Correspondence

The Soviet Jewry Movement

To the Editors:

How wonderful it was to read Yossi Klein Halevi's article on Jacob Birnbaum ("Jacob Birnbaum and the Struggle for Soviet Jewry," Azure 17, Spring 2004). I met Birnbaum during my first visit to the United States after being expelled from a Soviet prison in 1981. His modesty was such that I could scarcely comprehend the extent of his role in the struggle on behalf of Soviet Jewry. Naturally, the activists in the field were more conspicuous than Birnbaum the theoretician. It was only through this essay that I came to understand the great inspiration that served him in his leadership in the early days.

It is important to note, however, that our Zionist activity in the Soviet Union was largely unconnected to what Birnbaum was doing. Nonetheless, we did both start with the same frame of reference: The lessons of the Holocaust. Zionist activism in Riga, for example, began at the Holocaust graves of Rombola, on the outskirts of the town where I grew up to become one of the famed "airplane hijackers." Klein Halevi is correct in saying that the incident was the turning point of the struggle. However, he does not mention that on December 24, 1970—the day we were sentenced—100,000 Jews assembled in Dag Hammarskjold Plaza in New York and demanded, "Let my people go."

I now understand that they gathered thanks in no small part to Jacob Birnbaum, whose vision was so wonderfully realized. Klein Halevi writes that, from the outset, Birnbaum envisioned the educational impact of the struggle on American youth, and he was right.

If I am not mistaken, it was Malcolm Hoenlein who told me during my visit to the United States, "We have educated an entire generation on your struggle." While I was most happy to hear this, I am sorry that the contribution our struggle has made is still a modest one. It is true that many of the activists grew into leaders, and their greatness is in that they replaced the previous establishment. I can only regret, however, that the desire to engage in an uncompromising public fight on behalf of the Jewish people has not become a more widespread custom.

Yosef Mendelevich
Jerusalem

To the Editors:

In recent times, there has been a growing tendency to minimize the significance of the protest movement on behalf of Soviet Jewry. Accordingly, the decision of Azure's editors to publish Yossi Klein Halevi's masterly survey of the rise of the Soviet Jewry movement in America on the occasion of its fortieth anniversary is most timely, and has stimulated numerous important discussions.

Reaching back into his own memories of a passionate, youthful activism, and backed up by substantial documentation, Klein Halevi has shown the seminal nature of the student movement for Soviet Jewry in the 1960s, the movement that laid the foundations of the later, more influential national movement. Naturally, he is modest about his own contributions to that important student ferment. As a result, I would recommend readers to his moving book, *Memoirs of a Jewish Extremist: An American Story* (1995).

I am also pleased that he has captured so much of my own determination to shape not only a protest movement, but a truly redemptive movement in the spirit of the Jewish faith and history.

Jacob Birnbaum
New York City

Yossi Klein Halevi responds:

I am deeply appreciative to Yosef Mendelevich for his response, especially for his warm memories of Jacob Birnbaum. One point, though, needs to be corrected: The demonstration of December 24, 1970 did not attract anywhere near 100,000 participants. In fact, not until two years later, with the first Solidarity Sunday demonstration, organized by Malcolm Hoenlein's Greater New York Conference on Soviet Jewry, did a Soviet Jewry demonstration finally attract that level of mass participation. Though relatively small, the demonstrations that did occur during the Leningrad Trial were passionate and frequent—and inspired by Birnbaum's vision and active, practical guidance.

Eliezer Berkovits

To the Editors:

David Hazony's essay "Eliezer Berkovits, Theologian of Zionism" (Azure 17, Spring 2004) does due justice to a thinker whose Zionist theology—as opposed to his writing on the Holocaust—is often ignored.

However, it seems to me that by setting up Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook as a foil to Berkovits, Hazony presents a simplistic version of the thinking of the former, while in fact both thinkers

share many of the positions attributed by Hazony to Berkovits alone.

Hazony notes three characteristics of Berkovits' theological Zionism: (i) "that the Jewish collective identity is… a prerequisite for the fulfillment of the Jewish moral vision"; (ii) "that the centrality of the collective translates into a demand for national sovereignty"; and (iii) "that the resultant understanding of Jewish history, the predicament of exile, and the problem of enlightenment makes the Jewish state a precondition for the success and even survival of Judaism in the modern era."

R. Kook often articulated the first two of these ideas. For example, in one of his comprehensive essays, "The Intellectual Process in Israel," he writes:

> From the very inception of this people… there was manifested the aspiration to establish a great human collective that would "keep the way of the Lord to do righteousness and justice"…. In order that this goal be accomplished, this human collective must be in possession of a socio-political state, a sovereign state at the peak of human civilization…. Such a nation will make a statement that not only an elite, not only pietists and ascetics may live in the light of the divine idea, but entire peoples with all that society has to offer… encompassing all the socio-economic strata, from the intelligentsia all the way down to the masses.

In addition, both thinkers realized that the return to the land and the establishment of a state would require a renewal, but not a reform, of halacha. R. Kook wrote of the uniqueness of the "Tora of the land of Israel" and the need to create a new synthesis of halacha and agada, while Berkovits tried to locate within the system of talmudic law those principles which would allow for this renewal.

Hazony also gives short shrift to R. Kook's relevance by pigeonholing him and his son, Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda, as "redemptive determinists." It would, I believe, not be advisable to read any idea or position of the son as representative of the father. The writings of the elder Kook reveal a much more complex thinker than the one to whom Hazony alludes. It is correct that he saw the Zionist enterprise as part of a messianic process (the claim of determinism is more difficult to maintain), but this position was made possible by an appreciation of the role of modernity in bringing about a renewal of Judaism, which in turn is possible only in the land of Israel.

Yet Hazony continues to identify father and son in assuming that the political agenda enunciated by

Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda and his disciples after 1967 is the only true heritage of the father's thought. Furthermore, he assumes that with the rejection of the territorial message by the majority of Israeli society, R. Kook's thought is no longer relevant.

In fact, disciples of the elder R. Kook who do not follow the dogmatic line of the Merkaz Harav Kook yeshiva have showed how his teachings can be relevant in contemporary Israel. In this context, the names and writings of Rabbis Yehuda Amital, Yoel Bin-Nun, and Yuval Sherlo are exemplary.

It is true that, as a result of the death of R. Kook in 1935, his thought does not take into account the implications of the Holocaust to Jewish survival, a question that was crucial for Berkovits. R. Kook did not envision the establishment of the State of Israel, but instead believed in an imminent "spiritual revolution." This caused a serious (and perhaps tragic) lacuna in his Zionist thinking—that is, his lack of consideration for the significance and workings of a Jewish state established by both religious and secular Jews in an unredeemed world. The fact that he did not articulate the vision of such a state has contributed to the confusion of many of his followers in defining their message to Israeli society as a whole and in formulating their own understandings of the meaning of Israel.

Unfortunately, neither R. Kook and his followers nor Berkovits have succeeded in showing us how the State of Israel can and should become "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." They have left that burden to us, and to future generations.

Kalman Neuman
Jerusalem

To the Editors:

The work of Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits as presented by David Hazony is a great example of the trend depicted in Daniel Polisar's editorial in the same issue, "Towards a Common Judaism" (Editorial, Azure 17, Spring 2004). To my understanding, Berkovits' main innovation for twentieth-century Judaism was that Judaism is essentially incomplete without the elements of country and sovereignty; that in fact, all of exilic Judaism is a desperate attempt to preserve the Jewish people toward the end of creating a sovereign form of holiness; and that in essence, holiness cannot be truly achieved without the Jewish individual's contribution to the sovereignty of the nation. Taken this way, the secular soldier hailing from the most secular kibbutz may contribute to the holiness more than a yeshiva student

in Brooklyn. This theological reasoning flies in the face of all detractors of military service on religious grounds, and interprets Judaism as a lofty collection of groundless ideals, according to which suffering the vicissitudes of the world is an ideal unto itself.

With the establishment of a Jewish state, Judaism can now move beyond the stultified extremes that have characterized it—beyond the nihilistic extreme of a Douglas Rushkoff, for whom God is a great big Nothing; but also beyond the vision of Jewish life in the *shtetl*—and focus on the moderate middle ground. According to this middle ground, there is work to be done, a nation, a land and a civilization to protect and nurture. According to the middle ground, we are one people, with a common destiny.

These two articles leave me with a profound sense of optimism.

Yuval Brandstetter
Pardesia

David Hazony responds:

Kalman Neuman is right when he suggests that Abraham Isaac Kook's thought is more nuanced than one would gather from the majority of activists and rabbis who claim to follow his teachings today. He is also right to draw a major distinction between the teachings of Kook and those of his son, Tzvi Yehuda. I agree with Neuman that the elder Kook was an immensely creative thinker, and the Jewish people are sorely in need of both his example and a deepened inquiry into his thought. Moreover, there are certainly areas of overlap between his worldview and that of Berkovits—the centrality of sovereignty to classical Judaism, the importance of modernity in helping the Jews achieve that end, and the need for a renewed approach to halacha in light of sovereignty, being three striking examples.

At the same time, however, it would be a mistake to suggest that their view of history was identical. Kook *was* a redemptive determinist, in the sense that he saw the imminence of the final redemption as a fundamental belief. "The entire people believes that there will be no more exile after the redemption that is presently commencing," he wrote, "and this profound belief is the secret of its existence." Kook saw history as an unstoppable process, in which every generation produces a new synthesis out of conflicting forces. In this his writings are often more reminiscent of Nahman Krochmal, or even G.W.F. Hegel, than of his own contemporaries. It was this determinism, moreover, which formed a core belief

in the movement that came later, and which bears his name.

Compare this with Berkovits' concern that the Zionist ingathering could fail in any number of ways—not only because of the threat from external enemies, but also because the Jews themselves might not understand the meaning of their own endeavor, and might allow it to descend into either state-idolatry or universalist national denial. "Not every form of *eretz yisrael* is worth the trouble," he wrote, "and many a form could be unworthy of Judaism."

In Kook's view, the outcome is assured, and the challenge is to learn how to march in step. In Berkovits' view, history is mainly in human hands, and the risks are immense. This places a different kind of responsibility on the shoulders of those who act in it.

Strikes in Israel

To the Editors:

In her essay "Strikes Again" (Azure 17, Spring 2004), Evelyn Gordon examines the causes of strikes in Israel, but completely ignores the contribution of the employer of most of these employees—that is to say, the Ministry of Finance—to the problem.

For years, the ministry has "educated" workers in the public sector to strike in response to its policy of ignoring their demands. By means of a long tradition of broken agreements and unilateral measures, workers' unions have all too frequently had to resort to the only tools at their disposal.

In addition, it should be noted that it is in fact the same Finance Ministry, and not the workers' unions, that objects to referring labor disputes to arbitration, primarily because the ministry is afraid that the arbitrators' decisions will go against the policies it is trying to advance.

Gordon's article reads as if it could have been signed by a Finance Ministry spokesman. Too bad the other side of the argument was not presented to balance what is an extremely complex picture.

Yossi Natansohn
Tel Mond

Evelyn Gordon responds:

Yossi Natanson is correct that the Finance Ministry has at times contributed to the problem of strikes by refusing to begin negotiations in good time. The local authorities strike of February 2004—in which it was clear that the treasury would eventually have to provide additional funds, and there was therefore no reason to wait until a strike broke out—was a case in point.

Nevertheless, that has not been the case in the majority of strikes in recent years. Most of these strikes either began after the treasury had already made a reasonable offer, or were over issues of policy that should not have been negotiated with the unions. Examples of the former include the numerous strikes to demand a real wage increase in 2001. Given the deep recession and the layoffs and wage cuts in the private sector at that time, the treasury was quite justified in initially offering compensation for inflation, but not a penny more; the fact that the treasury later caved in and agreed to real wage increases in no way undermines the correctness of its initial position.

As for policy issues, the unions do not own the country's economic infrastructure and are not elected by the public to set economic policy. It would therefore be completely inappropriate for the government to negotiate with the unions over whether, for instance, the nation's ports should be privatized. Negotiations with the unions are appropriate only after a policy decision has been reached, to settle issues of financial compensation, job security, and so forth—issues that the treasury generally has been willing to discuss. The strikes, however, have usually been called not over these issues, but over the policy decisions themselves—and the fact that the treasury has usually ended up caving in to the strikers' demands in no way undermines the validity of its initial refusal to negotiate policy issues with them. It merely highlights the governmental weakness that, as my article noted, has been a key factor in encouraging public-sector strikes. In that sense, the treasury has indeed "educated" workers to strike.

The Jews' Right to Statehood

To the Editors:

Ruth Gavison is right when she says in her article "The Jews' Right to Statehood: A Defense" (Azure 15, Summer 2003) that (a) it is important to articulate, in terms of general moral and political philosophy, the basis for the legitimacy of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state; and (b) the most promising approach is to proceed by stages, beginning with how the Zionist movement acted legitimately in the pre-state period when creating the infrastructure for a Jewish and democratic state.

I believe, however, that Gavison skips over a difficult spot in her argument by assuming that the Zionist effort to form a Jewish nation state did not inherently violate fundamental principles of justice. For example, Joseph Raz has argued that any imposition of Jewish values upon

non-Jewish citizens, or of some version of Jewish values on Jews adhering to different versions of Judaism, is simply unjust. On a more general level, John Rawls argued that while a state like Israel, in preferring one particular religion (or one version of what constitutes a "good" form of life) is indeed not "just," it can nevertheless be considered a "decent" state. After the fact, then, it might be sufficient to argue that Israel's decency is legitimacy enough.

But in Gavison's stage-by-stage approach, she still needs to present some argument for why the Zionists were entitled at the outset to insist upon control of the coercive machinery of a state. Why was it not enough to aspire to the status of, say, the Amish in America—that is, a community of persons with its own way of life that locates itself, non-coercively, in a discrete geographic area, without aspiring to power over anyone else?

One possible argument—and one that Gavison at times suggests—begins with the premise that justice is not the sole political value; accordingly, there is a pluralism, in Isaiah Berlin's use of the term, of alternative valuable forms of states. For if there were such a thing as a Jewish system of political values, it would be legitimate for Jews to seek the creation of a state in order to exemplify how such values might be realized together with the value of justice. Likewise, other states could and should pursue their own valuable solutions. (All such alternatives would also presumably constitute at least "decent" states, as defined by Rawls.)

Jews, unlike the Amish, *need* to live in a political world in order to realize themselves as a nation, and in order to grow. Indeed, a critical review of Jewish history shows that many of our key "religious" developments emerged from political confrontations. For example, Baruch Halpern has argued that the turn towards individualism and against the authority of lineages at the time of Hezekiah was not just a consequence of, but rather a key instrument in, Hezekiah's plan to focus on the defense of Jerusalem, and to abandon the countryside to the Assyrians: Hezekiah publicized, using the words of Amos and Hosea, the new doctrine that the local family shrines would not be protected by God, and that individuals should henceforth view themselves as loyal solely to Jerusalem. Similarly, the Pharisees emerged as a movement from the success of the Maccabean rebellion, and, I would argue, as an effort to justify Mattithias' ruling—issued without any basis in tradition—that Jews are permitted to fight on the Sabbath.

Oliver Wendell Holmes argued that in the United States, the individual states are laboratories of

democracy. I submit that the same is true on an international level: Different nation states serve as laboratories for investigating how communities within those states can live together, and how individuals can form communities. As a Jewish state, Israel may or may not be "just," but it is certainly a "decent" and valuable experiment by a people that has shown great creativity in the past, and that continues to address creatively the new problems posed by modernity and pluralism.

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