

{FEBRUARY 5 2005}

DUNAM AFTER DUNAM

What would we say if an American institution, holding a seventh of all the land in the United States, adopted statutes that allowed it to sell or rent land only to White Anglo-Saxon Protestants? We would not believe it. And it is, indeed, impossible. But that's the way things are in Israel. This is now the subject of a stormy public debate.

These are the facts: The Jewish National Fund (in Hebrew Keren Kayemet le-Israel – KKL) holds 13% of all the land in Israel. Its statutes explicitly prohibit the sale or rental of land to non-Jews. This means that every Jew in the world, living anywhere from Timbuktu to Kamchatka, can get land from the KKL, without even coming to Israel, while an Arab citizen of Israel, whose forefathers have lived here for hundreds – or even thousands – of years, cannot acquire a house or an apartment on its land.

The debate arose after a recent ruling of the Israeli Supreme Court which proscribed discrimination between citizens in the distribution of land. On the strength of this, the KKL has been sued. Now the Attorney General has decided that the Government cannot discriminate against Arab citizens, even while distributing land belonging to the KKL.

This is all very nice, but there is a “but”. The best legal brains looked for a way out: How to keep the discrimination alive in spite of the court's decision? No Problem. The Attorney General simply proposes that for every dunam (1000 square meters, a Turkish measure still applied in Israel) that the KKL will have to distribute – God forbid – to Arabs, the government will compensate it with another dunam somewhere else. The alternative land will be in the “peripheral” areas, the Negev and the Galilee, where it is much more profitable. And for good measure, the government will guarantee that the annual revenues of the KKL will reach half a billion Shekels. Thus the cake will be divided but remain whole.

The KKL, by the way, appoints almost half the directors of the “Israel Land

Authority”, the government body that is in charge of all state-owned land in Israel.

In this situation, 20% of the citizens of Israel are denied the right to buy a home in large parts of the country, while this right is enjoyed by Jews living in Brooklyn and Odessa.

How did this state of affairs come about?

Like many other bad things here, it started quite innocently.

More than a hundred years ago, when the Zionist movement was created, the need arose to buy land for Jewish immigrants in Palestine. The KKL was set up for this purpose. In every Zionist home around the world a blue collection box was hung up. In every classroom in Jewish schools, children were urged to drop their coins into the box. In Jewish schools in this country, KKL-trustees were appointed, whose job was to encourage donations, for example by organizing fund-raising competitions between classes and between schools. The blue box became a symbol of the Zionist movement, perhaps the most prominent. I, too, put my coins into the box that was passed along the benches every Friday in my classroom in the Ahad-Ha'am elementary school in Tel-Aviv.

With the money thus collected, a lot of land was acquired, on which Kibbutzim and Moshavim were set up. That was the height of Zionist idealism. The “Redemption of the Land” and “Hebrew Labor” were the cornerstones of the Zionist dream.

And, indeed, what could be more beautiful? Children all over the world dropped their pennies into the blue box. The land of Israel was bought with good money. On this land the pioneers, sons of merchants and usurers, tilled the field in the sweat of their brows.

All over the world, Jewish children were singing: “I shall tell you, girl, / And you too, boy, / How in the land of Israel / The land is redeemed. // A dunam here, a dunam there, / Clod after clod, / The land of the people is being bought, / From the North to the Negev. // On the wall there hangs a box, / A blue box, / Every penny in the box / Redeems land...”

However, this beautiful story had a dark side, which was not registered in Zionist consciousness.

The land was indeed bought, often at exorbitant prices, but from rich absentee owners, who did not live on it or cultivate it. When the late Ottoman Empire was bankrupt and in dire need of money, it sold huge tracts to rich Arab merchants in Jaffa, Beirut and other cities, who bought them as an investment. The Arab Felaheen (farmers), who had tilled the land for many generations, were mere tenants. When the KKL bought the land, the Felaheen were driven out, often with the help of the Turkish, and later the British police.

In spite of all this effort, when the United Nations resolved in November 1947 to

partition the country between a Jewish and an Arab State, less than 7% of the land belonged to Jews. Only a part of this area belonged to the KKL, the rest to private Jewish owners in the towns and the agricultural “colonies”.

Logic would have dictated that with the founding of the State of Israel, the KKL transfer its lands to the State. After all, that was the idea of collecting the money.

But this did not happen. In fact, the very opposite took place: the new state transferred to the KKL millions of dunams of land expropriated from Arabs - the refugees who were not allowed to return (“absentees” in legal language), those who had remained in the country but were absent on a given day from their villages (“present absentees”), as well as Arabs who became citizens of Israel.

It is important to keep this in mind, since it disproves the big lie that hovers over the whole debate: that the KKL land was bought with the money of the Jewish people. The greater part of the present KKL land was not bought at all, but conquered in war and transferred to the KKL.

Why transferred? Why did the sovereign state transfer lands gratis to a non-state body? Only one reason comes to mind: so as to continue with the discrimination against the Arab citizens.

In an official brief, the KKL argues that it does not owe loyalty to the principles of the State of Israel, as put down in the 1948 Declaration of Independence (equality between all citizens, regardless of religion and race), but to “The Jewish People”. This means that “The Jewish People”, which is not a political body, is being presented as an independent entity superior to the State of Israel.

The KKL does not act, of course, for “the Jewish People”. It is an instrument of the Israeli Jewish community against the Israeli Arab community. It has become an instrument for institutionalized discrimination. The Attorney General’s sleight of hand, designed to satisfy the demand of the Israeli Supreme Court for equality between all citizens, while still allowing a body based on discrimination to keep hold of 13% of the land in the state, does not change the situation in principle.

The KKL is not unique. Discrimination reigns in many fields. In the last few days alone, the following facts happened to come to light:

1. The chiefs of the Treasury Ministry are pondering how to pay allowances to big Jewish families, without paying them to big Arab families. (There are two communities in Israel with a soaring birth-rate: the Jewish orthodox and the Muslim Arab, especially Bedouin.)

2. The Ministry of the Interior is pushing a law that allows all foreigners who marry Israelis to acquire Israeli citizenship, even if they are not Jewish - but explicitly excludes Arabs. This denies thousands of young Arabs, citizens of Israel, the right to

set up a family in Israel, if the bride or bridegroom is a resident of the Palestinian territories, even if he or she is a relative.

3. The Ministry of Education confirmed what until now has been an open secret: that the appointment of every teacher and principal in an Arab school in Israel is subject to the approval of the General Security Service (Shin-Bet). But the ministry is progressing with the times: Until now, the Shin-Bet representative was automatically the vice-chairman of the appointments committee. From now on, he will only be a simple committee member.

It would be nice if we could say that these phenomena, and the many others of the sort, are inspired by the right-wing. But the truth is that most of them came into being when the Zionist left was in control, and continue now with the support of the left-wing whose representatives serve in the Sharon government.

This is not the state that we promised ourselves in the Declaration of Independence. We have a tough struggle ahead of us, until Israel becomes a democratic, liberal, secular, pluralist and egalitarian state.

A step in this direction would be the abolition of the KKL and the transfer of its lands to the state.