

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR ISRAEL TO BE A JEWISH STATE?

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“Jew” vs. “Jewish” (and, of course, “Jew-ish”)

Yehoudi (יהודי) = Jew

- A noun, a name.
- “Being” a Jew.
- “Objective”.
- “Natural”, “biological” origin (ethnicity?).
- Paradigmatically: One is “Born a Jew”.
- Singular, applies only to persons.

Yehoudi (יהודי) = Jewish

- Normative. Historical.
- Corresponding to a certain quality.
- In dialogue with tradition.
- “Judgmental”.
- It is about authenticity.
- Narrowly: Adjective of Jew (“Jew-ish”).

“Jewish non-Jews” and “Non-Jewish Jews”

THE “JEWISH” STATE

OR

THE JEWS’ STATE?

“The Jews’ state” - מדינת היהודים

- “Objective” criteria.
- Constituted by the “political will” of “the Jews”.
- Origin/descent of the population.
- Israel as the Jews’s state = France ad the state of the French, Serbia the state of the Serbs, etc.
- Normatively neutral.
- Everything that Jews do *is* Jewish.

The Jewish State - המדינה היהודית

- Normative foundation.
- An “Impossible State”? (Re: Wael Hallaq, *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament*, 2012)
- Thin or thick “identity” for the state as Jewish.
- Corresponding with varying notions of Judaism.
- “Jewish” economy, “Jewish” diplomacy, “Jewish military”, etc.

Form vs. Content

- “The Jews’ State”: All about form. Whatever Jews do in their state is, by definition, Jewish.
- The Jewish State: About “content”. Judging the state’s behaviour against a benchmark derived from a certain reading of the teaching of Judaism.

A Jewish State in the Middle East

“[T]he 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 [...]*

(Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent*, p. xvi)

A state of Jews, NOT a Jewish state

“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, 22 May, 2013.

Israel's Jewish Identity Problem

- Zionism — “Modernisation,” “politicisation” and “secularisation” of Judaism.
- “Jews” precede “Judaism”
- Everything done in the framework of the Jews’ State is, by definition, “Jewish.”
- A demographic pre-condition: A majority of Jews to guarantee the state’s Jewishness.
- Lack of a Zionist, “secular” definition of Jewish identity.
- Relying on Orthodox rabbis as national gatekeepers, guardians of the nation’s boundaries.
- Jewish-Israelis insist that Jewishness means more than Jewish ancestry.

Israeli Politics as “Jewish” Politics

- Maintaining the ambivalence — both a “polity of Jews” and a “Jewish polity”.
- The “secular” premise: Revolutionising Judaism and Jewishness.

Basic Law - Israel: The Nation State of The Jewish People (The “Nation-State Law”), 2018

- Paragraph 1:
- “a) Israel is the historical homeland of the Jewish people in which the state of Israel was established.
- b) The state of Israel is the nation-state of the Jewish people, in which it actualizes its natural, religious, and historical right for self-determination.
- c) The actualisation of the right of national self-determination in the state of Israel is unique to the Jewish people.”

The Nation-State Law - Competing Assessments

- MK Avi Dichter, 2019: 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.”
- Prime Minister Netanyahu, 2019: “An important correction to make: Israel is not a state of all its citizens [...] while all citizens, including Arabs, have equal right [...] according to the nation-state law that we passed, Israel is the nation-state of the Jewish people –and its alone [...] Israel is a Jewish, democratic state with equal rights but the nation-state not of all its citizens but only of the Jewish people.”
- *Haaretz* editorial, 30 May 2013: “Basic Law: Apartheid in Israel”.
- *Haaretz* editorial, 11 March 2019: “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. [...] They should know that the state doesn’t belong to ‘all its citizens’.”

Jewish Opposition to the “Jewish Nation State”

- “How is it that you demand the whole world to recognize this state as the state of Jews when there is no Judaism in it at all, and even the very little that was in it in the past, you have almost entirely erased during one term? Oh God! In what is this state a Jewish state?”
- “They have ruined conversion. They have ruined the registration of marriages [a data bank aimed at preventing marriages that are deemed illegal by Jewish law]. They have undermined the rabbinical Courts. They have been ruining the right to study the Torah. So, what makes us Jewish?”

(Comment by readers on an online message-board catering for Ultra-Orthodox readers, 2014)

The Task: A Jewish approach to Israeli Politics

- “The whole idea of Israel in the Torah is conditional – conditional upon the people keeping their side of the bargain, living up to the billing as a ‘light of nations’ (Isaiah 49:6).” (Brian Klug, *Being Jewish and Doing Justice*)