Correspondence

The Gaza Flotilla and INGOs

To the Editors:

Har'el Ben-Ari, in his article "The Gaza Flotilla and the New World Disorder" (Azure 43, Winter 2011), does a fine job of analyzing the various problems inherent in the activities of international non-governmental organizations (INGOs): They are not elected or representative bodies, and as such bear no democratic accountability; they frequently yoke ethical discourse to their political goals in a cynical way; many of them collaborate, knowingly or unknowingly, with terrorist organizations; and, ultimately, they gnaw away at the world order. There is indeed something unsettling, even anxiety-provoking, about this activity, at least among those who are the beneficiaries of the current order—an order, it should be noted, that Ben-Ari extols almost without reservation. All the same, Ben-Ari does not hide the important contribution that many of these organizations do make to the struggle against moral injustice—injustice, I should add, perpetrated in the shadow and under the cover of that very same world order. Some of these organizations, he notes, have even received the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of their part in these struggles. Certainly these organizations deserved the prize more than did some laureates who represented states (Barack Obama) or national movements with aspirations to statehood (Yasser Arafat).

To Ben-Ari's credit, he is balanced in his description (though not, perhaps, in his judgment) of the activities of these non-governmental actors. Unfortunately, he is not nearly as balanced in his description of the world order's various state players. Allow me to attempt a brief corrective.

Let us proceed from the light weights to the heavy hitters. To begin with, there are the states that are referred to, quite rightly, as "lawbreaking"—Iran, Libya, North Korea, and their ilk. Iran slaughters its own citizens when they dare to protest against their government, and supports terrorist organizations around the world. As I write this, Libya is bombing its own people, who have taken to the streets to demonstrate against the tyrant Muammar Qaddafi. North Korea starves its people, fires at its neighbor to the south on a whim, and practically offers up weapons of mass destruction for the taking.

What makes it hard for the international community to intervene on behalf of the victims of these

regimes—and consequently, what allows these lawbreaking states to carry out such abuses—is the principle of sovereignty, on which Ben-Ari's exalted world order rests. Under the auspices of the world order—i.e., the political logic that informs it, and the economic logic that greases its wheels—law-abiding states can turn a blind eye, and even subsidize, these dictatorial and murderous regimes. The economic system, for example, is what encourages private corporations and states in the West to continue trading with Iran, while Libya becomes the West's darling not because of Qaddafi's charm or charisma, but because of the vast quantity of oil flowing from its shores—and also, let us not forget, because of the fear that refugees from Libya would swamp the southern shores of Europe. North Korea, for its part, enjoys the protection of China, and no one dares confront the latter—except, of course, members of INGOs, who have risked their lives more than once (such as during the Beijing Olympics demonstration) on behalf of human rights in the largest "people's republic" in the world. Note that these violations of human rights are all carried out by states and their agents, operating under the protection of the world order. This is the logic that infuriates those "hordes of militant anarchists," as Ben-Ari describes the INGO activists, and spurs them to go out and protest, sometimes violently (though, to be fair, the police forces that confront them are usually no better in this respect).

It is hard not to agree with Ben-Ari when he offers the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) as an example of the theater of the absurd: Its mix of morals (or lack thereof) and politics actually *undermines* our ability to promote an ethical, humane world order. Indeed, this council has worked very hard to acquire its ludicrous reputation. Nevertheless, remember that those who set its tone—thereby damaging the world order and eroding its legitimacy—are not the non-governmental players, but instead states like Libya, Cuba, Angola, and other such paragons of human rights.

Then there are the deeds of the law-abiding states, affiliated with the free and democratic world. These are the regimes that we are taught to see—often rightfully so—as models of proper behavior. One could extend Ben-Ari's description of the positive contribution of INGOs to these states, which work to promote human rights and the world order. I want instead to focus on the *injustices* wreaked by those same enlightened countries, and offer a sort of mirror image of Ben-Ari's sober (perhaps too sober) analysis.

"The axis of evil" is how George W. Bush (rightly) described Iran, Iraq, and North Korea. But it was the United States, under his presidency, that covertly sent suspected terrorists to be tortured in benighted countries—tortures that not all survived. The infamous Guantánamo Bay camp held prisoners under harrowing conditions, without trial or time limit, thanks to a loophole in American law—a loophole that, remember, is an outcome of the principle of sovereignty underlying the world order.

There is no question that in recent decades, a series of inglorious chapters have been chronicled in U.S. history. During the Cold War, America used any means possible—including support of terrorism—to achieve its goals. The Reagan administration assisted the contras in Nicaragua; in 1984, it ordered the mining of Nicaraguan ports, an act that the International Court of Justice defined as a breach of international law. When it wanted to overthrow unfriendly regimes in Chile and Argentina, the U.S. did not hesitate to offer its patronage to military juntas that tortured their citizens. And when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979, the United States—with flagrant shortsightedness—supported the Mujahideen, thereby contributing to the rise of the Taliban (and readers may draw their own comparisons regarding Israel's steps that bolstered the Hamas against Fatah).

Of course, the United States, the innocent or imperialist power (depending on your point of view), is relatively easy to hate. But it's not alone. The case of France also supports my argument. In his article, Ben-Ari mentions the sinking of the Greenpeace ship *Rainbow Warrior* in 1985 by French secret agents in Auckland, New Zealand. France may have violated New Zealand's sovereignty—an action that in itself undercuts the world order—but that is only part of the story. The Greenpeace ship was part of an attempt to stop the development—permitted to a few states, and forbidden to the rest—of weapons of mass destruction. What's more, Greenpeace was trying to prevent French nuclear tests in Polynesia, a colonial vestige that still belongs to France, thanks to the wonders of international law and the world order. Because the islands are far from France, however, they were the perfect place for tests that produce radiation and nuclear fallout—and to hell with the inhabitants of neighboring islands and their flora and fauna. Oh, the wonderful world order! And I haven't even mentioned what France has wrought in Africa: Suffice it to say, yet more evidence of its less-than-

glorious colonial legacy. The inhabitants of Africa are another silent victim of the world order.

Another Greenpeace flotilla from the very recent past—February 2011—put an end, if only temporarily, to Japan's hunting of whales. Under the dubious cover of promoting scientific research, Japan is continuing its slaughter of endangered whales, in flagrant defiance of the international conventions. Many would argue that the INGOs are doing a great kindness by giving voice to the otherwise mute cries of the whales.

And, of course, I cannot fail to mention Israel, many of whose actions violate international law and the standards of human morality. The work of INGOs exposes us, the citizens of Israel, to our state's behavior, both within its borders and in the occupied territories. A good example of this is B'tselem's camera-distribution project, which gives out video cameras to Palestinians who live in areas where conflict is to be expected. Were it not for these cameras, we would never have known about events such as the 2008 shooting in the foot of a bound Palestinian demonstrator, Ashraf Abu Rahma, at the order of Lieutenant Colonel Omri Burberg, and we would have continued to wave the banner of the IDF's "purity of arms."

Let me add, in closing, that beyond the political motives that inspired the *Mavi Marmara* flotilla and its passengers' provocations—which are amply described in Ben-Ari's article—there was another reason the ship set sail: the naval blockade of the Gaza Strip. It may be possible, albeit with great difficulty, to find legal justification for the imposition of the blockade, but it is certainly morally inadmissible. The State of Israel is locking up a million and a half human beings in one vast prison, and supervising all comings and goings (it succeeds only minimally in interdicting arms, and much more so with food and toys). Many of those aboard the *Mavi Marmara* were peace and human-rights activists in every fiber of their beings, seeking to protest and breach the blockade out of genuine humanitarian motives, and at great personal risk. Their action forced us Israelis to look in the mirror and face up to the injustices we are perpetrating. Moreover, their efforts bore some fruit: In the aftermath of the flotilla, Israel eased the blockade. What happened to all the security considerations that had been bandied about earlier?

The flotilla and those behind it not only ate away at the world order, they also promoted moral ends. Not everything is rotten in the kingdom of the "global civil society," nor is everything holy in the empire of the "old world order." There is no doubt that

we cannot function without a world order, and that many states (including the United States, France, Japan, and Israel) are making major contributions to fair and humane conditions of existence. But let us not exaggerate their contributions, or make light of those of the INGOs. Many population groups are groaning under the yoke of the world order and its inherent inequality, just as, conversely, many non-state actors are genuinely contributing to what Ben-Ari calls "the humanitarian interest," in part by their confrontational posture toward states.

Criticism is important, but we should not throw the baby out with the bathwater. Alongside our understandable skepticism, we must also show respect for INGOs and their major contribution to the strength and morality of the world order.

Piki Ish-Shalom
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To the Editors:

I found Dr. Har'el Ben-Ari's article most useful, as it explains a major specious device in international political relations. Using the rhetoric of human rights, justice, and peace, states are funding a worldwide substructure of illegal, non-democratic, and unelected entities that promote jihadist ideology and tactics, justify terrorist practice, and encourage hate, particularly against Israel.

Although those entities are called non governmental organizations (NGOs), some are in fact linked to the governments that fund them, and conduct policies that these governments prefer to hide. The racist and apartheid campaign against Israel, which aims at delegitimizing its existence and denying the inalienable human, cultural, and historical rights of its people, is supported by European states at large and many Western churches and foundations. So-called humanitarian NGOs, to which they grant considerable funds, privileged media access, and widespread exposure, provide a convenient cover for their views. These European states and Western churches and foundations can thus display a façade of objectivity, even as they create a very unobjective and undemocratic network of hate for Israel. Almost inevitably, it should be said, this network submits to the goals of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). Indeed, many of these NGOs developed after the 2001 Durban Conference—allegedly against racism, but in fact a bacchanal of racism against Israel—and were particularly encouraged by the Romano Prodi–Chris Patten–Javier

Solana triumvirate that presided over the European Commission from 1999 to 2004.

In Europe itself, similar transnational networks developed under the label of "representatives of civil societies." Of course, no one knows who these civil societies are, and certainly no one elected them. Under the guise of promoting "dialogue" and "peace," they militate for open borders, unchecked immigration, multiculturalism, the suppression of European national and cultural identities, and the vigorous condemnation of anything that even remotely smacks of "Islamophobia." As in the case of the anti-Israel INGOs, they are linked unofficially to European governments and the European Union in an effort to force its citizenry to accept the policy of globalization that the latter openly rejects. The two most recent networks are the Anna Lindh Foundation and the Alliance of Civilizations. If one examines their aims, rhetoric, and projects, one notices striking similarities with those of the OIC.

Indeed, the international campaign of demonization of Israel in particular and of Western values and identities in general seems to emerge from just one source: the OIC. Historians will have much work to do in analyzing the elements of this phenomenon that has changed Europe so profoundly, and which bodes ill for its future. Now, however, urgent judiciary action is needed to detect and expose the international system that legitimizes terrorism and war through the vocabulary of peace and justice, and subverts Western values by seeking to install a jihadist culture in their place. Finally, above all, we should not hesitate to name those political leaders who have created these trans national undemocratic instruments of war against civilization.

Bat Ye'or
Geneva, Switzerland

To the Editors:

In "The Gaza Flotilla and the New World Disorder," Har'el Ben-Ari analyzes the influence of international non-governmental organizations (INGOs). Behind vague slogans of "globalization," "civil society," and "international public opinion," INGO officials often promote their own narrow interests and partisan ideological agendas. Exploiting the rhetoric of liberalism, human rights, and international law, they lead the war on these very values, with Israel and the United States as the primary targets.

In addition to the campaigns led by Amnesty International and the central role of the Turkish Humani-

tarian Relief Foundation (IHH) in the violent Gaza "Freedom Flotilla," the activities of Human Rights Watch (HRW) in marketing Libya's totalitarian regime are particularly chilling. HRW is a New York-based INGO, founded in the 1970s as Helsinki Watch, and—like Amnesty—was initially active on behalf of political prisoners and in promoting human rights in the Soviet Union and under other totalitarian regimes.

However, in the 1990s, following the end of the Cold War and under the leadership of Kenneth Roth, HRW lost any claim to being a "moral force in the Middle East," as founder Robert Bernstein admitted in a *New York Times* article last October. Roth raised tens of millions of dollars by aligning HRW's activities with the most visible media events, and by adopting the agendas of key United Nations power brokers, particularly the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). For HRW's Middle East and North Africa Division, Roth hired apologists for Arab totalitarian leaders, such as division director Sarah Leah Whitson and her deputy, Joe Stork. As a result, for the past decade HRW has excused or soft-pedaled the daily abuses of these regimes, while devoting highly disproportionate resources to targeting Israel with false accusations of "war crimes," "violation of international humanitarian law," and the like. Infrequent and minimalist condemnations of Hamas and Hezbollah created the façade of "balance," but lack any substance whatsoever.

This agenda merged seamlessly with the issues discussed by the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), dominated by a coalition of the OIC and other systematic human-rights violators (Cuba, China, Russia, Venezuela, etc.). In echoing the UNHRC's frequent attacks on Israel (documented by UN Watch), HRW gained media exposure and further funding. In 2009, HRW stage-managed the appointment of board member Richard Goldstone to head the UNHRC's biased "fact-finding" mission on the Gaza war, thereby giving a Jewish imprimatur to the UNHRC's one-sided mandate and kangaroo court. Following the publication of the Goldstone report, which was based on unsubstantiated NGO allegations, HRW led the cheerleading.

In parallel, HRW and Whitson formed alliances with the Saudi and Libyan regimes. In May 2009, Whitson led a fundraising trip to Saudi Arabia, where she used HRW's testimony on "Israeli abuses to the U.S. Congress," accusations of "systematic destructive attacks on civilian targets," and the specter of the pro-Israel lobby to solicit donations from prominent

members of Saudi society. And in her wildly misnamed "Tripoli Spring" (*Foreign Policy*, May 27, 2009), Whitson lauded the Libyan "reform movement" and the role of the Qaddafi Foundation for International Charities and Development; in a second Libyan excursion, she went so far as to compare the foundation, headed by Qaddafi's son Seif al-Islam, to HRW ("Postcard from… Tripoli," *Foreign Policy in Focus*, February 11, 2010). Needless to say, this entailed ignoring massive human-rights violations. For example, Fathi Eljahmi, Libya's most prominent dissident, was imprisoned in 2004, tortured, and died in 2009. As his brother wrote, "in [its] May 21 statement Human Rights Watch didn't call for an independent investigation." Moreover, referring to Whitson's embrace of the Qaddafi Foundation, he wrote that "the organization is actively menacing my brother's family. Some family members continue to endure interrogation, denial of citizenship papers and passports, round-the-clock surveillance, and threats of rape and physical liquidation."

This example reinforces Ben-Ari's analysis, in which he traces the factors that have allowed some powerful INGOs to co-opt the language of morality in order to promote immoral agendas. To end this cynical abuse, and restore the universal foundations of human rights and international law, such detailed examination is essential.

Gerald M. Steinberg
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NGO Monitor

Har'el Ben-Ari responds:

Piki Ish-Shalom, Bat Ye'or, and Gerald Steinberg have each made important contributions to the arguments I raised in my article. Indeed, their letters prove just how controversial the activities of INGOs are, and why we cannot continue to take them at their word as regards their moral and professional pretenses.

In his comprehensive response, Ish-Shalom focuses on the shocking and, sadly, serial injustices perpetrated by governments, the principal and most senior agents of the "world order." I cannot help agreeing with Ish-Shalom's statement that "not every thing is rotten in the kingdom of the 'global civil society'"—assuming we know its nature and location—"nor is everything holy in the empire of the 'old world order.'" But I must stress that the point of my article was not to advocate for the existing order, as Ish-Shalom seems to think. On the contrary, I, too, wish to see it improved, and made healthier. The point

on which we disagree is Ish-Shalom's assessment that INGOs are endowed with the desire and ability to heal the maladies of the world order, or at least to repair some of its most pronounced perversions.

Many INGOs, Ish-Shalom maintains, take great pains to serve the cause of human rights. He offers several notable examples, and goes on to praise their willingness to stand up to states that groan "under the yoke of the world order and its inherent inequality." Let us, then, adopt Ish-Shalom's approach for a moment, and examine the way INGOs have behaved during some recent events of note. We may—or may not—be surprised at what we find.

Given the wave of mass protests that have swept the Arab world in recent months, one cannot help but wonder how decades of extensive suffering, oppression, and poverty failed to register a single blip on the revolution radar of observers—professionals and laymen alike—around the world. How is it that in the information age, when words and images cannot be stopped at a country's borders, the Arab states' systematic violations of human rights and their regimes' flagrant violence were treated by the international community as if they did not exist? After all, we might argue, one of the main roles of "global civil society," with its innumerable INGOs, is to protect and give voice to the disempowered sectors whose rights are trampled by their governments. We can only conclude that in this, the "global civil society" has been an utter failure. The facts speak for themselves: All of the recent protests were sparked by local populist forces that lacked external support, and resistance to oppression was triggered not by human-rights organizations, but by technological advances that make it possible for anyone to photograph events and distribute the evidence over social networks.

At the very least, after the exposure of the magnitude of the oppression perpetrated by Arab governments against their citizens, human-rights organizations—which have always preferred to turn the other cheek—can no longer dismiss difficult questions about their role in these societies through recourse to empty terms like "political pragmatism," "professional considerations," or "priorities." The recent "Arab Spring" has definitively put the lie to their claims to represent a broad spectrum of interests and to create a space for transnational democratic activity—a conclusion, it should be noted, that is backed up by empirical studies.

Ultimately, INGOs choose on whom to focus, with whom to team

up, to whom to offer help, and—crucially—from whom to receive technical and financial assistance. In theory, this is the source of their moral power. After all, they purport to be independent ("non-governmental") groups, motivated solely by conscience and universal interest. But this is also precisely why it is so important to keep a close eye on them and their backers. As Steinberg and Bat Ye'or point out, the hollowness of these organizations' claim to "objective expertise" has been clear for quite some time, particularly in the Israeli context. Moreover, it is no wonder that all three responses mentioned the loyal partner of these organizations, the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC)—a group whose anti-Israel bias is beyond dispute. The same may be said of the European Union, whose political and financial interests are frequently at odds with attempts to crack down on egregious violations of human rights taking place right under its nose.

Sadly, the INGOs' work methods and biases have corrupted an important political and moral enterprise that was meant to respond, if incompletely, to the maladies of a world order founded upon the nation-state principle. It is therefore truly a pity that national NGOs, which *do* have the ability to fortify popular democracy, lack the resources and prestige enjoyed by their international counterparts, which far too often serve only narrow and one-sided political and economic considerations. Needless to say, this state of affairs, instead of improving the world order, merely exacerbates its flaws.

Unfortunately, the first part of the Turkel Commission Report on the flotilla incident came out after my essay was published. As the report made clear, however, although such incidents are disguised as protest demonstrations, they are nothing less than acts of aggression. They put Israel's decision makers, and even more so its security forces, in an impossible situation: The latter are under orders to act in a selective and "proportional" manner against a motley crew of terrorists, mercenaries, politicians, human-rights activists, journalists, academics, and intellectuals—all with different citizenships and agendas—packed together on one narrow deck. Simply put, it is a recipe for disaster. The great irony, however, is that the primary audience of the report—namely, the Israeli public and the international community—was also the target of the cries that the *Mavi Marmara*'s "humanitarian activists" radioed from the ship: "Go back to Auschwitz" and "Don't forget September 11." It seems that local and international public opinion has not adequately internalized the full meaning of these statements. The real test of the

report, therefore, will be its ability to produce any change in attitudes in the international community—that is, any change in the awareness of the potential impact of these types of events, and in the willingness to cope with their ramifications (which clearly extend far beyond the Mediterranean basin).

In this light, it is important to note one of the primary elements of the flotilla phenomenon: the national and international civilian support system, without which the "humanitarian" enterprise could not exist. Although the Turkel Report does not deal with this directly, it does reveal the extent and complexity of the system. It is important to understand that before a ship sets sail, it needs the support of various civilian infrastructures. It must pass, for example, a series of inspections and obtain various permits—meaning that the relevant authorities can block its departure at any one of these stages. The fact that this did not occur in the case of the Turkish flotilla shows that the senior echelons in Turkey were aware of its goals, and were assisting its organizers—not, in other words, merely turning a blind eye to their actions. On the contrary, the agents that cooperated in the *Mavi Marmara*'s voyage included heads of government, ministers, and high-ranking bureaucrats. The UN and the EU authorities, who were in the know, did not lift a finger to stop the provocation. And no wonder: The IHH (the Turkish NGO responsible for the flotilla) has been granted the honor of "consultative status" by the UN Economic and Social Council, despite conclusive evidence of the former's ongoing support for Islamic terror throughout the world.

It is important to stress that the IHH is no exception. As early as 1996, the CIA published a report about the extensive relationship between terrorists and INGOs. Various studies from the last few years have exposed the deepening involvement of such organizations in militant activities throughout Europe, involvement that includes funding, recruitment of activists, and ideological backing. Unfortunately, even those organizations that are not suspected of sympathy for lawbreaking radicals opt not to participate actively in the effort to curb terrorist violence. Ironically, these groups' formulation of international conventions on human rights and the prohibition of force ended up impeding the measures taken by those countries that actually tried to combat the malignant phenomenon.

Regulation of INGO activities and the monitoring of the groups that fund them might provide a partial solution to the problem. As early as 1912, the idea was raised of granting these organizations some sort of

status in international law. Throughout the last century, in fact, various academic forums proposed drafts of international conventions to examine the issue. But representatives of the organizations themselves were never particularly enthusiastic about the idea—an understandable response, given that formal legal status would force them to maintain transparency and meet other restrictive standards; moreover, it would allow for regulation of their activities. Most governments, too, expressed reservations, primarily because of their fear of strengthening groups suspected of political disloyalty and support of terrorism. So the loophole in international law remained, giving INGOs virtually complete freedom of action.

As Ish-Shalom claims, "there is indeed something unsettling, even anxiety-provoking" about the activities of INGOs. But he thinks this concern is the province of "those who are the beneficiaries of the current order." He claims that "we must… show respect for INGOs and their major contribution to the strength and morality of the world order." Underlying these statements is an assumption I cannot accept: that these organizations' activities are appropriate, just, and beneficial to humanity. I do not believe that they should be exempt from the obligation to obey international (or national) law—weak and fragile though it may be—and they certainly do not have a monopoly on universal truth and morality, assuming such things exist. Criticism of these organizations, as scathing as it sometimes is, does not necessarily attest to sweeping satisfaction with the current world order; on the contrary, it may actually express concern that its maladies are worsening and its failures multiplying. Moreover, such criticism does not belittle the important humanitarian enterprise that the INGOs are intended to promote. Concern for this enterprise actually requires us to keep an eagle eye on those who claim to behave with "objectivity" and "expertise." In light of this, it is worth quoting what former British Prime Minister Tony Blair wrote in his recent memoirs:

> Over time, I'm afraid I came to dislike part of the NGO culture.… The trouble with some of them is that while they are treated by the media as concerned citizens, which of course they are, they are also organizations, raising money, marketing themselves and competing with other NGOs in a similar field. Because their entire *raison d'être* is to get policy changed, they can hardly say yes, we've done it, without putting themselves out of business. And they've learned to play the modern media game perfectly. As it's all about impact, they shout louder and louder to get heard. Balance is not in the vocabulary. It's all "outrage," "betrayal," "crisis." They

> also have their own tightly defined dogmas and conventional wisdom which, if you challenge them, they defend fiercely—not usually on their merits, but by abusing your motives for challenging them.

Well put.

Israeli Education

To the Editors:

As a teacher, I fervently believe that if there is one lesson worth learning, it is this: Any information taken out of context has the potential to distort reality. Sadly, as Avner Molcho has reminded me ("Education's Forsaken Vision," Azure 42, Autumn 2010), this is a difficult lesson to learn.

To be sure, I agree with Molcho that the system needs improvement. This will take resources, dedicated people at all levels, expertise from different sources, serious strategies, and a lot of time. Yet none of these will have any impact absent a healthy, vibrant, and inclusive discourse on education—a discourse that currently does not exist. Articles such as Molcho's, which skew the portrayal of Israeli education, quote policymakers and academics out of context, and handpick historical events to support a preconceived notion of reality in the service of a particular ideology, only contribute to the deterioration of an ailing discourse.

Molcho's argument is that a paradigm shift in education occurred in the 1960s, one that changed the goal from cultivating virtuous citizens to striving for societal equity. This departure from the system's original goal, he contends, was partially responsible for the decline in the quality of Israeli schools. Yet this contention suffers from three major flaws. First, the concept of "inequality" is not accurately or clearly defined; second, Molcho's conclusions about the Israeli education system are based on several incorrect assumptions; and third, he ignores the wider historical context of the subject at hand.

While I concede that the educational system cannot and should not be expected to correct inequality in society at large, it is important to point out that there are different concepts of equity at play in the debate over education. In his article, for instance, Molcho grouped equality of outcomes with that of opportunity. Now, a legitimate argument can be made that schools cannot guarantee equity of *outcomes*; even a great educational system cannot, for example, be expected to make medical school an obtainable goal for every student. This does not mean, however, that schools are unable to grant equality of *opportunity*. In other words, all

students should have the same access to technology, qualified teachers, and academic subjects and levels. No, we cannot expect our schools to correct all of society's ills, but we can—and should—expect that those wrongs not be compounded by the unequal distribution of opportunities *within* our schools.

Furthermore, I would claim that the educational system is capable of both creating equality of opportunity *as well as* preparing virtuous citizens. Why sacrifice one of these laudable goals for the other? After all, the two work together: When a school system fulfills its obligation to prepare all its citizens to participate in the democratic process, this in turn creates more equality of opportunity and social justice. Yet at the same time, it must be acknowledged that in a society as diverse and sectarian as Israel's, one cannot expect anything resembling a consensus on which values to teach. Moreover, I would argue that just as it is not the role of the school to correct inequality of *outcomes* in society, it is not the school's responsibility to decide on a set of values and beliefs for society as a whole. The role of the school is to create an environment where students gain knowledge and skills, and are granted opportunities to gain experience. In other words, schools should equip students with knowledge and skills, and let *them* decide which values, virtues, and beliefs to uphold and to champion.

I also take issue with Molcho's argument that the problems in the Israeli school system are a direct result of a lack of standards for student outcomes. First of all, this claim of causality assigns blame to the alleged educational paradigm shift, and eliminates individual and institutional responsibility. Second, and most importantly, it takes an extremely narrow view: History has shown that most changes in education theory occur organically, and are not implemented reforms. Andy Hargreaves and Ivor Goodson (2006), for example, make this point in their article on three decades of reform in selected schools in the United States and Canada—itself a confirmation of Tyack and Tobin's 1994 claim that education systems experience "waves of reform" whose compatibility with individual schools depends on those schools' distinct identity and culture, and are accordingly embraced or rejected. Nevertheless, these scholars emphasize that waves of reform are just one of five major forces of change with which schools are required to contend. The others are generational shifts among teachers; leadership succession; student and community demographics; and school interrelations. With this in mind, Israel's dissatisfac-

tion with its current school performances cannot be traced to one specific failure. It would be impossible, if not irresponsible, to isolate a single factor that could alone explain the decline. Molcho's argument—that the change to a more open system of secondary education is the overarching cause of that system's decline—thus tosses the proverbial baby out with the bathwater.

Another of Molcho's assumptions is that the right to education is a zero-sum game, i.e., that more students in the system lowers the quality of education per child. If this were true, the argument should be applied from kindergarten through elementary school, and not just to secondary education. In truth, high scores do not depend on enrollment numbers, but on teacher quality. Over the last decade, research by Heather Hill, Brian Rowan, and Deborah Ball has shown that student background differentials can be overcome by teacher effects. In other words, the quality of teachers is the most influential variable in measuring the difference in student outcomes, and not students' socioeconomic backgrounds. As such, the government needs to deal with these issues on a systemic level, namely by attracting highly qualified candidates for teacher-education programs, providing incentives for excellent teachers in struggling schools, supporting school-embedded professional development, and giving schools appropriate and necessary resources. If we want to improve student outcomes, we should be choosing our teachers from the top quarter of university graduates, not hand-picking students for secondary education.

Finally, Molcho ignores the wider historical context of education today. The changes he discusses are not simply national ones, after all, but are reflective of international trends. The information age makes radically different demands on students than did its predecessor, the industrial age. These demands in turn pressure governments and education systems to prepare their future work force in tandem. Molcho's isolationist argument—i.e., measuring the Israeli education system against its past successes, absent any examination of the global context for that system's development—is bound to produce an inaccurate picture.

We have a lot of work to do to improve our educational system, and we need to do it through discourse, not demagoguery. We need to work with the human resources and capital we have available to us, to examine our system within its international context, and to find solutions that respect the complexity of our nation. Above all, we need to stop blaming our teachers, our schools, and, most

importantly, our students. We have serious work to do to improve teaching and learning for all our children in Israel, and it has little to do with alleged paradigm shifts.

Esther Enright
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To the Editors:

Avner Molcho's essay presents an assessment of the shift in educational philosophy he has observed in Israeli public education since Israel's founding. Evolving from a mission to serve the civic needs of a new nation as well as the mathematical, scientific, and other intellectual needs of a modern society—a mission that enhanced social cohesion despite wide differences in student achievement—the reigning view he sees today emphasizes student rights instead of shared civic values and promotes upward social mobility for students from low-income families as the chief purpose of public education.

Molcho's purpose is to suggest that Israeli society would benefit from a revival of the central features of a classical education—its stress on intellectual goals and civic virtues. As justification, he points to the failure of the new mission for education to stimulate academic achievement in poor students or their upward mobility, despite increasing resources dedicated to these ends. In fact, he notes, achievement gaps between children of low- and high-income parents seem to have grown even as they all learn less, according to international test scores.

However, Molcho omits mention of the most recent expression in U.S. public policy of this problematic mission for public education, an expression that is likely to have undreamed-of negative effects on the school curriculum, academic achievement, and American society as a whole. Israeli educators, like their counterparts in many other countries, have long looked to the U.S. for ways to improve the academic achievement of students from low-income families and, hence, their social mobility. The Israeli public needs to learn what signposts American education policy makers are following on the yellow-brick road to Oz. Otherwise, "Education's Forsaken Vision" may soon become "Education's Long-Forgotten Vision" in both countries.

As is well known, the original formulation of "equal educational opportunities" did not imply equal outcomes or the repudiation of intellectual and civic goals by the schools. Equity was understood to mean a fairer distribution of resources to raise poor children's achievement. But

as it became clear by the late 1990s that the increasing flow of federal and other funds to improve their "basic skills" was not changing the demographic profile of low achievers quickly, if at all, U.S. educators and policy makers redefined equity to mean equal outcomes for all demographic groups (except for boys and girls) and altered the goal line.

Stressing the "closing of demographic gaps" as the supreme goal of the schools, the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) set forth a utopian goal: proficiency for all students by 2014 as determined by state assessments. An additional accountability criterion required "adequate yearly progress" for each demographic group. However, no practically significant increases in achievement at higher grade levels were detected in low-performing groups after accountability was added to the formula (although there has been progress on basic skills in the early grades). And serious problems elsewhere were ignored by policymakers.

Not unexpectedly, schools focused on what mattered to NCLB—getting low-performing students to pass state tests. But at the same time, NCLB offered no reward for increasing the number or percentage of students, regardless of demographic category, who moved from proficiency to advanced, or who completed an authentic algebra I course in grade 8, or who passed more advanced mathematics courses in high school (to name but a few examples). Yet the need to pay attention elsewhere was clear. According to the 2007 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, only 6 percent of U.S. students were at the advanced level in grade 8 mathematics, compared to, for example, 40 percent of students in South Korea. As a November 2010 report noted, "the U.S. trails other industrialized countries in bringing its students up to the highest levels of accomplishment in mathematics." The report did not identify "any single cause of the relatively small percentage of students in the U.S. who are performing at a high level of accomplishment," although the shortage of academically qualified mathematics teachers looms as a major factor.

Despite the stunning comparisons between percentages at the highest performance level, no alarm bells went off and no policies incentivizing increases in mathematics and science achievement at higher performance levels were forthcoming. Instead, the new mission for education drove public policy in the Obama administration to higher utopian heights than the Bush administration had aimed for, with an even more intense focus on low achievers and little attention to anyone else.

While early advocates of "equal educational opportunities" wanted more poor students reaching high academic goals, and not a change in these goals, supporters of the goal of social justice turned to an idiosyncratic and shrunken secondary curriculum (as content-free as possible), accompanied by changes in pedagogical practices and classroom organization, as a quicker means to their desired ends. If academic credentials (i.e., a college degree) are what promote social mobility, then what needed fairer distribution to get low-achieving groups moving upward were the credentials, not necessarily what they were designed to reflect.

The first step in facilitating a more equitable allocation of academic credentials was development of national standards in English and mathematics loosely tethered at the secondary level to their traditional content. That step was completed with the help of the Gates Foundation, which paid for the development, review, post-facto validation, and promotion of the reading and mathematics standards known as Common Core, released in June 2010, and which also influenced the selection of most of the personnel involved. Public officials and the media were repeatedly told by the developers of the standards that they were research-based and internationally benchmarked, even though independent field experts and researchers indicated this was not the case. To clinch the first step, the U.S. Department of Education ensured state adoption of these skills-oriented standards (about 45 states so far) with the lure of Race to the Top competitive funds.

The next crucial step is the development of tests based on Common Core's standards and the working out of important matters such as the quality and difficulty of the test items and the level of the passing scores. The Department of Education is funding and supervising this step directly. So far as we now know, the department also wants high schools, in a reauthorization of NCLB, to ensure that all their graduates are "college ready" as determined by the passing score on high-school-level tests. If so, schools will be held accountable for a greater utopian reach than was expected in 2001.

Efforts are already under way to make sure that all "college ready" students can be successful in their freshman college courses. Public colleges are being asked to "align" entrance requirements and the content of freshman courses to Common Core's secondary standards, not the other way around. And, to ensure that "college ready" students can

graduate from a college degree program in record time, all of their freshman courses must be credit bearing, not tagged as remedial (otherwise, these students could not be called "college ready").

This means, in effect, that those who pass the national high-school tests, which are to be first given at the end of grade 10, can go right to a college that accepts them and earn college credit for the content of the grade 11 or 12 courses they skipped, if the content is deemed necessary for their degree program.

Does anyone doubt that public colleges will be under pressure to admit "college ready" students and produce equal group outcomes in retention and graduation rates? Like high-school teachers, public-college instructors will find it in their interest to produce equal group outcomes, no matter how the outcomes are related to the content of what individual students know.

Once upon a time, making students "college ready" meant strengthening, not weakening, the high-school curriculum. Selective colleges in the U.S. will likely be able to fill their freshman classes with students from schools in, say, South Korea, Japan, and Singapore. But how long can any modern society sustain itself if it ignores both the intellectual and civic goals of public education and believes that able students come only in a few colors?

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Avner Molcho responds:

Esther Enright finds three major flaws in my paper. First, I seem to have "grouped equality of outcomes with that of opportunity." I certainly agree with Enright that we cannot expect schools to ensure equality of outcomes; that is why there was no discussion of the matter in my essay. Rather, the two forms of equality between which I did attempt to distinguish were those of opportunity and incomes (i.e., wealth). Many in Israel, myself included, still believe in certain socialist ideals, and feel that there is something fundamentally wrong with a society that allows for the existence of vast swathes of working poor. Moreover, like many Israelis, I believe that it is the responsibility of society itself—namely, the government—to confront this problem in a systematic way. *Unlike* many Israelis in policymaking positions, however, I do not consider education the appropriate weapon in the war against poverty. True, a good education can try to ensure that children from low-

income backgrounds have the same chance at success as their better-off peers in competing in the job market. But this would hardly reduce poverty. By definition, some children will lose out. Without a socialist *welfare* policy, which has little to do with education, equal opportunity will not help address the poverty problem. When everything is aimed at securing equality of opportunity, equality of incomes is of necessity neglected.

And not only socialism is made obsolete by the prevailing educational paradigm. Enright further thinks that the "educational system is capable of both creating equality of opportunity as well as preparing virtuous citizens," so why need we "sacrifice one of these laudable goals for the other?" True, in a perfect world, there would indeed be no need for sacrifice. But in *this* world, obtaining objectives always requires certain trade-offs. When all resources are aimed at ensuring equality of opportunity, other goals are unavoidably neglected. Those who think that the main goal of Israel's educational system is to secure equality of opportunity will naturally care less about educational standards—or indeed, about educating at all.

Which brings me to Enright's second point: "History has shown that most changes in education theory occur organically, and are not implemented reforms." I don't know about most changes, but regarding the one I dealt with in my essay—i.e., the shift to a focus on equal opportunity through education—it is impossible to extract it from wider changes in the general intellectual atmosphere. This should not come as a surprise: People who work in schools are also part of society, and are therefore also influenced by society's reigning ethos. Surely it is no coincidence that the attempt to secure equality of opportunity now dominates all spheres of our social life. It would be an even stranger coincidence if the educational sentiment that prevails today owed nothing to current economic theory, which emphasizes education's role in providing students with tools for success in the job market. In short, liberal sentiments are now ubiquitous, and we can hardly expect educators to be exempt from them.

Indeed, I would argue that Enright herself is an example of the phenomenon of educators' taking their cues from reigning liberal ideology in her expressed aversion to any attempt to reach an agreed-upon set of values. While I agree with her statement that "in a society as diverse and sectarian as Israel's, one cannot expect anything resembling a consensus on which values to teach," it is quite a leap from there to a total abandonment of any attempt to agree on "good" and "bad" values,

and to her conclusion that students should decide for themselves which "values, virtues, and beliefs to uphold and to champion." Even more importantly, while values and beliefs are (perhaps) a matter of a personal choice, or are at least guided to some extent by one's intellect, virtues are decidedly *not* a matter of choice. Simply put, children—or anyone else, for that matter—do not choose their own character traits; rather, traits are somehow cultivated in them. Now, the question is: Whose job is it to do this? Some would argue that any guiding hand is necessarily oppressive, but many parents do attempt to encourage the development of those traits of character that they believe to be good and desirable in their children. Should that work be left to parents alone? Is it really the case that, in the name of multiculturalism, liberalism, or whatever "ism" currently holds sway, schools should completely abandon their age-old goal of cultivating virtues through education (and that was, it should be noted, what the term "education" meant until recently)? Certainly, assigning this task to a public and highly bureaucratic system poses major problems, and it was beyond the scope and purpose of my essay to address them. But in pointing to the need for a discussion on the subject, and reminding ourselves of older, and very different, views on the matter, I had hoped to offer some helpful insights into the dilemma.

Enright's third point is that while I claim that "education is a zero-sum game, i.e., that more students in the system lowers the quality of education per child," research has in fact shown that "the quality of teachers is the most influential variable in measuring the difference in student outcomes, and not students' socioeconomic backgrounds." This argument mixes up so many points that it is difficult to even attempt an answer (it is not education "per child" that I argue about, nor did I claim that "socioeconomic backgrounds" explain educational differences); nevertheless, I will say wholeheartedly that I have no problem with the notion that better teachers make for better education. However, claiming that everything depends on the quality of teachers seems to me extremely unlikely, and pure wishful thinking. We need no studies to tell us that some children simply will not take to, say, history or literature, and others—despite the best efforts of their teachers—will do very poorly in trigonometry (I myself may serve as an example of this latter category). I do not know what the ideal number of students who should enter each level of the educational system is, but I'm quite certain that there are some

types and levels of education that are not one-size-fits-all. But when the entire system is aimed at obtaining equality, there is hardly any justification for sustaining above-average types of education, which, I am sure, many educators would find desirable. (This March, the Association of Chemistry Teachers warned that chemistry studies in high schools are on the verge of collapse. In a letter to the minister of education, the association claimed that after years of attempts to make the studies easier, so that more students could succeed, Israeli students today hardly know what a molecule is.)

Finally, Enright concludes by saying that "we have serious work to do to improve teaching and learning for all our children in Israel, and it has little to do with alleged paradigm shifts." I agree. I did not attempt to provide guidelines for educational policy, only to point out an interesting historical phenomenon that can illuminate some of the educational problems we face. If practical conclusions can be drawn from this history, all the better.

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