

The right to protest - up to the coastline

Democracy is not only an expression of the values that we believe in and of Jewish heritage but it is a strategic asset of the highest order for Israel.

By Yehuda Ben Meir

The public debate has focused lately on one of the most important and vital questions in any democratic society. Where does the border run between freedom of expression and the right to expose and criticize the incumbent government, including those most precious like the IDF and Shin Bet security service, and the elemental duty to be unquestioningly loyal to the state and its institutions.

As usual here, the debate is tainted by a great deal of demagoguery, unnecessary and groundless accusations and a small measure of incitement. The extreme right is trying to create an atmosphere of public hysteria with "traitors and informers," and the extreme left is willing to defend any despicable act, like that of a lecturer at an Israeli university who is working abroad for an academic boycott of Israeli institutions of higher learning. Both sides are taking the name of patriotism in vain, and the latter are doing the same to academic freedom.

The truth is that anyone who is not guided by an extreme political agenda will not find it difficult to locate the border. It can be figuratively described as running parallel to Israel's coastline. In Israel it is permitted to demonstrate against the occupation, even if that is incorrect. In Israel it is allowed to demonstrate against the occupation barrier, as long as the protest is nonviolent. "Peace Now" is allowed to document all construction in the settlements to publish its findings in the Israeli media and raise a hue and cry. This is not informing, but exercising the right of every citizen to act to the best of his ability against a policy he believes is disastrous for Israel. It is true that everything published in Israel is copied and published abroad, but that is not a reason to paralyze democracy or to restrict the right to protest.

But all this ends at the coastline. It is permitted to wage an uncompromising struggle in Israel with the aim of changing the country's policies and path, but it is forbidden to knowingly and deliberately obtain help from hostile elements, not to mention hostile elements, in order to impose on Israeli citizens a path they have not chosen. It is not the language and circulation of the criticism that matter, but the audience for which it is intended.

Whoever lends a hand to a boycott of Israeli institutions, or of agricultural goods it exports, whatever the motive, is showing disloyalty to his country. Whoever dares to assist, in any way, attempts to prosecute army officers or heads of state abroad is crossing a red line. Whoever gave information to the Goldstone Fact Finding Mission established by a one-sided body that is hostile to Israel, cannot be called a loyal citizen.

Dirty laundry must be hung outside, because it is well known that there is nothing more cleansing and purifying than the light of day. But it has to be hung in our own back yard (even if foreigners see it) and not in the neighbor's yard, especially if the neighbor wants to expel us from our homes.

Democracy is not only an expression of the values that we believe in and of Jewish heritage, but it is also a strategic asset of the highest order for Israel. Israel receives vital and extensive support in the free world because it is a democratic state that holds dear the right of protest and freedom of expression. Without such support we would be in dire straits. But at the same time, a state has the right to demand unconditional loyalty from every citizen, even if he disagrees with the path his country is taking. Whoever acts otherwise is excluding himself from the community.

