

## Impacts of nation-state

Canada's identity has evolved dramatically since the Second World War. First, the country's self-image changed from an Anglo orientation as a member of the British Empire-cum-Commonwealth to a concept of "two founding nations," which included the recognition of bilingualism and biculturalism as pillars of our identity. No sooner had that change been digested than we broadened the definition of Canadian-ness to incorporate multiculturalism and then, very belatedly, we have recently come to recognize the important place of indigenous Canadians and to attempt to reconcile our peoples with the history of injustice and cultural genocide perpetrated against First Nations.

Not all countries are given this sort of evolving self-identity. Israel, in very different ways but over the same period, has struggled to define itself in a manner that reflects both its founding premise and its demographic and cultural realities. For several decades, the country has debated the question "who is a Jew?"; a riddle that goes to the heart of the nation's identity in part due to the Law of Return, which grants citizenship to any Jew. But the place of non-Jewish citizens – both in the state of Israel and, more problematically, in the territories occupied in 1967 – has confounded the country as it struggles to be both a democratic country and one particularly founded as the homeland of the Jewish people.

This matter was brought to a head (again) recently by a law passed by the Knesset dealing with the country's Jewish identity.

In practical terms, the "nation-state law" has little impact. If an Israeli didn't follow the news, they would probably not notice any change in their daily life. The law is mostly symbolic. It enshrines the Jewish calendar as official, declares Jerusalem the country's capital, codifies what was already the practical reality in terms of Jewish iconography in Israeli national symbols, such as the Star of David on the flag and the menorah on the national shield. But, it also explicitly downgrades the Arabic language, mother tongue of 22% of the country's population, from official language to one with a "special status." That doesn't mean that Arabic (or English) will be erased from street signs or other official places, but it is a calculated poke in the eye to the country's largest minority population – people who have struggled for decades to adapt themselves to their status as non-Jewish citizens of the Jewish state.

Critics, particularly on the left, have condemned the law as the triumph

of Jewishness over democracy in the continuing struggle over the country's identity as a Jewish and democratic state. Some claim that the accusation of "apartheid" has now been proven and codified. Competing *New York Times* op-eds by Ronald Lauder, head of World Jewish Congress, and Naftali Bennett, Israel's minister of Diaspora affairs, took diametrically opposing positions on the law.

The law's enemies perhaps did themselves no favours during a mass rally in Tel Aviv nearly two weeks ago, when Palestinian flags were prevalent and some participants seemed to be promoting a one-state resolution.

The controversy is the culmination of several years of debate over the law, or variations on the theme. Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu defended the final bill, which passed the Knesset overwhelmingly.

"We enshrined in law the basic principle of our existence," he said. "Israel is the nation state of the Jewish people, that respects the individual rights of all its citizens. This is our state – the Jewish state. In recent years, there have been some who have attempted to put this in doubt, to undercut the core of our being. Today we made it law: this is our nation, language and flag."

The prime minister's words are accurate enough. He acknowledges the fundamental and perhaps irreconcilable tug between "the nation state of the Jewish people" and one that "respects the individual rights of all its citizens." And he is correct that the law enshrines what was already the de facto reality.

He is also not far off the mark in stating that some have tried to put in doubt Israel's identity as a Jewish state – there are calls in the Middle East and elsewhere for a unitary state between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River, a concept that would effectively eliminate Jewish national self-determination. Yet, this is perhaps the most specious of Netanyahu's arguments. Yes, there are those who would see the Jewish state destroyed. But these voices are no more mainstream nor prevalent than they have been in recent years.

The law is red meat for Netanyahu's core supporters and those to their right. It is a provocation – and an unnecessary one – that even the prime minister claims has no real, practical impact.

However, it does have an impact – and one that is perhaps not unintended. The law makes non-Jewish citizens of Israel feel isolated and demoralized and it strengthens the case of those inside and outside Israel who condemn the country for inequality and favouritism. ■

## It hurts and it ain't at all fair

JOANNE SEIFF

Families sometimes just have a bad run when it comes to health in the household. From December onwards, it seems like somebody has been sick at our house ... but, in between, there were brief periods when most of us functioned OK. It's been challenging.

Like many folks, I'm also signed up for an exercise class, but I have had to miss it a lot because of all these illnesses. I'm usually game for a long walk with the dog, but not a big fan of exercise – I do it because I should. We need regular exercise to strengthen and care for the body. However, when a kid is home sick, or I am, I have to skip that class, too. Exercising is, in the long run, good for me, but, in the short term, there are days when I just have to sit on the couch.

Figuring out how to care for our bodies is a balancing act. On the one hand, sometimes things hurt, but, on the other, there's no one else inside each of our bodies, telling us what to do about it.

Some people have a high pain tolerance and, more, we've been taught to "walk it off," "suck it up" or cope with what comes without complaining. Is this choice, to learn to cope with discomfort without complaint, a Jewish thing?

Some might say it is the opposite. If you read the Torah portions about the Exodus from Egypt, you get multiple examples of when the Israelites complained. They wanted meat. They wanted water. They wanted better food. In Numbers 20:5, it says, "Why did you make us leave Egypt to bring us to this wretched place, a place with no grain or figs or vines or pomegranates? There is not even water to drink!"

On more than one occasion, G-d does provide for the Israelites, but there's also punishment. People get sick, or are bitten by serpents. Complaining isn't rewarded. It might be natural for some to complain of their lot – even the most strong among us need to let out our frustrations after awhile. However, some of us were taught that complaining too much isn't OK; that, unless you're dying, you need to get on with things, and save the cries of pain and complaints for when something actually really matters.

Unfortunately, if you hold the pain in and don't act like you're dying, sometimes you don't get taken care of promptly. In some cases, the squeaky wheel gets the grease. Also, if you're not a big complainer, people may forget that there might be anything wrong, though being stoic, understated and self-controlled can make life less complicated, too.

I'd like to say that folks remembered that some in our family weren't 100% healthy, but that wasn't always the case. Sometimes I felt a lot of pressure for us to be joiners and attempt something that I knew just wouldn't work out – as I recovered from pneumonia,

for instance. I'd have to say things like, "Well, we're really not up to that, but thanks for inviting us." I feel like maybe we've missed out, but good health is really important. It has to come first.

Jewish tradition teaches us that the body is a temple. We have to take care of it. We wish people "*refuah shlemah*," or "complete healing." We say "*la bruit*" ("to your health") when someone sneezes. Midrash teaches us that we wish health to someone when they sneeze because, in the past, some saw sneezing as dangerous and deadly – the soul could leave through the nostrils. It's a *mitzvah* (commandment) to do *bikur cholim* (visiting the sick), and many congregations have committees in place to make food and visit those who are unwell.

We have contradictions here. In our oldest stories, there are complainers and punishments for complaining. In our ritual traditions, we wish people health, help them get well, and have an obligation to take care of others and visit them. We're also not to abandon those who are sick – when Miriam got sick, the Israelites waited for her to get well before traveling on. Yet, we're also part of a 24/7, on-the-go culture. It's hard to reconcile the need for good, old-fashioned rest with our modern lives, but both are necessary. When it hurts, it's OK to say so, within reason, and to expect others to care and wish you better health.

Here's a funny story of "it hurts." While I was in labour with my twins, another expectant mother came in. She came with two people (family members? friends?) and made a lot of noise. It turned out that, when the people with her had to leave the room, she stopped making noise. It felt like we were listening to a performance! This lady felt that part of delivering the baby required making noise about it – and we all heard it, on cue.

It's traditional to be supportive of someone in their time of discomfort – to support and help – but perhaps Hashem would prefer it if we saved the hysterical screaming for when it really hurts rather than just for when someone can hear us. Complaining for its own sake, it would seem, warrants punishment but, when it really hurts, we're commanded to visit, bring food and help.

Sickness happens to the best of us, and it sure isn't fair. But, there's no point in making it worse for everyone by screaming louder than anyone else. ■

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