

The New York Review of Books

'The Morning After': An Exchange

Jerome M. Segal, Alvin Z. Rubinstein, and George Jochnowitz, reply by Anton

Shammas

NOVEMBER 24, 1988 ISSUE

In response to:

The Morning After from the September 29, 1988 issue

To the Editors:

In "The Morning After" [*NYR*, September 29] Anton Shammas calls attention to my proposal that:

the state of Palestine allow dual citizenship. Palestinians who are citizens of other states are encouraged to apply for and travel on Palestinian passports [*The Washington Post*, May 22].

Shammas writes:

This means that the relation between Israel and the Diaspora is applied to the Palestinians.... In practical effect, this very likely means that the state of Israel will have every right to deprive me of my political rights inside its jurisdiction, arguing that I am able at any time to pursue my national fulfillment next door, since I am automatically wait-listed as a Palestinian citizen. Some Israeli officials from the Ministry of the Interior might argue, in the years to come, that since I have access to a Palestinian passport and, consequently, to a Palestinian nationality, this would annul my claims for an Israeli nationality....

Allow me to make a few points:

1. I firmly oppose any efforts to strip Arab citizens of Israel of their political rights. My proposals on dual citizenship and use of State of Palestine passports

is not intended in that direction and will not have great relevance to that issue.

2. The advocates of expulsion (etc.) do not need and do not wait for excuses such as the passport/dual citizenship approach to press their policies. They are doing it now. Unless there is major progress towards resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, events will play into their hands. A Palestinian declaration of independence and statehood coupled with a Palestinian peace initiative offers a real possibility for resolving the conflict.
3. The immediate task is to give reality to the idea that a Palestinian state can be created without Israeli permission and under conditions of Israeli military occupation. And then to bring about Israeli troop withdrawal from the country of Palestine. Many believe statehood implies a monopoly of force within a territory, and thus that there can be no Palestinian state while Israeli troops remain. I have argued that statehood is a social relation between a population and a governing body with respect to rule-giving authority and that the *intifada* is thus the process whereby the Palestinian state is being created.
4. In this effort to create a Palestinian state, the symbols of statehood play an important role. The passport and dual citizenship proposals are part of the effort on this level; other aspects include a State of Palestine currency, postage stamps, flag, and Olympic team.
5. The Palestinian state will not come into existence the day after it is proclaimed. It comes into existence through a gradual process. When Palestinians around the world start traveling on State of Palestine passports, when those passports are recognized and accepted by other nations, when there are Palestinians throughout the world who say "I am a citizen of the State of Palestine"—this will contribute to the realization of the State of Palestine, and thus to Israeli withdrawal.
6. The long-term status of Palestinians who are Israeli citizens will not be settled the day after a Palestinian state is announced. If there is a Palestinian state and if the conflict is resolved along the lines of the two-state solution, the condition of the Arab citizens of Israel will improve. Resolution of the conflict will give the Arab citizens of Israel greater acceptance and influence as a swing-bloc in determining the composition and policies of future Israeli governments.
7. Mr. Shamas fears that the State of Palestine will follow Israel's path in giving special rights to members of an ethnic group. This remains to be seen. But Israel is not a precedent for two basic reasons. First the status of Arab-Israelis has been heavily conditioned by the continued fact of the conflict. A Palestinian state emerging within conditions of peace might take a very different path. Secondly, the operative meaning of Israel as a Jewish state lies not in the Law of Return or its immigration policy, but in the raw issue of whether the levers of state power remain indefinitely in Jewish hands. This issue, in reverse form, is unlikely to arise for a democratic, egalitarian

Palestine. It will not be the first time that matters of principle are settled by matters of numbers.

8. These are speculative matters to be settled over the long-term. But the day after the State of Palestine is proclaimed there will be a different problem which is our responsibility. The leadership of the Palestinian state will undertake some peace initiative. It will be sincere, but it will not satisfy the demands of the American or the Israeli government. Repeatedly the PLO has said that its ability to make unilateral concessions is limited. They need a partner in the peace process; yet neither the US government nor the Israeli government will meet them halfway. The American public and the American Jewish community play a critical role in the period ahead. We should take the lead in moving events down the right fork in the road.

The declaration of independence will fan the flames of annexation within Israel. The State of Palestine will be in peril from the moment it is born. Our task is to help the State of Palestine survive. Without it there can be no two-state solution, and thus no justice and thus no peace in the Middle East.

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To the Editors:

As a professional writer, Anton Shammas has an obligation to use words precisely. Racism is an ugly word, but it does have a specific meaning: “the

assumption that psychocultural traits and capacities are determined by *biological* race and that races differ decisively from one another..." (*Webster's Third International Dictionary*) (italics added).

In writing that "the Israeli Law of Return is in effect a racist law," Shammas is culpable on two counts: first, in implying that Jews are a "race." There is nothing biologically homogenous about "Jews"; like Muslims and Christians, they include in their congregations peoples of different races—diverse peoples of European, Asian, and African background.

Second, as a non-Jew, Mr. Shammas may not like the Law of Return and the favoritism it accords Jew of all races, but he should not therefore distort its origin and purpose. A reaction to a Hitlerian-infected world that expelled or forbade entry to Jews simply because they were Jews, the Law of Return is a beacon to light the way of future cast-outs, for whom there is no welcome mat. No such problem haunts the Palestinians; they may not be able to return to the land of their forefathers, but there are many doors through which they can pass to find haven and build a new life. In this politically divided and fearful world that is a privilege not available to all uprooted groups.

Alvin Z. Rubinstein

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To the Editors:

Anton Shammas tells us that "the Israeli Law of Return is in effect a racist law." He would like a Palestinian state to be different and have "an ordinary immigration law, allowing the state to choose its citizens, and not vice versa."

I question the use of the word "ordinary." *The New York Times* of September 14, under the headline "Ethnic Germans in East Bloc Now Flock to West Germany," informs us, "Under the West German constitution, ethnic German migrants from Eastern and southeastern Europe...are eligible to settle in West Germany with full citizenship rights." Article 54 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China, a country very different from West Germany, says, "The state protects the just rights and interests of overseas Chinese and their relatives."

Perhaps the state Shammas dreams of will exist one day. However, it was

discouraging to read in *The New York Times* of September 26, in a news item about the construction of New York’s first mosque, that the trustees had dismissed the mosque’s architect, “complaining that he had hired a Jewish-owned concern as a technical consultant for the project.”

George Jochnowitz

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Anton Shammass replies:

I happen to have nothing but blind faith in Jerome M. Segal’s intentions in his ingenious proposal for a Palestinian Declaration of Independence. However, I am afraid we still do not see eye to eye on its implications for the Palestinian citizens of Israel, regarding the matter of “dual citizenship and use of State of Palestine passports.” This issue seems to remain a blind spot, so to speak, in Mr. Segal’s political theory. Contrary to him, I do believe that it has not only a “great relevance” to our subject, but, rather, a dangerous one.

It is true that “the condition of the Arab citizens of Israel will improve” in the morning after the establishment of the Palestinian state, and it is true that advocates of expulsion in Israel “do not need and do not wait for excuses such as the passport/dual citizenship approach to press their policies.” Nevertheless, a Palestinian passport, put in the hands of an Israeli Arab citizen, is destined to speed up the already rotating ethno-centrifugal Jewish state of Israel. Such a passport, with its political implications, will easily serve as a fig-leaved legal justification by the advocates of expulsion who, otherwise, have nothing else but sheer racism for a platform. The recent history of the Middle East clearly indicates that issues which were tactically swept under the carpet, on the pretext of having no “great relevance” at the time, are most likely to become time bombs. I am afraid the issue of “dual citizenship” is already ticking.

Since the notorious United Nations resolution saying “Zionism is racism” was passed thirteen years ago, whenever the word racism is used in a Jewish or an Israeli context, it immediately occupies the front burner and eclipses every other argument. However, raw nerves should not hinder logical inquiries.

“If we exclude its application to those Jews in the Diaspora who are still persecuted because of what they are—an application that should not be excluded,” I wrote, “the Israeli Law of Return is *in effect* a racist law.” And now dictionaries are flung open to define *what* is racism, and to argue that Jews are not a race, so

no Jewish law could be labeled as “racist.” The question of “who is a Jew” has not yet been decided upon even in the Israeli Knesset. However, the Israeli Law of Return, in its simplest implications, is not meant for non-Jews. Professor Rubinstein, American national as he is, is entitled to an instant Israeli citizenship according to the Law of Return, whether he wants it or not. The state of Israel has decided on his behalf that it belongs to him and that it does not belong to me.

My second edition of the *Random House Dictionary* defines “race,” among other definitions, as “a group of tribes or peoples forming an ethnic stock,” or “any people united by common history, language, cultural traits, etc.” Which means, in effect, that “common language” put aside, both definitions apply for the Jewish people. However, I am not going to cling to this lexical rebound. The Law of Return, in this context, is a masterpiece of deception. It does not declare that a non-Jew is not entitled to claim an immediate Israeli citizenship and residence. The bright, quasilegal side of it only states the rights of a Jew to that effect. But there is a dark side to it too, a perfect cabalistic dualism, which runs through Israeli Basic Laws in general. The state that is referred to as the only democracy in the Middle East is not the state of 18 percent of its citizens, not to mention 1.5 million Palestinians who have no rights in it (repeat: no rights) at all; nonetheless, this democracy seems perfectly *kosher* for the outside viewer, because even demolishing the house of a Palestinian is done legally, according to a certain law.

Labeling the Law of Return as in effect a racist law does not mean necessarily that Jews are a race; it means, rather, that all non-Jews are regarded by that law as such, and therefore they are not entitled to become Israeli citizens, unless they convert to Judaism, not to Israelism. The West Germans and the Chinese have such a law, with one important difference: citizens of Germany are all Germans, and those of China are all Chinese. But there are no Israelis in Israel. Come to think of it, Israel—paradoxically enough—may be the principal country in the world today where Jews are treated as a race. The main concern of all past governments, Labor and Likud alike, was and still is to keep the state strictly Jewish.

Five years after the Holocaust, the Law of Return provided the right haven for the castouts. However, since the Likud came to power in 1977 the memory of the six million has been once and again sacrilegiously used in the most cynical manner. So using the Holocaust today in the United States, to justify the dark side of the Law of Return, seems to me equally, albeit inadvertently, cynical. As for the wide-eyed argument of Professor Rubinstein that the Palestinians “may not be

able to return to the land of their forefathers, but there are many doors through which they can pass to find haven and build a new life”—I am not sure that even the highly trained Israeli pilots, hawk-eyed as they are, can point out a single one of those “many doors” as they fly over the refugee camps of the Middle East.

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