

COMMENT & FEATURES

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Omitting the flag

On July 31, when members of Labor MK Hilik Bar’s Knesset Caucus to Resolve the Arab-Israeli Conflict hosted Palestinian Authority politicians in the Israeli parliament, a Palestinian flag was displayed alongside Israel’s.

Thirty-three lawmakers from several parties representing the majority of the Knesset’s 120 MKs were present for this precedent-setting occasion.

There were MKs from Labor, Meretz, Hadash and Balad. But there were also MKs and ministers from coalition party Yesh Atid and from the haredi Shas and United Torah Judaism parties.

At the time, Muhammad Madani, a Fatah Central Committee member and head of the Palestinian delegation, invited the MKs to Ramallah and promised to fly both the Israeli and Palestinian flags during the visit.

This week, Madani made good on his invitation – at least partially. On Monday, nine Labor MKs and Hatnua’s David Tsur traveled to Ramallah to meet with PA President Mahmoud Abbas at the Mukata presidential compound. Several Palestinian officials, including Madani and PLO executive committee secretary Yasser Abed Rabbo, attended the event. Shas MKs had planned to come as well, but Rabbi Ovadia Yosef’s death kept them away.

Yet one other thing was conspicuously missing – the Israeli flag. There were two Palestinian flags in the room, a large portrait of Yasser Arafat and a mural of the Temple Mount with the Dome of the Rock mosque prominently featured. But despite Madani’s promise, there was no Israeli flag. Apparently Abbas did not want pictures taken of him with an Israel flag in the background to be plastered all over Palestinian newspapers.

Perhaps there should not be too much emphasis placed on the flag’s absence. The Jewish standard is probably not easy to come by in Ramallah or other Palestinian cities, though Bar would have been more than happy to bring one along with him.

Still, Abbas’s refusal to reciprocate Israel’s magnanimous gesture touches on a much more serious issue, which was at the heart of Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu’s Bar-Ilan speech this week – namely that the Palestinian refusal to recognize the “nation-state of the Jewish people” is the principal obstacle to peace.

Netanyahu was not referring to a solely pro forma declaration on the part of the Palestinians. Rather, the prime minister was addressing ongoing incitement against Israel in official PA media, including the glorification of terrorists who have killed Israeli civilians; the fact that locations inside the Green Line such as Acre, Jaffa and Haifa are still mentioned as belonging to “Palestine”; the official Palestinian line that rejects the Jewish people’s historical, religious and cultural ties to the Land of Israel, especially on the Temple Mount; and the nurturing of hopes that hundreds of thousands of Palestinian “refugees” will be permitted to return to their homes inside the Green Line.

UNFORTUNATELY THE idea that the Jewish people are “colonialists” who have no justification for creating a uniquely Jewish state in the Land of Israel is widespread. Ian Lustick, a political scientist from the University of Pennsylvania, who had been a longtime proponent of a two-state solution, recently wrote that such a resolution to the conflict “would have made Israel the only European fragment society to have successfully institutionalized its presence in a non-European region without effectively eliminating the aboriginal population.”

Lustick and other experts on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict see Israelis, even those who immigrated to Israel from Muslim countries in the region, as a “European fragment society” no different from the British in India or Kenya, the Belgians in the Congo, the Afrikanders in South Africa.

As long as the Palestinians view Zionists as just another colonialist white settler movement, there is little chance of reaching a two-state solution in which both sides recognize the legitimacy of the other to live here in peace and security.

The omission of the Israeli flag this week in the Mukata is just a symptom of a much deeper problem.

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HUNDREDS OF thousands of mourners attend Rabbi Ovadia Yosef’s funeral on Tuesday. (Reuters)

Rabbi Ovadia Yosef and the Ethiopian Jews

• By SHARON SHALOM

In one of my lectures about the halachic (pertaining to Jewish law) status of Jews in Israel, an Israeli of Ethiopian descent expressed his concern about the future of the entire Ethiopian community in Israel. He raised his hand and asked, “Who will protect us if something happens to Rabbi Ovadia?”

When I asked him what he meant, he explained that Rabbi Ovadia Yosef was the one responsible for him being able to move to Israel, since “Rabbi Ovadia was the only one who made the halachic ruling that we are Ethiopian Jews. As long as he lives, he will protect us. I am fearful that after he dies, they’ll send us back to Ethiopia, since there won’t be anyone else to protect us,” the boy said with palpable fear in his voice.

Throughout the years, Ethiopian and non-Ethiopian rabbis affiliated with the Shas party have proclaimed in the days preceding Knesset and municipal elections that Ethiopian immigrants in Israel are in debt to Rabbi Yosef for recognizing their

halachic status as Jews, and that they must therefore vote for Shas. I’ve heard people say, “Rabbi Ovadia Yosef brought you here... because of him we are here... you owe it to Rabbi Ovadia Yosef.”

Indeed, many members of the Ethiopian community, as well as many Israelis in general, believe that Ethiopian Jews were brought to Israel not because of their historical right as Jews, but as a result of Rabbi Yosef’s ruling that they were in fact Jews.

Everyone agrees that Rabbi Yosef’s 1973 ruling, which recognized Ethiopian Jews’ religious status, was the most important factor in making their aliya possible. His ruling brought about a complete turnaround in attitudes of the government and the Jewish Agency. There is no end to our appreciation of him for making this historic ruling, which was just one among many others.

At that time, the State of Israel and the rabbinic world were quite ambivalent about how to deal with the situation. Some rabbis disagreed with the ruling; they based their decisions on research

indicating that we had non-Jewish origins. The Israeli government’s attitude toward Ethiopian Jews was hesitant at best.

As one Jewish Agency representative remarked at the time, “To the detriment of the Falasha community, the powers that be are hesitant to accept their legitimacy. The hearts of the poor and innocent Falasha vacillated between hope and despair. Their lives and their children’s lives, and their feelings of loyalty, became victims of a cruel game.”

This was the background to Rabbi Yosef’s appearance on the scene, and his landmark ruling that “the Falashas are Jews whom we must rescue before they become assimilated. We must quickly bring them to Israel. As the book of Jeremiah says, ‘The sons will return home.’”

Where did Rabbi Yosef find the strength to say this?

In one of the Beit Hillel conferences, Rabbi Daniel Hershenkowitz, the president of Bar-Ilan University, asked: what is the most important part of a two-story house? His answer was the stairs that

connect the two floors. In my opinion, this was the secret of Rabbi Yosef’s greatness. He had two traits that made him one of the greatest geniuses of our generation: while on the one hand he was incredibly courageous, and on the other he was a great Talmudic scholar, he had the fantastic ability to bring the two together, and also to connect with the people. There are plenty of Talmudic scholars who lack courage and plenty of courageous people who are not scholarly. Rabbi Yosef was a combination of the two.

A number of years ago a yeshiva student asked me, “Did you have bibles back in Ethiopia? Did you pray? Do you have the same Torah as we do?” This question reminded me of an incident that took place in the 1950s, when a renowned Ashkenazi haredi (ultra-Orthodox) rabbi asked Rabbi Yosef, who was of Iraqi (ancient Babylon) origin, “Do you have the same Talmud as we do?”

To which Rabbi Ovadia replied, “And which Talmud does the esteemed rabbi have? The Babylonian Talmud! That means you have our Talmud!”

There’s no doubt that Rabbi Yosef’s ruling was unprecedented and historic, however, he only did what was expected of a courageous Talmudic scholar. Just as a physicist is required to uncover truths in nature, so too is the halachic scholar expected to reveal truths in the Torah. And just as a physician weaves certain materials together in an effort to cure people’s ailments, so too does a halachic scholar.

Because of his genius and greatness, Rabbi Yosef succeeded in revealing what had been forgotten for thousands of years: the historic truth of Beta Israel’s Jewishness. In this respect, Rabbi Ovadia is an outstanding example of what a halachic genius with a little bit of courage can do to find solutions within halacha.

And to the student I referred to at the beginning of this article, I would reply: You are our brother. Have no fear. You are an integral part of the Jewish people.

The author is the rabbi of Kadoshei Yisrael Community in Kiryat Gat, member of Tzohar and a Jewish philosophy doctoral student at Bar Ilan University, Translated by Hannah Hochner.

‘The Last Hope’

• By ASHER ELIAS

More than three decades of attempts at integration into Israeli society have now gone by. Although there have been some meaningful individual accomplishments, the Ethiopian Israeli community as a whole remains at the lowest socio-economic level of Jewish Israeli society. In recent years, a new generation has come of age, urgently seeking solutions and painfully aware that it is up to us to bring about a positive change.

Immersed in our parents’ dazzling determination to return to Zion – the main reason for our being here – we cannot reconcile with the dangerous prospect of descending into a world of poverty, marginalization and discrimination against a black Jewish minority in a white society. A society filled with prejudice, labels, stereotypes and expressions of racism toward Ethiopian Israelis, whether these stem from ignorance or systemic social philosophy.

The State Comptroller’s

Report (May 2013) confirms what we have always suspected – the lack of a true desire among those dealing with absorption to champion proper integration of the Ethiopian Israeli community into Israeli society. Three decades of profuse programs with substantial funding, mainly from the US, without much coordination, clear objectives or focus on output, have resulted in an outrageous waste of resources. Moreover, they have generated a dependent and marginal community whose capabilities have been undermined, intensifying a negative social image combined with racist attitudes toward Ethiopian Israelis.

As young social activists from the community, we are seriously troubled. When we are able to lift our heads above our daily concerns and attempt to look toward the horizon, our hopes for a change in the status quo and a better future seem impossible. It is difficult to raise children in an atmosphere in which there are segregated kindergartens intended only for Ethiopians, schools that

are unwilling to accept Ethiopian Israeli students and if so in separate classes, a special, all-inclusive classifying track for army recruits, distinct academic preparatory programs, exclusion and discrimination in employment, scandalous court rulings and repeated media exposure of racist expressions based on skin color.

Our worries are not only for our children, born and raised in this reality, not only for the improvement of the community’s low socio-economic position and poor image. We are also concerned for an Israeli society which does not see where the perpetuation of the status quo is leading, and for the Jewish people for whom discrimination, exclusion and racism are part of our historical experience, and who therefore are well aware of the consequences of knowing and remaining silent.

We are not requesting the creation of more programs designed specifically for Ethiopian Israelis. We are issuing a clarion call for a reality in which such programs are

no longer necessary.

In order to accomplish this change, three strategic elements are required for an “Exit Plan” that will instill the hope that we are truly at home, in an environment in which the barriers have been removed and where we are truly respected and can flourish:

1. An Exit Plan from the lowest socio-economic levels of society – this can be accelerated by establishing an economic development authority in the Prime Minister’s Office which will act as a coordinating and integrating body, one that will think and follow up in relation to government activity for the economic advancement of Ethiopian Israelis.

This was promised after the housing/racism demonstrations in 2011 but was dropped by the Prime Minister’s Office after the demonstrators and tent cities dispersed.

2. An Exit Plan from the poor neighborhoods – a program which will assist the integration of Ethiopian Israelis in various towns and cities across Israel and result

in a direct connection between Israeli society and the community, allowing us to live together equitably.

Preliminary discussions on the topic were held with the Prime Minister’s Office, but these have unfortunately not continued.

3. An Exit Plan from special programs for Ethiopian Israelis. Programs should be based on need, not on race. Rather than offer programs to Ethiopian Israelis because they are Ethiopian Israelis, program criteria should be based on academic, economic or sociological need, with special attention to integration into Israeli society for all groups.

These fundamental actions will succeed only if the prism through which Ethiopian Israelis are seen by the senior civil service and those dealing with absorption changes, through an internalization and understanding of the consequences of sustaining the status quo.

The writer is a representative of the Ethiopian Israeli Activists Forum.