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'Not afraid of 'autonomy'

By Nurit Wurgaft

"Our interpretation of the concept of a democratic Jewish state is that Israel is the state of the Jewish people and the state of all her citizens," began Meretz leader Yossi Beilin. "This means that we view as essential full equality between Jews and Arabs, except for one element, and that is entry to Israel. We certainly view Israel as the state of the Jewish people, and view the Law of Return as an important law and are not willing to relinquish it."

The law against family reunification has a similar purpose.

"We oppose the current directives against family reunification, but, just as the Palestinian state - whose establishment we are struggling for - will certainly open its doors to all Palestinians, so too the Jewish state opens its doors to every Jew. Beyond the entry policy, there must be no discrimination. It is unacceptable if an Arab citizen cannot buy a house because the land belongs to the Jewish National Fund, or cannot find work or rent an apartment [just because he is an Arab].

"We are proposing, for the first time, a separate track for Arab education, under the banner of collective rights. This expresses the desire that the group called Israeli Arabs, which is a national minority in Israel, be able to preserve its uniqueness, and not be told by any establishment, 'Do not preserve your uniqueness, because perhaps one day you will want autonomy.' We are not afraid of the word autonomy, because we do not think the Israeli Arabs harbor any real desire to create autonomy. If there is a Palestinian state and Israeli Arabs view it as the state of the Palestinian people, just as American Jews view Israel as the state of the Jewish people - who is denying them that right? Only the right to establish a state within a state, with a parallel parliament and state institutions, is something that seems undesirable to me, for either Jews or Arabs."

Why do you oppose that?

"Because it could, perish the thought, end up as a kind of third-class autonomy. Many Jews would be happy about that. Many Jews do not view Arabs as part of the general public, and would therefore be happy if the Arabs would handle

themselves and took care of themselves. When some Arabs say, 'We won't vote,' aren't there a few Jews on the right who are happy?"

Balad (National Democratic Alliance) says that voting for a Zionist party is akin to treason. How do you overcome that? What do you say when you are asked if you are a Zionist?

"That I am a proud Zionist. I think that people in that sector are mature enough to make their own calculations, to figure out what brought them to radicalism. Most Jews, even the most moderate, when they hear such remarks by Arab Knesset members, view them as being anti-whatever and do not see any possibility of cooperation. In my opinion, whoever thinks that the status of Israeli Arabs can be advanced without cooperation, without some Jewish-Arab covenant, is naive.

"In the past three years I have spent every weekend visiting the [Arab] sector. I know their problems with the electricity hookups in Arara better than most Arab MKs. There is no other party, apart from Hadash, that calls itself a Jewish-Arab party."

Based on the list of Knesset candidates, it is hard to see that Meretz is a Jewish-Arab party.

"True, we only have one man, Issawi Farj, in a place that I hope is realistic, but don't forget that we received only half a Knesset seat's worth of votes from the Arab sector, and the principle of reciprocity applies to voter support and representation."

There is a film clip on the Internet depicting a camel with the text, "They say I vote for Zionist parties - no way! I'm a camel, not a donkey." What is your comment on that?

"If a Jewish party were to say what the Arab parties are saying, we would say they are racist."

What do you think about the rights of national minorities?

"They have rights just like I do. I have been struggling for years for the establishment of a Palestinian state. It is a struggle of demonstrations, a parliamentary struggle - there are a thousand ways to express this struggle and they have the right to struggle for a Palestinian state bordering Israel, a state with which they might identify ideologically, but of which they would not be a part. I have proposed building a museum and reinstating [place] names. There is a problem with the erasing of memory, and I do not think we should allow it. I am in favor of bringing back this memory and if someone wants to call that

national rights, that's fine with me. I think it is important for the two peoples to know that there were hundreds of villages that were erased."

What about Avigdor Lieberman's plan?

"Over our dead bodies. It is unethical and un-Jewish and not part of some international club to which we want to belong. It is in contradiction with treaties we have signed and above all is against Israeli law. He says that this has been done in other places around the world, but anyone who checks these precedents will see that they were before the international treaties. This proposal contains the sick logic of a kind of ethnic cleansing and even though it is impractical, it gives the Arabs the feeling that the Jews view them as temporary citizens.

"I also do not want a state that is purely Jewish. I want children, like my children, to go to Jaljulya once a year, and for children from Jaljulya to be our guests, the children from both sides understanding that they are not the only ones in the world. I think that God did us a kindness by putting us here together."

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