Diverse Visions for the State of Israel - An Organisational and Personal "Shared Citizenship" Perspective
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This paper aims to contribute a few ideas regarding MERCHAVIM’s, and my own, personal vision for the State of Israel.

MERCHAVIM’s mission is about creating the shared civil space, (in Hebrew the "merchav"), to accommodate extremely diverse visions of what the State of Israel should be. Diverse visions are of themselves, natural, welcome and to be encouraged. However some consensual fundamentals are essential if any society is going to be able to function and prosper.

Every society has an urgent need to clarify common foundations, based on shared values and common interests. Because Israel is a society characterised by particularly deep rifts and few fundamental agreements, this challenge is especially urgent.

A few examples should illustrate the gravity of the situation:

Israel’s roughly six and a half million citizens were recently usefully described as belonging to “five tribes”, of roughly equal size. In no particular order, but with very broad generalisations, these can be summarised as:

- A million + Arab, Muslim, Christian and Druze-Israeli citizens
- A million + Russian-Jewish Israelis
- A million+ Sephardi, generally quite religiously traditional Jews of North African and Asian extraction.
- A million + national-religious and ultra-orthodox Jews
- A million + western, Ashkenazi Jews, generally secular in orientation.

In Israel, as in many multi-cultural societies, citizens do not share national, religious, political or ethnic affiliations. However in Israel the situation is far more complex.
Regional conflict means that for more than fifty years Arab-Israeli citizens have found their state, Israel, at war with their people, The Palestinians. Between “a rock and a hard place”, such circumstances represent an ongoing and traumatic stress for any minority group. In this particularly fraught case, I believe that Arab-Israelis have shown exceptional skill in navigating this complex dilemma, and of course, it is critical that this continues in the face of mounting external pressures and internal exasperation.

Important elements among Jewish Israelis and world Jewry do not agree on the definition of the State itself, as a Jewish and / or a democratic one. This debate goes to the most fundamental questions of sources of authority. One side believes in God, as understood through Jewish sources and as interpreted by Rabbis, as the ultimate source of authority. The other side holds democratically elected government to be the legitimate source of collective decisions.

Additionally, many Arab-Israelis and a minority of intellectually influential Jewish-Israelis, seek to define Israel as “a state for all its citizens”, with Judaism confined to the private sphere and the Jewish People outside Israel implicitly disenfranchised.

Dramatically, and frankly pathologically in a world of nation-states, Israelis and the Jewish People cannot even agree on Israel’s physical boarders. This is a condition that virtually all political scientists would agree to be contrary to the most elementary, defining component in the formulation of any nation-state.

Culturally, Israelis are also deeply divided. We speak many languages, not just Hebrew, Arabic, Russian and Amharic, but also “secular” and “religious.” Some of us speak the liberal language of “rights”, others the religious language of “duties”, of “mitzvoth.” For much the same reason, Israelis cannot even agree on time. Some are busy navigating their year and daily routine by the moon, others by the sun.

In Israel these matters are not only of academic interest. Israel’s distinct actual and cultural languages, mean that Israelis are frequently incapable of identifying the many shared values and common interests. These, without any doubt do exist, shared among citizens of distinct but closely intertwined traditions.

**MERCHAVIM**’s job, in all this complexity, is to create a common civil platform of shared citizenship, building upon the one thing, beyond our shared humanity, that all Israeli citizens self-evidently do have in common - citizenship. Crucially, **MERCHAVIM** sees no reason to develop shared citizenship at the cost of other, and possibly more personally or collectively valued identities, such as affiliation to the Jewish or Arab Peoples.
The shared citizenship model, developed over years by Israelis from all “five tribes”, is one of a possible shared vision for a **fairer society**. This fairer Israel is consensually understood as one that provides a more equitable (fairer) relationship between group identity and access to basic resources and opportunities. It is a society that provides fairer opportunities to all the groups that share Israeli citizenship, allowing them to fully participate, contribute, succeed and flourish, even as they celebrate and maintain their national, religious and ethnic distinctiveness.

The model is designed not only to help Israelis discover areas of agreement, but also how to decently disagree – a basic art of democracy. This is essential for the sustainability of every multi-cultural society. It encourages the development of active, critical and responsible citizens, taking charge of their lives and cooperating to make Israel fairer through collaborations that bridge and soften Israel’s dominant divides.

The shared citizenship model overcomes many issues not by ignoring them, but by advocating incremental progress rather than the impossible resolution of the biggest questions. In this regard, I passionately believe that to demand that Israelis and the Jewish People quickly agree on a definition of Statehood is to tear Israel and the Jewish People apart, and to create a real threat of Balkanization.

For me the struggle for a fairer Israel is a deeply personal Jewish and Zionist challenge. I see it as both a moral and pragmatic imperative. As a Jew born and raised in the UK, I grew up believing that caring for others, community, and minority rights, were core Jewish values. As part of the Jewish-Israeli majority, I refuse to accept that what I held to be part of Judaism’s great contribution to civilization was mere pragmatic expediency, a result of “the Diaspora condition”. After all, preaching tolerance towards weak minorities clearly has no moral value unless or until one has the power to be intolerant.

Pragmatically, if Israel does not quickly evolve as a fairer, more open society, I fear that it is in real danger of fragmenting along the different axis I have described. And one thing is certain: this will be a collective disaster for all Israelis and the Jewish People.

However, unlike regional peace, this challenge is entirely in our hands. For exactly that reason, it is one that I am doubly passionate about. I am truly confident that Israeli citizens and the Jewish People, share the collective will, morality and wisdom to weave a common fabric that overcomes our real and often legitimate differences. We have the power to create a fairer, more decent, safer and secure Israel that reasonably, if imperfectly, accommodates our diverse visions.