Correspondence

The Israel Defense Forces

To the Editors:

At first glance, the question of whether to transform the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) into a "professional" military force (Michael B. Oren and Benjamin Balint, "Save the Citizens' Army," Azure 19, Winter 2005) may appear to be a strictly internal question, of concern only to Israelis. Yet, while only Israel has the sovereign right to decide this issue, many other countries and peoples have a real interest in this critical element of Israeli defense policy. The perceptions of these other countries and peoples should be a significant factor in Israel's decision whether or not to convert from a citizens' army to a professional one.

Oren and Balint present an excellent discussion of the social and military factors that Israelis must consider, most of which are uniquely Israeli in context. For example, the social and educational functions of universal military service do seem, as Oren and Balint argue, to serve admirably the integrated Zionist vision of a Jewish state, whose identity and purpose as a homeland for the Jewish people outweigh any narrower ethnic, class, or birthplace differences. Likewise, the narrower military operational factors in the IDF structure would also appear to be best understood by Israelis themselves. Moreover, Oren and Balint prudently caution against too narrow a definition of future threats ("this is, after all, the Middle East"). Israelis, too, can best judge the mobility and armored forces needed, for instance, to occupy the Sinai, and how fast regimes and military policy can change in Arab countries.

But what Israelis may not truly recognize is the *perception* of Israel and the IDF held by much of the outside world, and what converting to a "professional" from a "citizens'" army would do to that perception.

Whether friends or enemies, other nations see Israel as uniquely established and organized, and, above all, uniquely committed to a cause. Much of the world thinks Israel has a distinct mission, one that outsiders may oppose, support, or just observe. And the IDF is seen as the embodiment of that mission: To preserve and protect the Jewish state and people. Now, every country says something similar about itself and its armed forces, but most armies exist primarily to suppress their own people and to protect

against regime change—but not the IDF. Other armies exist to parade as a nominal show of sovereignty while the country's defense is in fact provided by an umbrella of major powers or alliances—but not the IDF.

Israel's uniqueness, and its reflection in the citizen-based IDF, makes the outside world see the Jewish state as particularly resilient. Of course, the facts and myths of Israeli military victories, especially the War of Independence and the Six Day War, contribute to this perception. But it is the uniqueness of the Israeli state and the IDF that provides the fertile foundation on which these perceptions and myths grow. It wasn't just that Israel won these wars. It was, rather, the world's perception as to *why* Israel won that is most important. Other countries see a unique commitment and toughness in the IDF that stems from its being virtually identical with Israel itself. Enemies of Israel know that they cannot attack and defeat just any "professional" army; instead, any attack on the IDF is in effect an attack on all of Israel, on a people most of whom have served in the military, and are ready to do so again.

These outside perceptions have substantial deterrent value for Israel. If they are lost, and the outside world comes to view the IDF as "just another army," this deterrent value is lost. The image of Israeli invincibility held by the outside world is an invincibility of the heart, not of rifles or fighter planes.

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God Incarnate

To the Editors:

In his review of my book, *Abraham's Promise* ("His Body, Ourselves," Azure 19, Winter 2005), Benjamin Balint asserts that "Christianity has for Jews no more *theological* import than any other antinomian heresy, though it possesses of course both immense historical significance and contemporary political consequence" (his emphasis). He believes that I am guilty of Christianizing Judaism precisely because I assign to Christianity special importance from a Jewish perspective. In his view, for Jews, Christianity is a foreign religion that is no different than any other non-Jewish religion. But Balint is wrong.

In discussing Christianity and Islam, Maimonides teaches that these religions "served to clear the way for the king messiah, to prepare the whole world to worship God with one accord…. Thus messianic hope, the Tora, and the commandments

have become familiar topics—topics of conversation [among the inhabitants] of the far isles and many peoples uncircumcised of heart and flesh" (*Mishneh Tora*, Laws of Kings 11:4, uncensored version). Christianity and Islam thus play a role in God's redemptive plan, which Maimonides would not say of any non-Abrahamic religion.

But there is more. Of the two non-Jewish Abrahamic religions, Christianity is ahead of Islam. Maimonides writes: "It is permitted to teach the commandments to Christians and to draw them close to our religion… because they believe in the text of the Tora [as we have received it and do not argue] that it has changed, though they frequently interpret it differently" (*Responsa*, 149). While, according to Maimonides, both Christianity and Islam play a role in God's messianic program, Christianity, because it accepts the Hebrew Bible as Scripture, is close enough to Judaism to warrant being worthy of learning Tora. This is very close to characterizing Christianity as part of greater Judaism. During the Middle Ages, the consensus of rabbinic opinion was that, in spite of its Trinitarian theology, Christianity was not idolatry, at least for Gentiles. This is well documented by Jacob Katz in his *Exclusiveness and Tolerance.*

One more point. Balint objects to my view that Deuteronomy 6:4 should be rendered, "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone," instead of "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one." He detects in my preference for the first version some sort of pandering to Christian Trinitarianism by eliminating the clear statement that God is one and not three. Balint does not seem to know that the first version above is the verse as it appears in the 1999 JPS translation. It is the consensus of Jewish biblical scholars who realize that Deuteronomy 6:4 is not a metaphysical statement about the nature of God but a declaration that Israel will worship the Lord and no other God.

When I was asked several years ago to sign *Dabru Emet* (a statement about Jewish-Christian relations signed by rabbis and Jewish theologians, almost all non-Orthodox), I refused and explained my refusal in a letter to *Commentary* on the ground that Jewish and Christian readers of that document "could easily be misled into concluding that there are no really difficult theological differences between their faiths. Two of the most intractable of these are the divinity of Jesus and Christianity's abrogation of Mosaic law—neither of which is mentioned in *Dabru Emet.*" It is ironic

that in view of such a published statement and many others, I should now be accused of crypto-Christianity.

Michael Wyschogrod
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To the Editors:

Benjamin Balint accuses Michael Wyschogrod of claiming "that he understands Paul more accurately than did Augustine or Luther." Balint criticizes what appears to him to be an idiosyncratic reading of Paul's "well-known attack on Jewish law and legalism." Yet, whether or not "Christian and Jewish readers alike may be surprised to discover that contrary to the standard interpretation, Paul did not claim that after Jesus the Tora, superseded by a new law, became no longer obligatory for Jews" may well depend on how conversant these readers are with the revolution in Pauline studies that has occurred over the last twenty years or so. Thus what appears to Balint to be idiosyncratic is in fact quite commonplace among academic scholars of early Christianity; see the writings of such luminaries as Lloyd Gaston, John Gager, Stanley Stowers, or James Dunn.

Furthermore, Balint accuses Wyschogrod of excessive deference to Christianity. One of his pieces of evidence is Wyschogrod's alleged acceptance of "Jewish-born Cardinal Lustiger's explanation of his conversion to Catholicism." In fact, in the letter to Lustiger included in his book, Wyschogrod does nothing of the sort. He correctly notes that, according to Jewish law, Lustiger does indeed remain a Jew and thus under the yoke of the commandments. Wyschogrod also correctly notes that "from the Jewish point of view accepting trinitarian Christianity is not a good thing to do. In fact, it is so bad that a Christian Jew loses all sorts of privileges in the community of Israel." What Wyschogrod does in his letter is to challenge Cardinal Lustiger to explain what he means by claiming that he still remains a Jew, and to ask that he give some substance to that claim beyond the mere (albeit accurate) *halachic* statement. The fact that Lustiger did not answer the letter, although the two men know each other, is significant.

In the end, Balint's criticism boils down to his dissatisfaction that Wyschogrod wants to grapple seriously from within Judaism with the significance of Christianity. For Balint, "Christianity has for Jews no more *theological* import than any other antinomian heresy." But to a large extent, the identification of Christianity as an "antinomian heresy" depends on Balint's traditional reading of Paul being correct and the Wyschogrod-Gager-Gaston *et al.* reading being

incorrect, and is thus something of a circular argument.

No less important, Christianity simply *is* more significant for Judaism, theologically, than other world religions. No other religion affirms, along with Judaism, that the Jewish Bible is divine revelation. No other religion grew as directly out of a Jewish matrix as did Christianity, and no other religion explicitly sees itself as worshipping the God of Israel, Creator of heaven and earth and Giver of the Tora. To the extent that Christians have purged their religion of anti-Judaism and supersessionism, we ought to celebrate the fact that through Christianity millions of people now know and serve the God of Israel.

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To the Editors:

Though I agree with much of Benjamin Balint's criticism of *Abraham's Promise*, his review falls short in two respects. First, while correctly pointing out that Wyschogrod's recent work almost completely lacks references to the Oral Law, Balint fails to take this criticism to the next logical step: Namely, in what sense can Wyschogrod's work be called "Jewish" at all? Given that both Christians and Jews share a belief in the Hebrew Bible, it is in fact the subsequent works that define and distinguish their respective religious traditions, communities, and aspirations. We must then ask: Can Judaism without the Oral Law be recognizable as Judaism?

Balint also fails to take Wyschogrod to task for his description of the relationship between the Jewish people and the land of Israel. This is an area in which Wyschogrod should be hoisted on his own Barthian petard: The promise made by God to Abraham concerned not only progeny, but the land as well. In every iteration of the biblical covenant, the two are bound together. The entire Bible, in fact, can be read as a complex narrative whose epicenter is the relationship between a land and a people guided by a particular contract.

Wyschogrod is correct in pointing out the mystery of God's choice of Abraham, and the midrashic exploration of the possible reasons for this choice. But there is no doubt that God chooses Abraham and his progeny to settle on this land. In this important respect, Wyschogrod misreads, if not outright distorts, the biblical poetics he extols and on which his theology is based.

Rob Toren
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Benjamin Balint responds:

Invoking Maimonides, Michael Wyschogrod concludes that "Christianity is ahead of Islam." The great medieval sage, however, rules that Islam is monotheistic, whereas trinitiarian Christianity is not. Indeed, in his *Commentary on the Mishna*, Maimonides has the following to say about Judaism's daughter faith: "Know that this Christian nation, which advocates the messianic claim in all its various sects, all of them are idolaters. On all their various festivals it is forbidden for us to deal with them. And all Tora restrictions pertaining to idolaters pertain to them."

Contrary to Wyschogrod, Maimonides' oft-cited ruling on the permissibility of teaching the Tora to Christians but not to Muslims has little to do with "characterizing Christianity as part of Greater Judaism," and far more to do with a straightforward exegetical point: Christians recognize the text's integrity, and Muslims do not.

It is true that Maimonides accords Christianity and Islam a limited but positive historical function—to pave the way for true monotheism. But to rest one's case for the theological significance of these faiths on this passage is to ignore the whole thrust of Maimonides' writings on the messianic era: In removing from eschatology any miraculous and apocalyptic elements, he seeks to *de*-theologize it and place it firmly in the province of the historical.

Maimonidean interpretation aside, however, the essential point is this: For Christians, the Jewish people has an essential role in the Christian drama of salvation; but for Jews, Christians need not have an essential role in Jewish theology. In denying this, Wyschogrod mistakenly raises Christianity's mundane history to the level of the "theological." Contrary to Wyschogrod, however, Christian history, from Jesus' claim to be messiah to Paul's understanding of Christ as the fulfillment of Jewish law, carries no *religious* significance for the Jew.

In response to the questions I posed to Wyschogrod's claim that "neither Jesus nor Paul taught that any portion of the Law of Moses had become outmoded for Jews," Charles L. Arian makes another form of an "argument from authority." The school of scholarship whose authority Arian invokes, however, is not nearly as "commonplace" as he supposes. But even if it were the scholarly consensus, that fact wouldn't support Wyschogrod, since to my knowledge these scholars, unlike Wyschogrod, attempt to reconstruct Paul based on Galatians and Romans. Shai Held, in an excellent essay forthcoming

in *Modern Judaism*, writes: "A vast majority of New Testament scholars would reject his [i.e., Wyschogrod's] reconstruction of Paul's theology as overly tendentious and rooted in a very selective reading…. For example, his interpretation of Paul rests on the book of Acts, a New Testament text authored by Luke, rather than on actual Pauline writings."

Though Arian thinks I've gone too far in criticizing Wyschogrod, Rob Toren feels I haven't gone far enough. But Toren himself goes slightly too far. Wyschogrod, to be fair, is no Karaite. Though he says, "My Judaism is biblical," he does not reject the Oral Law: "I see the vast body of rabbinic literature as transmitting supplementary revelation to that found in Scripture. In addition, rabbinic literature contains the record of the human enterprise of interpretation, which is an ongoing process without which no living faith can adjust to ever-changing conditions."

Divine Love

To the Editors:

Meir Soloveichik quite successfully shows that the Christian view of divine love is radically different from the Jewish view ("God's Beloved: A Defense of Chosenness," Azure 19, Winter 2005). But his account of the way in which Judaism understands divine love is highly questionable.

Soloveichik fails to acknowledge that all of us are really in the dark as to the meaning of the word "love" when used as an attribute of God. One does not have to be a Maimonidean rationalist to accept that even if one does believe that God experiences pathos of some sort, it cannot be the same sort as that experienced by human beings. To say that "God loves…" is to use a metaphor, no more so and no less than when one says, "God became angry," or, "He is a jealous God," or even, "He is a living God." For in speaking of God, the analogy is never complete. In what respect, then, is the term "love," with which we are familiar only by virtue of human experience, being applied to God?

Precisely because we are dealing with an unknown—that is, divine love—Jewish theologians must refer back to Scripture. While Scripture is, of course, open to interpretation, in matters such as these we should refrain from assumptions that are neither necessary nor warranted.

Soloveichik states, for example, that "the way we love is a reflection of the way God loves." I hope not. It is only because Scripture speaks of "God's love," and the fact that the only refer-

ence we have for the word "love" is human experience, that we are compelled to examine the use of the word "love" in the human context. Surely if there be a divine pathos, it must be such as to allow for the kind of explanation and judgment as befits rational and moral persons. Thus, for example, Scripture generally associates God's anger with transgression, and God's jealousy with the sin of idolatry. So, too, in Genesis 18:12-19, does God explain the basis for his intimate relationship with Abraham: "Abraham will surely become a great and mighty nation and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him. For I knew him [expression of intimacy] that he will command his children and his household after him and they shall keep the way of the Eternal to do what is just and right that the Eternal may bring upon Abraham that which he has spoken of him."

Soloveichik interprets this passage as follows: "It was precisely, then, because of Abraham's *love* of what is just and right, and his *desire* to communicate these principles to his children, that God chose him to father a nation." But is "love" really the best word by which to describe Abraham's relationship to justice and righteousness?

Three distinct qualities are attributed to Abraham here, none of which has to do with emotion: Abraham recognizes that the "way of the Eternal" is that of justice and righteousness; he has internalized these values; and he is skilled in transmitting these values and a sense of destiny to the next generation. Thus, by his own account, God chooses Abraham not out of "love," but because Abraham on his own grasped the moral nature of God and has both the desire and the skill to transmit this understanding.

Once again, the problem stems from Soloveichik's conflation of human and divine love. The word "love" in a human context conjures up the most intense of positive emotions. However, since we are agnostic as to the nature of the divine pathos, the attribution of love to God should be taken more as warranting certain operational expectations. For example, because God loves Israel, he liberated them from Egyptian bondage and guided them in the wilderness. Of course, Soloveichik is quite correct in pointing out that contrary to the Christian concept of divine love, Judaism teaches that God's love is "preferential." But he errs in depicting divine love as "extending to every individual in his uniqueness." Indeed, for a human being, truly to love another is to love him in all his uniqueness; with respect to God,

however, while it may be said that he relates to each individual in a unique way, his love focuses on specific traits that, if found in other individuals, render those individuals worthy of God's love, as well. To see that this is so we need only consider Deuteronomy 23:6: "He does execute justice for the fatherless and widow and loves the stranger in giving him food and clothing."

Here we are told that God loves a particular class of people, presumably for some trait they share in common. God does not love the individual for his uniqueness, but rather for some general characteristic that God deems of intrinsic value. God's love, therefore, is conditional. When Israel sins and does not repent, God's love may be forfeit. Yet God remembers the oath he swore to the forefathers (Deuteronomy 7:8), and, I would argue, it is far better for Jews to rely on God's obligation to keep that promise than to place our trust in a sentimental God.

Soloveichik insists that God loves the people of Israel because they are the children of the beloved Abraham. What is the source for this belief? He cites Deuteronomy 7:8, which he claims is unambiguous on this point:

> The Eternal did not desire you nor choose you because you were more in numbers than any people, for you were the fewest of all people, but because the Eternal loved you and because he would keep the oath which he swore with your fathers, has the Eternal brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you out of the House of Bondage from the hand of Pharaoh, King of Egypt.

Clearly there is nothing in these verses that links God's love for Israel with his love for Abraham. Moreover, while there are texts that speak of God's love for the forefathers as a whole (i.e., Deuteronomy 4:37), Abraham, as an individual, is nowhere singled out as a recipient of God's love.

Once we reject Soloveichik's thesis that "God loves the Jewish people because of his love for Abraham," we have no need for his rather disconcerting notion that "God approaches Jews as a lover who 'sees the face of his beloved in the children of the beloved.'" Nice poetry, perhaps, but incoherent theology.

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Ecclesiastes

To the Editors:

Against the common interpretation of *hevel* as "vanity," lacking in purpose or merit, Ethan Dor-Shav's

essay, "Ecclesiastes, Fleeting and Timeless" (Azure 18, Autumn 2004) offers a new meaning for this word in his article: Breath (the exhalation coming out of one's mouth), which emphasizes the temporality of all things. This interpretation enables Dor-Shav to reconcile the apparent contradictions and gaps in the book of Ecclesiastes as he builds up his main thesis. "By understanding the fleeting nature of life as a whole," he writes, "Kohelet is no longer paralyzed by the burden of death. Life's transience is dynamically transformed into a powerful motivational force: An urgency to live."

Yet just as "breath," or exhalation, may be understood to expresses a sense of temporality, so too may temporality connote a sense of pointlessness and lack of purpose. Thus is the literal dimension of *hevel* (the scattering of air that comes out of one's mouth and the fleeting nature of exhalation) linked with its abstract dimension (of senselessness and meaninglessness). Dor-Shav's insistence on one side of the equation does not only miss the other, but also creates an artificial distinction that loses the singular significance created by both readings.

Furthermore, I find the linguistic analysis on which Dor-Shav bases his argument problematic. One way in which the writer tries to demonstrate that the word *hevel* is used to signify temporality is with the help of the expression "*hevel ure'ut ruah*" (vanity and pursuit of wind). He devotes a note to this expression, which he claims is unique to the book of Ecclesiastes, and is usually interpreted as the act of a shepherd who herds the wind rather than his sheep—that is, an action that is senseless and lacks purpose. Dor-Shav, however, explains that the "pursuit of wind" is the movement of the shepherd as he searches for a place for his flock—that is, not a pointless activity, after all. Indeed, Dor-Shav is so intent on reading *hevel* in the sense of "temporality" and not of "senselessness" that he distorts the essence of the shepherd's work, claiming that the shepherd moves like the wind while he searches for herding grounds. He goes even further: "The continuing misconception [of *hevel* as senselessness] misses the core meaning of this precise root-verb… the Hebrew root *ra'ah* does not imply gathering, chasing, or herding-in."

However, in Hosea 12:2, a chastising speech by the prophet includes a verse that explicitly contradicts Dor-Shav's interpretation: "Ephraim guards the wind (*ro'eh ruah*) and follows after the east wind: He daily

increases lies and desolation; and they make a covenant with the Assyrians, and oil is carried into Egypt." Here, the parallelism that Dor-Shav overlooked ruins his argument: The "shepherd" in this instance is a synonym for a "chaser." Herding, therefore, is a chase, and the chase—of wind rather than sheep—is a futile chase that signifies *ineffectuality* far more than it does temporality.

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