

Nationalism, Identity, and Citizenship

An Epilogue to the Yehoshua-Shammas Controversy:

*A Non-Platonic Dialogue**

On September 13, 1985, the eve of the Jewish New Year, Anton Shammas—the Christian Israeli-Arab writer, essayist, translator, journalist, and author of *Arabesque*,¹ an autobiographical Hebrew novel of a youngster growing up as a hybrid of Jewish-Arab culture and identity in the village Fasuta—aroused bitter controversy among the Israeli elite. His brief article accused Israel of excluding Israeli Palestinians from participation in the common political, cultural, and collective identity and nationality.²

His accusations of extreme discriminatory policy against Israel's Arab citizens were by no means a new issue on the Israeli political agenda. Between 1949 and 1966 Israeli Arabs had been subject to crass military rule, which served as a useful umbrella for land confiscation, exclusion from the labor market, and de facto deprivation of most citizen and human rights. Since 1966 the situation has gradually improved, but no Jewish intellectual

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would deny that Israeli Palestinians have remained an underprivileged ethnic or national minority. Shammās' claim, however, went far beyond the regular complaints and protests against discrimination of a minority group within a supposedly democratic and humanistic polity. Shammās called for space and participation for what he called Israeli Arabs within the Israeli collective identity and culture.³

Faced with such a provocation, even the liberal, so-called leftist, and dovish writer Abraham B. Yehoshua could not restrain himself. He was not the only respondent to Shammās, but he was one of the most strident and certainly the most prominent. "I am suggesting to you," shouted Yehoshua, "that if you want to exercise your full identity, if you want to live in a state that has a Palestinian character with a genuine Palestinian culture, arise, take your chattels, and move yourself one hundred yards eastward, into the independent Palestinian state, that will be established alongside Israel."⁴ Alluding to God's commandment to Abraham to leave his home and go forth into the land God will show him, the Land of Canaan, Shammās angrily responded that "I have no any intention to leave my motherland and my father's home, for the country Yehoshua will show me."⁵

Another respondent to Shammās' challenge was the Mizrachi writer Sami Michael, who stated, "Many Jews from every [ideological] camp understand his pain and identify with his suffering as a member of a minority. Many are ready to pay a price in order to make it more comfortable for him [to be a minority], but not to the point where they [the Jews] make themselves into a minority."⁶ Here the claim for equal civil and symbolic rights for Israeli Arab citizens was promptly transformed into restoring the situation in which Jews were a minority in Palestine, as they were anywhere in the world, and the Jewish nation-state was dismantled.

Shammās never intended to dismantle the state, but rather to challenge its constructions as a homogenous ethno-national entity and identity. He wanted to invent and create a new local national identity, or nationality, common to Jews and Arabs of the country and based solely on ethnicity, state citizenship, and territory. He stated explicitly,

What I'm trying to do—mulishly, it seems—is to un-Jew the Hebrew language, to make it more Israeli and less Jewish, thus bringing it back to its Semitic origins, to its place. This is a parallel to what I think the state should be. As English is the language of those who speak it, so is Hebrew; and so the state should be the state of those who live in it, not of those who play with its destiny with a remote control in hand.⁷

He added,

the State of Israel demands that its Arab citizens take their citizenship seriously. But when they try to do so, it promptly informs them that their participation in the state is merely social, and that for the political fulfillment of their identity, they must look somewhere else (i.e. to the Palestinian nation). When they do look elsewhere for their national identity, the state at once charges them with subversion; and needless to say—as subversives they cannot be accepted as Israelis.”⁸

The controversy between Yehoshua and Shammás over the meaning and boundaries of Israeli identity was reopened six years later, in 1992. This time Shammás was much more articulate in his arguments and Yehoshua more defensive.⁹

YEHOSHUA: My problem and debate with Anton are not about equality, but about identity. Because as a national minority in an Israeli state . . .

SHAMMAS: What’s an Israeli state? There’s no such thing!

YEHOSHUA: What do you mean there’s no such thing? . . . For me, “Israeli” is the authentic, complete, and consummate word for the concept “Jewish.” Israeliness is the total, perfect, and original Judaism, one that should provide answers in all areas of life.¹⁰

SHAMMAS: You see Israeliness as total Jewishness, and I don’t see where you fit me, the Arab, into that Israeliness. Under the rug? In some corner of the kitchen? Maybe you won’t even give me a key to get into the house?

YEHOSHUA: But, Anton, think of a Pakistani coming to England today, with a British passport and telling the British, “Let’s create the British nationality together. I want Pakistani-Muslim symbols . . .”

SHAMMAS: Buli [Yehoshua’s nickname], the minute a man like you does not understand the basic difference between the Pakistani who comes to England and the Galilean who has been in Fasuta for untold generations, then what do you want us to talk about? I always said that the Zionist state’s most serious mistake in 1948 was that it kept the 156,000 Arabs who did not run away and were not expelled. If you really wanted to establish a Jewish state, you should

have kicked me out of Fasuta, too. You didn't do it—so treat me as an equal. As an equal in Israeliness.

YEHOSHUA: But you won't receive one single right more for belonging to the Israeli nation. On the contrary. I'll take away your special minority rights . . . For instance you'll have to study Bible, just as in France all citizens study Moliere and in England Shakespeare.

SHAMMAS: But as a literary text . . .

YEHOSHUA: What do you mean?! We have no Shakespeare or Moliere. We have the Bible, the Talmud, and Jewish history, and you will study them, and in Hebrew.

SHAMMAS: If that's the case, then Judaism also has been separated from Israeliness, and you'll oppose that by force of arms.

YEHOSHUA: But how is that possible? Try, for instance, separating France from Frenchness—it is impossible.

SHAMMAS: France and Frenchness come from the same root, But Judaism and Israeliness is a different matter. That's why I advocate the de-Judaization and de-Zionization of Israel . . . I'm asking you for a new definition of the term "Israeli," so that it will include me as well, a definition in territorial terms that you distort, because you're looking at it from the Jewish point of view . . . [However,] ultimately we are dealing with the question of identity; the identity which is given to us by those who have the power to do so.

YEHOSHUA: I'm not excluding you. My Israeliness includes you and all the Israeli Arabs as partners in the fabric of life here. Partners in that you vote for the Knesset [Israeli parliament], on creation of Israeli citizenship as a whole.

SHAMMAS: You want me to vote for the Knesset so you can show off your democracy to the enlightened world. I'm not willing to be a party to that. I know that all I can do here is to vote and nothing else. I know that my mother would never be able to see me become Israel's Minister of Education.

Shammas had already demonstrated several years before this exchange that he possessed a comprehensive and sweeping understanding of the past and present, and what should be done in the future. Zionism as a national movement, Shammas argued, achieved its historic role with the establishment of the state. Every person then living within the Green Line¹¹ who was a citizen of the state of Israel should have been defined as an Israeli. The

time had come to transform the law of return into a regular immigration law, as existed in Western secular and democratic states. This state would have the authority to decide who could be called Israeli, but Israeliness should no longer be automatic or self-evidently granted only to Jews, and all Israelis should be equal with regard to rights and duties. As the bottom line of his argument, he proclaimed that “we, the members of the Israeli nation, should then wait, with Levantine patience, for the first Jew to proclaim at the head of the camp: ‘Zionism is dead, long live the Israeli nation!’ That in the hope that the entire [Jewish] camp will follow after him.”¹²

Subjects and Citizens

We may grossly divide the states in the world into two categories: subject states and citizen states. As T. H. Marshall argued,¹³ subject states emphasize the obligations of the individual toward the state and its rulers, and citizen states emphasize the rights that the state is obliged to grant to its citizens. Pure subject states are characterized by the unconditional status of the state’s population as the state’s property, lacking a true basis or claim to any rights based on universal and egalitarian membership in the state. Relations between the state and its subjects are akin to patronage: Different groups, such as class, ethnic, gender, religious, racial, or occupational groups, receive favors and privileges according to their closeness to the state’s rulers and ruling strata in exchange for loyalties to the state’s ruler. This loyalty is usually constructed and camouflaged as patriotism, nationalism, and commitment to the state as motherland.

The citizen state is a sociopolitical order based on an unwritten conditional contract between the state and each individual member. The state promises to grant a package of citizen rights that go beyond the self-evident human rights defined by the United Nation’s Charter, and the inclusion of which are inviolable, self-evident citizen rights internalized by the state and its legislative and social welfare systems. All of these citizen rights are provided in exchange for a package of citizen obligations toward the state. The state’s minimal obligations are to provide law and order, defend against external threats on the citizen’s life, insure property and freedoms, and supply basic needs, such as health services, schooling, and subsistence. The state possesses a legitimate monopoly on exercising violent power within its sovereign territory, that is, the right to make war and peace with other states and external entities. In exchange, the citizen’s obligations toward the state

are to obey the law, pay taxes, answer the call to military service, and even endanger one's own life as the ultimate sacrifice to the state's demands.

No wonder that Charles Tilly compared state-citizen relations to those of a "protection racket."¹⁴ The citizen has to pay the organization protection fees, and beyond these reciprocal relationships, any expansion of the state's role—for example, the scope of the welfare offered by the state or its redistributive agencies—is the subject of perpetual negotiation and bargaining between the state and various groups of citizens. An additional major principle of the notion of citizenship is its universalistic character, or more simply put, that all citizens of the state possess equal constitutional rights. This means that the same criteria for access to both material and symbolic common goods are indiscriminately assured for all citizens, and the same duties are demanded of all.

The idea of rights and obligations implies the inclusion of an individual or social category within the boundaries of the state. The definition of citizenship as a personal status—even if the status symbolizes membership in a collective of equal citizens or in the nation-state as a membership organization, in Brubaker's terms—presumes the existence of an individual to whom rights and obligations are naturally determined by an invisible social contract.¹⁵ According to Tilly, the definition of citizenship as a legal-personal status is as a series of continuing exchanges between persons of a given state, in which each has enforceable rights and obligations "by virtue." The virtues or traits are based on an individual's membership as an exclusive category, that is, native born or naturalized, and on the individual's relation to the state rather than to any other authority the agent may enjoy.¹⁶ The equation is reversed, however, for an active mass immigrant-settler society, in which the natives are not a part of the nationality of the nation-state and the immigrants claim to be the original natives.

Defining citizenship in terms of the individual-state relationship focuses attention on the juridical, political, and symbolic levels of the mutual relations between individuals and the state.¹⁷ It presumes at least a legal membership in the polity congruent with the liberal theory and approach to citizenship, which defines it as a "set of normative expectations specifying the relationship between the nation-state and its individual members which procedurally establish the rights and the obligations of members and a set of practices by which these expectations are realized."¹⁸ Under such a definition, individuals are not committed to each other and lack "communal" responsibility for their fellow citizens. Rights and duties are fulfilled without

the help of intermediaries such as institutions and communities, but rather through a direct link between each person and the state.¹⁹

More precisely, the state relates and constructs citizenship as individual or collective according to its various interests and internal power structures. Some states tend to delimit different types and degrees of citizenship, for example, ethincized, classized, or genderized citizenship.²⁰ Thus, within the same state, different patterns of citizenship may coexist according to differential access to the rights and obligations of citizenship. The question is how much the underprivileged or passive citizens consider their lowered level of obligations to the state²¹ to be a privilege that compensates them for their lowered rights in other spheres, and not as a symbol of their total exclusion from membership in the state. Are “individual-minority rights” a worthy compensation for a lower degree and quality of citizen rights, as Yehoshua hinted to Shammass in equating citizen rights with minority rights?

Theoretically the problem should be even more acute: Can a claim based on the liberal dogma of unalienable equal citizen rights, which is itself based on the right of an individual, legitimately claim equal collective rights as well? Can individual citizen rights be separated from collective religious, ethnic, or cultural rights? The problematic sounds somewhat familiar, and indeed resembles the nineteenth-century French and German Enlightenment and Emancipator movement slogans, that a Jew as a person should enjoy full citizen rights, but Jews as a collective should not. The Jews rightly considered the formula as covert anti-Semitism and as an attempt to dissolve Jewish identity, culture, religion, and community.

Nonetheless, various patterns and qualities of citizenship that grant different scopes and degrees of rights to different groups reflect how states use citizenship to incorporate social groups into their structures and re-define or re-create social categories. As a consequence, patterns of citizenship and diverse cultural, ethnic, and political identities are shaped, created, or reinforced. The identity of Israeli Arabs, or even Israeli Palestinians, was created rather successfully. This seems to fit with White's²² and Derrida's claim that self-imposed identity, not to mention that imposed by others, is an act of violence. This is because “the rapport of self-identity is itself always a rapport of violence with the other; so that the notions of property, appropriation and self-presence, so central to logocentric metaphysics, are essentially dependent on an oppositional relation with otherness. In this sense, identity presupposes alterity.”²³ On the other hand, Moore and I have showed how minority groups can maneuver among different definitions of

self-identity in different social and political contexts as a survival strategy (see Chapter Two).

Different positions within the holy civic communion of the state prescribe what Soysal has conceptualized as “models of membership” or “institutionalized scripts and understandings of the relationships between individuals, the state, and the polity as well as the organizational structures and practices that maintain that relationship.”²⁴ These “scripts and understandings” include cultural assumptions that shape the boundaries of the citizens’ collectivity, the different positions within it, and the ways in which access to citizenship is interpreted. The cultural assumptions may be conceptualized as national projects, not because they constitute a desire for a separate political and cultural representation for a collectivity, but because they are shaped through narratives and discourses of the state’s interests in the discursive space of citizenship.²⁵

The convention is that historical processes shape national projects. These processes and constraints explain the ties between citizenship and national identity that national projects promote. As such, they frame the conception of the links between citizenship and nationality, and define the exclusiveness or inclusiveness of those ties as well as their primordial or civil character. Moreover, the patterns or degree of inclusion—full, partial, differential, or exclusive—in the community of citizens, and the arenas through which inclusion is concretized and symbolized, are central to understanding how individuals and social groups react to the state’s practices. Patterns of inclusion, meanwhile, are central to understanding the patterns of social action and identity mobilized in transactions between individuals, social groups, and the state’s agents, whether those transactions take the form of bargaining or hostility. Negotiations and bargaining over citizenship are not only related to who gets what, but also to who is what and who can decide who is what. The identities and narratives raised in the process of making claims and negotiating over citizenship, including the terms and degree of participation and membership demanded, are thus central to understanding the identities that claim recognition.²⁶

The Israeli State and Identity

Citizenship includes a basic and inherent contradiction (see Chapter One). On one hand, it is a legal status that the modern state grants to its members. On the other hand, the state is not just rationally bureaucratic or indifferent

to identity; it is also the embodiment of ethnic and national, and sometimes also religious, attachments. These positions result in the state's dual identity, or what Hegel calls a historically produced sphere of ethical life, rooted in the identities of two rival social entities *bürgerliche* and *gesellschaften*—one based on primordial ties and the other on civic-orientations.

The Israeli state takes this contradiction to its logical and sociological end. By its own constitutional definition, Israel is Jewish and democratic, and at first glance nothing is contradictory about it. It sounds precisely like French and democratic or German and democratic. A Jew who is entitled to French or German citizenship, but needed to keep his or her ethnic or religious identity, became a French Jew or Jewish French. The same goes for Turkish German or even Muslim French. Nevertheless, taking into account that Israel is a Jewish state, can we even consider a fusion of Jewish and Christian, Jewish and Muslim, or Jewish and Buddhist? These impossible combinations are almost unthinkable within the Jewish Israeli political culture, including the combinations Jewish Jew and Arab Jew. If Israel is a Jewish nation state, it implies that the Jews are a nation, and that Judaism is actually a Jewish national identity. Thus, the existence of a particular Jewish citizenship within the Jewish nation-state sounds, to be blunt, weird and puzzling.

For most Israelis, however, the puzzle has a self-evident answer. It is not accidental that the inscription on the rubric of my official identification card is “nationality (*leom*): Jewish” and not “citizenship: Jewish” or even “Israeli.” This is simply because neither Jewish nationalism in its Zionist incarnation nor the Israeli state could invent or construct a purely secular or a civil national identity.²⁷

Zionist nationalism was generally not constructed as a pure ideology, but was intermingled with other ideologies, such as classical liberalism, or with varieties of socialism, including communism.²⁸ The beginnings of Jewish national thought and activity were shaped at the end of the colonialist era, when Jewish migration was intertwined with large-scale intercontinental population movements. During this era, the formation and construction of immigrant-settler nations was still at its height. European colonialism was the dominant world order, and Eurocentrism was the hegemonic cultural approach.

Jewish religious nationalism, which approximated the European approach, was a negligible and marginal minority within the Jewish religious collectivity because the religious principles did not permit “forcing the End,”²⁹ or achieving collective salvation without divine intervention, though the religious worldview looked positively on ascendance (*aliyah*)

to the Holy Land. The religious-national mixture thus demanded a very great intellectual and interpretive effort, and its theological standing within Judaism is quite shaky and problematic even today.³⁰ Samuel Mohilever, the first rabbi who can be classified as a Zionist, was more concerned with convincing secular Jews to consider the sensitivities of fervently observant Jews than he was with the theological problems of a return to Zion in his day. Practically, Mohilever failed in his mission to bring about an understanding of religious sensibilities among the founding fathers of Zionism, and played a part in starting the split between the religious and secular components of the movement. This laid the foundations for the beginnings of the Mizrachi movement—short for *mercaz ruchani*, or spiritual center—which in 1902 incorporated the group of Rabbi Isaac Jacob Reines.³¹

Even the absence of a distinction between religion and nation is not, however, the primary cause of the basic nature of the Israeli state, but rather flows from it. The nature of the Israeli state cannot be understood apart from its historical and sociological context. Israel was formed as a society of settler-immigrants, and is still an active immigrant society, engaged in the settlement process to this very day. Two mutually complementary political practices are involved. The first concerns what is referred to as Israel's status as an immigrant-absorbing state; the second concerns the expansion and contraction of its borders, which are still in the process of formation.

Despite the tremendously rapid transformation that Israeli state and society is undergoing, its fundamental character as a settler society that must consolidate itself in a given territory, living by the sword and with a need to create a space for itself, remains constant. Almost from the beginning of Jewish settlement, the Arab inhabitants in whose midst the Jewish immigrants settled have consistently resisted the process with great determination. The Jewish-Arab conflict flows from this. Zionism, the national movement that motivated and was also formed by Jewish immigration and settlement, was clever enough to distance itself from the global colonial context that gave it birth. Zionism emphasized the uniqueness of the Jewish problem, anti-Semitism, persecutions, and later, the Holocaust, offering itself as the sole realistic and moral solution. Thus, the Jewish immigration movement was successfully represented as a return to Zion, correcting an injustice that had lasted for thousands of years and totally disconnected from the movements of European immigration to other continents.

Nonetheless, that Jewish immigration and settlement were construed in these terms was not enough to change their basic social and cultural

character. In reality, Israeli society was established mostly by immigrants from an ethnic, religious, and cultural background that differed from the broad local population, and who thought of themselves as part of Western society. In the political culture of the postcolonial world order, Israeli society has been plagued by the problem of existential legitimacy. It has had to explain repeatedly, to itself and to the international community, why it chose Palestine, the land renamed the Land of Israel, as its target territory for settlement. Palestine was not chosen for its fertile soil, its natural treasures, the presence of a cheap labor force, or its potential markets; rather, it was chosen out of ideological and religious motives.³² This meant that the Zionist project was not only unable to support itself from an economic point of view, but also that it was an essentially religious project, unable to disconnect itself from its original identity as a quasi-messianic movement. The essence of the society and state's right and reason to exist is embedded in symbols, ideas, and religious scriptures, even if there has been an attempt to give them a secular reinterpretation and context. In this sense, the society was held captive from the beginning by its choice of target territory for immigration and nation building. Neither the nation nor its culture could be built successfully apart from the religious context, even when its prophets, priests, builders, and fighters saw themselves as completely secular.

At least three basic laws³³ and one additional regular law state that Israel is a Jewish and democratic state. The definition of Jewishness that the state has adopted, however, makes the two concepts of democracy and Jewishness mutually exclusive in certain areas.³⁴ As a result, many state practices hardly conform to usually accepted notions of Western, liberal, and enlightened democracy. Israel inherited what is known as the millet system from both the Ottoman Empire and the British colonial administration.³⁵ This system provides that religious ethnic communities should enjoy autonomy from the state and have sole jurisdiction in matters of personal status litigation. Even before its establishment as a sovereign entity, the Israeli state decided to preserve the institution of the millets and to construct a millet form of citizenship. Therefore, citizens are subjected to two separate legal and judicial systems that operate according to different and even opposing principles. One is secular, Western, and universalistic; the other is religious and primordial, and is mainly run—if we are speaking about Jews—according to the Orthodox interpretation of *halakha*. The minorities, who were thus defined ab initio as religious minorities, are forced to conduct their au-

onomous lives in accordance with this dual system. The Israeli parliament has so far given up its authority to legislate in crucial areas and recognized a parallel legal and judicial system outside of its control. The state, meanwhile, has obligated itself to relate to rules of *halakha*, *shariya*,³⁶ and diverse Christian denominational rules as if they were its own law.

Jewish religious elements have been incorporated into other areas of legislation as well, such as the Work Hours and Days of Rest Law and the Freedom of Occupation Law. In contrast to these, the Law of Return and Law of Citizenship, immigration laws intended as a sort of affirmative action or corrective discrimination on behalf of world Jewry after the Holocaust, are relatively liberal ordinances. One must of course qualify this characterization, since the laws were indeed discriminatory against both Palestinians who were uprooted from the territory that fell under the rule of the new state and those who remained and were for the most part denied family reunification.

Although the laws of return and citizenship are not based on the theological definition of Judaism,³⁷ and in practice the laws grant Israeli citizenship and define the boundaries of Judaism more or less according to the broader definition of the Nuremberg Laws, the logic underlying them is internally consistent and justified. The laws were intended to grant citizenship to almost everyone who suffered persecution as a Jew, even if the individual case did not correspond with the *halakhic* definition of Jewishness. If the laws of return and citizenship have been among the most problematic laws in Israel until now, they have nevertheless preserved relatively open boundaries of Judaism. The currently proposed Conversion Law,³⁸ however, has apparently been intended to heal the breach and give the Orthodox a monopoly on determining the boundaries of the collectivity. Complementing the laws of return and citizenship is the Law on the Status of the World Zionist Organization (of the Jewish Agency), which also facilitates allocating particularistic benefits to Jewish citizens of the state alone. Yet another constitutional arrangement is inherent in the Social Security Law, and for many years, it has been complemented by a set of welfare laws the only eligible beneficiaries of which are so-called former soldiers and their families. This most unsubtle code phrase is intended to construct a broad separation between Jewish and Arab citizens. Similarly, the agreement between the Jewish National Fund and the Israel Lands Administration prevents the leasing of state lands—93 percent of the territory inside the Green Line—to non-Jews.

Conclusions

Israeli national identity or nationalism is based on a mixture of both religious and primordial symbols and orientations and civil and universalistic orientations. These two components of Israeli Zionism complement each other, but also create strains, contradictions, and distortions in the democratic regime. The primordial component is exclusionary and emphasizes Jewish ethnocentrism, while the civil component is inclusive and based on the modern notion of citizenship. On the one hand, the primordial orientation envisions the state as a homogenous Jewish nation-state in which ethnic or national minorities have some protected individual rights as citizens. In this view, citizenship is regarded as a legal status, granted to individuals but limited to certain fields. On the other hand, the civil orientation regards citizenship not as a mere legal status, but also as an all-encompassing dominant cultural and political meta-identity, common to all citizens of the state.

According to the primordial orientation, the people constitute a state, which is entitled to grant different kinds of membership to the population under its control—ranging from full citizenship to partial rights for those who are seen as subjects under state control. The opposite approach perceives citizenship as an absolute right, granted at birth to any member of a democratic state. This citizenship and the rights it supplies are considered to be the ultimate base for a common national identity and as the necessary condition for its very existence.

The debate between A. B. Yehoshua and Anton Shammass over the fundamentals of Israeli society centered around these primordial, civil, and symbolic axes. The liberal Jewish Yehoshua was anxious to preserve the exclusive Jewish ethno-national identity of the state, while the Arab Palestinian Shammass demanded, for his own interest, equal symbolic and cultural shares for his local Arabness under a reshaped universal Israeli nationality based on citizenship. Conceptually speaking, Shammass fused the liberal individualistic approach to citizenship and the communitarian construction of citizenship.³⁹ His hidden argument is that citizenship can be shaped and reshaped by an interaction between the individual as a part of a community and the community that makes individuals—and that individuals have the right of equal representation within the national identity as a part of a minority community.