Correspondence

Israeli Education

To the Editors:

David Hazony paints a bleak picture of Israeli education in his article "Higher Concerns" (Azure 27, Winter 2007). Sadly, it does not do full justice to the grim reality. We in Israel are mired in an education crisis far deeper and wider than Hazony describes. Even if Israeli academia were to be restored to its former glory *apropos* the study of Judaism and the humanities, it is questionable whether this would be sufficient to cure the malaise affecting Israel's current leadership, which is, in my opinion, akin to that of a terminally ill patient.

Schooling, education, and culture in general have lost their prestige as essential Israeli values, and have been marginalized in the face of frighteningly cynical economic and political forces. Science and technology are now the driving forces behind Israel's economic growth, but there can be no effective education in these fields without a corresponding investment of effort and resources in the study of the tradition, history, and archaeology of the Jewish people in Israel and the diaspora. Science and technology are universal subjects, independent of nationality, and one can study them and excel at them anywhere in the world. Israel is certainly not the best place to learn or build a career in these professions. Thus, anyone wanting to learn and apply them in Israel must do so out of a sense of national responsibility and a desire to contribute to the advancement of his country. Therefore, he needs to grow up in an atmosphere in which it is clear to him why he must study and work here and not somewhere else—and the "here" is the Israel Institute of Technology in Haifa (the Technion), the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Bar-Ilan University, and the Universities of Tel Aviv and Haifa, whose names bear the imprint of the history of the land of Israel and the Jewish nation that built it.

I deeply regret that I cannot see anyone in the ranks of today's leadership who acts out of a true concern for the promotion of the country's spiritual affairs, and whose past and present actions serve as an example and a model to be imitated and esteemed. I cannot identify a single leader who could inspire the multitudes to social, educational, and cultural activism. The rifts in Israeli

society that have spawned extremist political and religious factions have blighted us with phenomena such as draft evasion, drug addiction, and horrifying levels of verbal and physical violence. They have also marginalized education and culture, and have left our schools to play the meager technical role of training experts in various fields—a role in which they have no guarantee of longterm success in the face of fierce competition in the international arena.

In a relatively short period of sixty years, then, we have succeeded in building something magnificent—namely, a Jewish state—and then destroying it with our own hands. We have turned our backs on everything that contributed to that extraordinary creation, including the culture of learning in all the Jewish diasporas, and have attempted to copy, unsuccessfully, the developed countries of the West in an effort to be just like every other nation. We have hacked away at the rich and varied Jewish cultures of the world in an attempt to create an "Israeli" culture that lacks substance and meaning. The result is a superficial amalgam that is slowly dissolving into a swamp of corruption and cynicism.

The era of Israel's founder, David Ben-Gurion—who, in even darker days for our country, started a Jewish Bible study group in his own home, and authored the book *Ben-Gurion Looks at the Bible*—ended all too soon, and certainly before it managed to put down strong roots. Indeed, the idea that one of this country's leaders would study and teach the Bible in his home seems quite absurd today.

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The Midrash on Marriage

To the Editors:

Ido Hevroni's excellent article "The Midrash as Marriage Guide" (Azure 29, Summer 2007), ably shows how halacha is always necessary for a Jewish religious life, but not sufficient actually to constitute it. For that more sufficient constitution, Jews need agada; i.e., we need not only the precepts of halacha but, just as much, the personal examples of how the halachic life is to be fully lived. The narrative of agada is replete with such examples. This is especially so with regard to Jewish marriage, something so central to Jewish existence that it is taken to be an analogue to God's covenantal relationship with

the people Israel, which we see in the rabbinic treatment of Song of Songs in general, and in the particular text from Song of Songs Rabba that Hevroni cites and discusses at length in his piece.

Furthermore, agada not only supplies content to the reality structured by halacha, it also influences the way halacha is interpreted and applied. To show how this is done in the context of Hevroni's article, let me gloss his point that "The halacha does not rule here on whether it is obligatory to divorce the first [childless] wife, or if it is instead possible to take an additional wife." This question goes back to the time when Abraham takes Hagar as his second wife in order to have a child with her, since his first wife Sarah has been unable to bear children, and she now seems to be beyond childbearing age. Yet, despite the fact that Abraham (then still called "Abram") does not divorce Sarah (then still called "Sarai"), when discussing the obligation of Jews to procreate, the rabbis rule, "If a man took a wife and lived with her for ten years and she bore no child, he may not abstain (*eino rashai levatel*)… he shall divorce her and give her her *ketuba*" (Tosefta Yevamot 8:4; Yevamot 64a; see also Jerusalem Yevamot 6:3 and Genesis Rabba 45:3; Maimonides, *Mishneh Tora,* Laws of Marriage 15:8). So, just as a man

has the duty to procreate, so too does a man have the duty to divorce his childless wife after the stipulated period of time. And, judging from this text, anyway, taking an additional wife does not seem to be an option for this man in lieu of divorcing his first wife, despite the fact that Abraham took Hagar as his second wife without divorcing Sarah.

All that notwithstanding, the great fourteenth-century Spanish Jewish jurist R. Isaac Ben Sheshet Barfat (the Rivash) writes about this rabbinic ruling, "In fact, this is the letter of the law (*shurat hadin*), but what can we do? In our days we have never seen, nor have we heard of it for many generations, that a court was bound to do this: To force a man to divorce his wife… if he did not have children with her" (Responsa of the Rivash, 15). In other words, what was originally a man's duty, which he may not neglect, now becomes a man's right, which he may or may not exercise. Moreover, what seems to have been the court's duty to enforce divorce in the case of prolonged childlessness now becomes the court's right, which, like the right of this man, it may now choose not to exercise. Thus we might conclude that a man may continue to be married to his childless wife if their relationship has more to it than procreation. And we might conclude that the court does not want

to intrude into the intimacy of marriage unless, as the Rivash points out, the marriage was a clearly forbidden union *ab initio*.

Finally, although he does not quote this text, the Rivash's argument is enhanced by the following quote from the Jerusalem Talmud, Gitin 4:8: "Many married women are sterile, but because the husbands enjoy satisfaction (*nahat ruah*) with them, they keep the marriage intact." This quote is not given as a point of law, but rather narrates what many Jews have actually done. Clearly, even though halacha is not to be directly derived from agada, nonetheless, in less direct ways, agada has certainly influenced the way halacha has been interpreted and has thus led in its development.

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Israel's Media War

To the Editors:

Noah Pollak's essay "Show of Force" (Azure 30, Autumn 2007), is both timely and welcome. Supporting his arguments with concrete examples, he successfully analyzes the shortcomings of Israel's information policy. Although the facts which he presents are generally known, his interpretation and insights are creative and refreshing.

According to Pollak, Israeli policymakers do not really understand the media war and its importance, or why Israel needs an effective integrated strategy. In short, the Israeli officials who deal with public opinion in the international media are "out of their league." Here it would be helpful to place Pollak's fine paper in historical perspective.

Israeli policymakers have never quite grasped that media warfare is a form of war—i.e., political war—whose objective is to isolate the Jewish state from its friends and to delegitimize it. This problem dates from Israel's earliest years, when David Ben-Gurion refused to take international public opinion into account as a factor in policymaking. During this era, Israel enjoyed considerable good will abroad, and its enemies were not organized. Gradually, the Israeli establishment internalized the view that in policymaking, military considerations took absolute precedence, even to the exclusion of diplomacy, not to mention information policy. During the post-1967 era of arrogance, Moshe Dayan said it all: "Israel has no foreign policy, only a defense policy."

With the First Lebanon War in 1982, Israel began to feel the force

of hostile news coverage, and after the outbreak of the first Intifada in December 1987, the rules of the game began to change. Israel now faced a popular uprising instead of an army in the field. Because of political considerations, which now included international public opinion, it found itself unable to find a military solution that would pacify this revolt. Subsequently, the Palestinians quickly learned to exploit the media in this asymmetrical war. For them, favorable public opinion helped compensate for military weakness. As a consequence of a lack of imagination and incompetence, Israel's leadership did not come to grips with this new political and media challenge. Indeed, the pain of this setback enhanced the desirability of any negotiated arrangement.

Prior to Oslo, in May 1993, Shimon Peres, then Israel's foreign minister, terminated the country's information policy with the confident exclamation, "If you have a good policy, you do not need public relations, and if you have a bad policy, public relations will not help." It is important to grasp the assumptions behind this statement, because they reveal a fundamental misperception. The architects of Oslo were convinced that if Israel could reach an understanding with its Palestinian "partner," real peace would ensue. Then, in an "end of history" type of scenario, all would be well, and there would be no further need for public relations.

Such views fail to take external reality into account, particularly the fact that the Palestinian objection to the Jewish state is existential. As Professor Yehoshafat Harkabi wrote in the 1970s, the other side has "an *unlimited* grievance, which the [Israeli] opponent cannot redress to its liking and yet stay alive." In other words, the Palestinian war against Israel in the media and otherwise will remain a constant, whether Israel has a "good policy" or a bad one.

An additional dimension of the problem relates to Jewish identity. For some members of Israel's secular elite, who look upon themselves as urbane citizens of the world, the thought that others could hate them because they are Jews is simply unbearable. Their solution is to seek refuge in a type of agreement that would enable them to avoid issues of identity by purchasing acceptance with "painful concessions." The prevalence of this state of mind, which can be defeatist and fatalistic, suggests that Israel's problem with the media war goes beyond its inability to determine the type of war in which it is engaged. Indeed, it is all the more serious, because this confusion of identity can undermine the will to win.

Pollak has performed a service by keeping the problem of Israel's weakness in the media war before the public. This subject merits serious attention in its own right. At the same time, the poor performance of Israel's official institutions in safeguarding the country's legitimacy and facing the media challenge may be symptomatic of a deeper cultural and social problem.

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To the Editors:

Israel has an "image problem," asserts Noah Pollak. The problem is certainly not new: Since the outbreak of the second Intifada in 2000, and especially during and after the Second Lebanon War, I have heard multiple complaints from Jews and—perhaps especially   noteworthy—non-Jews about Israel's self-destructive public conduct. Pollak appropriately delineates its most worrisome aspects, such as "gratuitous apologies and self-criticism," along with "a reflexive assumption of guilt" in response to unmitigated aggression. Israel's sworn enemies have never renounced their underlying objective to annihilate the Zionist entity; yet Israelis are unable to make a case for their fundamental right to self-defense. Conversely, they have been prone to bemoaning their own belligerence, repeatedly demonstrating servility before overtly hostile international public opinion upheld by a politically correct media. To a great extent, this self-deprecating behavior has contributed to Israel's grotesque image as a state in which the propensity towards violence borders on sadism.

Appalled by what seems to be an ongoing policy blunder, people offer explanations. They tend to justify Israel's self-imposed vulnerability by objective challenges, arguing, for instance, that the country's economic constraints require "moderation" and "compliance" with the Western line of thinking, lest it invite aid cuts and/or trade sanctions from abroad. Another compelling argument holds that Israel has no choice but to succumb to foreign public-opinion pressure so as to avoid moral ostracism, detrimental to the country's already damaged international status.

While legitimate, these concerns help little to understand the absurdity of habitual self-condemnation, which all but defeats Israel's purpose of securing respect in the community of democratic nations. Practical considerations are only part of the story: When dealing with ostensibly rational justifications for self-destructiveness, we should recognize them as rationalizations of obscured yet vital motives.

I would like to suggest that behavior patterns we attribute to personal psychology may also serve as paradigms for revealing the roots of irrationality on societal and national levels.

Consider, for instance, Stockholm syndrome, a well-known phenomenon in which hostages—helpless and under extreme threat to their lives—begin to show signs of loyalty to their captors. Victims are known to become emotionally attached to their victimizers, defending them even after no longer in captivity. Psychologists see this paradox as a defense mechanism, a means for the victims to come to terms with relentless fear: If successful in intricate mental ploys to develop pseudo-sympathy for their torturers by attributing to them various would-be positive characteristics, the hostages provide themselves with a simulation of safety. This is an essential psychological defense for the frantic mind of someone overcome by anxiety—as well as the collective thinking of people living under the perpetual threat of terror and impending war.

I certainly do not claim that everyone in Israel is a victim of Stockholm syndrome. I do, however, want to propose that many Israelis who blame themselves for being blown up by suicide bombers may be showing signs of this very aberrancy. As do those who seek to placate terrorists

with apologies and other manifestations of "good behavior." We do not yet understand the effects of Stockholm syndrome on the level of the collective consciousness; still, it is reasonable to suppose that the weak-kneed vulnerability, compliance, and self-denunciation we so often see among Israelis are some of them.

Now, I do not dare venture into the "Israeli vs. Jewish identity" dilemma; this open-ended discussion is relevant here only in connection with the country's image troubles. Whether and to what extent Israelis are primarily Jews, as opposed to citizens of Israel, is unclear for many Israelis today—a convoluted issue that renders the subject of appearance in the eyes of others a self-image problem. Bluntly put, Israelis are not sure who they are and what their attitudes should be, including those with regards to the country they call their own.

Indeed, ambivalence seems to have become the norm. I remember a conversation with a twenty-year-old aspiring Israeli musician who, in the fall of 2000, used some feeble excuse to evade military service. "I could not care less about the Intifada; all I want is to play my trumpet." And yet, he was indignant when I asked him why he could not do so in, say, Chicago. "Why should I move to Chicago? This is my country," he said, and

added, "Only I want Jerusalem to be… like Chicago." And so he went on pretending that he lived in some "normal place"—as do many other Israelis, for whom "normal" has come to mean "Western." (And Jerusalem, presumably, must accommodate them by becoming a little less "Jewish.")

It is a truism that fear gave serious impetus to diaspora Jews to learn the art of mimicry: For the sake of security, be less conspicuous and hide who you are. Perhaps we are masquerading now for an opposite reason, and wear the mask of citizens of the world to conceal the fact that we no longer *know* who we are. Israeli intellectuals are particularly prone to assume this identity and impose it on their audiences via the media and in the classroom. They promulgate it as a new, "post-Zionist" ideology. It is mandatory not only for anyone who wishes to belong to the intellectual community, but also for state and military leaders, and it reverberates in their awkward efforts to explain Israel's national security measures.

Who has not been warned that he might not know the distinction between his face and the mask, should he wear it long enough? As a people, we have thus managed to confuse ourselves about our identity, and are paying the price typical for unsettled souls—embarrassment and tenuous self-esteem. Not surprisingly, we consequently fail to evoke the respect of our allies and our enemies, to whom our damaged self-image is being communicated.

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