

Concealed Brilliance

I have received my second copy of AZURE here in Minsk and I am delighted with the refreshing and truth-laden content. I have one observation and criticism.

Your papers present the largely forgotten principles that preserve civilization and permit the development of all that we know to be desirable for all people. These are ideas which are desperately needed by the emerging eastern bloc, but they remain largely unknown here. Yet tragically, AZURE is such a scholarly and verbose publication that it will rarely be read by those who need this information the most. It will be read only by those who have the interest and language skills to enable them to read the many pages that hide the brilliant and life-changing principles.

I have no suggestions. Maybe someone can advise how these principles can be summarized, or displayed, clearly and simply for those who desperately need to know them. I pass

them on verbally to our young people here and they receive them eagerly.

Donald M. Coder
Minsk, Belarus

At the Risk of Prophecy

I have just finished reading “Tony Blair and Other Tory Notions” (Editorial, AZURE 3, Winter 1998) with excitement and delight: Someone else shares my deep concern about these issues. It is truly a pleasure to find a soul mate and brother-in-spirit.

I came across AZURE unexpectedly, and it has stopped me in my tracks and commanded my attention. Yours is a well-written, well-edited and, above all, well-reasoned publication, with a clear and coherent voice. It is more than a journal “for the Jewish Nation,” since its ideas obviously have direct implications for everyone else in free Western societies as well.

AZURE reminds me of the youthful *Commentary* when it repeatedly debunked holier-than-thou “liberals.” In doing so, it defined a neo-conservative agenda that eventually triumphed. You are obviously correct in stating that these “conservative ideas ... have become the lingua franca of political discourse,” by now adopted even by left-leaning leaders in the West.

Since the destruction of the Temple, prophecy has been given only to fools. Even so, it is safe to assume that the central concerns of AZURE will also be victorious in the marketplace of ideas and in polity, and sooner rather than later. For instance, by clearly describing and focusing on the widespread trend toward increasing respect for Jewish tradition (“Dusting Off the Jewish Bookshelf,” Editorial, AZURE 4, Summer 1998), AZURE has empowered that trend with even more legitimacy, and thus instantly propelled it forward with greater force.

Reuven Bar-Levav
Southfield, Michigan

Reexamining the Past

I recently received two issues of the Hebrew versions of AZURE. I read them both from cover to cover and marveled at the articles’ originality and

depth. I particularly enjoyed your refreshing “*The Jewish State at 100*” (AZURE 2, Spring 1997), which was as bold as it was insightful. I also enjoyed Hillel Neuer’s instructive article on Aharon Barak (“Aharon Barak’s Revolution,” AZURE 3, Winter 1998), whom I know well from our days as classmates at Beit Hakerem High School. As an Israeli-born economics professor trained at The University of Chicago, whose body is here and whose heart is “there,” I applaud AZURE and The Shalem Center as a most welcome endeavor for a rigorous reexamination of the past and a dialogue on the future character of the Jewish nation.

Sol Shalit
Oconomowoc, Wisconsin

Pagan Origins

Yoram Hazony’s article, “The Jewish Origins of the Western Disobedience Tradition” (AZURE 4, Summer 1998), the first thorough study of this subject that I have come across, thrilled me by confirming my own long-held personal beliefs. The model of the Jewish prophet as “state comptroller” has been an invaluable inspiration toward civil disobedience for mankind. However, Hazony’s projection that paganism

naturally supported dictatorial empires, and that Judaism inherently fostered morally crusading prophets, may have been too sharp a distinction from historical and religious perspectives. A closer look at Jewish history reveals many commonalities between paganism and Judaism, and consequently in the development of Jewish political institutions: Over time, Jewry developed the same social diseases that initially outraged Abraham and Moses.

First of all, the Jewish tradition of adopting pagan practices was well established, as documented in the Tora. Like so many Jews in the diaspora, Joseph became a better-than-average Egyptian when he perfected Pharaoh's bureaucracy at God's command. Moses, having married into a successful pagan family, got a little help from his father-in-law Jethro, the high priest of Midian, in organizing the inchoate Jewish government and army in the desert (Exodus 18:18). The Jewish tribes lacked permanent, central authority—hence political viability—until the establishment of the Jewish monarchy. When Samuel tried his best to dissuade the nation from anointing a monarch (I Samuel 8:11), the tribal leaders realized (in modern terms) that their team did not stand a chance without a good coach.

David turned out to be one of the greatest kings in history, but he could not help adopting some of the

negative influences of the pagan regimes around him: Creating his own army and personal retinue, which included foreign mercenaries, appointing official high priests, and leading a controversial social life. He readily accepted the criticism of prophets, but this did not become a fixed institution amongst the later Israelite kings. Solomon was perhaps the wisest king, but his sense of political expediency compelled him to compromise key divine commandments, which led to the disintegration of the monarchy into rival kingdoms.

The threat of Assyria and Babylonia and the sins of the Jewish nation enraged numerous prophets, but they could not guide the stubborn kingdoms away from behavior that would lead to the destruction of the First and Second Temples. However, the Jewish nation was given a second chance by a pagan, whom many described as the messiah. After conquering Babylonia, Cyrus of Persia not only allowed the Jews of Judea to flourish in their first exile, but financed and militarily supported the resurrection of the Jewish state. This policy of the colossal empire of Persia has been considered a turning point in history: Rather than crush its vassal states and enslave their populations, as was standard practice, it supported their political *and* religious autonomy. Of course Persia acted out of self-interest, but this still gave the Jews another four

centuries in its homeland, before the next exile. Although not nearly as benign in its conquest and administration, Rome, too, might have continued to grant Israel autonomy, if only the zealots had not believed so much in civil disobedience.

Hazoni also ignores the fact that Judaism eventually emphasized the collective will of the lawmakers over the divinely enlightened individual. Long after Jewry could no longer maintain official courts to enforce Jewish law, the power of the Beit Din to excommunicate “heretics” constituted the exercise of the collective will over those individuals who disobeyed halachic rulings. Even Maimonides and the founders of Hasidism, among others, who observed halacha but in an innovative way, were violently attacked by the mainstream for compromising God’s law.

Today, Jewry again must choose between protecting all the rights of the individual or placing priority on serving the collective will. Because the founders of the State of Israel were faced with such a disparate population that was so prone to civil disobedience, they established a centralized socialist society in order to unify the many competing interest groups. This has bred one of the most divisive and controversial democracies in the West, full of contradictions and structural problems. How can a government serve its

citizens when disobedience is so much a part of the political culture that even government ministers regularly act in open defiance to the nation’s elected leader, sometimes more akin to feudal lords ruling their fiefdoms than to bureaucrats serving the collective good of the state?

On a recent visit to Israel, Newt Gingrich commented most insightfully that “Israel is too democratic. Its system rewards those who foster divisions, and punishes those who strive to unify the electorate.” The roots of civil disobedience sink deep into Israel’s wellsprings. The key question now is how Israel’s citizens can overcome their addiction to civil disobedience and competition between her many special interest groups, in order to achieve goals beneficial to the majority.

Yonah Triestman
Jerusalem

Man of Letters

After having read Yoram Hazoni’s article, “The Jewish Origins of the Western Disobedience Tradition,” I am amazed that the Jews’ role in civil disobedience and their impact on history is not better known. Historically, Jews were forbidden to own and use arms. How appropriate that we

preached nonviolent civil disobedience. As our own Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel stated, "The world exists as a result of three things: Judgment, truth and peace." And what is civil disobedience if not the battle for truth and justice? It is every Jew's obligation to understand the inner workings of this subject, as it so much affects our lives. I tip my hat to Hazony for bringing this information to light in a scholarly yet down-to-earth manner. He truly deserves the title "man of letters."

Josh Wander
Jerusalem

Radiating Health

I am quite taken with AZURE. From one issue to the next, I gain a better understanding of your vision: To engender conservative thought in Israel and establish a cultural framework that will chip away at the hegemony of the Left. To me, however, this is all very vague. You express firm confidence in a system of axioms relating to economics, society, ethics, politics, science and the arts, which apparently is what is called "Right." But I was not raised abroad, where it is clear what the Right

thinks. I only know what the Left thinks; consequently, the axioms that form the basis for your writing are not at all clear to me.

To explain: Educating to achieve health can be effected in two ways: By radiating health, in the hope that it will heal what surrounds it; or by fighting illness, defining it, showing what is unhealthy, explaining what a healthy condition looks like and how it is attained. AZURE is an excellent vehicle for radiating health, but are you also trying to fight the malady? Is there any publication where I can learn in a fundamental, thorough way the arenas of debate between Right and Left? This in itself is something totally new to me: The understanding that the terms "Right" and "Left" do not pertain solely to questions of security and the land of Israel. Extended forums should be dedicated to exploring this novel idea. Is anyone working on something like this?

At any rate, by reading between the lines of certain articles in AZURE I am learning about these things. For this alone, you deserve our heartfelt thanks.

David Hillel
Israel Defense Forces

AZURE welcomes letters to the Editor. Letters should be sent to: AZURE, c/o The Shalem Center, 1140 Connecticut Avenue NW, Suite 801, Washington, DC 20036. E-mail: azure@shalem.org.il. Letters may be edited for length.
