

May 21, 1970

Rabbi Henry Siegman
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New York, New York 10016

Dear Henry:

I am not normally the type that writes fan letters, but I received today from the R.C.A. a copy of your letter of March 26th to The Village Voice.

It was more than a letter; it was a classical essay. I cherished reading every single word. You have my unbounded admiration for having said what you did so forthrightly and so well.

Cordially yours,

RABBI NORMAN LAMM

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A Question of Truth

Dear Sir:

Simple ignorance might explain why a Michael Zwerin ("Outside: London," March 5 and 12) would not know how Israel voted in the United Nations on the subject of South Africa. To assert, however, as he does, that "Abba Eban always voted against the U.N. resolutions condemning South Africa" when the very reverse is in fact the case (Israel has repeatedly voted in the U.N. to condemn South Africa and in favor of economic sanctions, even though national self-interest would have dictated at least an abstention), is to be guilty not of ignorance, but of a deliberate lie, and reveals Zwerin, or his Israeli anti-Israel friends, or both, as malicious persons intent on defaming Israel and Jews.

This maliciousness is a disease that is regrettably as common as it is unsightly—a Jewish self-hatred born of an embarrassment and an inability to come to terms with the "tribalism" of Jewish faith and Israeli nationalism.

That this phenomenon is indeed a disease and not a noble universalist impulse is evident from the fact that generally the very same people who find Israeli nationalism "racist," "tribal," and "parochial" are entirely uncritical in their support of the nationalisms of Third World Asian and African countries, which are invariably described as "progressive," "revolutionary," and strangely compatible with their universalism.

One is stunned by the depth and ugliness of the pathology. Zwerin's London heroes counter-picket Jews who demand freedom for Soviet Jews. In response to their chant "Let my people go," the universalists counter, "Go where? To Palestine? To oppress the Palestinians?" The proposition that a Soviet Jew who is freed to go to Israel is thereby transformed into an oppressor of Arabs could only come from the diseased mind and spirit of a Jewish self-hater.

But this is not all the universalists have to say. They reproach the tribal Jews for their concern with other Jews. "And what about the Armenians and the Tartars?" they ask. Better that Jews rot in the Soviet Union than to bring into question their universalistic compassion for the Armenians and the Tartars!

(I suppose it would be irrelevant to note the fact that the Armenians and Tartars, unlike Soviet Jews, have autonomous territories of their own within the Soviet Union in which they can speak their own language, have their own schools, sponsor their own theatres, etc.)

Similarly, the sensibilities of Zwerin's friends are outraged because a London Jewish newspaper singled out the Jews who were hanged in Iraq for special mourning, even though non-Jewish Iraqis were also hanged. At the heart of the malaise that afflicts Zwerin and

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his friends is their inability to understand that there is no nobility in a perversion of honest human sentiment to deny a closer affinity and a greater sense of personal loss and tragedy when your own child, or a more distant member of your own family, or even a close friend is killed, than one senses for a person with whom one does not have such ties. To proclaim a universalism which denies the special love of a child for its mother is to proclaim a lie; indeed, it is to deny the very possibility of genuine universalism. A person who because of his own hang-ups cannot acknowledge his love for his father and mother, for the roots that nurtured him, is totally incapable—in spite of loud public protestations to the contrary—of love of humanity. Love of humanity must begin with the ability to accept the love of and the special ties that bind one to those who are closest to him.

Of course, Israel's Arabs are not yet first class citizens—not because Israel is a diabolical and undemocratic state, but because it is engaged in a life and death struggle with the brothers and cousins of those Israeli Arabs across the border. The amazing thing is that even under these circumstances, Israeli Arabs nevertheless enjoy civil liberties that are unknown to their fellow Arabs in Arab countries. Here again, Zwerin's noble friends are guilty of a deliberate lie when they assert that "The half million Israeli Arabs are not permitted to form their own political groups or to print their own newspapers." Israeli Arabs do indeed publish their own newspapers (Al Quds, Al Ittihad, Al Rad, Al Jadid), and not only do they vote in local and national elections, run for and are elected to local and national office, but the Rakach party (a Communist party which is outspokenly pro-Nasser) is comprised entirely of Israeli Arabs.

By contrast, the remaining Jews in Iraq (the amazing fabrication of an Israeli plot to get them out of the country is recounted as if it were a well-known fact, without a shred of substantiating evidence) are lynched in public squares to the blood-thirsty howls of delighted Arab onlookers, the remaining Jews in Egypt rot in Egyptian jails, where they have been since the Six Day War, but to Zwerin and his friends it is Israel that is the butt of their moral indignation for daring to call itself a democracy, and is accused of employing "genocidal tactics against Arab civilians."

And this patently dishonest and vicious nonsense is peddled by The Village Voice, I suppose to prove to itself that it is an "enlightened" publication.

No, it is not true that one cannot criticize Israel without risking being called an anti-Semite. That is a part of the defamation. Jews and Israelis criticize Israeli policies all the time, including such anti-establishment types as Simcha Flapan and such establishment types as Ariel Eliav, the General Secretary of the Histadrut. No one has called them anti-Semites. However, when one is caught in a blatant lie, then one risks being called a liar. And when one is caught lying repeatedly, deliberately fabricating the most malicious distortions, and through all of these lies and distortions saying "look what a fantastic liberal and universalist I am; I can spit on fellow Jews and call them racists and genocide practitioners," then one risks revealing oneself as a Jewish anti-Semite, and a very, very sick one at that.

At the outset of his article, Zwerin quotes his friends as insisting "It is not a question of truth." For Zwerin and his friends, it is not that at all.

—Rabbi Henry Siegman
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