Correspondence

Chabad's Messianism

To the Editors:

Tomer Persico ("Chabad's Lost Messiah," Azure 38, Autumn 2009), would have us believe that virtually all of the messianic accomplishments enumerated by Maimonides in his Laws of Kings were radically reinterpreted by Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the late Lubavitcher Rebbe, so that he himself would fit the bill. To support his thesis, Persico provides extracts from and references to select speeches and actions of the Rebbe, enhanced by the claims of other, like-minded academics. The bulk of his "evidence" consists of an abundance of innuendo, which may be summed up as follows: "I am the long-awaited, superhuman messiah. Irrespective of my qualifications (or lack thereof), I have been chosen by God to be the savior of Israel. I will redeem you—if I haven't already done so." According to Persico, even those of the Rebbe's statements that may seem, to the untrained eye, quite innocuous were actually laden with insinuations—which his followers would have readily comprehended—to the effect that he himself was the ultimate redeemer of Israel.

Yet, in the course of his essay, Persico paints a portrait of a man who could hardly be more distant from the Rebbe to whose teachings I, along with tens of thousands of others, was drawn, and whom I was privileged to come to know in person.

Indeed, the Rebbe I knew was a man of self-effacing humility, altruistic benevolence, and sophisticated theology. His was a life of selfless commitment to *tikkun olam* (literally, the "repair of the world"); of faith and trust in God; of awareness of the limitations of one's humanity; of the realization of one's full potential while avoiding the pitfalls of self-aggrandizement; and of absolute dedication, alacrity, and optimism—all this along with a profound sense of realism. By contrast, Persico's Rebbe is a man who was obsessively deluded by his messianic "responsibility," whose sense of self-importance knew virtually no bounds, and whose theology would embarrass even the most primitive of religious thinkers.

Although Persico's thesis surely deserves a full-blown rebuttal, I will limit myself to a discussion of what is arguably the most central and representative example of his misguidedness, in the hope that it will illustrate

the degree to which he lacks the requisite knowledge of the relevant sources.

Before doing so, however, I should state my position clearly: I write as one who (a) was present on many of the occasions to which Persico refers in his essay; (b) has studied all of the Rebbe's discourses on messianism and related matters; and (c) is an "insider," privy to and well-acquainted with the subtle dynamics of a closed group's language. I therefore feel qualified to assert that Persico has *not* undertaken a systematic and contextual study of the primary sources he discusses. Rather, his conclusions have been formed under the influence of the propaganda pushed by radical messianists, who do not represent the views of Chabad and in most cases could not have been present at the alleged events they describe. I will also preface my remarks by saying that mine are not the views of a loner, a maverick Lubavitcher with an idiosyncratic view of the matter. Rather, they reflect a mainstream position within the movement, one that has been documented in numerous significant Chabad publications and that is expressly advocated by the most celebrated of Chabad rabbis and teachers.

The Rebbe dwelt on Maimonides' messianic criteria in a number of public addresses and published letters. He always insisted that Maimonides, who was writing in a legal framework, meant for these criteria to be understood in their literal sense, and that they constitute the ultimate authority on the matter. Moreover, the Rebbe stated that in addition to providing qualifications on whose basis the real messiah may be identified, Maimonides sought to provide the Jewish people with foolproof ammunition against mistaken messianic claimants.

We see this, for example, in the Rebbe's insistence that Maimonides' phrase "If there arises a king," refers, as it always does in Maimonides' code, to a monarch in the conventional sense of the term. Accordingly, the word king (*melech*) connotes a person who enjoys recognized autocratic authority over the Jewish people (albeit one who has not yet been appointed by the Sanhedrin). Moreover, he prevails upon Israel (*veyakuf kol Yisrael*) to walk in the way of the Torah, namely by using his monarchical power to coerce recalcitrant Jews into abiding by Jewish law. The messiah will thus succeed in bringing all Jews, willingly or not, back to a life of full observance. Only once this has been accomplished will the king proceed to the next stage, namely fighting the wars of the Lord—i.e., bodily battles waged against Israel's foes, including the wars that he will fight against the people of Amalek. (The Rebbe noted that this may also

include battles against anti-Jewish elements from within, but, he hastened to add, "this is merely a *pshetel*," i.e., a non-literal interpretation of the term.) If and when a king fulfills all of the above criteria—and only then—it is possible that he may in truth be the awaited messiah.

Time and again the Rebbe reiterated that this was Maimonides' final word on the matter, and that any claims to the messianic mantle that do not meet the abovementioned requirements *in their literal sense* must be vigorously rejected. On occasion, he even added that, to date, there is no one who fits the bill. Clearly, then, according to the Rebbe's own stated position on the matter, he could not have entertained the idea that he himself was the Maimonidean Messiah incarnate.

But Persico does not seem to be aware of the Rebbe's oft-repeated assertions in this regard. Only thus can he make the unsubstantiated claim, for example, that the Rebbe subscribed to the ludicrous view that the children's program he initiated, Tzivos Hashem ("The Armies of God"), was intended to "fulfill" Maimonides' requirement that the messiah "fight the wars of the Lord," or that his homiletic play on the phrase "building the Temple" was meant to be interpreted as a reference to the literal construction of a synagogue. Indeed, notwithstanding the Rebbe's own protestations to the contrary, Persico claims that the Rebbe believed he had the status of the king to whom Maimonides refers in the above-cited passage, adding that it is for this reason that the Rebbe espoused a "condescending attitude toward other prominent Jewish figures" and "refused to visit any of them."

In short, throughout his essay Persico fails to draw the distinction that is axiomatic to any serious student of the Rebbe's literature—namely, between terms that the Rebbe employed in homiletic hermeneutics and those he articulated in a pragmatic, factual context.

Persico also does not seem to be aware of the many occasions on which the Rebbe chastised those who referred to him as the messiah. On one such occasion, in 1991, the Rebbe, stated that he ought to leave the synagogue in the face of such pronouncements. (Persico's description of the Rebbe's encouraging David Nachshon's messianic rantings are taken from the ever-increasing body of messianist myth.) On several occasions, the Rebbe publicly lambasted those who engaged in messianic speculation, and harshly rejected private missives that were sent to him in which people referred to him as the messiah. For instance, when an Israeli activist made messianic pronouncements about the Rebbe, the Rebbe

sent him an unequivocal message: "You are taking a knife to my heart."

In one 1992 episode—preserved in a video recording by Jewish Educational Media—not long before the Rebbe suffered the devastating stroke from which he never recovered, a journalist from Israel said to him, "We appreciate you very much, we want to see you in Israel; you said soon you will be in Israel, so when will you come?" The Rebbe responded: "I also want to be in Israel." The journalist insisted, "So when, when will you come?" The Rebbe responded, "That depends on the Mashiach, not on me." The journalist persisted, "You are the Mashiach!" to which the Rebbe responded, "I am not."

These episodes and others like them, which have all been documented in Chabad literature, have evidently escaped Persico's attention.

Finally, I somewhat reluctantly offer a word about Persico's crude suggestion, in the notes on his essay, that the Rebbe abstained from the fulfillment of the mitzva of procreation and lived a life of celibacy because he saw himself as the messiah. I would like to think that this opinion, typical of a messianism abhorrent to Orthodox Judaism and antithetical in the extreme to the Rebbe's entire ethos, would require no refutation. It reflects a most disturbing trend, one that promotes indulgence in the most unreasonable speculation, allows the wanderings of an idle mind to pass for scholarly thesis, and exploits deeply personal human tragedies for the advancement of tabloid-style thrillers dressed in the thinly veiled garb of academic parlance.

If those engaged in academic Jewish studies wish to retain their integrity and respect, they ought to exercise more caution before offering its platforms to theories like this one. By admitting such ill-conceived speculation into the arena of Jewish scholarship, the entire discipline earns disrepute.

Rabbi Chaim Rapoport
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Tomer Persico responds:

In his critique, Rabbi Chaim Rapoport attempts to refute my argument that the Lubavitcher Rebbe believed he was the messiah and insinuated as much to his followers. Based on his claim of expert knowledge of the material, and without bringing so much as a single reference to bear, Rapoport has determined that the central thesis of my essay is incorrect. The main problem with his critique is that he elects to ignore the many proofs that I brought in support of my argument. He rejects, for example, my assertion that the Rebbe encouraged

declarations that he was the Messiah, despite numerous witnesses to that effect—not to mention the video footage that clearly shows the Rebbe waving his arms to the sound of his hasidim singing, "Long live our master, our teacher, and our Rebbe, King Messiah, forever and ever!" In the notes on my essay, I provided links to these clips on the Internet, and readers—Rapoport included—are invited to form their own impressions.

In truth, however, I wish to avoid a sparring match where each side trots out his arsenal of evidence to substantiate his claims. Rabbi Rapoport has already demonstrated, in his recent negative review of the new (and important) book by professors Menachem Friedman and Samuel Heilman, *The Rebbe: The Life and Afterlife of Menachem Mendel Schneerson*, that he does not accord much weight to facts that conflict with the picture he wishes to present. But this is not the real reason there is no point to this polemic. There is no point because it is utterly divorced from reality. For while Rapoport attempts to "prove" that the Rebbe never claimed to be the Messiah, the overwhelming majority of Chabad hasidim hold the opposing view.

In rejecting the interpretation that ascribes messianic pretensions to the Rebbe, Rapoport is, in fact, not only challenging incontrovertible evidence and common sense, he is also going against the vast majority of his movement. It is obvious that his criticism of my arguments is actually directed against his fellow hasidim, though its objective is to bolster the image of Chabad to the outside world.

I can understand Rabbi Rapoport. He represents a tiny minority of levelheaded hasidim who look on in helpless frustration as the messianic fervor that has seized Chabad robs their glorious movement of its dignity. Indeed, I would be happy if Rapoport's views genuinely reflected "a mainstream position within the movement," to use his words. Unfortunately, this is far from the truth. Rapoport is engaged in a futile battle against the decisive majority of his movement, which is now carrying out the Rebbe's legacy with a tenacity that would be improbable if it did not originate in a profound certainty that it was the explicit desire of their venerated leader. Rabbi Rapoport can continue to argue passionately that Menachem Mendel Schneerson did not intend to crown himself King Messiah, but the other hasidim heard the same words and know very well that the Rebbe unquestionably meant them. And the Chabad movement itself is already as far removed from him as the Moon is from the Earth.

Israeli Radicalism

To the Editors:

In his essay "The Sad State of Israeli Radicalism" (Azure 40, Spring 2010), Assaf Sagiv attempts to deal with the arguments of the radical left in and of themselves, as well as with the moral and ideational challenge these arguments pose to the Jewish state. While his analysis is both interesting and thought-provoking, by choosing to ignore the historical context of the past struggle between the Zionist and anti-Zionist camps, as well as the present confrontation between Zionists and "post-Zionists," he leads the reader to a number of questionable conclusions.

With the emergence of Zionism, its opponents within the Jewish world were also born. Three main streams of opposition appeared as early as the turn of the twentieth century: those of the ultra-Orthodox, the assimilated liberals, and the socialists. Today's post-Zionism is a direct outgrowth of these last two. True, they were primarily diasporic groups—their outposts in Israel were, by all accounts, small and marginal—while the present phenomenon is "blue and white," with most of its proponents either born or educated in Israel. Nevertheless, it is inaccurate to view the movement as expressing a novel point of view.

Indeed, the fundamental arguments against Zionism have remained virtually unchanged for the past hundred years. In the first four decades of the twentieth century, Zionist thought developed through debate with its opponents and through competition with the Bund movement and the communists for the hearts and minds of idealistic Jewish youth, especially in Eastern Europe. With the wholesale slaughter of European Jewry during the Holocaust and the subsequent founding of the State of Israel, however, the "rightness" of the Zionist movement was assumed to have been proven; as such, it no longer feared ideological competition. It was thus that, in the 1970s, when Zionism's opponents returned to the scene, their arguments were interpreted, wrongly, as "new challenges."

The Israeli left's opposition to Zionism has taken diverse forms. The left rooted in the Matzpen (socialist) movement is very different from the left whose roots lie in "Canaanite" or communist ideologies, though there were undoubtedly certain similarities between them. Then there were the Brit Shalom and Ihud movements, whose ideologies were so radically different from the others on the left—then and now—that, were it not for their position on Arab-related issues,

they would hardly be counted among their number.

Both the Zionist and radical lefts have gained a great deal of traction since the Oslo accords, when the illusion flourished that peace was at our doorstep, and Israeli discourse could finally free itself of questions of war, peace, and survival (and focus instead on ones of society, culture, and identity). Buoyed, both the Zionist and radical lefts moved closer together; when the "peace process" failed, however, the two found themselves wedged apart once more. The Zionist left, as Sagiv describes, gradually abandoned itself to disappointment and defeat, a situation only helped along by the results of the disengagement from Gaza in 2005. The radical left, however, further radicalized its position: It began to identify more and more with the Palestinians and their narrative, while simultaneously increasing its alienation from Jewish society. It depicted the Jewish national enterprise as a colonialist, orientalist movement; Israel's War of Independence as a campaign of "ethnic cleansing"; and Holocaust survivors and Sephardi Jews as victims of the Zionist determination to create a "new Jew."

It might at first appear as though the radical left embraced the theory of post-modernism as well. Yet this adoption was at best partial and conditional—and to a large extent hypocritical. For rejection of the existence of an absolute truth does not extend to the Palestinian narrative, which certainly appears to radicals such as Ilan Pappe as truth of the most absolute sort. Indeed, the total negation of nationalism promoted by post-modernist theory is valid only insofar as it concerns *Jewish* nationalism. In the same vein, Israeli feminism stops at the Erez crossing; within the borders of the Gaza Strip and beyond the separation fence, the "rights discourse"—e.g., human rights, the rights of homosexuals, the right to political dissent—apparently ends. It would therefore seem that from the radical left's perspective, post-modernism is first and foremost an instrument to be wielded in the fight against Israel. Theirs is not a global struggle with common principles, but rather a struggle limited to specific circumstances, and a specific time and place.

Moreover, Sagiv's assertion that "it is not easy to be a radical in Israel" strikes me as simply wrong. If we were talking about persecuted revolutionaries, willing to pay a personal price for their beliefs, it might be possible to agree with him. But this is simply not so. In past generations, supporters of the radical left—and right—in Israel indeed paid a steep price for their activism: The authorities

restricted and sometimes even prevented their participation in the civil service and in academia. The situation of today's radical-left "revolutionary," on the other hand, is completely different. He enjoys a friendly local environment—and takes advantage of it unabashedly. Political correctness shields him from virtually all criticism. Not only do the authorities not persecute him, they even *finance* him, by supporting, for example, his filmmaking enterprises. His livelihood is assured, and in many cases his status fortified by academic tenure, which he employs—in the name of freedom of expression—in the incitement against those same institutions from which he earns his living and in whose shelter he takes refuge. And if he is unable to find a position in Israeli academia (and from there, in Western universities), the abundance of local non-governmental organizations dedicated to advocating his cause will happily make use of his talents. Is life difficult for a radical leftist in today's Israel? Not really.

Finally, the key to understanding the radical left, so far as Sagiv is concerned, is recognizing its desperation. The radical-left academics in Israel and the rest of the world, he argues, have despaired of their inability to influence policy, and thus they withdraw into a sort of "internal exile" that, like the political messianism of the past, carries with it a failed promise of a better world. But Sagiv's diagnosis is problematic. The withdrawal we are witnessing is not necessarily an expression of despair. For the most part, it is simply an indulgence. Perhaps there are those among the radical left who have given up, yet it is doubtful whether they see themselves as depressed and detached. On the contrary, since their place in Israel remains marginal, they have simply turned to newly formed movements in the West in their efforts to weaken the legitimacy of the Jewish state. As such, their objective is not so much a change in Israeli culture or society, but rather the undermining of the sheer existence of a Jewish nation. For a nation that does not exist is not in need of a nation-state, and thus the road is paved for a "state of all its citizens"—which is not a Jewish state at all.

According to the radical left, Zionism is not the Jewish people's national movement for self-determination, but an aggressive and anachronistic colonialist movement that must be eradicated. When confronted with such a group, there is no place for compassion or mercy. On the contrary, today's Zionism has no choice but to pick up its gloves and return to the ring it deserted years ago—the ring, that is, in which the struggle for the Jewish nation's

right to self-definition, territory, sovereignty, and existential security is fought. It must rise up and conquer its opponents anew.

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To the Editors:

I read with great interest Assaf Sagiv's eloquent essay on Israel's radical left. The distinction he draws between self-hatred and desperation is apt: More than the Israeli left hates its nation, its country, and its people, it despairs of its own ability to effect fundamental change in the Jewish state. This should not surprise us, as its guiding principles are a radical-liberal understanding of the concept of civics and a fundamental objection to anchoring nationalism in the legal and constitutional order that governs the state. This is not, it must be emphasized, an expression of classical liberalism in the spirit of Mill and Locke, nor is it even the type of liberalism introduced by Rawls in his *Theory of Justice*. Rather, this kind of liberalism relies on a series of post-modern premises that aim to undermine moral themes in contemporary discourse—themes such as the nation-state, the essence of Western democracy, and certain understandings of the good, of justice, and of truth. This liberal radicalism, which is identified with French philosophers such as Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, and Jean Baudriard, combines radical individualism with ideas that were traditionally identified with socialist—and even Marxist—worldviews.

Unlike Sagiv, however, I do not believe that it is desperation that motivates Israel's radical left. Instead, I would point to an organized worldview that strives to establish a liberal-democratic state within the 1967 borders—a state, however, in which a shared concept of civics is the common foundation uniting all residents. In this state, Jewish nationalism would be neutralized as a motivating force in policy. It is unnecessary to point out that such a state, whatever its borders might be, would be established on the *ruins* of the current State of Israel.

Sagiv also attacks, rightly, the title "post-Zionist," which is so often attached to members of the radical left. In his words, "some radicals have openly repudiated it, and for good reason. Their position is not 'post-Zionist'… but unabashedly *anti*-Zionist. Their rejection of the Jewish state is unequivocal and absolute…. Their criticism of Israel… leaves the Zionist project not a trace of legitimacy—or a shred of hope." Yet Sagiv

misses, in my opinion, an important and essential element of the left's anti-Zionism. It is true that the Arab question is the local context for these radicals' activities. However, the *motivation* for their activities is not solely the objection to Zionism, but rather a pure, liberal scholasticism that negates Zionism's historic aspiration to establish a Jewish state in order to realize the Jewish people's right to political independence in its own land. This scholasticism, which in the past was based on Lenin's and Stalin's rejection of the legitimacy of Jewish nationalism, today finds clear expression in the theories of the likes of Noam Chomsky and Judith Butler.

Sagiv wonders about the "intensity of their [the radical left's] solidarity" with the Palestinians, as "leading the Palestinian struggle against Israel are either the corrupt Fatah nationalists or the Hamas religious fundamentalists—not exactly the stuff of which an enlightened and progressive community is made." In my opinion, however, he is mistaken in his understanding of liberal radicalism. For it was Lenin who determined that in order to establish a revolutionary socialist regime, an alliance must be formed with those who are oppressed by "imperialism." This is the Marxist dialectic at its best: It is necessary to band together with all who oppose an "imperialist," capitalist order in an effort to dismantle it, destroy it, and establish alternate arrangements. The radicals' support for the Palestinians draws on similar logic. Consequently, at the helm of those defending the oppressive theocratic regime in Iran stand liberal human rights advocates. Absurd? Not if we understand their driving logic.

To understand the specific case, we must appreciate the general context: namely, the radical-liberal suspicion of all authority as authority, and specifically of the state as an institution—a suspicion that is anchored in the theories of Giorgio Agamben, Carl Schmitt, Jacques Ranciere, and others. This is not just *opposition* to the way in which the modern political regime is implemented, or *despair* of forms of modern government. On the contrary, it is an attempt to *dismantle* the existing social and political order—capitalism, globalization, nationalism, or Western culture—and to establish a new order in its place, in the spirit of radical-liberal values.

In France, for instance, these same radicals reject the Republic's enlightened secular constitution and ally with the Islamists in an effort to transform the French nation-state into a country that promotes multiculturalism (as opposed to cultural pluralism) and justifies the presence of oppressive religious traditions in public institutions. We see this,

for example, in the ban on veils. In Israel, the radicals propose a political alternative that replaces Jewish national independence with a national civic arrangement. In both cases, the radicals have not yet realized their plans. They indeed despair at this failure and express it daily in articles in *Libération* or *Haaretz*. However, just as this despair is not the motive for their conduct, so the symptom to which Sagiv points—their sweeping identification with "national liberation" movements and guerrilla organizations—is not the fuel for the radical fire.

To understand these radicals, a philosophical distinction must be made between essential properties and accidental properties. The essential property of radicalism is an unwavering commitment to the concept of liberal citizenship as a political paradigm; it aims to dismantle certain commitments, first and foremost Western nationalism, and to replace them with other commitments that are supposedly universal. The accidental property of liberal radicalism is the Arab nationalistic obligation, and, in the financial context, a preference for a socialist order over a capitalist-liberal one. Likewise is the despair evinced by radicals an accidental property: there are more-despairing and less-despairing types. There are radicals who, as these lines are being written, lament "the situation in the territories" while watching the World Cup, and there are those who are busy igniting a third Intifada by demonstrating in Jerusalem's Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood.

It is clear that in the current political situation, liberal radicalism senses its vulnerability. Its representation in parliament is negligible, it wields less academic power than it did in the past, its influence on the legal system is far from absolute, and its primary means of navigating political processes is through contact with international organizations. (The Goldstone report is a classic example: The Israeli press recently exposed that radical Israeli organizations supplied the "evidence" for the report.) Nevertheless, a sense of despair over their failure to make headway in Israeli society should not be identified as the central motivation behind these radicals' activities. After all, if they were truly despairing, they surely would not bother with energetic overseas activities such as promoting boycotts of Israeli academia. Recently, the Israeli-American filmmaker Udi Aloni published a series of articles in which he expressed his pride at the radical left's success in undermining Israel's claim to being both a Jewish and a democratic state. Aloni did not sound at all despairing. Indeed, these radicals' determination to put their ideas

into action positions them as opponents of the Jewish state, rejecters of Israeli society, and consistent supporters of Israel's enemies. It is clear that in a civilized democracy—and Israel has indeed remained a civilized democracy, despite the accusations hurled against it on a daily basis—the duty of citizens is to protect the rights of those intellectuals to express their opinions, discordant though they may be. However, it would be a mistake to attribute to them characteristics that would paint them as people who have simply lost their way and entered a state of despair.

In the folklore of the left, the story of the member of the *Hashomer Hatzair* youth movement who settled in the north's Kibbutz Dan in the 1950s in order to "greet the mighty Soviet army" is well known. He did not despair; rather, he believed that the Red Army would indeed arrive. Today's radicals, too, do not despair, despite appearances to the contrary. When they throw rocks at Israeli soldiers at protests in Bil'in and hold joint rallies with Hamas and Islamic Jihad, they, like the kibbutznik from Dan, undoubtedly believe that the victory of Palestinian nationalism will arrive someday soon.

David Merhav
Ramat Gan

To the Editors:

Assaf Sagiv concludes his learned essay on the radical left in Israel with a statement proving that, despite the considerable thought he has devoted to the topic, in truth he has not understood anything at all. Sagiv writes, "If something is rotten in the State of Israel, then it must be dealt with." This sentence contains the implicit assumption that the primary criticism of the radical left is directed toward Israeli society, an extremely heterogeneous and diverse group of people who lack the ability to act unanimously in any way. But in fact, the real criticism of the radical left is aimed at the institutions of the state and the various powers that be, which in truth determine the preservation of the status quo.

This is not an accidental error. The fetishistic identification of Israeli society with the State of Israel predominates in our country. Consequently, all substantive criticism, internal or external, relating to the conduct of the state is regarded as a real and personal threat to every member of society and is therefore automatically deemed illegitimate, ludicrous, and at times even antisemitic.

Yeshayahu Leibowitz addressed this phenomenon already in 1984, in his article "The Road from Nationalism to Animalism," published in *Haaretz*. "The fount of nationalism—in the

form of statehood—raises the state to the level of an end in itself, whereby man's obligation toward it is absolute," he wrote. "In this view, everything—including all human action—is judged and evaluated in terms of the needs and interests, real or imagined, of the state, which is the embodiment of the nation; and the stature and greatness of the nation is perceived purely as a function of the power of the state, which is measured by the extent of its sovereignty and dominion."

Thus, the radical left—of which I am a member, but which I do not purport to represent in its entirety—levels its criticism against the state and several other bodies. What constitutes the essence of this criticism? Sagiv refers to "something [that is] rotten in the State of Israel." However, when throughout the entire duration of its existence, a supposedly democratic country imposes a military regime based on ethnic-religious factors on hundreds of thousands or millions of civilians; when for more than forty years this regime is imposed on civilians living in occupied territories who are denied basic civil rights; and when, time and again, the state chooses to ignore various peace proposals (such as the Arab Peace Initiative) aiming to bring an end to the state of emergency and constant state of war, clearly we are not dealing merely with a minor failure in need of correction. We are dealing with an approach that, despite its declarations to the contrary, continues to divide the world according to the following criteria: Jews vs. Arabs, sovereigns vs. subordinates.

Contrary to Sagiv's claim, any reasonable person is certainly aware of the differences between the situation of the refugees living in exile and that of those living in the West Bank, Gaza, East Jerusalem, or within the borders of Israel. These differences are of great political significance and determine the range of possible solutions. Nevertheless, the basic attitude that permeates the spheres of legislation, the legal system, the media, the education system, and the discourse on the street—and which governs the daily behavior of every soldier, policeman, or security guard—is one of consistent racism. Only as a result of this racism can the views of the radical left be deemed extreme and delusional, when all that it demands, in the end, is a just peace, equality, and democracy.

Sagiv's main argument, which is repeated throughout the essay and summarized in his concluding remarks, is that the radical left is mired in a deep despair that prevents it from engaging in constructive action to correct what is "rotten."

I will not deny that it is indeed demoralizing to encounter such

fierce opposition from the majority of Jews in Israel. For example, during the recent war in Gaza—after years of repeated military operations and a suffocating siege, and after more than three thousand Palestinians had been killed in Gaza alone since the end of the year 2000—it was nearly impossible to endure the total obliviousness and indifference to these facts within Israeli discourse. It was also intolerable to hear the claim repeated that, "for eight years we have been bombarded with Qassam rockets and exercised restraint." Finally, it was insufferable to see everywhere expressed the full backing of the public for every military action, regardless of its nature.

It is also discouraging to witness the deep bigotry evident in the conduct of soldiers in the territories, who accept without question the orders they are given to protect the Jews—even if they violate the law—from the Palestinians, even if said Palestinians are being attacked or are simply trying to protect their lands. It is depressing that most Jews in Israel choose not to know what is happening in the territories, not to hear, and not to protest.

This despondency leads to quite a few differences of opinion among the members of the radical left. Some, out of sheer desperation, choose to leave Israel. Others have given up trying to influence the Israeli Jewish public and choose to invest all their energies in joining the struggle alongside their Palestinian partners. There are also those who stubbornly insist on advocating a different approach, either one based on the belief that change is possible in the near future, or one motivated by a desire to prepare the ground for change that will eventually come about, perhaps only as a result of international pressure.

The members of the latter group—and I am glad to be counted among their ranks—repeatedly emphasize that we consider ourselves part of Israeli society and are striving to help build a better future for the state. For this reason, we join in the fight for various social causes within Israel: feminist struggles, the struggles of trade unions, or those of people who are evacuated from their homes. We meet with our fellow citizens regularly and discuss Israel's actions in the territories; we raise possible alternatives to the current state of affairs. We speak in schools, pre-military academies, universities, and colleges, and even try to engage people on the street. This is no easy task, as the Ministry of Education prohibits conscientious objectors from lecturing in schools. Also, security regulations prevent tours to large areas within the occupied territories, and most Israelis are afraid to violate the laws of separation. But

sometimes our efforts are successful. Friends, family members, colleagues from school and work, and total strangers alike participate in tours guided by discharged soldiers in Hebron; visit Sheikh Jarrah; begin to take notice of the apartheid roads; and witness the violence and aggression taking place at checkpoints and in the settlements. Occasionally, they even dare to join one of the demonstrations against the separation fence, and experience firsthand mutual cooperation between Jews and Arabs—the kind of which we were taught can never exist.

Whoever comes but once can never again see the situation in the same light. He understands immediately that we must recognize the balance of power between the occupiers and the occupied, and realize that the struggle for a free, secure, and just society must be shared by both Jews and Arabs, for the benefit of us all.

Sagiv argues that the radical left's support of the refusal to serve in the IDF proves that we stand "*outside* Israeli society." Undoubtedly, in a climate of a militaristic politics, where military service is a prerequisite for full citizenship, refusing to serve is a choice to be excluded. However, today more than half of Israel's citizens do not enlist in the army or do not complete even one year of military service. Even among the recruits, we know that women and noncombat male soldiers are regarded as inferior. Therefore, the refusal to support Israel's policies of war and occupation is a choice intended to influence society at large, for the betterment of us all. It is a choice that seeks to establish a new discourse, in which army combat service is not a condition for citizenship, and in which all citizens are equal by virtue of their citizenship.

Sagiv goes on to claim that supporting sanctions and boycotts against Israel is further evidence of action taken from the "outside." It must be noted, however, that support for these measures, carried out in partnership with the Palestinian struggle, is coupled with simultaneous efforts here in Israel. These efforts are simply accompanied by a deep sense that after so many years of relentless attempts on the inside, external pressure is also necessary. This sentiment is supported by the fact that Israel not only suppresses acts of war waged against it, but also thwarts the acts of unarmed demonstrators.

Finally, Sagiv adds, unconvincingly, that the radical left supports terrorism. In this instance, I can only be pained that he would raise such allegations against people who have been protesting for years against all forms of violence against any civilians, wherever they may be.

In conclusion, I would like to offer a constructive suggestion, of a kind

that Sagiv believes we are incapable of proposing. I suggest that readers try to view the society in which we live as a singular entity composed of both Jews and Arabs. This society is rife with extreme discrimination, an abundance of violence, and the domination of one group over another. As citizens (especially those belonging to the dominating group), we have a duty to take a stand. We can choose to perpetuate the legacy of domination and oppression, and pay the ever-increasing price of wars, societal violence, and ostracism from the international community. Or we can choose the path of solidarity and joint collaboration, and aim toward a future of justice and equality. This is not an easy path or a modest aim; admittedly, the odds are stacked against us. But we must not despair. For the future is in our hands.

Haggai Matar
Tel Aviv

Assaf Sagiv responds:

Yoav Gelber seeks to anchor the discussion of Israeli radicalism in a broader historical context, and reminds us of the left's opposition to Zionism when modern Jewish nationalism was still in its infancy. I agree that one cannot grasp the full picture on this issue without taking this context into account. My goal in writing the essay, however, was more modest: to delineate the specific logic that characterizes the arguments of the radical left today.

In my opinion, this examination reveals a fundamental difference between the positions advanced by Jewish anti-Zionists in past decades and those of their modern-day heirs. Gelber notes the impact of post-modernism, but qualifies his words by asserting that this theoretical platform is only an "instrument" in the campaign against Israel. He seems to underestimate the importance of the seismic shift that has taken place in the radical worldview, both within the circles of post-modern philosophy and outside it. The dramatic transition from the political messianism that characterized traditional Marxism to a sweeping, Gnostic-like pessimism is of more than marginal significance to an understanding of the radical left's critique of the Jewish state. In many ways, it defines and establishes the parameters of this critique. As Gelber affirms, it is indeed "a struggle limited to specific circumstances, and a specific time and place," but it cannot be assessed without taking into account certain deep currents of thought that have altered radical thinking since the 1960s, especially after the collapse of the Soviet bloc.

Gelber does not accept my argument that the radical left is steeped

in despair. What I view as desperation he identifies as self-indulgence. After all, radical academics enjoy not only freedom of action but also the support of the very establishment they seek to subvert, as well as strong approval from Western universities and various organizations that share their agenda. There is nothing inaccurate about Gelber's description of the situation, yet I wish to clarify that when I speak of despair, I am not referring specifically to a mental state. I am not a psychologist and have never presumed to offer a clinical diagnosis of one or another group of people. The despair I described in my essay, rather, is a type of ideology, worldview, or metaphysics, and its disciples may very well be people who walk around with a perpetual smile on their faces.

Finally, Gelber considers my assertion that "it is not easy to be a radical in Israel" to be odd, since the very opposite is the case. Perhaps I am naïve, but I am perfectly willing to believe that a considerable number of radical activists are individuals with a developed moral consciousness, people who feel genuinely distressed by what they perceive to be a malignant evil thriving all around them. I do not accept their viewpoint, and I vehemently denounce their methods, but I refuse to accuse them of hypocrisy. This seems to me an overly facile method of dismissing the weighty arguments they raise.

David Merhav focuses in his letter on what he terms "liberal radicalism," which seeks to replace the national state with a political order based on a universal concept of citizenship. No doubt there are Jews and Palestinians who champion such an approach, but I do not believe it would be proper to present this concept as the common ideological ground of all radical currents. The purist liberal discourse that Merhav criticizes is only one alternative to the Zionist idea. Another option, no less avidly supported in radical circles, calls for the establishment of a binational or multicultural state. Such arrangements recognize and respect collective identities; the main difference between them and Zionism is that they discard the very idea of granting political, legal, and cultural preference to a single national group—the Jews—over other groups. As a Zionist, I find the debate with the proponents of these options no less fascinating than that of the polemic of the advocates of universal citizenship, but it is important to understand that these are different positions, which require separate discussion.

My essay did not purport to engage in such a deliberation, however, but rather to direct readers' attention to the fact that the radicals no longer sound convinced when they offer their prescription for a "morally acceptable" Israeli society. My impression is that

they are well aware of the distinctly utopian sound of their ideas on the matter and have no illusions that their civic or binational vision will be realized anytime soon. At best, they present it as a moral asymptote, which makes the injustices spawned by the current system stand out even more starkly. The radical despair I warn against appears at two critical junctures: one, in the radicals' conviction that Israeli society is so plagued with disease, and so rotten to the core, that there is no alternative but to appeal to outsiders to impose their authority upon it; and two, in their realization that redemption will never actually happen—that, in fact, nothing will ever "really" change.

Last, Haggai Matar's letter also seems to confirm a substantial number of the arguments in my essay. He roundly criticizes what he considers to be my failure to distinguish between the left's critical position regarding the conduct of the state and its attitude toward Israeli society, which is "an extremely heterogeneous and diverse group of people who lack the ability to act unanimously in any way." The hitch is that only a few lines later, Matar goes out of his way to describe the strikingly uniform behavior of this "heterogeneous and diverse group of people": "the basic attitude that permeates the spheres of legislation, the legal system, the media, the education system, and the discourse on the street—and which governs the daily behavior of every soldier, policeman or security guard—is one of consistent racism," he writes.

Generally speaking, I cannot accuse individuals like Haggai Matar of despair. They seem to hold on to hope, or at least to a measured optimism. Matar, who takes pride in the modest successes of the protest campaign against the evils of the occupation and the Jewish state, concludes with the somewhat naïve encouragement that "The future is in our hands." In an atmosphere of paralyzing passivity and malignant cynicism, I am impressed by such enthusiastic idealism, even when it is directed against me and the values that are dear to my heart. Nevertheless, I believe that the trends I delineated in my essay are more powerful than Haggai Matar and his handful of young friends, and that they, too, will ultimately be sucked into the black hole of revulsion and helplessness. And this, I think, is something all of us should regret.

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