

Sermon 8.04.18

In game theory a zero-sum game is one in which each participant's gain or loss is exactly balanced by the losses or gains of the other participants. If you get more than the other person gets less. A person cutting up a cake who takes a larger slice thereby reduces the amount of cake available for others.

The opening chapter of Parshat Ekev, Deuteronomy chapter 7, tells of the fight for ancient Canaan as a zero-sum conflict too:

"You shall be blessed above all peoples... And the LORD will take away from you all sickness... but will lay them upon all them that hate you. And you shall consume all the peoples that the Lord your God shall deliver to you."

Modern day Israel has made some decisions lately that make it seem like we are in a zero-sum game with all of the citizens there. A new law was just passed in Israel called the "nation-state law."

Those in favor say it puts Jewish values and democratic values on equal footing. Critics, however, say the law effectively discriminates against Israel's Arabs and other minority communities.

The law became one of the Basic Laws, which are similar to an Israeli constitutional law. In other words, it's very important. It's like if we passed a constitutional amendment.

The law declares that Jerusalem is the capital of Israel, sets the Hebrew calendar as the official calendar of the state, and recognizes Independence Day, days of remembrance, and Jewish holidays. These parts are not considered the controversial parts.

One clause of the bill downgrades the Arabic language from official language to "special" standing, but also states that "this clause does not harm the status given to the Arabic language before this law came into effect." That's medium controversial but probably does not change anything.

The really controversial part is declares... that Israel is the nation-state of the Jewish people and only of the Jewish people.

Opponents...claim that it prevents non-Jewish citizens of Israel from feeling that it is their country as well. The strongest objections to the law come from Israel's 130,000-strong Druze community.

The Druze are a breakaway sect from Islam. They are the only minority that serves in the IDF in large numbers alongside Jewish soldiers in some of the IDF's most elite units.

They fight alongside the Jews in the Israel Defense Forces in elite units and have paid a heavy price in lost lives in the defense of the nation.

Their leaders say they feel hurt and offended by this law and they are not alone.

The hawkish education minister and Jewish Home leader Naftali Bennett said the government had to find a way to heal the wounds it had inflicted on "our brothers who stand shoulder-to-shoulder with us on the battlefield and made a covenant with us."

Now I should point out that earlier versions of the law did include references to Israel as a democracy. And three years ago, Benny Begin drafted a proposed text of the law that kept the balance:

His version stated: "Israel is the homeland of the Jewish people, based on the foundations of freedom, justice and peace as envisioned by the prophets of Israel, and upholds equal rights for all its citizens."

Netanyahu, at the weekly cabinet meeting on Sunday, insisted that: "The State of Israel is the nation-state of the Jewish people, with full equality of rights for all its citizens."

He said: "Nothing in this law violates your [Druze] rights as equal citizens of the State of Israel, and nothing prejudices the special status of the Druze community in Israel. The people of Israel, and I am part of it, love and cherish you. We greatly value our partnership and our alliance," he said.

What do you think? I think some things are true whether or not you say them. Israel should have the right of return. Hatikva is the national anthem. Obviously Hebrew is the national language, the calendar is the Jewish calendar. These things are not being debated — so if you put them into law — okay.

But then the equality of all Israeli citizens is a commitment that is also worth saying again and again.

The Torah reading from Ekev gives a black and white situation — a zero sum game. When the children of Israel come into the Land "you shall consume all the peoples that the Lord your God shall deliver to you." I think it's meant to be a one time event.

Jewish life and democracy can flourish together. Passing a piece of important legislation that needlessly and deliberately omits one of them seems harmful to Israel's reputation.

There is no contradiction in being a Jewish state that opens its doors wide to all Jews, and in being a democracy that stands for full equality for all who live there.

Actually, that's one of things that makes me proud of Israel and it should be celebrated — and if it's true then we should have no problem saying it in law: "We treat people fairly, and equally."

Shabbat Shalom

