

The Jewish Agency for Israel
The Department for Jewish Zionist Education

Deep in the heart - and the lawbooks

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[On the Hatikvah Law, 2004]

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Ever so quietly, in a tone that could not be more muted, on Wednesday of last week the national anthem, "Hatikva" ("The Hope"), became state law. The legislation provides that any change in it will require an amendment. The law was passed in the Knesset by a majority of 38 to 8, with no discussion or reservations. Now, 118 years after Naphtali Herz Imber published the song "Tikvateinu" ("Our Hope"), the anthem has joined the blue-and-white flag and the menorah symbol, which have been anchored in law for 55 years.

What made the symbolic and solemn event of anchoring "Hatikva" in law into something so secretive and insignificant in the media was the prolonged dying of Palestinian Authority chairman Yasser Arafat. The little room that Arafat left was devoted by reporters to the wonder pill that is supposed both to kick the smoking habit and cure obesity, and other topics that really do make the Jewish soul soar in song.

So many Knesset members have tried so many times to make "the hope of 2,000 years," as the words of the anthem declare, into law - and failed. MK Pinchas Goldstein of the Liberal faction of the Likud proposed as far back as 1984 that the anthem be anchored in law and that the words to the song be displayed in every classroom. In 1993, Knesset members Silvan Shalom (now foreign minister) and Avraham Hirschon of the Likud proposed prison terms for anyone who defiles the honor of "Hatikva."

The millennium year, during Ehud Barak's tenure as prime minister, was one of proposals for laws that would constitutionally anchor the Jewish, democratic and Zionist character of Israel - each of these characteristics individually and all of them together. Among those who proposed such laws was MK Yosef Lapid (now justice minister) of Shinui. Presumably the fact that Lapid now heads the ministerial committee on legislation was of great help in mustering the government's support for the National Anthem Law. During that same period, Education, Culture and Sport Minister Limor Livnat, who at the time was a Likud MK, proposed bolstering the law with a special majority of 90 Knesset members. No less.

Russian hope

There were many other proposals, but this entire honorable bunch failed. It is in fact to deputy Knesset Speaker Michael Nudelman, the renegade MK of the National Union Knesset faction, that Naphtali Herz Imber's song owes its official status. Altogether, the National Anthem Law is a coproduction from the workshop of the immigration from Russia. The person who advanced the law in the Interior Committee and presented it in the plenum was MK Yuri Stern of the National Union.

"In Russia, when they would hear the anthem, the heart of every Jew leaped," explains Nudelman.

MK Ran Cohen of Meretz-Yahad was one of the few who voted against the law, he says, simply because he thought that it was superfluous. If they want to change the national anthem now, he asks, will they have to amend the law? Exactly! What luck that the law was not in force in 1905 when Dr. Y.L. Metman Cohen, a teacher from Rishon Letzion, rewrote Imber's song and changed the words "to return to the land of our fathers to the city where David stayed" to "be a free nation in our land, the land of Zion and Jerusalem."

The adaptations of the melody for "Hatikva" - the one that is so reminiscent of Czech composer Bedrich Smetana's "The Moldau" from his symphonic poem "My Country" - have been even more flexible. In 1958, the 10th anniversary of the founding of the state, it was reported to then prime minister David Ben-Gurion that conductor Gary Bertini had improvised on the music when he conducted the national anthem at the World Bible Contest. "The Old Man" demanded a severe reprimand of the person responsible for "playing supposedly improved national anthems in which there was an insulting and hurtful lack of taste." In retrospect it turned out that there had been no improvisation, but rather that because of the bad lighting, the orchestra simply could not see the conductor.

The good hope contest

The truth is that quite a number of people have looked into alternative hopes. True, when the Sixth Zionist Congress concluded in 1903, they were already singing "Hatikva" there. But only six years earlier, on the eve of the First Zionist Congress, Benjamin Ze'ev Herzl and Max Nordau held a contest to select the national anthem and promised a valuable cash prize. Because of problems of language, most of the 43 songs that were submitted were in German.

Nordau summed up this frustrating experience in a letter to Herzl: "I have spent a bleak day with these songs. They prove that not a single one of our talented people (whose existence I do not wish to doubt) has not been acquired for our idea." Nordau called the competitors "miserable amateurs," and liberally awarded the potential anthems the mark of 0. Herzl, the more generous of the two, tended toward a grade of 4. No song won the prize.

"Hatikva" was not adopted easily. The people of the Second Aliyah (wave of Jewish immigration to Palestine), for example, preferred Haim Nachman Bialik's "Birkat `am" ("Blessing of a Nation"), more familiarly known as "Tehezakna" ("Be Strong"). The religious public preferred Psalm 126, which is also part of the liturgy: "A song of Ascents. When the Lord brought back those who returned to Zion." After the Six-Day

War then MK Uri Avnery suggested replacing the eye looking expectantly toward Zion with Naomi Shemer's "Jerusalem of Gold."

The nationalist camp also sinned with thoughts of changing the national anthem. During the days of prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government, on the agenda of the ministerial committee on ceremonies and symbols there were, briefly, two proposals for improving the national anthem. This was in 1996, two years before the state's Jubilee celebration, and it was hard to ignore the fact that the lyrics of the national anthem were still dealing with longings to be a free people in our own land. Our former ambassador to Colombia, Jacques Dekel, proposed adding two stanzas that included, among other things, the striking line: "The State of Israel has arisen to restore the crown to its former glory." Presumably, Shas would have been happy to have supported this national anthem.

Jews' hope

Arab public figures have always had a problem with the words "a Jewish soul soars in song." In 1984 the committee of the heads of the Arab local councils argued that MK Goldstein's proposal to anchor the national anthem in law was racist. The Israeli consul-general in Atlanta in the mid-1990s, Mohammed Masarwa, refused to sing "Hatikva" on the grounds that was not his anthem. Former state controller Miriam Ben-Porat proposed upon her retirement in 2000 the addition of a second national anthem, for the sake of Arab citizens.

So where were the Arab Knesset members when Nudelman's law was passed nine days ago? MK Azmi Bishara of Balad, for example, only first heard this Wednesday that the law had passed, from a Haaretz reporter. "Maybe because of the rais we didn't pay attention?" he said. Anyway, according to him, "people are fed up with so many nationalist proposals. Who has the strength for riots? I haven't the strength."

The ultra-Orthodox, too, have never been enthusiastic about "Hatikva," which does not mention the name of God, and they often jeer at the author's fondness for the bottle. In 1993 there was a scandal when the leader of Shas, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, preferred to peruse a holy book rather than rise to his feet when the national anthem was played. Shas MK Shlomo Benizri argued at the time that "Hatikva" is a secular song that does not have any Jewish motif in it.

Like Bishara, Benizri and MK Avraham Ravitz of United Torah Judaism heard about the passage of the law from a Haaretz reporter. "I've never been opposed to the national anthem," claimed Benizri, "only to the attempt to force it on people." Ravitz: "I was not aware of the vote." He does not think that there was any point in protesting. "Who listens to protest these days? This isn't a period when matters of the spirit are discussed seriously."