

The Sabra's Lawless Legacy

TO THE EDITORS:

Assaf Sagiv's editorial ("The Sabra's Lawless Legacy," *AZURE* 33, Spring 2008) attributes the recent corruption exhibited by Israeli political leaders and other public figures, and the breakdown of social norms—ranging from bribery to sexual harassment—to the anti-legalistic tradition handed down by the Zionist pioneering ethos. The "unruly, irresponsible, and lawless behavior that runs rampant in the Jewish state today," he writes, "is not a sudden detour from the path laid out by the Zionist pioneers. On the contrary, in certain respects it constitutes a natural, almost inevitable outcome of the ethos they created." Sagiv views this negative development as a result of two components. The first is the tendency to disrespect the law—a feature that, according to him, resulted from Israel's "founding fathers'" decision to abandon their *own* fathers' tradition ("the rejection of *halacha* as the legal framework of national existence created a normative vacuum in the lives of the first Jewish settlers"). The other is the effort to fashion a "new Jew," a *sabra* who is distinguished by positive traits such as courage and decisiveness, yet also

inclined toward "mischief and law-breaking." This combined tradition, which has perpetuated a certain kind of "Israeliness," is what Sagiv believes accounts for Israeli culture's refusal to "follow the rules" and, eventually, for widespread corruption and the moral contamination of the public sphere.

To be sure, attacks on the "new Jew" and on the *sabra* have become *bon ton* in the media in the past few years. With Sagiv's essay, one can now add "vicarious liability" to the list of the *sabra's* faults. It is not my intention to defend the *sabra*, but I wish to propose an alternative genealogy for the corruption that has taken root in Israel.

Prior to the modern age, Jews observed *halacha*. But even then, there were Jews who chose to break the rules. If such behavior had not existed, after all, there would have been no need for excommunication or delayed prayers, among other regulations. Indeed, even in a society marked by a definitive constitutional framework, there is no assurance that transgressions of the law will not occur. Furthermore, although Jews obeyed the *halacha* (some stringently and some leniently), they also viewed themselves as exempt from the laws of the countries in which they resided.

The Jews of Eastern Europe provide an excellent example of this attitude toward legalism. Indeed, they viewed the German Jews, who were meticulous adherents to the rule of law and who founded the Israeli legal system, with contempt bordering on pity. The Eastern European Jews had always seen themselves as entitled to dupe the authorities—and they did *not* grow up on the ethos of the new Jew or the sabra, but came to Israel as adults.

When the Jewish state was founded, these norms that permitted bypassing the law were replicated on a large scale. Though there were no non-Jews in Israel to dupe, a state is still a state, even if it is a Jewish one. Thus, disrespect for the rule of law—to one extent or another—was in no way limited to the adherents of the sabra ethos. It is possible to argue that this attitude trickled down into other groups in the *Yishuv*, including the Israeli right, which rejected the worldview (and behavior) of the Palmah and preferred Menachem Begin's legalism. Yet how can we explain the fact that even ultra-Orthodox Jews, who observe every aspect of halacha—which, as stated, was abandoned by the founding fathers of the pioneering ethos—are not immune to acts of corruption, sexual harassment, and other moral perversions in the public sphere?

Sagiv seems to imply that if Israel had a constitutional framework, things would be different. But the truth is that in every country, and even in the most civilized of states, sin lurks near: People search for legal loopholes, and if they believe that they will not get caught, they will break the law. The United States, the most legalistic of all countries, which prides itself on a constitution rooted in a centuries-old tradition and boasts a high proportion of lawyers per capita, is also not immune to corruption. Let us recall that an American president was forced to step down due to the Watergate affair, and his vice president was sentenced to prison for corruption charges. Human beings are simply human beings—and sometimes not even that. In times of rising hedonism, when material gains are the measure of success, corruption always rears its ugly head.

Furthermore, countries of immigrants, where different ethnic groups maintain different traditions and behavioral norms, are more vulnerable to phenomena of unruliness and lawlessness. In a socially and culturally homogenous state, by contrast, it is more likely that the laws will be obeyed. This is why the Scandinavian countries always receive positive ratings in the International Corruption Index. Thus, even though

I share Sagiv's opinion that David Ben-Gurion's resistance to the establishment of a constitution was a tragic mistake; I do not accept his claim that legalism is the solution that will save us from corruption.

When speaking of lawless behavior as a typical characteristic of Israeli society, one cannot refrain from mentioning an area where it occurs daily, and even enjoys public support. I am of course talking about the Jewish settlements: Since the very beginning of this endeavor, it was accompanied by violation of the law, disregard for army and police orders, and an attempt to present realities on the ground as *faits accomplis* to the authorities. Are the fanatical settler youth who regularly confront IDF soldiers the modern-day heirs of the ethos of the new Jew? Or perhaps they embody an extreme Jewish heritage joined to the disdain for representatives of the law—that is, the view that precisely *because* it is the law of the Jews, it may therefore, paradoxically, be dismissed.

Israelis live in a culture that is the result of a merger of various traditions: the anti-governmental Jewish tradition, the Russian-Jewish tradition that sought to deceive the authorities in any possible way, and the Israeli tradition that sanctified the ability to “get by,” which is expressed in creativity and the

ability to improvise, but also in the incessant search for boundaries to be crossed. The sabra, however, had one feature that stood in contrast to the corrupting influence of those traditions: straightforwardness. There was a degree of toughness in speaking the truth as it is, but in this bluntness there was also sincerity and integrity. The mischievousness of youth does not necessarily lead to corruption in middle age, just as a naughty schoolboy does not usually become a violent thief in adulthood.

There is no reason to accuse the founding fathers of the Zionist state of their grandchildren's sins. Too many factors have been woven into Israeli tradition to draw a direct link between stealing livestock from farms to stealing millions from the public treasury. It is true that, as Sagiv puts it, the sabra has served his purpose, and Israel's fields are now in need of plowing, in the sense of instilling more appropriate norms in Israeli society. However, the remedy for impaired Israeli morals will not be found by exorcising the sabra “demon.”

Anita Shapira

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TO THE EDITORS:

Assaf Sagiv's article raises many issues that require a great deal of further analysis. By claiming that corruption

in our society is largely due to the historical and intellectual origins of the Zionist leadership, he ignores the fact that severe corruption within the Israeli leadership did not emerge until the late 1990s. The earlier Zionist leadership under Ben-Gurion, Sharett, Eshkol, Meir, Begin, Shamir, Rabin, and Netanyahu, despite their occasional lapses, cannot be compared to the severely corrupted culture that surrounded Sharon and Olmert.

In my opinion, however, the “historical approach” to this problem only tells one side of the story. There are other, more important and immediate factors to be taken into account.

First, the Israeli electoral system inherently breeds corruption. The 100-percent proportional voting system by which the Knesset is elected leads to the creation of elite political cliques based upon the old Leninist creed of “who knows whom,” rather than on any responsibility to the electorate at large. This elite cannot be removed without a truly massive shift in public opinion, far beyond what would be required in any parliamentary system based upon direct representation, or a mix of the direct and proportional systems. As a result, proportionally elected elites are forced to negotiate coalition governments whose policies are often unrecognizable to voters.

This system also exacerbates the feelings of helplessness, apathy, desensitization, and disinterest in public affairs mentioned by Sagiv.

Second, there is the growth of anti-Zionist sectors in our population that have no real connection with, or any desire to become part of, the State of Israel.

The Haredi population, for example, is a law unto itself. It has no obligation to the general society other than extracting maximum funding for its internal systems of education and welfare. Its political representatives in the Knesset—Shas and the Lithuanian religious parties—have made it clear that they exist solely to blackmail the government into granting them “gifts” that would never be contemplated in a normal political system. Their outright refusal to allow their sons to be drafted into the army is, in itself, a flagrant demonstration of “we will do what we like—the law be damned.” No government today is prepared to defy them. They prefer instead to “twist,” or corrupt, existing law in order to accommodate them.

Then there is the Arab sector, which has increasingly engaged in openly supporting, at least rhetorically, the enemies of this country with absolute impunity. Its Knesset representatives behave as if the State of Israel were a purely transitory phenomenon, and

are simply waiting for the day when it is destroyed by war or collapses from within. This is an intolerable situation for any democracy.

Third, the Hebrew media in Israel is often so biased in its support for existing corrupt elites that what little objective reporting is done tends to be buried under the weight of editorial policy. I disagree with Sagiv's admiration for the media's enthusiastic exposures of institutional corruption. A study of the current situation would show that the press has actively responded only in the most extreme cases, and only after public opinion has been sufficiently aroused to demand some form of action. Even then, it is done on a very selective basis in keeping with overall editorial policy. Recent op-ed articles in *Haaretz* praising MK Tzahi Hanegbi are a prime example.

Sagiv makes a very salient point, however, when he says that the educational system has a central role to play in the development of a more responsible, law-abiding society. However, this can succeed only if a more general educational syllabus is applied, one that includes some rudimentary understanding of and instruction in Jewish religious values. Under the present circumstances, this is impossible, as the ideological divide between secular Zionists and

moderate religious Zionists is so wide that any attempt to introduce a system of religious-based values runs into a brick wall. Secular education ministers have become so anti-religious that they prefer a system that is value-neutral. Zionism in isolation, however, leads to "Canaanism," as it is not a broad-based, value-driven ideology. This is what Sagiv is in effect implying when he says that Zionism must push beyond its "half-century-old arrested adolescence."

Furthermore, continued division is built into the educational system, as parents must choose in which camp—religious or secular—they wish to educate their children, so little cross-fertilization of values or beliefs is possible. After high school, the army can help, but more often than not it is a case of too little too late.

The solution to the problem is, therefore, far more complex than Sagiv proposes. Broad educational reform is commendable, but I fear that the situation has deteriorated to such an extent that we don't have the luxury of waiting a generation for it to have any effect.

The most important issue that should be tackled, then, is electoral reform, as its impact would be more immediate and may lead to the breakdown of the insular cliques mentioned above. This could lead

to greater integration, acceptance of general social values, and an increased respect for the law.

Allan Leibler
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ASSAF SAGIV RESPONDS:

My thanks to Anita Shapira, Allan Leibler, and Jonathan Yudelman (whose letter appeared in the last issue) for their thought-provoking comments. For the most part, I agree with their opinions. I have no doubt Shapira is correct in noting that the Eastern European tradition of “outsmarting” the authorities and Israel’s identity as a heterogeneous immigrant nation are viable alternative explanations for the corruption plaguing this country. Leibler is also justified in pointing an accusing finger at the Israeli system of proportional representation (an issue that is discussed at length in Amotz Asa-El’s article “Electoral Complex,” published in *AZURE* 31, Winter 2008). And Yudelman accurately criticizes the Israeli bureaucracy, which can make the life of the average citizen unbearable, and pushes—indeed, practically forces—him to cut corners and skirt the letter of the law.

All of my critics believe that I am unjustifiably slandering Zionism and—in these post-ideological times—simply piling another heap of

imaginary “faults” onto its back. But I am a Zionist, and nothing Zionist is alien to me. If I have criticized the heritage our nation’s founders have left us, it is not because I wish to engage in fashionable self-accusation, but rather because certain failings in that heritage have metastasized to the point that we can no longer safely ignore them.

Israel is not rotten to the core, and there are certainly other countries that are far more corrupt—even in the civilized and enlightened West. As Shapira points out quite rightly, wherever a legal framework exists, there will also be violation of the law. Even the most legalistic societies—such as one based on halacha—will suffer from one kind of criminality or another. I have never claimed, nor have I tried to give the impression, that the Jewish state is a country populated by criminals and run by gangsters. On the contrary, Israel can take some pride in its rule of law and widespread criticism of corruption and incompetence.

Yet something is rotten in Israeli society, and I believe that Zionism bears partial—though not sole—responsibility for it. The reason is that the Zionist movement was not content with operating outside and in opposition to the law when it was necessary to do so—under the British Mandate, for instance—but also cultivated an ethos that glorified

contempt for regulations and rules in general. As I have stated in my article, this was, to some extent, a reaction against the extreme legalism of traditional Jewish society, which some of the early Zionists chose to reject. Of course, not everyone accepted this attitude. Immigrants from Central Europe (“Yekes”), and the liberal right headed by Menachem Begin had a very positive opinion of the law and the legal system. However, the mainstream of the Yishuv and, later, the State of Israel, developed a subculture of national activism that saw the law as at best a burden, and at worst an obstacle to be overcome. This activism has been gradually pushed out of the Israeli public sphere—it still exists on the margins, in a less statist form—but the attitude that always accompanied it continues to resonate with us today. Even though lawbreakers appear, as Shapira says, in every society, in Israel there are certain circumstances in which they become heroes, and even popular leaders.

Clearly, the founders of the Zionist movement and the State of Israel were not, generally speaking, corrupt or hedonistic. Their private lives were far indeed from the ostentatious profligacy that characterizes those who have taken their place today. But their suspicion, if not their hostility, toward various forms of legalism has allowed what could have been a superb

constitutional tradition to lie fallow. (The Supreme Court’s attempts to rectify this over the course of several decades have been far from successful.) Today, the weeds that have grown in this untended field have begun to suffocate a substantial part of the public domain. It is not enough to plow them, or even to pull them out by the roots; this land must be re-seeded.

Not Our Mother’s Feminism

TO THE EDITORS:

I fully sympathize with the contentions that Marla Braverman makes regarding the type of feminist activity needed in our contemporary world (“Not Our Mothers’ Feminism,” *AZURE* 34, Autumn 2008). However, I am rather disappointed by two matters that are related to the piece: carelessness in terms of the information contained within it, and unfounded innuendos. Such things certainly do not match the high level that *AZURE* has maintained for some years now. Please allow me to outline the two points.

First, I was surprised at the careless manner in which Braverman conveyed information in the piece. I am not a sociology professor but an anthropologist. Moreover, I am

part of the department of sociology and anthropology and not the sociology department. Readers may justifiably reason that these are but relatively unimportant points. However, when Braverman characterizes me as an outspoken critic of Israel's ultra-militarized culture, I find that I am at a loss for words. If anything, the only ones to characterize me in this manner are some rather extreme right-wing Jewish-American pundits (from whom Braverman may have gathered at least part of her information). Not only have I served on a number of committees established by the Israel Defense Forces (including ones appointed by former Shabak head Ami Ayalon and former IDF chief of staff Dan Halutz), but I appear regularly in the media in order to supply a balanced view of the place of the military in contemporary Israel. I do realize that she uses my case as a mere rhetorical device to launch into her important argument, but such sloppiness was not expected from AZURE.

Second, after an obligatory nod to "alleged" crimes that I seemed to have committed, Braverman simply goes on to make a number of unsubstantiated innuendos such as that I am the actual perpetrator of offenses and that my students—the victims—had to endure years of harassment in silence. A reading of

Israeli newspapers (available in the English language) and blogs would have revealed to Braverman that early on the recommendation of the police was to drop my case. Moreover, since the end of August I am under no restrictions imposed by either the police or the Hebrew University. Not only am I back at the university, but I have actually met and supervised numerous students (including, of course, women). Against the background of the carelessness of Braverman's reporting, her innuendos do much harm not only to myself but to my students (since any one of them can be understood as succeeding only as a victim of my advances and not on the basis of her achievements). I have, indeed, been charged, indicted, tried, and sentenced in the court of public opinion, and it seems that Braverman has perhaps thoughtlessly reproduced this process.

To reiterate, I fully support the argument that Braverman puts forward in her important and timely editorial. However, I would have expected her to refer to my case in a different manner.

Eyal Ben-Ari

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TO THE EDITORS:

In her editorial "Not Our Mother's Feminism," Marla Braverman

rehashes several familiar anti-feminist sentiments that have been forever popular with women who reject feminism's fundamental commandments: empathy (including with other women) and solidarity among women. Braverman's simplistic argument seems to be that if women "just do it," all their problems will go away. All they need to do is say "no" when they don't want sex, and then complain to the authorities if sex is imposed on them despite their clear objection to it. If they simply follow this advice, they will express their agency, refuse to be victimized, and solve their problems.

Braverman seems to have conveniently forgotten how difficult it is for a woman to say "no" to her supervising professor, for example, who may not respond graciously to such rejection. He may stop writing her reference and recommendation letters, withdraw his support in committees, and not go out of his way to get her scholarships. As those of us who care about people and look reality in the eye know, such conduct is enough to devastate a Ph.D. student's career. The professor may go further and suddenly decide that despite previous distinction, the female student is no longer good enough and drop her altogether, suggesting to his colleagues that she is not worth their effort and that they shouldn't waste time on her.

This, by the way, is exactly what is claimed by more than one of Ben-Ari's doctoral students: that merely ignoring his sexual hints cost them his supervision and their doctoral status in his department. Based on their conversations with other professors, they are convinced that had they complained, his colleagues on the committee would have seen no merit in the accusations, and found him innocent. This systematic power structure, which has not changed, is what radical feminism has been trying to expose, and what Braverman is eager not to see.

On the theoretical level, Braverman's is an old argument that has been presented over and over, and refuted again and again. But I would like to refer to Braverman's references to Israel. Her missive supposedly refers to Israel as well as the United States, but sadly, it is completely misleading in this regard.

In Israel, unlike in certain segments of American society, "our mothers" (in the 1960s and 1970s) were never feminist. Not of this kind, not of that kind, not of any kind. Nor are Israeli female academics feminist today. Braverman's fantasy of feminist journals and militant, radical feminist academics spitting fire from their ivory towers has nothing to do with Israeli reality. We have not a single feminist journal, nor radical feminist

academics. We hardly have women in academia at all. Women in Israeli academia constitute eleven percent of senior professors, and, much like Tzipi Livni, most of them want nothing to do with women or with feminism. Few of them teach feminist theory, and when they do, it is mostly in English. Simply put, not a single Israeli woman academic (other than myself) took a stand in the Ben-Ari scandal and joined the students in their demand that the Hebrew University investigate the complaints—a demand, by the way, which the university has been ignoring for years, and apparently continues to do. It was women activists, journalists, and the public who were outraged and vocal, not academia. The fearsome radical academic feminism that Braverman objects to disappeared from American universities over a decade ago; but it never existed in Israel. Before calling for change, perhaps Braverman should take a closer look at reality. She will find that our mothers had no feminism, which is, sadly, true for most Israeli women still.

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MARLA BRAVERMAN RESPONDS:

Eyal Ben-Ari agrees with the arguments I set forth in my article but

takes issue with my description of his academic career and his sexual harassment case. He denies, specifically, that he is an “outspoken critic of Israel’s ultra-militarized culture.” As proof, he points to his service on various IDF committees and his regular appearances in the Israeli media, where he claims to supply a balanced view of the role of the military in Israeli society. The fact of participation in IDF committees, of course, does not in itself prove anything regarding his ideology; merely that he is recognized for his scholarship on the relationship between the military and civil society. As for the “balanced” view he purports to espouse in his many media appearances, a selection of quotations from various articles he has authored paints a different picture. In “The Psychological Discourse and the Normalization of War in Israel” (2008), for example, he writes that the national psychological discourse “blurs, hides, and ‘purifies’ in different ways the subjects connected to violence, power, and moral responsibility, and as such ‘normalizes’ the reality of war in the daily life of Israeli society.” In the introduction to his edited anthology *The Military and Militarism in Israeli Society* (1999), he describes how scholarly studies have come to include an examination of Israeli society as “a radical

instance of how democracy normalizes militarism of a specific kind,” as well as the development in Israel of a “*military mentalite*,” or the “extent to which military ways of thinking have seeped into, indeed dominate, everyday life in Israel.” There, too, he asks whether “the adoption and promotion of the military parade by Israel’s noncombatant elites [could] not be a signal that militaristic attitudes... have come to saturate the very thinking of civilian leaders” and explains that the essays included in the volume all explore, in part, “what may be termed an ‘Israeliness-militarism-manhood’ complex that is the epitome of the Israeli hegemony”—with “hegemonic” defined as encompassing “ideas about a socially legitimated and maintained hierarchy between alternative arrangements and the centrality of the state (and its myriad agents) in controlling not only material and state resources but also dominating the very conceptual categories through which Israeli Jews think about the reality in which they live.” Moreover, in his 2005 analysis of Israeli snipers in the Al-Aksa Intifada, he writes that their reasoning for killing “is closely linked to a Zionist text in the sense of connecting their personal understanding to the grand narrative of the IDF protecting the very survival of the Israeli nation-state.” As such, “violence

does not only belong to the realm of the pathological but is woven into the fabric of normal everyday life.” These and other remarks may indeed strike Ben-Ari as balanced, but that is a matter of interpretation. What is demonstrable is that his views regarding the militarization of Israeli society are located at one (extreme) end of the political spectrum.

More importantly, Ben-Ari claims that I make a number of “unsubstantiated innuendos” to the effect that he indeed committed the crime for which a file was opened with the Israel Police. Yet a rereading of my essay reveals that I did not, either explicitly or implicitly, point an accusing finger at him. Indeed, as he himself concedes, his case was not the focus of my piece at all. Rather, I referred to those details of his case provided by the police, faculty, students in his department, and the media in the course of an intellectual discussion the point of which was clearly not to determine the veracity of the allegations connected with it, or his guilt or that of any other individual. That is a matter for the courts to take up—if, of course, it is demanded of them.

Last, Ben-Ari points out that he is a professor not of sociology, but of anthropology; and that, moreover, he is a member not of the sociology department, but rather of the department of sociology and anthropology.

On this matter I fully concede my error, and thank him for bringing it to my attention.

In accusing me of espousing anti-feminist sentiments, Orit Kamir follows in mainstream feminism's unfortunate tradition of dismissing all criticism of its methods—even that criticism whose mutual goal is the promotion and protection of women in our society—simply for failing to toe the party line. Dressed up as “empathy” and “solidarity,” the fundamental commandments of feminism she claims I have broken are in truth no more than lockstep conformity, invariably with a narrative of immutable oppression. Yet this insistence on women's victim status has done them no favors. On the contrary, it has only hampered their efforts to overcome the many obstacles still in their path.

Kamir is no doubt correct that rejecting the advances of a supervising professor—or any man in a position of authority for that matter—can be a difficult thing for a woman to do. Yet recognizing the difficulty of saying “no” should not absolve women of their *responsibility* for doing so—and not least because such absolutism, however unintentionally, frequently undermines women's belief in their ability to say “no” at all. By nurturing a culture in which one's powerlessness is a badge of identity, feminism

not only creates the expectation of injustice, it also ill equips women to address that injustice and triumph over it. Moreover, while Kamir is also correct that the price of lodging complaints and following through on them can be high, in academia as elsewhere, I would argue that only women who consider their victimization a given would accept the notion that the attainment of one's professional aspirations can be achieved at the cost of her dignity. Women must reject the idea that passivity is the predictable, even legitimate, response to attacks on their autonomy. Until that happens, no change in the existing “systematic power structure” will solve the problem of sexual harassment in Israeli society.

Yet the truth of the matter is that Kamir's approach is not only—albeit unintentionally—demeaning to women. Nor is it merely defeatist. It is also, quite simply, spoiled. She and other radical feminists want to eradicate patriarchy. They call for a complete restructuring of society. In short, they talk about a revolution. But revolutions come at a price. In the not-too-distant past, revolutionaries stared down tanks and risked exile to hard labor camps; many paid the price of their cause in blood. Seen this way, feminists should perhaps be thankful that the price of fighting for gender equality is “merely” forgoing

grant money and letters of recommendation.

As to whether, in the example of the Ben-Ari case, his colleagues in the department would have ignored all complaints against him, it is impossible to say (although it may be argued that complaints lodged anonymously, as in this case, likely have less effect than those attached to women willing to identify themselves, and to pursue both visibly and vocally the justice of their cause). What it *is* possible to say, however, is that there exists in Israel the precedent of women in positions of little authority bringing down men in positions of great authority, as the high-profile cases of former defense minister Yitzhak Mordechai and, more recently, former president Moshe Katsav make clear. In both instances, the outcomes were the combined result of progressive sexual-harassment legislation *and* the courage of the women involved to avail themselves of it.

Finally, in her dismissive characterization of the Israeli feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s (and, I would add, the early 1980s), Kamir does “our mothers” a great disservice. Israeli feminists such as Marcia Freedman established in the 1970s a nationwide network of advocacy and support for women, including the first battered women’s shelter, the Community School for Women,

which provides education in women’s studies and economic empowerment. Freedman also founded the Women’s Party, which, although it did not gain entry to the Knesset, nonetheless proved critical to raising awareness of women’s issues within the Israeli public. She was aided in her efforts by leading feminist activists such as Shulamit Aloni, Alice Shalvi, and Naomi Chazan—the latter of whom, it should be noted, is a professor of political science, and was always a vocal feminist voice from within the academy. Like today’s feminists, they too believed (rightly or wrongly) that Israeli society was sexist, and that women labored under a burden of inequality. Critically, however, their ultimate goal was not to imbue women with a sense of the extent and nuances of their oppression. Rather, they focused their energies on women’s *empowerment*, and the legal, political, and even religious means of its attainment. Unfortunately, this aspect of feminism has taken a backseat in recent decades, particularly in the humanities departments of today’s Israeli universities, all of which feature a “gender studies” or “women’s studies” faculty, and all of which make wide use of feminist theory in their curricula. To be sure, the disproportionately low percentage of senior female professors in Israeli universities is problematic, and an issue that requires

rectification. Yet it is quite inaccurate to argue, as does Kamir, that from this percentage we may draw conclusions regarding the existence and impact of feminist ideas in the Israeli academy. The fact of the matter is that radical feminist theory holds sway there, and is one of the leading critical models through which students are taught to understand their subjects of inquiry. Radical feminist theory also informed the editorial slant of *Noga*, Israel's Hebrew-language feminist journal of some thirty years' standing, which ran its last issue in 2004. And it continues to be the subject of numerous essays published in both liberal and scholarly Israeli journals, such as *Theory and Criticism* and *Israel Affairs*, as well as the focus of dozens of blogs by female Israeli scholars (of which Kamir is one).

As for the failure of Israeli female academics to take a stand in the Ben-Ari case that Kamir lambastes—I would say that it merely confirms my own analysis of the effects of a victimist ideology among those closest to its source.

Finally, Kamir's rejection of Kadima party chairperson Tzipi Livni and others like her as "real" feminists is, sadly, all too telling. For Kamir, it seems, having obtained a powerful and influential role in society is not enough to earn one's feminist credentials. Rather, women who have

"made it" must serve as a mouthpiece for women's issues, and pay consistent lip service to the oppression of their sisters. I, for one, reject such an approach to determining appropriate female role models. I hope that mainstream feminism will one day come instead to celebrate the achievements of those women who have demonstrated, by virtue of their actions and despite the many hurdles, what it is possible for the rest of us to achieve.

A Right Above All Others

TO THE EDITORS:

The Bush administration has left many victims in its wake. One of the most tragic is the policy of advancing democracy worldwide—a policy that emerged bruised and battered following the failures in Afghanistan and especially Iraq. The war there was justified and marketed as a struggle for the spread of democracy. According to President Bush and his neoconservative advisers, bringing down Saddam Hussein's tyrannical regime would clear the way for the growth of an Arab democracy and, consequently, help begin the process of building a stable Middle East based on a democratic peace. But the Middle Eastern reality has left nothing of this optimistic vision. After a

swift and impressive victory, American armed forces have sunk into a grueling, unremitting, and bloody struggle. The Iraqi democracy that was supposed to flourish under American auspices has remained nothing but an illusion. It cannot serve as an eye-opening example to neighboring countries. And so, instead of enjoying a democratic peace, the Middle East is sliding toward instability and nuclear proliferation.

Such an outcome will lead to a renewal of American isolationism. American political culture fosters two essentially contradictory beliefs about the role of the United States in the world, which exist alongside one another. The first is the ideal of advancing democracy worldwide, in the name of which the Bush government has led a crusade. The second is isolationism: the urge to withdraw behind the walls of “Fortress America” and ignore the outside world. The failure of Bush and his neoconservative advisers’ policy has weakened those who advocate the advancement of democracy, and may lead the American public and its political class to embrace a new isolationism. Amitai Etzioni’s eye-opening article (“A Right Above All Others,” *AZURE* 33, Summer 2008) is a sincere and stimulating attempt to salvage something from the wreckage of the Bush presidency. As such,

it is especially crucial in light of the new administration—although it is still too early to gauge President Obama’s intentions, or to evaluate his political abilities and qualifications. Moreover, the recently released National Intelligence Council report, which predicts the erosion of American hegemony, indicates that there is a critical need to rethink the foreign policy that the United States and its democratic allies should pursue.

Etzioni raises this issue, and states correctly that we must not abandon moral principles when formulating foreign policy. He is speaking mainly to the United States, but this is true of all democratic countries. It would be easy for the Western nations, which are licking the wounds inflicted by their military failures and dealing with the current economic crisis, to withdraw into themselves. But isolation has never been a moral or effective resolution to world crises. American isolationism is bound to create a leadership void, and one that will not remain empty for long. Other forces will rush to fill it, exploit the situation to their own advantage, and further destabilize the world. In the absence of global leadership, it will be difficult to coordinate international actions intended to ameliorate moral injustices and humanitarian disasters. One must admit that the international

community's record in this field is far from satisfactory. Moreover, American leadership is usually employed for the purpose of increasing economic exploitation worldwide, instead of relieving global poverty. Nevertheless, in the framework of the current world order, the United States has at least displayed leadership, other countries have shown their readiness to act in coordination with it, and the international community has been successful in alleviating the suffering of many victims around the world—albeit with alarming delay. To illustrate this point, one can mention, among others, the interventions in Haiti, Liberia, Kosovo, and East Timor. If the United States were to adopt an isolationist foreign policy, even these modest accomplishments would disappear.

In the absence of American leadership, moreover, there would be no one to act against the hastening process of nuclear proliferation. On this point, Etzioni's argument is crucial: The United States and other democratic countries must adopt a foreign policy that is guided by moral principles, first and foremost among them being the right to security and to life. Etzioni is right in saying, "when the right to security is violated, all other rights are threatened," and in his claim that when security is guaranteed, public support for legal and

political rights increases. It is self-evident that the destruction of life also nullifies the possibility of exercising one's rights; and it is also reasonable to assume that the effective protection of life creates the foundation for an effective democracy. Etzioni is also correct that those who support a policy of aggressive democratization have reversed the proper order of things. Democracy does not necessarily ensure peace, but living in a state of peace does give democracy a chance. If this is so, then a policy that asserts life as "a right above all others" may also help bring stability to the world and straighten its moral backbone.

I would like, however, to point out a problem with this approach, although I admit that some may see my argument as a bit utopian and naïve. Etzioni accepts the current framework of international relations as a given, and as such believes it dictates the limits of our power to effect change. As he puts it, "As I see it, brutal international reality often requires following what might be called a 'second-worst' course to avoid having to negotiate the worst one." I do not deny that the reality of international relations is indeed cruel from time to time. Unfortunately, this is quite often the case. But the limits this reality imposes on us are not necessarily as harsh as Etzioni assumes, especially if

we consider other, non-state actors on the international scene.

It is true that the sovereign states are currently the central and most powerful players in global affairs. It is also true that the United States, the focus of Etzioni's article, is the most powerful of all the sovereign states, and is currently the only superpower in the world. Etzioni's assumptions about the limits imposed on American power are quite reasonable. At the moment, the United States cannot unilaterally pursue a policy of democratization and, at the same time, a policy of ensuring security and stability. America must also consider the limits of power when it collaborates with its allies. Sovereignty, legality, legitimacy, and the various norms and institutions that allow a state to maneuver in the international arena also limit it to specific courses of action. All of these factors shape the behavior of the state as an international legal personality that has rights and is subjected to restrictions. In addition, a state's legitimate focus on securing and promoting its own national interests further limits its freedom of action. In other words, the source of a state's power (including that of the United States) in the global arena is also its weakest point when it comes to humanitarian acts and the promotion of democracy. This weakness is the strongest justification for

Etzioni's argument that life is "a right above all others." If the capabilities of the sovereign state are indeed limited, there is no way to avoid ranking different goals and prioritizing actions. Such a policy, one that considers moral principles as well as practical limitations, leads almost inevitably to an approach that deems life "a right above all others."

What would happen, however, if we expanded our analysis beyond the sovereign state to include other types of actors—such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), transnational social movements, and influential private individuals and public figures? The influence of all these non-state actors is increasing. Indeed, we must not forget that the terror organizations against which the United States is leading an all-out war are also transnational social movements. This detrimental influence on international affairs could be countered by movements with a positive agenda—such as promoting human rights and democracy around the world. These organizations already exist in great numbers, and occasionally operate with the indirect assistance of democratic governments; they include the Red Cross, Doctors Without Borders, Amnesty International, Oxfam, Freedom House, Transparency International, and others. To this list,

we can add the European Union, which has features of both the state and the non-state actor. In addition, there are certain honorable private individuals who are influential on the international scene, such as Jimmy Carter, Nelson Mandela, Elie Wiesel, the Dalai Lama, and many other good people. While countries can easily communicate with other countries—that is, government institutions can easily communicate with other government institutions—non-governmental organizations and individuals can act together on the level of civil society. In other words, the global civil society—or its offshoots—can influence domestic civil societies.

So a global civil society can promote democratic civil societies in individual countries while states ensure security and the right to life. In other words, alongside the principle of life as “a right above all others,” we can also act on the principle of democracy as “a right *for* all others”—democracy in the sense of an appropriate political order that assures human rights, acceptable norms of cooperation and justice, and the political order to which all those who demand it are entitled. There are many around the world who are demanding it, including in dictatorial countries. It is enough to mention the recent mass demonstrations—and their

suppression—in Myanmar and Thailand, as well as the political activists who risk their freedom and their lives in Russia, Iran, and China. It is possible, I believe, for the United States and its allies to protect the worthy cause of life as “a right above all others,” and simultaneously support a global civil society and its efforts for the sake of democracy.

When one considers the possibility of this global civil society and its potential, it becomes clear that democracy should not be promoted in a unilateral, militarily aggressive way, as the neoconservatives and the Bush administration tried to do. The cause of democracy can be promoted only by a multi-faceted strategy, careful dialogue, and winning the hearts and minds of other people. A global democratization campaign cannot be satisfied with building democratic institutions through local elites, who are generally more than glad to cynically exploit the first stages of the process in order to legitimize and ensure their power—see, for instance, the case of Russian leader Vladimir Putin. Such a project should instead promote democratic values and norms, and their internalization by the citizenry through democratic education and the cultivation of local agents of democracy—quite unlike the failed neoconservative approach. There is, of course, no guarantee that

such efforts will be successful, but the principle of life as “a right above all others” does not prevent us from advocating “democracy *for* all others” through these new actors on the global stage. This is not merely an advisable course of action, but also a moral obligation.

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AMITAI ETZIONI RESPONDS:

Piki Ish-Shalom’s points are well taken. There is indeed no reason to settle for the international system as it is, and we do have a moral obligation to try and transform it into what it ought to be. I also agree that promoting human rights and democ-

racy by non-violent means—such as public education and visits by luminaries and political leaders—and the further development of the nascent global civil society can aid such progress. Nevertheless, given that what must be done is extensive and resources are decidedly limited, the issue of setting priorities looms very large indeed.

I must, therefore, return to my thesis that our first priority must be to stop killing, maiming, and torture in places such as, for example, the Congo and Sudan; to prevent terrorist attacks; and to eliminate weapons of mass destruction wherever possible. This is essential for two reasons: Saving lives is an even higher moral good than promoting freedom; and without ensuring basic security, freedom does not have a prayer.

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