

Israel's Radical Left

TO THE EDITORS:

The dilemma of the radical leftist described in Assaf Sagiv's essay ("The Sad State of Israeli Radicalism," *AZURE* 40, Spring 2010) can be summarized as the conflict between the rejection of what one's society stands for on the one hand, and the attempt to retain some degree of effective participation in its life on the other. It is also the awareness that one's actions will invariably be dismissed by the majority of that society's members. As one fated to express radical views, I have felt this predicament keenly for forty years and over many campaigns. For instance, I have seen my book, *Overcoming Zionism* (2007), banned, and I have been forced from my academic position. It has indeed been rough at times. But I would not say—as does Sagiv—that I have despaired.

For me, at least, being a radical connects with something much greater and more enduring than the mere obloquy of the world. There is comfort in feeling connected to those who have gone before me in the struggle for radical change, for example the anti-slavery campaigns in the United States or the anti-Apartheid struggle in South Africa. There is

comfort, too, in knowing that all four Gospels remind us of Jesus' saying that a prophet—the word for "radical" in those days—is not without honor, save in his own country and household. There are many examples of this principle in the Hebrew Bible, whose prophet-radicals so often camped outside the walls of the city. Indeed, I feel privileged to have been able to call for the basic transformation of something so destructive to humanity—Jews included—as the Zionist state.

Although my knowledge of the Israeli anti-Zionist radicals about whom Sagiv writes is minimal (in part due to my limited Hebrew), I wish that he would do more than infer their misery. Sagiv should provide evidence as to how these radicals actually feel about standing against the majority of Israeli opinion. I wonder about the degree to which they are sustained by beliefs such as those which I described above, and whether it is they who despair, or instead members of the Zionist left. It is the latter, after all, who are faced with the thankless task of trying to resolve the absolute contradiction of Zionism: Namely, that a Jewish state, born in violence and maintained by usurpation, can also be genuinely

democratic and worthy of the ethical grandeur woven into Judaism.

In fact, I believe the Zionist leftist has the much harder time of it, being a walking oxymoron; her tribalist, Zionist identity crashes continuously against her solidarity with the victims of injustice and those who struggle against it. She must also grapple with her fidelity to the Enlightenment tradition of critical reason, or what Marx called “the ruthless critique of everything existing.” But an oxymoron is only a logical category, and thus it can be overcome, at least to a degree. The Zionist left (and I am led to include Sagiv in this category) can do something about these contradictions, namely by striving to expand the universal elements within its discourse while simultaneously narrowing the corrupting influence of chauvinism. Concretely, the left should work hard not to present the Palestinians as bloodthirsty congenital terrorists, and the anti-Zionist radicals as peevish cranks.

Unfortunately, Sagiv’s method gets in the way of this, precisely because, as he says, it “avoids the usual quarrels over historical narratives... [in order to] uncover the internal logic of anti-Zionist thought and point to its theoretical implications and practical conclusions.” The problem is that, however we shape our narratives, there *are* objective and

discernible dynamics to history. To set these aside can make a seemingly sophisticated analysis arbitrary, thus creating a vacuum to be filled by Zionist chauvinism. Case in point: Sagiv frames his argument by invoking the “weight of Palestinian violence,” under which the hopes of the Zionist left “may indeed have crumbled.” He is also agitated by the “stubborn refusal of the Palestinians” to recognize the legitimacy of the Jewish state or to renounce the “right of return” that dashed the near-“messianic” hopes of Oslo. The image is of congenital Palestinian intransigence and, along with it, the perverse insistence of the radicals that the answer lies in the events of 1948. Well, maybe it does—or maybe the history goes back to 1937, 1929, 1917, 1897, or 70 C.E. But what about the history of the Oslo period itself, which we are meant to regard as an abstract, “good-faith” gesture made by the liberal Israeli state under Ehud Barak?

I am amazed that Sagiv omits consideration of that most glaring of the “facts on the ground” during this period: the expansion of settlements in the West Bank. Was this, we must ask, a mere real-estate operation, or was it in truth a slow-motion ethnic cleansing that continues to this day? What conclusion can a rational person draw except

that settlement building expresses the Zionist impulse to eliminate everything non-Jewish from Palestine? It is a lot harder, when seen in this light, to fault the Palestinians for stepping up their resistance. By ignoring such a pertinent aspect of the situation, Sagiv makes the radical anti-Zionists seem like quixotic romantics instead of like people who soberly assess the reality on the ground.

Sagiv's essay also touches upon the vexing question of the Palestinian right of return, and here another problem surfaces. The relevant passage is as follows:

One... problem lies in the marking of 1948 as the turning point in Jewish-Palestinian relations.... It stems, in large part, from a desire to turn back the hand of time and "heal" the original trauma. At the same time, however, it precludes any possibility of ever reaching a feasible agreement with the Palestinians. After all, a return to 1948 as a way of making amends, if only in part, for the injustices of the Nakba would also imply an acceptance in some form of the Palestinian "right of return." *Needless to say*, this proposal is met with fierce opposition from the vast majority of Israel's Jewish citizens, who perceive it, *not unreasonably*, as a recipe for national suicide. Given the present reality, the radical left's position is more intent on reopening old wounds than it is on achieving a real breakthrough toward reconciliation. [Emphasis mine.]

Instead of "*Needless to say*" and "*not unreasonably*," Sagiv would have been wiser to say, "*unreasonably*," since he obscures the fact that there are two distinct meanings condensed into the term "national suicide." First is the actual, self-inflicted death of the Israeli nation, reminiscent of Masada, and second (and more likely) is allowing for a repeat of the Holocaust. Of course, the Holocaust has not the slightest chance of recurrence in today's world; nonetheless, it looms like an ominous rain cloud over the Israeli collective consciousness. It is used to prevent any chance of coming to grips with the second, and real, meaning of the right of return, which is the potential downfall of the Jewish state, whose pseudo-democracy depends on a permanent majority of Jews, and could dissolve were Palestinians allowed to return to the land from which they had been expelled.

By not differentiating between the two meanings, Sagiv uses the Holocaust to haunt the notion of human rights and trump the very idea of justice. He allows radical *unreason* to override the claims of reason and justice, all the while calling it "not unreasonable." This manipulation of the great sufferings of the Jewish people in the name of perpetuating Zionist rule is, unfortunately, symptomatic of larger segments of Israeli society. It largely explains the rise of

the religious right and the collapse of the Israeli left. As a result, it is hardly surprising that Israel is becoming more and more isolated—and more and more desperate—with the passage of time.

Indeed, all that holds the Jewish state together today is the infusion of massive doses of impunity by its imperial patron. But as this impunity only leads to more reckless transgression by the Zionist state, Israel has become caught up in a vicious circle with no resolution, save eventual collapse. As a matter of fact, the Jewish state's collapse is being hastened by the inevitable withdrawal of American support, despite the enormous degree of influence wielded by Zionists in American society. There are too many straws in the wind to ignore the storm's approach. Consider what Israel's Ambassador to Washington, Michael Oren, said several months ago: Relations between the two countries are not in a "crisis," because a crisis is something that passes; rather, relations are in a state of tectonic shift, in which continents are drifting apart.

In light of this reality, anti-Zionist radicals are becoming more prophetic, and less despairing, by the minute.

Joel Kovel
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TO THE EDITORS:

Assaf Sagiv provides a view of the Israeli radical left as seen from a conservative vantage point. Although his analysis aims to be fair, and does avoid the ill-informed and hateful rhetoric so common in the media, he nevertheless makes several crucial missteps. As a result, he paints a distorted picture.

First, Sagiv's account of Israeli responses to the failure of Oslo ignores that process' most important aspect: the ongoing settlement construction, the land confiscation, and the intensification of the Occupation (through closures, roadblocks, targeted assassinations, etc.). The effect of these Israeli policies was twofold: The Palestinians, out of frustration with the process, turned to Hamas; and Israeli radicals rejected the two-state solution. The consistent reluctance of both the Israeli government and the public to abandon their practices of expansion and subjugation, and to regard the Palestinians as equal partners, could not but raise questions about the historical roots of that approach and its implications for a possible solution.

Second, in citing Ehud Barak's explanation for the failure of Camp David in 2000, Sagiv ignores a significant body of research that disputes Barak's account and asserts that Israel effectively offered Palestinians a series

of non-contiguous territories with limited powers—thus falling far short of real independence. This truth was exposed, for example, in a series of articles by Robert Malley and Hussein Agha in the *New York Review of Books*, among others. But again, for Sagiv, radical responses have nothing to do with Israeli policies and actions.

Third, Sagiv's statement that the radical left wishes to return to 1948 is misleading. Rather, the radical left seeks to address the legacy of the situation created in 1948, while acknowledging that many subsequent changes are irreversible (demography, for example). Most authors discussed in the essay (Kimmerling, Yiftachel, Shenhav, and others) accept the State of Israel as an inevitable product of history, but seek to change its nature so as to render it a more liberal state, one that treats all of its citizens equally. To be sure, expanding the boundaries of citizenship by severing its restrictive relationship to ethno-religious identity may not be acceptable to the majority of the Israeli-Jewish public. But is this not a classic liberal goal?

Fourth, contrary to Sagiv's claim, the majority of people mentioned in his essay recognize that pre-1967 Israel is not the same as the Israel of the post-1967 Occupation, and that Palestinian citizens enjoy more substantial civil liberties than their occupied

relatives. But they also argue that the Jewish nature of Israel places serious limits on the degree of democracy for Arabs (as the phrase goes, "Israel as a Jewish-democratic state is Jewish for Arabs, and democratic for Jews"). They also argue that the relative democratic nature of pre-1967 Israel could be made possible only *after* the ethnic cleansing of the majority of the pre-1948 Arab residents. There is a strong inverse relationship between the proportion of Palestinians in the country's population and their political assertiveness on the one hand, and the degree to which Israeli Jews are willing to live with them in a fully democratic system on the other. Seeking to make democracy more inclusive is a well-established liberal goal, and would not be considered radical at all in most societies.

Fifth, in contrast to Sagiv's assertion, no member of the radical left supports or sanctions the acts of tyrants or terrorists (on the Arab or Muslim side). Rather, they frequently express solidarity with the struggle of the Palestinian people for political rights and equality with Israeli Jews. Such solidarity cannot be equated with support for their leaderships.

All these points clearly demonstrate that, contrary to Sagiv's analysis, the so-called Israeli radical left wants Israel to become a more liberal, more democratic, more inclusive state. In

most societies in which Jews live as a minority, this is a desirable goal, one they often support fully. Why, then, should it be seen as a radical existential threat in the case of a society in which they are a majority?

Ran Greenstein
Johannesburg

TO THE EDITORS:

As a certified “radical Israeli leftist,” and an anthropologist who, rather than teaching, directs the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions, I read Assaf Sagiv’s essay with the detached and bemused interest of a subject who has been rendered an object, or at least a category.

I have little problem with the terms Sagiv uses to describe “us.” In fact, his radical-versus-Zionist-left distinction captures the great ideological chasm that has divided radicals from liberals in all times and places. As Sagiv recognizes—yet doesn’t seem to accept—radicals, unlike most liberals, define themselves not by their citizenship in a particular state, but rather by their commitment to universal social justice, along with a heavy dose of suspicion toward the intentions of states and those who too closely identify with them. Sagiv’s enigmatic phrase, “They deride the accusations of treason,” sums it up nicely.

The same applies to a nationalist ideology like Zionism. Israeli radicals do identify themselves as Israelis (hence the name of the organization I head), but would argue that any nationalist conception must conform to the cause of a just peace and inclusive social justice. Radicals envision Israel being transformed into a state of all its citizens, either binational or unitary. Unfortunately, this criterion does alienate radicals from the general public, as Sagiv notes deridingly. From their perspective, this alienation derives not from the justness or workability of their conception of the state and the universal values it embodies, but rather from the lack of critical political thought demonstrated by the public—a public, that is, socialized by state-run educational institutions, a flawed political system, subservient media, and nationalistic militarism into a narrow nationalism and a fear of the Other.

It is difficult to provide a radical critique of Sagiv’s paper, because the issues it raises—the inability of radicals to influence government policy or public opinion; their unavoidable “anti-Zionism,” based on the “sins” of 1948; their mistrust of states in general; their political agenda, which rejects mere reform and insists instead on restructuring society according to principles of egalitarian inclusiveness, cultural pluralism,

and universal human rights; and the transnational nature of their activism, which holds one's own country can be held accountable for its policies and actions—rest on an infrastructure of assumptions shared by Sagiv and his AZURE readership that tend to be left unsubstantiated and merely asserted. In many such instances, as when Sagiv quotes Sartre's famous introduction to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, he believes it is enough simply to ask: "Is there any radical leftist in Israel who would not wholeheartedly endorse these words?" The outrageousness of this assumption does not require any additional comment.

The problem for a critic, then, is not to counter Sagiv's analysis; in fact, he puts his finger on the main issues defining the radical-left position and provides excellent documentation. It is, rather, to ask: *So what?* Sagiv does not actually address the substance of the various positions he reviews, but simply assumes that by exposing them, their unacceptability will be evident to a "normal person." Yet the positions outlined are "repulsive" only if the reader accepts the unstated "Zionist," and generally conservative, *weltanschauung* underlying Sagiv's own position. So we must start by deconstructing the self-serving ideological foundations of Sagiv's piece.

First, Sagiv assumes that Zionism is morally defensible in an age of human rights and is somehow normative; "anti-Zionism" is, therefore, to be deplored as an unacceptable deviation. He evaluates all the arguments of the critical Israeli left in light of a reified, unproblematic, disembodied "Zionism," as if the actions of the Israeli government over the past six-plus decades do not count. For Sagiv, there is no autonomous Israeli agency. Only the Arabs act, only *they* are to blame for the "colossal failure" of the Oslo process. Missing is an Occupation that pursues policies based on an exclusive Zionist claim to the entire Land of Israel, rather than on genuine security concerns. Regarding the particular issue with which I am engaged, for instance, some 24,000 Palestinian homes have been demolished since 1967, almost none with a security motive.

Sagiv's omission of Israeli responsibility—and power—might reflect the views of most Israeli Jews, but it creates an intellectual discourse in which discussion of radical-versus-liberal politics is divorced from reality. The figures mentioned above are not mere details; they mean something. But Sagiv's decision to approach the positions of the radical Israeli left on a purely ideational level allows him to avoid such messy externalities. For this reason, he discusses mainly those

views of radical academics (with the exception of Hannah Safran, Sami Shalom Chetrit, and a brief quote from Gideon Levy). While academics indeed constitute a key part of the radical left, missing are those engaged intellectuals positioned largely outside of academia, whose actions and analyses are grounded in the daily oppression that is the Occupation: the late Simha Flappan, Uri Avnery, Shulamit Aloni, Michel Warschawsky, Akiva Orr, Ruhama Marton, Reuven Kaminer, Uri Davis, Dafna Baram, Meron Benveniste, Michael Sfard, Peretz Kidron, Haim Baram, Shir Hever, Sergio Yahní, Meir Margalit, Kobi Snitz, and others, myself included (not to mention the many voices of Palestinian citizens of Israel). Perhaps that is why Sagiv concludes, in the face of intense activity in the Territories, within Israeli society, and internationally, that “Unfortunately, radicals are all too reluctant to get down in the trenches. They would rather criticize from the safety of their perch above.”

Much of Sagiv’s criticism of the radical left rests on his indignation that in bypassing channels of internal change—that is, in invoking such extra-state authority as human rights, international law, and UN resolutions—it is not playing by the rules. He accuses the radical left of harboring a “profound suspicion of

the modern state as such,” and argues lamely that because “said state’s dominance is showing no signs of decline” (a very contentious proposition), radicals are deluding themselves if they think they can effect social change, hence entering into—and disseminating—despair. There is “something almost pathetic about the politics of ‘resistance’ advocated by the radicals,” he writes.

Now I do not know what world Sagiv lives in, but if he does not harbor a profound suspicion of the modern state (by which he means one of the powerful loci of the capitalist world system), with its bristling militaries pursuing deadly resource wars and its neoliberal economics impoverishing the vast majority of humanity, all the while invoking “security” as a pretext for limiting civil rights; if he believes, moreover, that “the encroaching colonization of life by the law” is not the biggest danger threatening us—then we really do have little to talk about.

But is the radical left really so powerless in mobilizing forces for a just peace? Maybe we’re talking about a difference of strategy rather than of effectiveness. Sagiv would naturally wish to shift the Israeli Jewish public this way or that by internal political processes, since he is (emphatically) part of that mainstream. But radical leftists have set for themselves a

different agenda—namely, bringing Israel, with its structured discrimination of its own Arab citizens and a 43-year-old Occupation, into conformity with the norms of the international community—even as they fight to make countries everywhere accountable to those same norms. Given that states like Israel have the power to neutralize the critical abilities of their own citizenry through their monopoly over the media, the education system, the political agenda, and the decision-making process, it is no wonder that the radical left goes abroad to try and effect changes in Israeli policy. Sagiv is simply wrong when he says that “The vanguard of radical resistance to the Jewish state is not interested in taking part in the Israeli milieu, even as an opposition. It has given up on it, and *is looking for a way out.*” (Emphasis mine.) We are not looking for a way out. But in a situation where 90 percent of the Israeli Jewish public cannot recognize the illegality, immorality, and just plain stupidity of unleashing one of the world’s most sophisticated armies on a defenseless population of a million and a half people in Gaza, we are simply looking for more effective means of change. But sadly, Sagiv, like the Israeli government itself, misses—or dismisses—the most potent force for that change: international civil soci-

ety. Rather than leading to “despair,” the radical agenda leads to just the opposite: hope, struggle, resistance, and change. I have just returned from the U.S. Social Forum in Detroit, where the issue of Palestine was central to the 13,000 young people gathered there. Loyalties today seem to be shifting away from states, and toward the universal principles of social justice and human rights that states have either actively opposed or failed to respect.

There is also the issue of what “Zionism” still means (Sagiv, after all, aims his essay at “those waging a moral crusade against Zionism”) and to what degree an ideology can really define, or even influence in the long run, a state. This is especially so in the case of Israel, a country whose very character is being contested by many of its own citizens. What constitutes “anti-Zionism” is also an open question. If, to take Zionism at face value, it means supporting the idea of Israel as a Jewish state, then one can hardly imagine anything more anti-Zionist than the systematic policy of settlement activity inaugurated by Begin and Sharon, which, despite various attempts to sell a Palestinian Bantustan as part of a “two-state solution,” has had the effect of permanently incorporating into an Israeli polity millions of people to whom it does not want to extend citizenship.

Ideology certainly plays a role in the evolution of a country, but it by no means determines it. All kinds of things happen that fundamentally influence the direction a country takes, many of which have nothing to do with ideology, and in the end may even defeat it. Consider just a few developments that have taken place since 1948: the end of colonialism and the oppressed masses finding their own “voice,” for example, or the rise, since World War II, of human rights and international law as integral parts of international relations. There have also been dramatic demographic developments: The vast majority of the world’s Jews chose not to emigrate, including 99 percent of American Jews; meanwhile, perhaps 800,000 or more Israelis have left the country. Some 25 percent (Amnon Sofer puts it at 30 percent) of Israelis are not Jewish. Moreover, because of its settlements and exaggerated security demands, Israel has created a binational reality and controls, probably permanently, the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza—meaning that half the population of de facto Israel is Palestinian, which in turn raises the specter of apartheid. There have also been fundamental economic realignments (Ber Borochov would have been appalled by the national obsession with the Tel Aviv

Stock Market, an IMF official being appointed governor of the Bank of Israel, and the government’s policies of privatization).

In the end, Sagiv offers us a rather unusual essay. His commentary aside—for it does not add up to a counterargument—it is a rather good review of radical-left positions, with rich and evocative quotes. But rather than “confronting” radical views “with honesty and courage,” as he took it upon himself to do, he constructs a “radical left” straw man, and then proceeds to demolish its well-reasoned positions with one or two lines of dismissive assertions. One is left with the question: Why is the state of the radical left “sad”?

Is it because it is not popular among the Israeli public? “The radical left, particularly among Israeli Jews, is an extreme minority,” observes Sagiv. “Its considerable influence in academic and cultural circles does not translate into any sizable political power, and its spokesmen and activists usually relegate themselves to parties representing the Arab vote.” Since when, however, has being in a minority ever had a bearing on the cogency of one’s political views? Skipping over the obvious reference to Germany in the 1930s, consider South Africa, where more than 90 percent of whites supported the apartheid regime until

its sudden collapse, and Jews worldwide took pride in the lone voice of Helen Zussman.

Sometimes the majority is fickle. For example, the vast majority opposed giving up the settlement of Yamit and the Sinai region on the eve of Sadat's visit, yet the vast majority supported Begin's decision to do so immediately afterward. I'm not sure the Israeli Jewish majority today does, in fact, support the government's settlement policies or its political program. Overall, as the capitalist system collapses and natural disasters overtake us, most governments, supported by the majority of their populace, nevertheless pursue unsustainable policies. In terms of anticipating global developments that will affect Israel in major ways, I would argue that the radical left may be a small minority, but it is much more in touch with reality than is Sagiv's Israeli Jewish mainstream, locked as it is into the tunnel vision of local politics.

"Sad," "ineffectual," "frustrated," "in despair"? According to Sagiv, radical Israeli leftists exhibit a "fascinating yet frightening *weltanschauung* that cultivates pessimism instead of hope, and alienation instead of involvement." On the contrary, I would argue that we are "winning." Our actions, together with those of thou-

sands of our compatriots in Palestine and abroad, and supported by global politics and processes, have rendered the Occupation unsustainable (a term used by Joe Biden on his recent visit to Israel). Just how and when the Occupation will end, and what will replace it, is still unknown, but it is impossible to gauge this impending, momentous change simply by observing Israeli politics, or by assuming any connection between what Israeli Zionists want and what will actually transpire. The thrust of Sagiv's argument leads to a disconnect between internal politics and global processes, which is extremely dangerous for Israelis who would like to salvage something from the end of the Occupation, even if it is the increasingly unlikely prospect of a two-state solution.

There are many other specific issues Sagiv brings up that cannot be addressed here. For the most part, however, after presenting the radical left in a fair, thorough, and insightful way, he fails to engage with it, and prefers instead to reduce sophisticated arguments to simplistic caricatures. Thus his essay is littered with phrases like "reopening old wounds," promoting a "culture of complaint," being "blind to the many shades of gray," "the problem can be solved by simply handing over their backyard to

their neighbors,” and mere “fantasies of severing the Gordian knot of the Occupation.” He also belittles and ridicules significant issues, often in an insulting way, as when he writes: “Of course, no list of the victims of Zionism would be complete without mention of the female sex.” And he sums up complicated positions with flippant non sequiturs, such as the following description of radical-left thought: “The Occupation, the Zionist government, Israeli society—all are bound up in a stinking mass that must be wiped off the face of the earth, one way or another.” Such a dismissive and shallow discourse does not do justice to Sagiv’s own justification for his essay (phrased, as usual, in a qualified and patronizing manner), namely that the voices of the radical left “contain nuggets of truth and profound insights that merit careful attention.” That “careful” consideration is yet to come.

Jeff Halper

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ASSAF SAGIV RESPONDS:

Many of the criticisms leveled against my arguments from the radical fringe of the political spectrum are directed toward several points that I deliberately refrained from ad-

ressing in my essay. Jeff Halper, Ran Greenstein, and Joel Kovel seek, for instance, to discuss the circumstances in which the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians foundered, assigning responsibility for the resounding failure of the Oslo accords to the Jewish state alone. It would be tempting to argue this issue with them, and to remind them of certain facts that seem to have slipped their memory, but I will leave this work to others. Although I have a definite opinion on the matter (which is not devoid of self-criticism), I did not intend to make it the focus of my piece; in any case, it is only marginally relevant to the general context of the thesis I presented. My main goal, as I clarified, was to trace the course of radical thought, wherever it might lead us.

And it definitely takes us to some strange places. Joel Kovel, for example, defines the Jewish state as “destructive to humanity,” and seems to be under the impression that it is the contemporary incarnation of the Third Reich. Someone who ascribes to Zionism the impulse “to eliminate everything non-Jewish from Palestine”—no less!—probably has no idea what actually goes on in the State of Israel and the territories under its control. This is the rhetoric of a hysteric, one that employs images and expressions borrowed from

the darkest chapters of history. He seeks to imbue his audience with the sense that it is faced with an absolute evil, one that must be eradicated at all costs. Indeed, it is ironic that Kovel accuses me of making perverse use of the Holocaust, when he himself does not hesitate to attribute genocidal intentions to the Zionists, and to accuse Israel of a “slow-motion ethnic cleansing.” Obviously such a crude demonization of the Jewish state—is there any point in arguing with it on the factual level? In bringing it face to face with reality?—provides full justification for terrorism. In Kovel’s words, “It is a lot harder in this light to fault the Palestinians for stepping up their resistance.” This sanitized expression refers, we should remember, to the blowing up of buses full of women and children, and the showering of rockets on civilian communities.

Kovel openly yearns for the collapse of the Jewish state, and those who support its continued existence are therefore entitled to reject his call for the fulfillment of the Palestinian right of return. Ran Greenstein presents a somewhat gentler vision. The goal to which he and his friends aspire, he contends, is simply to render Israeli democracy more “inclusive.” He envisions a liberal state “of all of its citizens” in which Israelis and Palestinians enjoy equal rights, and

does not understand why I insist on labeling this aspiration “radical.”

Greenstein’s arguments can only be described as disingenuous (his insistence that no radical has lent his support to terrorists or tyrants is quite astonishing; the way Noam Chomsky consorted with the leaders of Hezbollah during his most recent visit to Lebanon, in May of this year, is only the latest example in a very long list of shameful associations). He asserts his absolute commitment to liberal democracy, yet there is something undemocratic, if not anti-democratic, in the way in which he and some of his colleagues have advocated a boycott of Israel. One need only read the letter by Jeff Halper, co-founder of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions, to be persuaded of this.

Halper’s lengthy and carefully argued response deserves to be closely parsed. If I could have, I would have quoted it in the essay itself, as it openly manifests some of the most disturbing aspects of the radical campaign against Israel. Halper justifies the radical left’s resort to foreign tribunals on the grounds that 90 percent of the Israeli public has been thoroughly brainwashed by the government, and is therefore incapable of making decisions or acting in a morally acceptable manner. Simply put, they are zombies, creatures devoid of reason. Accordingly, Halper explains, there

is no point in radical activism within the framework of Israeli politics. Whoever aspires to genuine, substantive change in the status quo must turn to a different, external force: “international civil society.”

This is a disturbing claim, as it indicates that Halper despairs not only of Israeli society and the modern state, but also of democracy in general. Contrary to the government of Israel, or that of any other democratic state, what Halper refers to as “international civil society” neither represents nor purports to represent the will of the voting public. What this pretentious label really denotes is a multitude of organizations and institutions that have taken up the cause of “human rights.” This is in itself a noble cause, yet its proponents all too often engage in sanctimonious attacks on the West, aligning themselves, both intentionally and not, with some of the worst forms of religious and ideological fanaticism. Some of these groups—like the thousands of young people who participated in the U.S. Social Forum in Detroit, whom Halper proudly mentions—are motivated by a naïve idealism, a sincere desire to mend the world that is not informed by a genuine understanding of the political, economic, and moral realities. Others are not so innocent: Organizations like the IHH, which initiated the Turkish flotilla’s expedi-

tion to Gaza and waves the banner of “humanitarian aid” while aiding and abetting Islamic terrorism in places like Afghanistan, Chechnya, and Bosnia, dramatically illustrate the dangers inherent in the lax admission requirements of the so-called international civil society.

Henry James’s Conservatism

TO THE EDITORS:

R.R. Reno is absolutely right to insist—against the popularly held view to the contrary—that James’s later novels are political (“Henry James’s Critique of the Beautiful Life,” *AZURE* 40, Spring 2010). There is no better proof of Reno’s argument than his own graceful readings of two of James’s later novels: *The Ambassadors* (1903) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904). But in correcting one popular misunderstanding, Reno has perpetuated another. James’s politically and ethically engaged aesthetic, as Reno would have us believe, does not make James into an antagonist of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s self-reliant individualism. Rather, it makes him its beneficiary. The Jamesian moral vision, as Reno renders it, in truth affirms James’s deep affinity with Emerson.

Reno's misstep occurs when he adopts the popular view of Emerson as the "prophet of individualism" against any and all claims of the body politic. According to Reno, for Emerson "the goal of the journey of life is to be true to oneself, even at the cost of tossing overboard the baggage of inherited moral norms." This is at best a simplification of what Emerson means by self-reliant individualism. Indeed, it is a gross reduction of Emerson's complex social philosophy, which James himself exposes early in his career, in his depiction of Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady*. Like Daisy Miller, Christopher Newman, and other Jamesian protagonists, Isabel does quite disastrously believe in her radical independence and freedom from all social convention. For this reason, she represents, in comparison to European culture, a kind of frivolous, naïve, and very self-endangering Americanism. On the political and philosophical level, she represents an undigested, unthinking Emersonianism. In the course of the novel she outgrows this "dream of existential freedom" (as Reno calls it), when she finally comes to commit herself not to the bad marriage she has made, but to the child who has become her own as a result of that marriage. Recalling the behavior of American literature's first Emersonian heroine, Nathaniel Hawthorne's

Hester Prynne, Isabel returns home to a home that is no home in order to make it into a home, for others if not for herself. This provides Isabel's action with both a personal moral vision and an ethical political objective.

Emerson, in the service of a truly moral and democratic pluralism in the United States of America, is a master of rhetorical exaggeration. When he says, in "Self-Reliance," that "If I am the Devil's child, I will live then from the Devil," he does not mean literally to advocate the devil's position. Rather, he wishes to play what we call "devil's advocate" in what remains for him the important dialogue of culture. Emerson's self-reliant individual, in other words, will do anything and everything in order to further the legitimate ends of society, even if that entails the *risk* that one's position might be mistaken for that of the devil, pure and simple.

Risk-taking is essential to Emerson's moral vision, as his abolitionist politics make clear. Similarly, as philosopher Stanley Cavell has taught us, when Emerson says in the same essay that self-reliance is the "aversion of conformity," he does not mean that self-reliance is simply disgust vis-à-vis conformity, and therefore its out-and-out rejection. Rather, he wishes us to turn away from conformity (which is what the word *a-version*, i.e.,

turning away from, literally means) so that we might produce the kind of social formation or coming together (*con-formity*) that achieves the highest aims of human existence. For Emerson, thoughtless conformity can result not only in bad behavior, but also in a denial of moral responsibility. Individuals need to think for themselves, not because the individual is always right, but because only the individual can take responsibility for his or her actions and words. That's what relying or depending on oneself means.

As Emerson's word play suggests, language is essential here. In anticipation of a writer like James, Emerson invested in reading and writing as instruments of a moral politics. The title of James's *The Ambassadors*, and the aristocratic contexts both of that novel and of *The Golden Bowl*, make it almost inescapable that we think in terms of political and ideological contexts. What Reno so superbly shows us about these novels is that the moral action that promotes the good of others has everything to do with reading the situation and interpreting it properly—whatever society seems to dictate, and whatever we might desire for ourselves and for others. One must see moral logic through, and subordinate oneself to its demands, even if those demands might appear, to some, to come from the devil. For

James, as for Emerson before him, this was the only way to engage in a meaningful and moral relationship with other self-reliant individuals.

Emily Budick

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R.R. RENO RESPONDS:

I am of course gratified that Emily Budick agrees with the main thrust of my interpretation of the late novels of Henry James. She rightly brings *The Portrait of a Lady* into the discussion. It is a fine novel that focuses on the sudden transformation of a provincial, middle-class young lady into a woman whose vast wealth puts the world at her disposal—or so she imagines.

Her disagreement comes, it seems, with my characterizations of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Budick reads Emerson's work as a therapy of detachment from superficial social conformity that is designed to prepare us for a more honest, more earnest, more courageous loyalty to deep moral truths. She alludes to Emerson's abolitionist politics as an example.

Emerson is a tough nut to crack, because he draws upon the prophetic traditions of the Bible, giving the impression of an inner reform of culture

rather than a fundamental revolution. But by my reading, the basic thrust of Emerson's Transcendentalism is clear: We must cultivate nonconformity, not for the adolescent pleasures of rebellion for its own sake (as Budick rightly says), but so that we can fan the divine spark in our souls. Thus the gist of Emerson's view: what humanizes our lives and renews our society comes from within. The individual soul is the sacred font, the true and reliable source of life.

Henry James knew Emerson, and was well acquainted with the Gnostic sentiments of American Transcendentalism, sentiments given peculiar form by his father's enthusiasm for Swedenborg. By my reading, a great deal of the fiction of Henry James reflects a profoundly anti-Gnostic reaction. What humanizes our lives does not radiate from the inside, working its way outward. Rather, as his lifelong fascination with the role of gardens, estates, furnishings, and manners suggests, Henry James came to see that our lives are given dignity from the outside as it works its way inward. In the final novels, this sociological insight takes on a moral tone. The objectivity of moral facts, facts embedded in culture and surrounded by reinforcing social conventions—and precisely *not* our subjective potential—anchors life. It's a view

that strikes me as fundamentally (and self-consciously) anti-Emersonian.

I find myself reinforced in this view when I reflect on the philosophy of William James, Henry's older brother. As an approach to philosophical questions, pragmatism represents a self-conscious refusal to allow existential questions to become imprisoned in sterile debates about criteria for truth, debates that in the modern era have ended up focusing on the way in which the inner world of ideas connects to the external world of facts. For William James, we are thrown into the world and must make our way in it, trusting in the power of reality to shape our ideas over time. Although William James tended to naturalize the world rather than give it the elaborate cultural forms we find in Henry's novels, both brothers believe that the power of reality comes from the outside, working its way inward, forming and vivifying the soul.

At the risk of crude simplification, therefore, I would say that Emerson—and with him a great deal of modern American thought—is antinomian, or perhaps more precisely anti-halachic. He treats the specific and pressing demands of culture as the greatest threat to our moral integrity. By contrast, the James brothers came to see that our modern isolation and anomie—often

exacerbated by Emersonian fantasies of existential freedom—pose the greatest threat. Left to our own devices, we tend to become disoriented, demoralized, and self-deluded. Far from courageous nonconformists, if we fail

to allow external realities—including conventional cultural realities—to form us, then we easily become, as in the case of Isabel Archer, victims of the efforts of others to manipulate our desires to serve their own.

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