

The necessary elimination of Israel's democracy

Haaretz publisher and owner Amos Schocken asks: Is there a future for an Israel in which inequality and discrimination are taking root?

By Amos Schocken

Speaking in the Knesset in January 1993, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin said, "Iran is in the initial stages of an effort to acquire nonconventional capability in general, and nuclear capability in particular. Our assessment is that Iran today has the appropriate manpower and sufficient resources to acquire nuclear arms within 10 years. Together with others in the international community, we are monitoring Iran's nuclear activity. They are not concealing the fact that the possibility that Iran will possess nuclear weapons is worrisome, and this is one of the reasons that we must take advantage of the window of opportunity and advance toward peace."

At that time, Israel had a strategy - which began to be implemented in the Oslo accords, put an end to the priority granted the settlement project and aimed to improve the treatment of Israel's Arab citizens.

If things had gone differently, the Iran issue might look different today. However, as it turned out, the Oslo strategy collided with another, stronger ideology: the ideology of Gush Emunim (Bloc of the Faithful), which since the 1970s, apart from the Oslo period and the time of the withdrawal from Gaza, has established the concrete basis for the actions of Israel's governments. Even governments that were ostensibly far removed from the Gush Emunim strategy implemented it in practice. Ehud Barak boasted that, in contrast to other prime ministers, he did not return territory to the Palestinians - and there's no need to point out once again the increase in the number of settlers during his tenure. The government of Ehud Olmert, which declared its intention to move toward a policy of hitkansut (or "convergence," another name for what Ariel Sharon termed "disengagement") in Judea and Samaria, held talks with senior Palestinians on an agreement but did not stop the settlement enterprise, which conflicts with the possibility of any agreement.

The strategy that follows from the ideology of Gush Emunim is clear and simple: It perceives of the Six-Day War as the continuation of the War of Independence, both in terms of seizure of territory, and in its impact on the Palestinian population. According to this strategy, the occupation boundaries of the Six-Day War are the borders that Israel must set for itself. And with regard to the Palestinians living in that territory - those who did not flee or were not expelled - they must be subjected to a harsh regime that will encourage their flight, eventuate in their expulsion, deprive them of their rights, and bring about a situation in which those who remain will not be even second-class citizens, and their fate will be of interest to no one. They will be like the Palestinian refugees of the War of Independence; that is their desired status. As for those who are not refugees, an attempt should be made to turn them into "absentees." Unlike the Palestinians who remained in Israel after the War of Independence, the Palestinians in the territories should not receive Israeli citizenship, owing to their large number, but then this, too, should be of interest to no one.

The ideology of Gush Emunim springs from religious, not political motivations. It holds that Israel is for the Jews, and it is not only the Palestinians in the territories who are irrelevant: Israel's Palestinian citizens are also exposed to discrimination

with regard to their civil rights and the revocation of their citizenship.

This is a strategy of territorial seizure and apartheid. It ignores judicial aspects of territorial ownership and shuns human rights and the guarantees of equality enshrined in Israel's Declaration of Independence. It is a strategy of unlimited patience; what is important is the unrelenting progress toward the goal. At the same time, it is a strategy that does not pass up any opportunity that comes its way, such as the composition of the present Knesset and the unclear positions of the prime minister.

The term "apartheid" refers to the undemocratic system of discriminating between the rights of the whites and the blacks, which once existed in South Africa. Even though there is a difference between the apartheid that was practiced there and what is happening in the territories, there are also some points of resemblance. There are two population groups in one region, one of which possesses all the rights and protections, while the other is deprived of rights and is ruled by the first group. This is a flagrantly undemocratic situation.

Since the Six-Day War, there has been no other group in Israel with the ideological resilience of Gush Emunim, and it is not surprising that many politicians have viewed that ideology as a means for realizing personal political ambitions. Zevulun Hammer, who identified this ideology as the way to capture the leadership of the National Religious Party, and Ariel Sharon, who identified this ideology as the way to capture the leadership of Likud, were only two of many. Now Avigdor Lieberman, too, is following this path, but there were and are others, such as the late Hanan Porat, for whom the realization of this ideology was and remains the purpose of their political activity.

This ideology views the creation of an Israeli apartheid regime as a necessary tool for its realization. It has no difficulty with illegal actions and with outright criminality, because it rests on mega-laws that it has adopted and that have no connection with the laws of the state, and because it rests on a perverted interpretation of Judaism. It has scored crucial successes. Even when actions inspired by the Gush Emunim ideology conflict with the will of the government, they still quickly win the backing of the government. The fact that the government is effectively a tool of Gush Emunim and its successors is apparent to everyone who has dealings with the settlers, creating a situation of force multiplication.

This ideology has enjoyed immense success in the United States, of all places. President George H.W. Bush was able to block financial guarantees to Israel because of the settlements established by the government of Yitzhak Shamir (who said lying was permissible to realize the Gush Emunim ideology. Was Benjamin Netanyahu's Bar-Ilan University speech a lie of this kind?). Now, though, candidates for the Republican Party's presidential nomination are competing among themselves over which of them supports Israel and the occupation more forcefully. Any of them who adopt the approach of the first President Bush will likely put an end to their candidacy.

Whatever the reason for this state of affairs - the large number of evangelicals affiliated with the Republican party, the problematic nature of the West's relations with Islam, or the power of the Jewish lobby, which is totally addicted to the Gush

Emunim ideology - the result is clear: It is not easy, and may be impossible, for an American president to adopt an activist policy against Israeli apartheid.

Legalizing the illegal

Because of its inherent illegality, at least in democratic terms, an apartheid regime cannot allow opposition and criticism. The Gush Emunim ideology is obliged to eliminate the latter, and to prevent every effort to block its activity, even if that activity is illegal and even criminal, meant to maintain apartheid. The illegal activity needs to be made legal, whether by amending laws or by changing their judicial interpretation - such things have occurred before, in other places and at other times.

Against this background, we are now seeing the campaign of legislation against, and the unbridled slandering of the Supreme Court, against human rights organizations and against the press, as well as the so-called boycott law, which is aimed at preventing the possibility of dealing with Israeli apartheid in the way South African apartheid was dealt with. It is against this same background that legislation has been submitted that is directed against the Arab citizens in Israel, such as the Loyalty Law and the proposal for a "Basic Law of Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People." It is against this background that a campaign of incitement and intimidation is being waged against the necessary and justified critique being voiced by members of academia.

The Supreme Court, which permitted the settlement project and effectively collaborated with the Gush Emunim ideology, has now become an obstacle that needs to be removed - in the eyes of those who still adhere to that ideology - primarily because the court refuses to recognize the possibility of settling on privately owned Palestinian land and did not overturn the government decision to evacuate the settlements in the Gaza Strip. Because the land belongs to the Jews by divine decree and history (from this perspective, there are similarities between Gush Emunim and Hamas), there is no choice but to elect to the Supreme Court justices who live on Palestinian land, possibly private land, and those who understand that there is no such thing as "land under private Palestinian ownership."

Similarly, this line of thinking goes, the Supreme Court's interpretation of human rights laws also requires its elimination in its present format. Judgments such as those relating to the Kaadan family (allowing an Arab family to build a home in a Jewish community); the selling of Jewish National Fund land to Arab citizens of Israel; the amendment to the Citizenship Law (no ruling has yet been handed down, but there seems to be a possibility that a majority of justices will rule it illegal); the opening of a highway to Palestinian traffic - all these rulings conflict with essential elements in Gush Emunim ideology: the discrimination between Jews and Palestinians (in Israel and the territories) and the deprivation of the Palestinians' rights, which transform them into second-class people, absentees or, best of all, refugees.

Does an Israel of this kind have a future? Over and beyond the question of whether Jewish morality and the Jewish experience allow such circumstances to exist, it is clear that this is a flagrantly unstable and even dangerous situation. It is a situation that will prevent Israel from fully realizing its vast potential, a situation of living by the sword - a sword that could be a third intifada, the collapse of peace with Egypt and a confrontation with a nuclear Iran. Yitzhak Rabin understood that.