

Correspondence

On Love and Lennon

TO THE EDITORS:

Ze'ev Maghen, in his charming piece "Imagine: On Love and Lennon" (*Azure* 7, Spring 1999), writes that the will to love and be loved is the sole true motive for human behavior, and that love means isolating an object from and preferring it over everything else. The pretense to love everyone equally means eliminating distinctions among people and among groups, something attainable only by means of a Procrustean bed—which is why regimes based upon universal love are murderous ones. From this Maghen draws a conclusion about the kind of group one "should" identify with: That of one's national origins. Only our own people deserve our greatest love.

For purposes of the discussion, I am willing to grant the claim that love is the only motive, to skip the question of the origins of love, and to call into question the assumptions of his essay, all by way of a single question: How do we determine the object of our love?

When dealing with love directed at a single person, the first condition for love is availability. We do not fall in love with someone whom we do not

know about; rather, we tend to fall in love with people who we have reason to believe will reciprocate. Rejected love hurts, and people who tend to fall in love with those who cannot love them back are condemned to tragic lives. The likelihood of falling in love and receiving love in return depends on any number of individual variables, but also on how many opportunities the two people have to meet. A peasant who has never left his isolated village will fall in love with a local girl, while a nomad may fall in love with someone who lives far off. This is why a common bit of advice for the broken-hearted is to create a broad network of social contacts.

The second condition for falling in love is the power of imagination. We project upon the object of our love positive qualities which we think will act in synergy with our own. The old line about the masochist's longing for the sadist contains a great deal of truth. Love disappoints as soon as we discover that we have been deceiving ourselves with regard to the traits of our beloved, or to our own, or that the partners to the tacit agreement have themselves changed over the course of time. The point is that love is fluid; it derives from self-definition, and it is liable to change its object.

What is true for interpersonal love is no less true for the sort discussed by Maghen. An individual may replace the group of people to whom he casts his affection with another group, or narrow or widen the existing one. A resident of Piedmont who loves his city may love its Italianness—that is, he may identify with a group that came into being during the last third of the nineteenth century—or he may love its own unique qualities. In the latter case, he may support the secessionist Northern League and feel a greater affection for people from Vienna than for those from Naples. A man from Barcelona or St. Sebastian may see himself as primarily Catalanian or Basque, or, alternatively, as Spanish, French or European. His preferences will depend upon the circumstances which shaped his worldview: Someone shaped by a tribal world will tend to prefer his own tribe, while someone shaped by a borderless world in which a billion people speak in English and eat at McDonald's is likely to adopt a far broader identity.

Maghen thinks that he can identify the “correct” level of identity. If we follow his line of thinking, we reach the conclusion that the best love is that which is restricted to the smallest group. The correct object of one's identity is a nation, and certainly not a social class, a profession, the human

race or one's Internet “chat” group. But if “smaller is better,” why is the nation the basic unit of identity—and not one's ethnicity, city, neighborhood or family?

The young Israelis whom Maghen met at the Los Angeles airport, followers of this swami or that, are depicted by Maghen as fools, because they choose to love the cosmos as a whole. He correctly observes that they misunderstand the teaching that they have embraced, but he has missed something more important about them: They did not fall in love with a vulgarized Eastern religion, but with the role that they have found for themselves—the sense of mission, the feeling of camaraderie among the members of their sect, the saffron outfit, and their release from the Israeli identity. They fell in love with an object that fit their emotional needs at this stage in their lives.

One can “redeem” them (I understand that Maghen is an expert in this) and bring them “home” to “proper” love, but why do so? The only answer is that *we* need everyone we can find who will help strengthen our own group. But to reach that conclusion, there is no need for Maghen's neat, yet untenable, theories about “love.”

Yaron London
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TO THE EDITORS:

I recently encountered Ze'ev Maghen's beautifully written essay, "Imagine: On Love and Lennon," in the Spring 1999 issue of *AZURE*, which I found on the desk of a friend. I took it home, read it, and my brain was on fire. The author took a strand of thought, a linear logical and emotional progression running through my mind, and clearly articulated it on paper. I thank him. It is an intellectual celebration, as well as a relief, to have an emotional and cerebral struggle translated into rational and linguistic clarity.

However, I am not writing to praise the author for a praiseworthy piece, but rather to challenge some of the very foundations of his pyramid of logic, pillars of his articulate architecture without which his symmetrical structure crumbles.

I think that "man" can be crudely divided into two compartments: The internal, distinct, personal consciousness, and the interaction of the self with the environment. I'm not saying that they are two separate entities; of course not—the internal consciousness reacts to stimuli from the world through physical senses in a continuous, spiraling, interdependent relationship that makes man man. I'm simply suggesting that there exist both the distinct "personality," on the one hand, and the self that perceives the environment and is a part of the environment,

on the other—the same abstract separations used to defend either side of the nature-versus-nurture arguments.

Now, tentatively adhering to this simple model of man, I have immediate problems with the author's conception of love. I agree with him that love's a thing. When he asked, "Why do you get up in the morning?" my body screamed, "Love, dammit, Maghen!" And when I saw those pretty four capital letters on the top of the next page, I knew that the author and I were sharing a moment. My disagreement arises with Maghen's belief that love is preferential. To a certain extent, of course, love *is* preferential: We relate to people who share pieces of ourselves—sympathy and compassion are founded on our abilities to imagine our own emotions in other people, as if that person were an extension of the self. So inevitably, we will be able to love and sympathize with those human beings with whom we share most characteristics: Family, friends, lovers, etc. All of this does indeed create the hierarchical love that the swamis in Maghen's essay were so afraid of: The preferential love that values specific human beings over others based on their personalities, their existing characteristics that relate to you.

But I think that's only half the heart. Preferential love feeds the part of man that is his internal consciousness, his recognized distinct self. It is

a practical love based on the ability of other individuals to tap into and extract personal emotions from your body, a practical love based on existing real characteristics between two people that attract each to the other, based on the realization that you can only meet and share experiences with so many people. Fine. Yes, I love my daddy more than your daddy and yes, Rabbi Akiva hit the bull's-eye.

But another part of the individual, the individual that is not so much an internal, distinct consciousness but a being that interacts with its environment and perceives itself as a piece in a larger puzzle, also feels a type of "love." It is a being that feels unified with strangers—of course based on the same assumption that strangers can feel my emotions and share my thoughts and experiences—good old beautiful human imagination. But this type of love is one of *potential*. It is the love of the imagined human potential in strangers. And this love manifests itself ideally in the child. Every man looks at a child and feels what I would call love for it, and it is not a nostalgic love; it is a love of the potential of that child, the inherent potential of innocence to feel any emotion. This is the basis of universal love.

It's obvious the author understands what I'm talking about—he just doesn't seem to respect it. True—universal love won't get me "turned-on,"

but it *does* get one up in the morning. And people sacrifice their lives every day for that love—dying for children, fighting for the innocent sufferers, jumping into fires to save schoolchildren, working as social workers in inner-city neighborhoods. These people, sometimes called heroes, are not people who are able to love everyone preferentially, but they *are* moved by that incredible, tangible connection to man, particularly to innocence, because it confirms unity in its potential to feel all. This is exactly what people "kill or die for"—the imagined conception of shared humanity.

Maghen asks the question, "Why do I get up in the morning?" Answer: Love. Now, Maghen knows that every reader whose daddy didn't spank him too hard is going to agree with him. He is banking on it. Why? Because he has faith in the universalism of the heart, in the realization that the anonymous reader is human and, therefore, loves. And loves to love. I am not saying that this constitutes an intimate relationship between the author and the reader, but there is a beauty, an abstract love, a potential love, based on the faith he has in the reader, an emotional shared consciousness worth fighting for. And, of course, it is a type of love much different from the love of your girlfriend who unlocks specific emotions because of specific personality traits and

specific shared experiences. It is a love perpetuated by the very existence of strangers, a love that grows precisely because you are *not* “hanging out” with that person.

Maghen deems the two strands of love—preferential characteristic-based love and the universal potential-based love—mutually exclusive. Either the swami or Jewish particularism. Either Rabbi Akiva in this world or Christ in heaven. I strongly disagree. The two rather exist together, in harmony, side by side, in different realms but in the same individual. People don’t just live in this world. Without imagination, this world is just skin and bones. You need imagination to “feel” the soul and what people may call divinity in all its glory, to make man both animal and God. Indeed. Why do the two types of love have to be mutually exclusive? Because universalism threatens to suffocate preferential love? Because this conception of love is keeping Jews in New York? No way. Every individual is aware that love is also preferential in nature. Jews don’t live in the United States because universalism has drowned their ability to see their distinctiveness and, therefore, go where they can relate to more people, Israel. No, they live in the United States because their conception of preferential love is based on characteristics that have less to do with ethnic and religious qualifications. They are, as Maghen so

eloquently put it, more connected to their bowling team.

Which brings me to my next conflict: The characteristics Maghen uses to judge whether one should be able to preferentially love an individual. His vision of various socio-cultural units interacting makes me feel warm and fuzzy inside. I am just as terrified of the all-red rug and the pixel rug as he is. It’s just that I am not completely convinced that the social group a Jew should be a part of, the distinct socio-cultural unit he should throw himself into, should be the Jewish community. As I was reading, I was waiting for Maghen to explain it to me—part of me was anticipating a mind-blowing revelation. But instead I found the humble, not so reassuring but truly admirable words, “I don’t know.” Yeah, me neither. To me it’s obvious that it should not be the one and only socio-cultural group to belong to—just look at this country of five million Jews and counting. I’ve never seen such a compartmentalized, fictionalized state in my life, save Lebanon, and I have been to many countries (a good twenty-five or so): Secular versus religious, Sephardi versus Ashkenazi, Ethiopian versus Russian. Judaism as an over-arching characteristic that manifests physically the progression of preferential love fails. I am not saying it doesn’t succeed in some ways. But I really

don't know how much it can unify a people or why.

I am not, in fact, Jewish. I am a Lebanese-Egyptian-American-Palestinian-Christian creature. My mother is Greek Catholic Lebanese, and her Palestinian parents lived in Haifa until they were kicked out in 1948. My father is a Copt from Alexandria. My family and I don't seriously practice Christianity, but I think each of us prays once in a while and thanks God once in a while and we go to church on Christmas and Easter. Sometimes I believe in God, sometimes I don't—depends how many times a day I shudder at the thought of my mortality or feel connected to the insects flying around my face. One of the most transforming events of my life was returning to Lebanon when I was sixteen, after eight years of separation. All I knew of the country were my dark memories of falling bombs and the images of covered women running around southern Lebanon from the numbing television. Lebanon was incredible—destroyed all stereotypes, invigorated me with a new identity, and gave me a homeland and a people. I finally met people who could relate to parts of me that others never could touch. I have the best friends in the world in the United States, but they could never reach, well, my Arabness. In America, I was the emotional one, the outgoing but sensitive

to women one, the vain and vulnerable one, but in Lebanon, I was just Lebanese. In the United States, I had to lead the friendships, to teach them what true friendship was—sacrifice, trust, loyalty, and vulnerability—but in Lebanon, they taught me. In Lebanon, you could introduce someone to your mother after knowing them for two hours and she would cook you both dinner and your new friend would feel completely comfortable. In Lebanon, because they related to the personal traits that made me foreign or distinct in the United States, they saw deeper into me, past my Arab uniqueness and into my soul. I met people who laughed when I laughed and cried when I cried.

Maghen is no doubt aware that he wasn't just writing to American Jews; he was writing to any diaspora community living in the horrifying yet physically liberating vacuum of the United States of America. So maybe he is right. Maybe I should get my Arabic down, find me some Arab friends who have a little American humility and Princeton intellectualism, and date some beautiful Lebanese girl. But I think restricting myself to this narrow ethnic-based lifestyle really limits you to one world. I think it kills you. I think the only real way to live is to recognize and celebrate cultural differences, but at the same time transgress the inherent boundaries that

come with recognizing those differences. Maybe I'm just kidding myself, and maybe in ten years, I will look back and laugh at my American friends, and move to Lebanon, but right now, to me, the ethno-religious formula is not the all-encompassing model for maximizing preferential love.

Instead, I offer you a fourth rug: Each thread has at its base a centimeter of red, but then each thread consists of different colors depending on what groups one identifies with, some threads with five or six different colors—white and blue for Israel, orange for the bowling team, etc. And this is a dynamic carpet, infused with the element of time, so that threads are changing colors with experience, jumping from group to group, all against a faint red background. It is a more complicated rug, with fewer lines drawn purely according to ethnic and religious characteristics, but at the same time creating infinite socio-cultural units that maximize and celebrate preferential love, a dynamic mutuality in unity.

In closing, I should add that Maghen and I now have a "relationship." I feel somewhat "close" to him because of my ability to completely relate to this literary piece and the philosophical and inevitably emotional struggle for identity that he shares with nothing less than my soul. This relationship has no religious or ethnic boundaries. I bet he didn't expect a Palestinian to read

"Imagine" and become so emotionally involved with it.

George Farah
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The Supreme Court

TO THE EDITORS:

Mordechai Haller's decisive and insightful article, "The Court that Packed Itself" (AZURE 8, Autumn 1999), is a tightly reasoned and convincing call for democratic reform.

Since the Knesset has the power to change the process and since Israel is so deeply committed to democratic government, the obvious question is, why hasn't the Knesset acted?

Haller does not provide an answer. I believe the key is with the awesome power of the Supreme Court to subpoena evidence and witnesses, to investigate any aspect of the life of a Knesset member, to frighten and intimidate, all based on what might be flimsy pretext. "Power corrupts, but absolute power corrupts absolutely."

If the Israeli government wants its citizens to respect governmental institutions, it has the responsibility and challenge to ensure that they are truly democratic.

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The Shas Campaign

TO THE EDITORS:

David Hazony's editorial in the last issue of AZURE ("What Do You Mean, 'He's Innocent'?" AZURE 8, Autumn 1999) was, at best, disappointing. In his editorial, Hazony seems to have circumnavigated the main issue of whether the judicial system and the associated institutions of law enforcement in Israel today serve their function or not. A secure and objective judicial system is absolutely necessary to the orderly business of any state, and "a Jewish politics" certainly does not negate that fact. However, Jewish politics also cannot allow rampant hubris to dominate the relationship between the ruled and rulers, especially in a judicial system from which there is hardly any redress of grievances.

It is entirely incorrect to suppose, as Hazony seems to, that the Supreme Court just happens to be overstepping the legitimate bounds of the separation of powers. There are historical reasons behind their claim to unlimited authority. At least one of these reasons has been stated by Supreme Court President Aharon Barak himself: They have a mission to impose the values of the Israeli ruling elite on the rising Jewish masses. Is it not likely that the motivation driving this holy mission compels the overstepping of the bounds of judicial decency in other areas as well?

Hazony's implication that people were incited, manipulated and misled to vote for Shas, or for Lieberman's Yisra'el Beitenu party or United Tora Judaism for that matter, is erroneous. These parties garnered twenty-six mandates in the Knesset because their voters have for some time had *no confidence* in the judicial system, in the Attorney-General's Office, in the government's public prosecutors or in the senior police officials. There are many more people who share the opinions of those who voted for these parties. Hazony's pieties will not help to make the situation any better. It is truly a serious crisis.

In *The Peloponnesian War*, it is related how the Lacedaemons founded the colony of Hereclea not far from Thermopylae in order to check the spread of Athenian power in that area. Many people from all the tribes of Greece joined the effort without hesitation, encouraged by the promise of security which a Lacedaemonian colony seemed to offer. However, the place was quickly left in ruins. According to Thucydides, the father of European historians, this was because the colony's inhabitants were frightened away by the severe and unjust practices of its governors.

In the book of Jeremiah, it is related that Zedekiah, the last king of Judea, convinced his nobility and elite to free their Jewish slaves. At the time, the

country had been overrun by the Babylonians, and Nebuchadnezzar was besieging Jerusalem. The elite freed their slaves, and shortly afterwards Nebuchadnezzar had to lift the siege because he was called away to meet a military crisis on his northern border. Within the year, however, all the freed slaves were once again enslaved. How was it possible? The answer must be that the elite controlled the financial operations of the state and the law enforcement institutions. They believed that they were able to do whatever they wanted. The next time the Babylonians invaded, a few short years later, their conquest was final and total.

The Der'i case would be just another questionable case of possible gross injustice if it were not the most cynical expression to date of the desperate and hopeless, the anti-democratic and anti-Jewish mission to quash the only real opposition to the corrupt way of life of the "Zionist" elite. It is too bad that Hazony has seen fit to put himself in the same camp with people who literally "know no bounds," with people who would sell Hazony himself down the river rather than share power with the Jewish rabble.

Shabtai Teicher
Jerusalem

The Political Stupidity Of the Jews

TO THE EDITORS:

In "On the Political Stupidity of the Jews" (AZURE 8, Autumn 1999), Irving Kristol writes the following: "It is fair to say that American Jews wish to be more Jewish while at the same time being frightened at the prospect of American Christians becoming more Christian. It is also fair to say that American Jews see nothing odd in this attitude. Intoxicated with their economic, political and judicial success over the past half-century, American Jews seem to have no reluctance in expressing their vision of an ideal America: A country where Christians are purely nominal, if that, in their Christianity, while they want the Jews to remain a flourishing religious community."

I agree that it is arrogant and add that it is also hypocritical to hope this. That being understood, the attitude of distrust of Christians is due to rational fear of zealous Christians based on periodic attempts to oppress the Jews in the past, even though today some zealous Christians are "philo-Semitic," and anti-Semitism is less of an ever present concern.

In this case, fear of Christian religious zealotry has weighed more

heavily in Jewish thinking than worries over having an obvious double standard concerning religious fervor.

Peter Stevens

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Crisis in Politics

TO THE EDITORS:

Ofir Haivry's editorial, "Everything is Personal" (AZURE 7, Spring 1999), calls for more politics, not less. While it is true that we are witnessing a shift from substantial issues as determinants of elections, Israel's "profound disappointment in political ideology" may not be the fault of its leaders.

Haivry points to Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Rabin as betraying their voters. This is first and foremost a misrepresentation of the truth. Further, it is this glib interpretation of complex ideologies which robs the public of their right to richly woven beliefs in the political realm.

The unintentional juxtaposition of these two topics—Begin and ideology today—offers a unique opportunity to combine them in a search for meaning.

First, to the issue of "betrayal"—there is no more consistent a leader and visionary than Begin. Relinquishing the Sinai, which was not part of

the ancient land of Israel, in exchange for a serious peace agreement was exactly the step that emphasized Begin's belief: The land of Israel was not for sale, no matter what the price. This distinction was clear; it clarified the Jewish people's historical right to specific areas and not to others.

Thus what Haivry judged a "monumental reversal" of policy was, in fact, the expression of those tenets.

In terms of the search for ideology, Menachem Begin's vision was long-term and intricate. Respect for the law, coupled with the moral obligation to protect human rights, plays an intrinsic role in a worldview often characterized one-dimensionally as hard-line.

History provides numerous examples of Begin's liberal policy, some of which are clear only in hindsight. What Begin saw as the Jewish people's "historic right" does not obfuscate individual rights "that come before the form of human life called a state" (1959). In February 1962, Begin presented a draft proposal for a bill abolishing the emergency defense regulations, claiming no relation between the military government and Israel's security needs. Examples pursuant to these tenets are abundant and represent Begin's consistent, however complex, politics, skillfully balancing individual and national rights.

It is the current prime minister, Ehud Barak, who consistently relates

to Menachem Begin not as a right-wing maverick, but as the original architect of a Middle East peace. As he told a Washington audience last July, "In this spirit we now follow the road of Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Rabin... and we will follow in their footsteps."

How can Menachem Begin's heritage help us in today's search for ideology? We are agreed that society today does show an alarming lack of healthy politics. It is currently the trend to point a finger at our political leaders. I, however, refuse to place all the blame on the politicians and propose instead to look inwards.

Our society displays an impatience with complexity of any sort. The search for a quick-fix microwave dinner has its expression in the search for innovation in all walks of life, including politics. Attempts to raise issues in the media result in a casual dismissal: "It's not interesting," or "the message is too complex to be understood." These are the excuses we encounter and which prohibit serious debate, usually to the relief of those involved. Long-winded details do not sell papers. And it is more difficult to convince an audience, however educated and well versed, with complex details.

Many of us have not yet recognized the harm inherent in stripping issues of their essence. The heart and soul of our society lies in bravely exposing our differences, rather than glossing over them or, worse, taking a stand only for calculated gain. The twentieth century's great leaders, such as David Ben-Gurion and Menachem Begin, were not afraid of declaring their policies openly and decisively, basing themselves on morality and consistent worldviews. Indeed, Begin's last public address ended with an appeal to us all, stressing the importance of believing, of encouraging us to fight for what we believe: "The just cause will always win the day."

Yes, we must reawaken our senses and seek true debate. But by misplacing the blame for our lack of content, we miss the opportunity to bring about that change ourselves. We, together with our leaders, must not be afraid to take a serious, moral stand on the issues debated in society today. In this, our leaders of the past can light the way for a more inspired future.

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