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New York Times Op-ed - New Lyrics For Israel

By ADAM LEBOR

AS Israel prepares to celebrate its 60th birthday next year, it's time to update its national anthem, "Hatikvah" ("The Hope"). Only a single phrase needs to be changed: "nefesh Yehudi," which means a Jewish soul, should be replaced with "nefesh Israeli," an Israeli soul. Why tamper with a beautiful, stirring hymn? To solve what we might call the "Hatikvah" contradiction.

Israel strives to be both a Jewish state and a democracy, yet about a fifth of its population of 7.1 million people are not Jewish, but Arab Muslims, Christians and Druse. Among the emerging middle class, many Arabs are thriving. There are diplomats and judges, beauty queens and army officers, television anchors and members of the Knesset, the Israeli Parliament.

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert recently appointed Raleb Majadele as Israel's first Muslim Arab cabinet minister, in charge of science, culture and sports. But the disconnect between the Jewish state and its Arab minority endures. Mr. Majadele caused outrage among the political right in March when he told the Israeli newspaper Yedioth Ahronoth that he stands up for "Hatikvah," but will not sing it.

Yet why should he? He is Israeli, but he is not Jewish. And he is not alone. A growing number of Israelis of all faiths are calling for an inclusive national anthem. They argue that "Hatikvah" symbolizes a wider inequality. Despite the Arab success stories, deep disparities between the Jewish and Arab sectors remain in employment, health, welfare and education. A report published last year by Sikkuy, the Association for the Advancement of Civic Equality in Israel, compared 10 similar Arab and Jewish municipalities. The total 2004 welfare budget for the Jewish municipalities was 220.8 million shekels (about \$50 million), but only half that, 107.4 million, for their Arab counterparts.

Such problems demand strategic solutions; altering one word in "Hatikvah" would not make them magically disappear. And even with the inclusion of "nefesh Israeli," Israel's Arabs might still object to other verses about the longing for Zion.

But both history and current events show that we should never underestimate the totemic power of state pageantry. Even knowing the horrors of Communism, the Red Army choir singing the "Internationale" still can bring on goose bumps and visions of Soviet troops charging Nazi tanks. And South Africa's new national anthem has set an excellent example in inclusive nation-building. Thirteen years ago, "Die Stem van Suid-Afrika" ("The Call of South Africa"), the apartheid-era hymn, was merged with "Nkosi Sikelel iAfrika" (God Bless Africa), the anthem of the African National Congress. A powerful symbol of the new multiracial country, the anthem is now sung in three African languages -- Xhosa, Zulu and Sotho -- as well as English and Afrikaans.

Such a gesture of inclusion is needed in Israel, a recognition that to be an Israeli in 2008 is something very different from what it was in 1948. Updating "Hatikvah" could be the start of a psychic shift among the country's Arab and Jewish citizens about what it means to be Israeli. It could lead to the evolution of a modern Hebrew (and Arabic) Israeli identity, predicated not on religion but on the more usual criteria of citizenship -- shared cultural, linguistic and economic ties and simply living together on the most contested sliver of land in the world. Remember also that Israel is home to several hundred thousand non-Jewish Russians and guest workers from Africa, Asia and the Balkans. They, too, deserve to be included in the national community.

Let's not over-venerate "Hatikvah." However stirring its chords and words, it is not an ancient Hebrew song. Its lyrics were written in 1886 by Naftali Herz Imber, a Central European poet. The melody, by Samuel Cohen, was inspired by the Czech composer Bedrich Smetana's work "The Moldau," itself based on a folk song. It is as much an expression of 19th-century nationalism as of spiritual yearning for the Holy Land.

What Israel needs in the 21st century is an anthem that can be sung by all its citizens, of whatever faith. At a time of rising Islamic radicalism it is absolutely in Israel's long-term interest to bind its Arab minority to the state. At the same time, if Israel is prepared to evolve and adapt, it must demand full civic loyalty from its Arab population. It would no longer be enough for many to regard themselves as semi-disconnected citizens.

Three years ago in Jaffa, I met a Jewish community activist named Sami Albo. Mr. Albo told me of his dismay that, on Holocaust Memorial Day, when the memorial siren sounded, the muezzin of a nearby mosque recited the Koran, rather than observe the moment in silence, because a Muslim religious leader had died.

Updating "Hatikvah" to take account of Israel's religious diversity would rightly demand a reciprocal gesture from its Arab minority to also respectfully commemorate the victims of the Holocaust.

Many will claim that at a time when Israel faces such existential threats as a potential Iranian nuclear bomb, a resurgent Hezbollah, last week's triumph of a recalcitrant Hamas and daily rocket barrages from Gaza, altering "Hatikvah" would be a sign of weakness.

I would argue precisely the opposite. Changing that one word from "Jewish" to "Israeli" soul would show both strength and confidence, because it would send a clear message: here we are, Israelis -- Jewish, Christian, Muslim, African, Russian and more -- in the heart of the Middle East. And we are here to stay.

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