Ignoring the Elephant in the Square, Shaul Arieli, 27/12/2020

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Saturday night at Balfour Street. I listen to the 10th speech, read the signs of the numerous organizations. And finally, ponder the meaning of the various protesters’ ignoring the elephant in the room (in this case, Jerusalem’s Paris Square).

The elephant, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, stands there in all its might, filling the square. It enables the despicable rule of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his flock of loyalists. Leaving the State of Israel without permanent borders for more than 70 years now. Trapping it in a reality of state and society that don’t know where they begin and where they end, who is within them and who is outside, what their identity is and what their regime is. A collection of warring tribes without a single, unifying idea.

A state is a spatial entity with recognized borders and a permanent population that maintains a single, independent central government. The territory is the spatial manifestation of the state, and it has great importance in the eyes of those who live in it – it is the heart of their identification with the state. A diplomatic border is a fundamental component of the modern state, and its stability has supreme importance politically, economically and militarily in terms of how the state is perceived by other states, and by its own citizens. The border marks the separation between the “self” and the “other.” Depending on the relationship, it is sometimes perceived as a barrier, one that protects us from the “others” who are beyond that boundary, and sometimes as the point of connection with them.

Because of the conflict, the State of Israel and the society that lives in its sovereign territory (within the Green Line) is not bounded by diplomatic borders and is not separated from the Palestinians who live in the West Bank. There is no line where the Israeli “self” ends and the Palestinian “other” begins. And with each passing day, Israel penetrates deeper into this area, where the vast majority of the population is Palestinian, chopping it up and harming its fabric of life – but cannot vanquish it demographically or spatially. It has no defined territory in which all its members can consolidate their modern national identity. It is a not a society that sees all of its members as equal before the one law that exists there, nor do all of its members belong to it of their free choice.

In the absence of agreed-upon territory and borders, Israeli society cannot overcome the rifts among its members, who live as separate groups, each adhering to a different territorial conception – to which it believes its identity is tied and in which it sees this identity being fulfilled. The society that currently lives “between the river and the sea” is replete with rifts: Israeli-Palestinian, Arab-Jew, religious-secular, democratic-fascist, Greater Land of Israel versus “Two States for Two Peoples,” a Jewish state versus a state of all its citizens, and more. Only an agreed-upon territory could negate some of these rifts and heal or contain the others.

Netanyahu is doing his utmost to preserve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and prevent the drawing of a diplomatic border between Israeli and Palestinian society. The lack of a border enables him – through oppressing some of the groups on the one hand while paying “protection” to other groups that live between the river and the sea – to preserve his rule.

Netanyahu opposes ending the conflict and setting a border, because a border would separate the five million Palestinians who live in the territories from the nine million Israelis who have national aspirations of their own, for with the absence of a border, the Palestinians are, against their will, members without rights in the society between the river and the sea. A border would prevent Netanyahu from continuing to drive a wedge between Israelis and Palestinians with the baseless threat that “a PLO state would be a mortal threat to Israel.” A border would seriously reduce the Jewish-Arab rift in Israel by moderating the national component in society and would ultimately promote civic equality.

A border would pull the carpet out from under the messianic nationalists, depriving them of the platform on which they wage their war over the face of Israeli society, its government and values. It would force them and Netanyahu to say goodbye to the “fees” that include huge amounts of funding for the settlements and their institutions, harming the rule of law, increasing religious indoctrination and racism. A border would also cancel the budgetary and social “fees” to the ultra-Orthodox and force them and the government to advance their full integration into society in terms of employment and education.

A border would remove the “security mask” behind which Netanyahu hides all of his dark attributes – corruption, fraud, deception, breach of trust, incitement, lies, greed, hedonism at the public’s expense – from his voters who still believe that, for the sake of Israel’s security, he may be forgiven everything. A border would nullify all the ideas of establishing a binational state and would enable Israel to remain a democratic country that ensures equality to all and with its symbols, culture and way of life, fulfills the right of the Jewish people for self-definition in its homeland.

As we head toward yet another election, the Balfour protesters should put forward a complete – diplomatic, security-related, social and economic – ideological conception that offers an alternative to Netanyahu’s policy. An accord and permanent borders are the heart of the change needed to unify Israeli society within a political framework, to produce a society whose members, out of free choice, would be obliged to recognize it as defining them and their identity more than all the other different characteristics.

Perhaps then, all the politicians who wish to unseat Netanyahu will muster the courage to echo the comments of President-elect Joe Biden, who stated at a J Street reception in September that “the two-state solution is the only way to ensure Israel’s long-term security while preserving its Jewish and democratic identity… And it is also the only way to ensure the Palestinians’ right to a state of their own.”