

Haaretz Article Samah Salame

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What can a feminist Palestinian in Israel do at the end of a week that began with a modest demonstration against a Sharia court ruling forbidding a Muslim woman from travelling without husband's consent? The decree, which denies the woman freedom of movement, a basic right, has been put on hold, but the arena is heating up. The protest provoked a wave of abuse and accusations against organizations promoting the rights of Arab women from the patriarchal leadership which is cloaked in religious garb. They claim that we feminists act as hostile foreign agents that weaken the Sharia court and that we labor day and night to promote a covert agenda for dismantling Arab society from within, aided by dirty foreign money, in favour of the nation-state of the Jewish people. I wonder from whom did our ?sheikhs lift this argument, which sounds familiar in today's Messianic Israel

The wheel of fortune continued to churn up surprises with the publication of a massive government report, which recommends that in the struggle against polygamy, the justice minister allow polygamous marriages of Arab men with proven Bedouin genes in the event that the first wife is barren or chronically ill, including mental illness or if a woman has been .widowed and her brother-in-law has designs on her

I decided to try to ease the distress I felt, lest I should become mentally ill myself, and to sidestep the dilemma felt by men who need two women to exist on this planet and receive an attentive ear under the auspices of Ayelet Shaked's "cultural sensitivity". The minister seems to have made an alliance with the traditional Bedouin leadership in the Negev at the .expense of the vulnerable women

Instead I tuned in with great interest to the troubles of the more enlightened and less enlightened Jewish neighbours who were discussing the surrogacy law. They talked about two mothers or two fathers and their right; there is no need for equality before the law, the main thing is equality before the sperm, I told myself. After all, at the end of the day the new-born will be strictly kosher, the chosen race will be preserved for generations to come and the continuation of the debate on the Nation-State Bill will be ensured. Yes, we have come back to the Nation-State Bill, which the prime minister said is "crucial to ensure the ".foundation of our existence, which is Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people

The winds of Nation-State Bill that are blowing in our midst have shrunk the problems of Arab women and gender inequality to a microscopic size compared with the "foundation of existence" of the people that have survived for thousands of years, which is now being put to the test therefore looks to Knesset legislation for salvation. The Iranian threat has disappeared, and the status of Arabic as an official language seriously endangers Israel - not that anyone has ever notice that this is indeed the case today according to law. The Nation-State Bill is supposed to solve an existential issue such as: how will more towns and villages be built solely for Jews, in addition to the 700 built since 1948, without ever telling the world that they are exclusively Jewish. And at the same time hoping that no one will pay attention to the theft of Palestinian land and sinking millions of tax-payer funds into the Occupation.

In the annals of democratic laws, this would be called "encouragement of Jewish
."settlement

After all these discussions, I sat down in the living room of my house in the village of Wahat-al-Salam (Neve Shalom), the only Arab-Jewish village that was deliberately and maliciously built, against all odds, 40 years ago as a common place for Jews and Palestinians much more courageous than me. Here, on land belonging to the Latrun monastery, which signed up to the simple idea that it is possible to co-exist without fighting, my husband and I chose to
."raise our three sons

I asked myself: What are the Jews so afraid of and why do they feel persecuted? Do my Jewish neighbours really need a Nation-State Law? Will it help them deal with our Arabic at the General Assembly or understand a message in WhatsApp in Arabic with a special but unofficial status? As of now, we, the indigenous Palestinians, will remain here forever. The Jews, some of them native and some immigrants, will also remain. I don't think anyone is going to leave any time soon. Actually, thousands of young Jews are emigrating in search for a new horizon of hope. Something went awry on the way to realizing the Zionist dream and self-liberation in a democratic state. The part of the national anthem that speaks of "being a free people in our land" has been lost. The new Nation-State Bill raises many legitimate questions, such as who the "people" mentioned really are, what it means to be "free" and
."what "our country" is, questions that most Jews would rather not deal with

Those young Jews, who like the Palestinians, still seek the right of self-determination, freedom and democracy, and equality in general, have despaired of the religious prison here, the coercion and the complicated definition of who is a kosher Jew and how they must live. Moreover, the State refuses to establish and mark the borders of the country. Those Jews have found refuge in Berlin and New York, and I will probably meet them in lectures on the conflict and the difficult struggle to end the occupation, where they will preach to me
."about the importance of a nonviolent struggle

Insignificant me is incapable of solving the problem of the Jewish nation. My identity is strong enough to build a living partnership with those who desire to remain here. Those who chose to live here will never get rid of me, my history and the story of my family, who are Palestinian refugees who were forced to flee the Syrian civil war to the modern Diaspora
."created for them on the distant holocaustic European soil

Ladies and Gentlemen, I am the Palestinian Arab citizen who shares the common space with you, which will henceforth be called a "Jewish state with a democratic regime"; I live with you with your complicated, heavy and sad historical baggage, which I did not load onto your shoulders. And believe me you can live, recognize, understand and correct part of what was brought upon a third generation Palestinian by your forebears. And my Arabic, ladies and gentlemen, is well maintained from birth, which is why it is referred to as a mother tongue.

It is the most prevalent language in the Middle East, alongside it is the Hebrew I have
."acquired with great effort as an adult, so as to be able to explain myself repeatedly to you

It is clear as day me that Arabs and Jews will live here together for many years to come. Most Palestinian citizens of the current entity called Israel understand this already. By the

way, treasury officials are counting on it in their future forecasts, as are the Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza and Jerusalem, and most of the Jews, deep inside, know this truth - yet they want to enact a law that will allow them to build, with labouring Arab hands, Jewish enclaves rising up like rosebushes in the mountains of Galilee

Some Jewish Israelis still live under the illusion that the identity and consciousness of the Palestinian natives," can be transformed by way of the womb, by legislation, land swaps, and other fanciful solutions

It will not happen. Even if the Jew, the owner of the house built with Palestinian hands, would try to hide and trample upon the relationship between tax-paying Palestinians and millions of Palestinians across the separation fence, and even if the occupiers and their partners get drunk with wine- (naturally not soiled by any Ethiopians whose Jewishness is in doubt) on the balcony of an illegal settlement and try to dazzle the eyes of visitors from around world, this relationship will never fade

As an incorrigible optimist I was looking for something encouraging in this situation, and I decided that don't have any time for frustrating processes of depression, despair and frustration. We just don't

Last week I saw three Jewish mothers protesting against a council head who did not allow them to enrol their children in the binational and bilingual school in our village. He told them to enrol in a religious kindergarten - certainly not binational! They demonstrated, went on strike and won

I saw many organizations who joined together to demonstrate against the Nation-State Bill in Rabin Square and thousands who came out in protest against it. I checked how many families wanted to be part of the education that our little village offered - Arab-Jewish, Palestinian-Israeli, bilingual, bi-national, however you define it - and they numbered hundreds. Unfortunately, we do not have room for all of them. I saw many beautiful initiatives by organizations and individuals offering Arabic lessons to Jews, who opened their eyes and discovered what's is really like without Zionist mediation and reached the conclusion that there was no choice but to communicate and to share a common language. I have watched reports that Jewish youngsters from the Birth right program abandoned the Zionist propaganda train and joined Breaking the Silence to see for themselves the occupation of Hebron and make up their own minds

I believe wholeheartedly that we, Palestinians and Jews everywhere, also there on the other side of the fence that suffocates Gaza, are legion. It is possible that in fact we are the majority and it is time to just get up and do something

(The writer is a feminist activist, blogger and a resident and Wahat-Al-Salam Neve Shalom)

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