

## Correspondence

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### Eliezer Berkovits

TO THE EDITORS:

David Hazony has rendered a sorely needed service to Jewish thought about ethics and observance in his beautifully written review of Eliezer Berkovits' philosophy (AZURE 11, Summer 2001). The article crystallized for me several vague notions that have been dancing around in my head for a while, especially: (i) That most "evil" is really selfishness is really weakness is really lack of discipline, and (ii) that a major aspect of Christianity's (Hellenistically inspired) critique of Judaism involved a denunciation of the Tora's *inductive* methodology—what Hazony refers to as the heteronymous nature of halacha, in which higher ideals are attained via action and "one learns to swim by swimming"—in favor of the new religion's far more "logical" *deductive* methodology, in which one confronts individual challenges by applying a limited number of overarching principles to each new situation.

This dichotomy was best illustrated for me in my IDF medics' training course, halfway through which our instructor was demobilized and another officer assumed command. The

first teacher had insisted that we learn all the dozens of different dressings for the wide variety of possible wounds *by rote*, and we would drill each specific application of bandages for days on end until we had it down to second nature: Chest wound with possible lung collapse? Do "a" then "b" then "c." Leg severed below the knee? Do "x" then "y" then "z." We could pull this off blindfolded, or under fire, and the common medical principles informing these diverse treatments gradually revealed themselves to us as a result of the *doing*.

The new guy phased out that whole method, dubbing it wasteful and inefficient. He believed we should comprehend and internalize the fundamental "principles" of wound-dressing: Stop the hemorrhaging, immobilize the limb, prevent infection, and so forth. Then, at the moment of truth, we would be able to bring these principles to bear on each different medical crisis we faced. This process was supposed to create a "flexible," "thinking," and "improvising" medic. It was an unmitigated disaster (and was promptly adopted as the preferred teaching method at Training Base 10).

I had read Berkovits' *Not in Heaven* years ago, and was left with

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the impression that he saw Judaism as enshrining the methodology of the second instructor—halacha as a framework (in Berkovits' own formulation) for "the creative boldness of application of the comprehensive ethos of the Tora to the case." The concluding section of Hazony's essay provided me with an essential corrective, whereby it became clear that there is a crucial difference: While Berkovits saw the attainment of certain lofty ethical objectives as the ultimate *raison d'être* of the Judaic system (and the premier guide of the rabbis in fleshing out and "adjusting" scriptural law), he did not make what I personally see as Christianity's major blunder of confusing ends with means, of employing ultimate aims as intermediate pedagogical techniques. *Ideals don't make good steppingstones toward their own achievement.* We do not arrive at a charitable society by constantly preaching charity, but by constantly giving charity, as Maimonides points out in his commentary to the exhortation "all is according to the amount of the work." (Mishna Avot, 3:19) Asking whether it is better to give a hundred beggars one coin each, or one beggar a hundred coins, Maimonides answers that the former option is preferable, because it inures one to the act of giving.

Berkovits as Hazony presents him has at least as much of my first,

"inductive" instructor in him as he does of my second, "deductive" instructor, and this was news to me. Biblical and rabbinic norms, at any rate, appear to be a two-way street, proceeding at one and the same time inductively, *min haprat el haklal* (from the particular to the general), and deductively, *min haklal el haprat* (from the general to the particular). Berkovits as Hazony reveals him embodies this dialectical tension nicely, and builds upon it a truly compelling conception of Judaism.

Hazony's comparison of Berkovits' outlook in this matter with those of Martin Buber, Abraham Joshua Heschel, and R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik is as enlightening as it is timely: It should be required reading for all our resident mystics, philosophical ethicists, and spiritual individualists who have "turned the spotlight inward." I look forward to further installments of this edifying stuff.

**Ze'ev Maghen**

Tel Aviv

TO THE EDITORS:

David Hazony's essay "Eliezer Berkovits and the Revival of Jewish Moral Thought" is a thoughtful and lucid presentation of a number of central issues in my father's thought. The essay, and even more importantly, the forthcoming anthology

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*Essential Essays on Judaism*, edited by Hazony, which is to be published later this year, represents a major effort to focus our attention on the works of one of the most significant figures in twentieth-century Jewish thought. I believe that what would most excite my father about this project is the prospect of deepening our understanding of the major questions which continue to confront us in the application of Judaism in the modern Jewish state.

In the 1960s and 1970s, few if any Orthodox thinkers were concerned with the issues that preoccupied Eliezer Berkovits: Judaism and democracy; the role of women in the community and in Tora scholarship; unity and religious commitment; the relation of body and spirit in the worship of God; halacha and ethics; and the relation of rationality and personal experience as a foundation of faith. My father's work is perhaps the most important attempt to date to create a philosophy to deal with these issues and with the creative application of Tora in human life, within a total commitment to the authority of Tora.

Today, important streams of Orthodox and secular life are growing aware of the critical need to concentrate on these issues. Thus, the Berkovits project is deeply relevant to the growing number of Israelis

who aspire to live a realistic Jewish life in contemporary Israel. The encounter between European Orthodoxy and modern Western experience has at times become one of confusion and mutual ambivalence, and yet at the same time has catalyzed communal creativity. In the final analysis, though significant numbers of Orthodox Jews have been integrated into the sciences and technology, the liberal professions, the Israel Defense Forces, and the academic world, modern Orthodoxy remains the "peripheral man" in Israel and in the diaspora, spiritually, socially, and culturally.

In Eliezer Berkovits' interpretation of Judaism as a living framework for a contemporary Jewish state, the bedrock issue always is "the nature and function of halacha." R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik harnessed a unique blend of religious existential thought with the rigors of the "Brisker" talmudic method to enrich and deepen a life of halacha. R. Abraham Isaac Kook plumbed the depths of kabalistic writing to describe the creative spiritual personality that might bring about the revival of Tora in the nascent culture of Israel. My father saw the central issue facing modern Orthodoxy as the challenge posed by the revolution in the activities and aspirations of real people and real communities. In response he began

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to see halacha as a tool in fashioning contemporary Jewish life. He sought a creative halachic process that would remain loyal to the ultimate concerns and commitments of Tora and Orthodoxy. The conceptual basis was formulated clearly by him in England in 1943:

Actual life is a great partner to the spirit; without the one the other is meaningless. The teachings of the Tora can therefore reveal their real sense only when there is a concrete reality in which they can be applied... for just as Tora shapes life, so does Tora-shaped life, in its turn, direct and unfold Tora.... And so on to eternity; Tora leading life, and Tora-led life unfolding Tora. This is the inner meaning of the partnership between Tora and prosaic, everyday existence; and out of this partnership emerges a Judaism capable of unlimited development. (*Toward Historic Judaism*, p. 32)

However, it was the new social and cultural reality of an independent Jewish state that made the need for a life-forging halachic process so crucial. Only when the tradition of rigorous halachic thinking, combined with halachic compassion, was applied creatively could personal, communal, and national life be renewed. In order to bring about a renewal of this kind, and make possible the education of creative halachic personalities who would operate within the limits

of the halachic tradition, he felt it was necessary to reconsider a number of basic categories in the way the Talmud was studied. For example, he wanted to reconsider the relations between halacha and agada; the relation of the search for religious meaning to law in talmudic halachic discussions; the nature of human creativity in the context of a divinely revealed Tora; the limits of rabbinic authority in dealing with practical social and economic needs; and the intellectual breadth and human experience necessary for rabbinic leadership. Without reorienting Talmud study to deal with these issues, relevant to the contemporary needs of real people, secularism and ultra-Orthodoxy, he believed, would continue to dominate the public arena.

Forty years after framing his idea of the basic relationship between the revealed Tora and “actual life,” my father wrote the following concerning halacha and the State of Israel:

Halacha is the application of the Tora to life. But since there is no such thing as life in general, since it is always a certain form of life at a specific time in history, in a specific situation, Tora application means application to a specific time in a specific situation. *The result of this process I call halachic Judaism.* Our generation has witnessed what is probably the most radical transformation of the conditions of

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Jewish existence since the destruction of the Second Jewish Commonwealth in the years 69-70 of the common era.... The Tora has to become effective anew in the midst of revolutionary changes in the world situation as well as in the condition of the Jewish people. There has never been a greater need for halacha's creative wisdom of Tora application to the daily realities of human existence than in our day. (*Not in Heaven*, pp. 1-2; italics added)

I think it safe to say that Eliezer Berkovits used the well-worn phrase "halachic Judaism" in two revolutionary ways. First, though springing from the fundamental commitments of Orthodoxy, halachic Judaism according to Berkovits refers to a non-denominational, or better, a post-denominational, Judaism whose ultimate concern is not with ideology, or even theology, but with the living demands of the dynamic condition of the Jewish people. Second, though deeply rooted in the wisdom of the Tora, the central aim of halachic Judaism is not to formulate a defensive, traditionalist posture for the protection of Tora from life, but rather to be a formative tool for the creative fashioning of human realities.

**Dov Berkovits**  
Shiloh

## Adi Ophir's Evil Empire

TO THE EDITORS:

Regarding Assaf Sagiv's essay on the moral philosophy of Adi Ophir ("Evil's Empire," AZURE 11, Summer 2001): Ophir bids us to avoid evils that are trivial and relative, ignoring an absolute evil that has happened to us; also, Kant once had an absolute good wherewith, he thought, one could meet all evils, i.e., his good will that obeys moral law, not for the sake of reward, but for its own sake alone. After the war, the late Hans Jonas visited a German professor whose conduct, unlike his teacher Martin Heidegger's, had been admirable. The professor said: "Jonas, without Kant I could not have done it." An inspiring story about moral philosophy in Nazi Germany.

But even Kant would not have helped had the professor been in Auschwitz, for, as Primo Levi has testified, its victims, the so-called *muselmann*, had been robbed of all will: "One hesitates to call them living, one hesitates to call their death death." Normally humans are either dead or alive: The *muselmann* is, if not the sole, the most significant Nazi contribution to civilization; and the chief problem of moral philosophy, certainly the Jewish, is to define good and evil after Auschwitz.

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To define “good” will still take a long time; “evil” I tried to define decades ago: Judaism has 613 commandments; after Auschwitz we have a new one, a prohibition—we are forbidden to give Hitler posthumous victories. This commandment applies not only to Jews, but to all humanity.

**Emil L. Fackenheim**  
Jerusalem

TO THE EDITORS:

I read with great interest Assaf Sagiv’s essay on Adi Ophir’s new book, *Speaking Evil*. The publication of this book is without question a milestone in the intellectual life of Israel, and AZURE’s dedication of a full-length essay to it is commendable. I wanted to add a thought that may shed light on some of the issues raised in Sagiv’s essay. Adi Ophir stresses that his work “was thought and written in Hebrew,” and that this is not “an essay on French philosophy.” But to what extent does the *content* of his thought fit in with the Hebrew philosophical tradition—or is it, perhaps, closer to French thought?

As I read the book, I recalled a famous legend from the Talmud (Shabbat 88a-b). A Sadducee provoked the talmudic scholar Rabba by accusing the Jews of being a rash

people. At Sinai, he argued, the people of Israel accepted upon themselves commitments of which they had not yet heard, as is reflected in their declaration that “We will do and we will hear,” (Exodus 24:7) which places “doing” before “hearing”—that is, obeying before understanding. Instead, argues the Sadducee, they should have first heard the obligations, then evaluated whether they were capable of honoring them, and only afterwards should they have decided whether to undertake them. Rabba’s response is that concerning the Jews, who walk with integrity, it is written that “the integrity of the upright guides them”; with respect to other peoples, who walk in perversity, it is said that “the perversity of the treacherous leads them to ruin.” (Proverbs 11:3)

At first glance, the question raised by the Sadducee is understandable, while Rabba’s answer is less so, for the Israelites indeed seem to have acted irrationally. Yet there is something profound in Rabba’s answer: It is their integrity itself that guides the upright, while the treacherous are led to ruin by their own perversity. A person or system who acts only according to the rule “we will hear and we will do,” who acts not out of faith and integrity but out of only suspicion and criticism, will eventually fall

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victim to his own principles. Such a system cannot possibly result in anything constructive. Could anyone imagine, for instance, a healthy and productive relationship between parents and children that does not contain a certain element of “we will do and we will hear”?

It seems that this is precisely where Adi Ophir deviates from the tradition of Jewish thought. As Sagiv notes, Ophir seeks to present a this-worldly and radical-secular philosophy of ethics, free of the residual transcendentalism that accompanies modern ethical philosophy. As a result of exclusive focus on the earthly and tangible, without any room for “we will do and we will understand,” the only basis on which Ophir can ground his philosophy is that of evil. From evil he seeks to derive good. And, in the spirit of his postmodernist approach, he constructs a real “kingdom of evil,” which he finds everywhere. Not surprisingly, his theory of action winds up prescribing little more than sabotage and protest.

In this context, a comparison between Ophir and the French-Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas is illuminating. Sagiv notes that Ophir does not accept Levinas’ willingness to compromise with non-ethical interests in order to realize ethics in the real world. In my opinion, however,

the fundamental difference between the two philosophers occurs where Levinas’ philosophy is not only French but also Jewish. Levinas establishes that the consciousness of commitment to the “other,” whose otherness is total, is an expression of commitment to the total, transcendent Other. Ophir, however, purges his philosophy of Levinas’ commitment to this Other. Indeed, it is hard to understand how Ophir derives altruistic commitment from the ordinary and the tangible. This basic difference between the starting points of Levinas and Ophir results in the former being much more optimistic and constructive than the latter. In contrast to Ophir, Levinas possesses a faith that leads him not to be satisfied with passive anticipation of the Messiah, but to believe in the possibility of transcending our current existence and building a better world.

The recognition of some infinite transcendence has allowed Jews to critically examine human values and mores, which themselves are finite. In this, Ophir continues in the Jewish tradition, if not explicitly. The other side of the coin in Jewish tradition, however, is the necessity of believing that there exists something “beyond the here and now.” Faith and innocence are the necessary foundations of all creation and creativity,

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and of every endeavor that advances mankind.

Avi Kanai  
Jerusalem

## Normalcy and Zionism

TO THE EDITORS:

I wish to address a few words to Assaf Sagiv's editorial, "Not Normal" (AZURE 11, Summer 2001). Sagiv analyzes the longstanding debate over whether the State of Israel should have a special Jewish or Zionist mission, or abandon this type of aspiration in favor of a normal life, or, put better, a normal lifestyle. This debate is found not only in Israeli public life but in other societies as well. Simply stated, there is a tension between two views: One which gives precedence to idealism, nationhood, and self-denial, and another which advocates materialism and self-indulgence. One vision links the present with the past and the future, while the other is anchored to the single dimension of the present. By defining his subject within the perspective of the history of ideas, Sagiv has provided the background in which the issues may well be appreciated.

The debate within the context of Israeli public life has its parallels in the Western world, but in terms that

our ancestors in this land originally formulated and which have become a part of the Western cultural legacy, particularly the uplifting vision of moral perfection. One such example is William Blake's poem *Jerusalem* (lines 13-16):

I will not cease from mental fight,  
Nor shall my sword sleep in my  
hand,  
Till we have built Jerusalem  
In England's green and pleasant  
land.

Similarly, Garrett Mattingly, the Columbia University historian of Renaissance diplomacy, described how high moral aspirations permeated the culture of early modern Europe and provided the foundation of professed values for the incipient state system: "In the Latin West idealism was not a policy deliberately adopted, but a basic moral assumption. Man was not the less bound to strive eternally towards perfection because he knew in advance that his best unaided efforts could scarcely bring him measurably nearer to it. The gulf between aspiration and achievement was part of God's ordering of the universe. Like other creatures, princes and republics were prone to sin and error. That did not impugn the validity of the norms by which their conduct must be judged. It had not yet been suggested that in these matters society might accomplish more just by expecting

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less.” (Mattingly, *Renaissance Diplomacy*, p. 43) Both of these visions reflect ideals of social organization and moral behavior that the Christian world adopted from the biblical prophets and made universal.

What, in contrast, would the reality of the “normal” life imply? One description may be found in William H. Chafe’s text *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II*, portraying American society in the 1970s with its cultural contradictions and social “Balkanization”:

Much more prevalent... however, was an assessment that saw America’s crisis as one of cultural values and spiritual decay. “Throughout much of this century,” Daniel Yankelovich wrote, “Americans believed that self-denial made sense.... But doubts have now set in.” According to Yankelovich, Americans had foresworn the old ethic of social responsibility, and in pursuit of the liberation ideology of the sixties had embraced a new ethic of personal self-indulgence. According to his data, between 70 and 80 percent of the American people were now saying: “Forget the family, to hell with my obligation to others.” (p. 468)

What is noteworthy about the American example given above is the observation that a retreat from long-established patterns of behavior brought social fragmentation and spiritual poverty. The decline of

loyalty to one’s family and a diminished sense of collective responsibility have resulted in a harmful depletion of the country’s social capital. But this process is not unique to America. It has identifiable parallels in contemporary Israeli society.

There is no compelling need to construct an ideology of justification for the “normal” life, here or anywhere. No gratification of the senses or of the mind is beyond reach, a fact which reflects favorably on the high level of personal freedom that Israeli citizens enjoy, despite the constant assault on the country’s security and continuity from within and without. Indeed, such a program will run its course the instant it has been attained.

It should also be noted that the advocates of the “normal” life do not envisage their program coexisting with the fulfillment of collective, idealistic national goals, but displacing them instead. Here, they seem to have abandoned the culturally pluralistic, democratic norms of an open society, which in other contexts they stridently and aggressively profess.

Another limiting factor is the unstated reality that the type of solution they advocate is intended essentially for the middle class and is beyond the reach of the poor. In contrast, the vision of the heavenly Jerusalem as a policy ideal retains its

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vitality and universality, not the least because it is deeply rooted in Jewish religion and culture and makes demands upon the finest human virtues. Many Israelis still hope to build a cohesive society based on the principles of justice and compassion and thus raise the earthly Jerusalem closer

to the heavens. If William Blake set his mind to building the heavenly Jerusalem in England, it is no less honorable to share this vision for Israel, the Jewish state.

**Joel Fishman**  
Jerusalem

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*AZURE welcomes letters from its readers. Letters should be sent to: AZURE, 22A Hatzfira Street, Jerusalem, Israel. Fax: 972-2-566-1171; E-mail: [azure@shalem.org.il](mailto:azure@shalem.org.il). Letters may be edited for length and clarity.*

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