from a Christian-religious point of view. They saw the rapid victory and widespread occupation as an expression of Divine Providence and the realization of prophecies. These relations intensified with the rise of the right-wing government in 1977 and became closer during the reign of the current prime minister.

These Christian Zionist groups find in their reading of Genesis 12:2-3 guidelines on how to deal with the people and the state of Israel: "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

This unreserved support for Israel, the Jewish people, the State of Israel and government policy (esp. regarding the settlements in the West Bank) allows orthodox Jews, who cannot be seen as compromisers in the religious-halachic realm, to enter into and justify close cooperation with conservative Christian leaders and communities. It allows rabbis to turn a blind eye to reality and to explain to their communities that Zionist evangelical Christians do not want them to accept Jesus, they do not want to influence them, and that their interest in Israel has nothing to do with their eschatological scenario. They are simply faithful to the bible and love the Jews as they are.

The same attitude towards Christians can be seen in the Makor Rishon article, which we quoted above. According to the journalist, the "wonderful moment" at the inauguration ceremony was that "senior representatives of the world's largest religion, which has persecuted the Jewish people for thousands of years, stand beside us, pray for us and wish us success"^v.

It seems that nationalist Jewish groups allow themselves to put aside the inherent tension between Jews and Christians expressed in many other frameworks and discourses and to cooperate with very religious conservative Christian groups that support their nationalist agenda.

In many cases it seems that this alliance is maintained because of the confrontation with the common enemy who, in their view, is the Muslim world.

Aramaic Christians vs. Nation-State Law

According to the Central Bureau of Statistics, 175,000 Christians live in Israel today. About 80% of them are Arabs, which corresponds to about 135,000 people.

The attitude towards the Arab Christian population in Israel has been complex since the early days of the state. Because of the Christian-middle Eastern ties to the churches in the West, they have been culturally and socially more strongly influenced by Western culture. Most of them are educated in institutions founded by European churches, have family or religious ties to Christians in the Western world, and they live according to relatively high economic standards.

These relations with Western countries require special attention on the part of Israel, as the state's Christian policy receives international attention, both positive and negative, from the churches and Western countries. Israel, however, is in a protracted conflict with the Arab world and with the Palestinian people, and the local Christians are mainly Arabs, most of them identifying with the Palestinian nationality.

^v Ariel Shanbel, Makor Rishon, 18.5.2018: <https://www.makorrishon.co.il/opinion/47679/>

This results in a complex relationship: on the one hand, a greater sense of proximity between Jews and Christians based on a cultural background shared by both groups; on the other hand, a distrustful and distant relationship based on the Arab identity of the local Christian population. In his book "Christianity and Christians in the Jewish State" (published in Hebrew 2010), Amnon Ramon describes the ambivalent Israeli policy towards the Christian population with reference to a passage from the Babylonian Talmud where it says: "Let the left hand repulse but the right hand always invite back" (Sanhedrin 107 b).

In recent decades we have experienced in Israel a phenomenon that is part of a broader process among Arab Christians in the Middle East who deny their Arab identity and emphasize their pre-Arab origin. In Israel, there is a small group of Christians who refuse to identify themselves as Arabs and prefer to be ethnically identified as Aramaic. This dates back to the common language of the local population in the region before the Arab-Muslim conquest in the 7th century.

This Christian-Aramaic group works to encourage Christians to serve in the Israeli army, out of a commitment to the state. It cooperates with Israeli right-wing political organizations that help to achieve its goals. Nationalist politicians and activists have recognized and embraced the potential of this group.

In 2014, a law was passed allowing all those whose roots are Aramaic to change registration in the Population and Immigration Authority and in the Nationality Clause from Arab to Aramaic.^{vi}

In 2017, Knesset members worked hard to remove the fee for changing registration with the Population and Immigration Authority (about 1,100 NIS), hoping to encourage more Christian Arabs to change registration from Arabic to Aramaic, as only 16 people did so between 2014-2017.

In April 2017, the Knesset Research Department published a report investigating "Aramaic Identity". Its calculations showed that 80-90% of Arab Christians in Israel have the right to be registered as Aramaic – and they are welcome to do so (with the exception of some Latins with Western roots and the Armenians).

What are the practical implications of this step? None. The implications are purely declarative. By identifying these Christians as Aramaic, they differ from the broader Arab world, which includes members of different religions, especially Christians and Muslims. Encouraging Christians to adopt an Aramaic identity erases their Arab identity, even if they are part of the Arab culture, language and region.

For these activists in government and other organizations, erasing the Arab identity transforms these Christians "From Foe to Friend"^{vii} so that they can be accepted by Israeli Jewish society as desirable "ger"^{viii}. If these Christian Arabs are no longer Arabs, they pose no threat to the Jewish state, and their loyalty is praised in the propaganda campaigns of nationalist activists around the world.

^{vi} In Israel, every person is registered under the nationality and religion clause. A son of a Jewish mother is registered as Jewish in both clauses, while an Arab, for example, is registered with Arab nationality and Christian-Catholic, Christian-Orthodox or Muslim religion. Immigrants who have immigrated under the Law of Return and do not have a Jewish mother can be registered without religion, their nationality corresponds to their country of origin.

^{vii} A name of a short story by S. Y. Agnon about a person and the wind who learn how to live together.

^{viii} A stranger. There are many biblical laws dealing with the way Jews should treat strangers, based on their experience as strangers in Egypt. There is a vivid dispute in Israel if these laws apply to Palestinians in Israel and/or in the Palestinian territories.

This phenomenon of adopting Aramaic identity while at the same time renouncing the Arab one and thus an Arabic, Palestinian national identity (since Aramaic is mainly an ethnic identification without national aspirations) has provoked considerable criticism in the Arab public. Christians who emphasize their Palestinian identity over the Christian one and engage in the struggle for self-determination and the rights of the Palestinian people have resolutely resisted it.

But most Christians choose the integration approach. They do not renounce their Arabness or their Palestinian nationality. They try, however, to integrate into Israeli society and come closer to it through cultural partnership, and to continue to fight for their rights as a minority in a democratic state.

But it seems that the same nationalists who encouraged Christians to abandon their Arab identity were the ones who advocated the enforcement of a controversial basic law passed by the Knesset in July 2018: "Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People"^{ix}.

The law that defines Israel and the nation-state of the Jewish people states that "the exercise of the right to national self-determination in the State of Israel is unique to the Jewish people". The law refers only to Jews, their rights, symbols, history and settlements. The only mention of the Arab 20% minority is that the Arabic language changes from an official language to a language with special status.

All Christians, whether they were among the leaders of the struggle for Palestinian self-determination, or those who renounced their Arab identity altogether, or those who saw themselves as integrated into Israeli Jewish society, were degraded to "second-class citizens".

It turns out that the left hand that repulses, pushes harder than the right hand that invites back.

Nationalist aspirations do not do justice to the complicated identities of minorities – religious, cultural, political – but focus on the fact that they are non-Jews belonging to the "other" group of the threatening enemy. Therefore, nationalists do not hesitate to expel these minorities, even if only apparently in a declarative way. Minorities in Israel – Christians, Muslims, Druze and others – describe it as a "slap in the face".

With these two examples, I have tried to show how the rise of nationalism affects Christian-Jewish relations.

The first example of the relationship between right-wing religious groups and evangelical churches supporting Israel shows the willingness of orthodox Jewish groups to compromise on religious-theological and halachic issues in order to obtain political support from right-wing Christians who share their nationalist agenda.

The second example dealt with the ambivalent "invitation and repulse" of the State of Israel towards Arab Christians. On the one hand, Israel tries to bring them closer by supporting the deconstruction of Arab identity; on the other hand, these nationalists enact a law that emphasizes the Jewishness of the state at the expense of a quarter of the population that is not Jewish, including Christians.

^{ix} <https://knesset.gov.il/laws/special/eng/BasicLawNationState.pdf>