

OPINION

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• AMNON RUBINSTEIN

Judt unpicks Israel's Jewishness

IF THE Star of David is to be removed from the Israeli flag, why should the combined crosses of St. Andrew, St. Patrick and St. George stay on the Union Jack? (Ariel Jerozolimski/The Jerusalem Post)

The alternative is not an enlightened Western multicultural society, but to be dominated by the Muslim ocean in which she lives as a menaced island

The drawing is as important as the article itself: Tony Judt – an illustrious NYU historian – has written an article entitled “Israel must unpick its ethnic myth” (*Financial Times*, December 7).

Illustrating the article is a drawing depicting an Israeli flag whose Star of David is being removed. Prof. Judt's argument is simple: Israel must rid itself of its Jewishness.

Relying on a book by Shlomo Sand of Tel Aviv University, which denies the existence of a Jewish people, Judt accepts Sand's idea that Jewish continuity is both a myth and a handicap to Israel. First, “it reduces all non-Jewish citizens of Israel to second-class status.” And second, again relying on the sage from TAU, “the perverse insistence on identifying a universal Jewishness with one small piece of territory is dysfunctional... it is the single most important factor accounting for the failure to solve the Israel-Palestine imbroglio.”

All this is written more as a papal bull than a reasoned article. Even so, two questions remain.

FIRST, IF Israel's non-Jews are second-class citizens – surely an overstatement – because of the state's Jewishness, what about other minorities in other countries? What about German-speakers in Italy, Slovenes in Austria, Hungarians in Slovakia and Romania, Russians in the Baltic States and national minorities all over Europe? And if the Star of David is to be removed from Israel's flag, why should the combined crosses of

St. Andrew, St. Patrick and St. George stay on the Union Jack? Or the crosses remain on Scandinavian, Greek and Swiss flags? Or why shouldn't Christmas be abolished as an official holy day in most countries, or Catholic holy days stop being holidays in secular France? Or why shouldn't national repatriation laws – similar to the Israeli Law of Return – which exist in many nation-states, be rescinded? Why single one nation out of many?

Second, Judt does not call for the disappearance of Israel, but wants to rid it of its Jewish character. What should be its new character? What should replace its “Jewish myth”? Judt does not specify, as he does not describe how Israel is to become un-Jewish – by replacing Hebrew with another language? Which one? By replacing the Shabbat with Sunday or Friday? By repealing the Law of Return?

For Israel, the only alternative to being Jewish is not an enlightened Western multicultural society, but to be dominated by the Muslim ocean in which she lives as a menaced island. If this happens, the only democracy in the Middle East would have disappeared, and the Jews of Israel would be forced into another exile from their historical homeland.

TRUE, BEING Jewish doesn't mean Israel should be undemocratic. And Israel – it must be admitted – is, like many democracies, a flawed one. Israel should remedy these flaws: It should enact a civil marriage law, reform its immigration laws, recognize non-Orthodox conversions, put an end to Orthodox-haredi monopolies, and abolish budgetary and other inequalities pertaining to its Arab-Palestinian minority while ensuring equal obligations, including national service.

But Judt is not content with implementing these reforms. He wants Israel to turn its back on its very *raison d'être*, on its Jewishness, on the right of the Jewish people to self determination. A Jewish state, like a Swedish or German state, combines elements not only of a common religion, but of a common identity and a shared history – and in the Jewish case, shared traumas.

Sand's much-touted point that Ashkenazi Jews are not blood descendants of King David – an accusation that, by the way, he does not support with any scientific evidence – is really irrelevant. I know of no Zionist argument that claims Jewish racial purity. Herzl specifically denied it. He wrote in a diary entry for November 21, 1895: “We are an historical entity, a nation made up of diverse anthropological elements. This also suffices for the Jewish state. No nation has uniformity of race.”

INDEED, NO nation can claim racial continuity. When French schoolchildren learn about “our ancestors, the Gauls,” they realize that many of them are not biological descendants. And the same applies to Jews who talk about their biblical antecedents. This racial nonsense is dreamt up by the fertile minds of anti-Zionist Israeli academics. It is indeed a sad sight to watch a distinguished historian like Tony Judt embracing such half-truths.

Jews, like other peoples of the world, have a right to their own narrative and their own state. This right exists despite the ramblings from Israel's anti-Zionist brigade.

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