

Democracy, obedience and refusal

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A few words about democracy

Sometimes we confuse the spirit of democracy with its procedural aspects. To my mind, democracy is an approach to making collective decisions aimed at finding the middle ground, honestly and with mutual respect, that reflects the wishes and perspectives of the individuals in a society in which the vast majority accept for themselves a common fate, mutual commitment and constitution -- not necessarily a legal one, but, more importantly, a cultural one. A democratic procedure is a mechanism aimed at realizing a minimal threshold of the spirit of democracy. Of course, no mechanism can guarantee that a society's actions will be democratic in spirit. There is no guarantee that a majority of people will not decide -- in a legal and procedurally correct manner -- to blatantly violate what others hold sacred.

All in all, Israel maintains democratic procedures. But I have doubts about its democratic spirit. There is, of course, the case of Israel's non-Jewish citizens, who have been systematically deprived for over 50 years, the "proper" result of a democratic procedure that has perhaps expressed the wishes of the overwhelming majority of Israelis. In the religious-secular conflict, particularly during recent years, the two sides (including the secular side) have tried to impose their wishes through the democratic mechanism, without granting appropriate legitimacy to the cultural constitution of the State of Israel. In 1982, we embarked on a war of choice despite the fact that the spirit of democracy demands that this kind of war be waged only if it is backed by a nearly unanimous consensus. This is because a war initiated by the majority requires the minority to kill and be killed. And, most relevant to our discussion here, is my view that the majority -- and certainly not the minority -- has no right to obligate us all to be full partners in ruling over another people for 35 years.

The cultural constitution of the State of Israel specifies that it is a Jewish state. Personally, I am a proud son of the Jewish people and would like my children to live only in a Jewish state. For me, and for many of us, being Jewish does not mean being religious. We are driven by perhaps a biological instinct of continuity. I feel obligated toward the Jewish tradition and the national ethos, as we all experience it. I am here as a response to my wish to live with my people amidst a feeling of continuity, identity and belief that we have many things in common that I would like to share.

The Jewish ethos, to the best of my knowledge, does not include occupation. On the contrary, it leads me to identify with those suffering under occupation and to feel disdain toward the occupier and oppressor, even when the occupier and oppressor is me. Our cultural constitution does not give us the right to be a people who occupy another people against their will -- and for such a long period of time. It is important to clearly emphasize that for many of us this is a fundamental principle that we relate to in exactly the same way as a religious Jew relates to the basic prohibitions of Jewish law. No procedural democratic decision, even if made by a large majority, can take away the right of a religious Jew to maintain his faith and his notion of what it means to be Jewish. In the same way, no procedural decision, even if made by an absolute majority, can force us to be occupiers.

There was a time when we deluded ourselves into thinking that the territories were essential for our security and constituted a bargaining chip for peace and all sorts of other ridiculous things. It's difficult to understand now how reasonable people like us once believed these things. After 35 years, the only choice we can really make is whether or not to continue to rule over another people. As one of the signatories to the ``New Officers' letter" said, ``Ruling over another people is not an option for the Jewish people." The Jewish existence requires putting an immediate and unilateral end to ruling over another people, regardless of any terror, ceasefire, political implications, and chances for peace. I would choose this option even if I were convinced that the result of such a withdrawal would increase the personal risk against our lives.

I am aware that there are those who have similar thoughts, but draw opposite conclusions. To many of these, I only feel the need to say, ``Look, I'm a thoroughly secular person, but I value the great importance of the Jewish people's continuity in its religious tradition as well. Thus, I agree with you that the State of Israel must also preserve its Jewish character, even when this entails religious aspects that contradict my personal lifestyle. But I expect that you will also understand that I also have things pertaining to my Jewishness that I cannot give up." And if the religious Jewish public and the national secular public, to which I belong, do not agree with this cultural constitution, no parliament or court is capable of completing this work. This is not an absolute limit of democracy, but rather of Jewish society in general.

Doesn't a democratic society require obedience?

The Jewish ethos, to the best of my knowledge, does not include reverence for obedience to human beings. Our ethos, like that of many other peoples, I think, is full of heroes who refused to obey. How would you relate to a new hero of Israel who sees evil and injustice, but nevertheless continues to obey because this is the will of the majority? It seems to me that I have even heard advocates of obedience express admiration -- perhaps justifiably so -- toward a certain general because he knew when not to obey commands.

We have a small mix-up here between the obligation to obey something I reject and the requirements of "responsibility" and solidarity that underlie our cultural constitution. You don't have to be a soldier in the Gaza Strip to share this responsibility. All of us are responsible for what is happening here and there, regardless of whether we serve or refuse to serve in the armed forces exercising Israeli rule. Unwillingness to revere obedience is not equivalent to irresponsibility or anarchy. I don't honor the obligation to obey, but, of course, I believe in responsibility. And, if I might add, the obligation of responsibility is what is under threat here. Thus, for example, we don't care and don't do a thing while knowing that more than 10 percent of breadwinners in Israel return home from a day of work without a minimum wage or minimal social benefits.

Am I in favor of refusal?

I don't feel that I have any right to say anything to those who must decide between the dictates of their conscience and their obligation toward their friends and the unpleasant experience of sitting in prison. I've only twice been confronted with this dilemma. During my regular army service (1970), I found myself participating in a search from one ramshackle home to another in a refugee camp in the Gaza Strip. We went in, searched, and rummaged through the few belongings we found. One woman looked at us with a proud and scorn full expression. So, in response, we went back and trashed her house. I felt no dilemma. I went back and trashed. I tell this unimportant story and understand how much the little animal lurks also in me.

And nine years ago, opposite Dehaisheh, when my views were already different. I didn't refuse to serve in the occupation. I thought about it. I wanted to see once how it looked from the inside. I was afraid of the attention and the hassle of a trial and prison. I had other things in mind. At that time, I refused to take charge of Palestinian prisoners. This didn't bother anyone. In any case, they were most interested in finding someone to patrol the road at night and this was "okay" because it was meant to save lives. All in all, I arranged things for

myself so that somehow I would avoid the difficult questions. I have no right to say a word about refusal.

The only thing that I can say is that I regard this group -- called ``refuseniks'', but whom I would call ``the Neturei Karta of the Jewish conscience '' -- as the heroes of Israeli society in 2002. Not only them, but also the young people who are sacrificing their worlds to take command responsibilities and confront moral dilemmas, who are serving in the IDF not out of an obligation to follow orders or because of a democratic decision, but rather amidst a daily internal struggle between what is permissible and prohibited, between the demands of reality and the raising of a black flag. I admire both of these groups. On the other hand, ``I don't admire'' (to put it mildly) those who rule over another people because ``they were told'' to do so, or those who do not see any problem in this.

But, Israel's main problem in 2002 is not a refusal to serve in the occupying forces, but rather the danger that many of us will reach the conclusion that we refuse to bear the responsibility for what goes on here. We are all partners, whether we like it or not, in ruling over the territories and we all have the right to ask whether we want to be a part of this. A refusal to be a part of this society is certainly most legitimate from a legal perspective. And no democratic law can prevent this type of refusal. While the current refusal derives from a feeling of concern, responsibility and readiness to bear an oversized share of the burden, this other type of refusal, which is ostensibly more legitimate, is actually more threatening.

I can say to myself that I personally will remain here, no matter what, and at best I'll even try here and there to influence others to stop this terrible thing. I feel fully entitled to say to my children, aged 16 and 9, that their fate is to be here even if this state faces horrible existential dangers. And you don't need special connections with the head of the Shin Bet to imagine that it is very possible that during their lifetimes they may face more terrible scenarios than those we have experienced. But, woefully, I tell myself that I have no way to explain to them that they must tie their lives to a pseudo-Jewish state that is determined to continue ruling over millions of other people, a state that has contempt for the very history that established it. Even if they accept the obligation to a state that sends them to rule over millions of another people, they and their friends will still have the right to refuse to be part of this. Personally, the thought that they, and those like them, are liable to choose not to be here scares me to tears.