

RABBI NORMAN LAMM
THE JEWISH CENTER
181 WEST 86TH STREET
NEW YORK, N. Y. 10024
—
SCHUYLER 4-8511

November 29, 1973

Editor
New York Magazine
207 East 32 Street
New York, N.Y. 10016

Dear Sir:

The article by Nora Ephron in your Nov. 19 issue has been brought to my attention by a number of people who felt outraged by it.

I am therefore sending you enclosed a "letter to the editor" in the hope that you will print it fully.

For whatever the information is worth to you, I am Rabbi of The Jewish Center in New York City and professor of Jewish philosophy at Yeshiva University in New York. I am the author of a number of books, some of them treating issues Miss Ephron has touched upon in her article.

Sincerely,



RABBI NORMAN LAMM

NL/me

RABBI NORMAN LAMM.

THE JEWISH CENTER

131 WEST 86TH STREET

NEW YORK, N. Y. 10024

SCRUTLER 4-3511

November 29, 1973

TO THE EDITOR:

I was aghast at the flimsiness and flippancy of Nora Ephron's insensitive broadside against Judaism in Israel ("Women in Israel," Nov. 19, 1973). It betrays all the negative consequences of looking at a complicated situation from a distressingly narrow perspective (in this case, Women's Lib): exaggeration, distortion, and downright falsehood. Furthermore, her ranting at "the rabbis" is but a thin disguise of her attack on traditional Judaism -- of which she seems to know precious little.

It would take an article equal in length to hers to point out her errors; perhaps longer, since it is so much easier to be casually and simplistically critical than it is to explain intelligently a complex historical tradition with all its subtle nuances. But a few of her more offensively silly remarks should not go unanswered.

Her comments about mikvah (the ritual bath in which married women or brides immerse after their menstrual periods) reveal some of the dangers of pretensions of omniscience by crusading journalists. It is not based "on primitive beliefs about the uncleanness of female genitalia following the menstrual period." The word "cleanliness" (she even uses the more pejorative "Dirty Days" -- the first time I ever heard the expression) is simply a mistranslation of the Hebrew tamei, a Biblical term which has ritual and metaphysical but not social or physical significance. The rabbis of the Talmud saw in this institution remarkable psychological values that enhance the marital relationship, specifically to disabuse the husband of the notion that his wife is a mere sex-object created for his pleasure. (I have discussed this in detail in my A Hedge of Roses.) The High Priest, in Biblical days, was similarly required to immerse in a mikvah -- no less than five times on Yom Kippur. To the best of our knowledge, he was never "dirty" -- certainly not that much.... The "balderdash" is not that of the Jewish tradition but of a presumptuous writer who should know better.

The law of agunot -- wives of husbands missing in action or otherwise -- is an even more painful example of journalistic hubris by a tyro who passes judgment in an area where she possesses neither sophistication nor sensitivity. The idea of not permitting a wife to remarry without adequate proof that her husband is dead is not a malicious invention of sexist rabbis, but a fundamental manifestation of Judaism's desire to protect the sanctity (quaint as that sounds) of marriage. That problems exist as a result is obvious. But Miss Ephron should know two things: first, that it has been an ongoing preoccupation of Jewish jurists throughout the centuries to relieve the burdens of the agunot (legally, and not by liberationist fiat), and second, that it is precisely because of such concern for the inviolability of the marital bond that Jews have developed an admirably stable family life.

Miss Ephron's abysmal lack of understanding of Judaism is almost matched by her insensitivity to what is going on in Israel. Thus her snide comment that "the rabbis keep quiet about military spending, and in exchange, the politicians keep their hands off the religious laws." She probably heard criticism of religious parties coming to a deal with the ruling Labor Party -- a charge which has a limited validity -- and then substituted her own American liberal bias about military spending, something which has no relevance to a little country without friends, fighting for its very existence. Rabbis indeed! Her remark is poignantly ungracious coming so soon after the Yom Kippur War. Has she no shame?

Finally, her complaint that women soldiers are not doing the fighting and killing on Israel's front lines leaves me singularly underwhelmed. Tut-tut!

RABBI NORMAN LAMM