
Correspondence

Diaspora Judaism

To the Editors:

I was disappointed to read the From the Editors piece in Issue Three of Kedma.

The editors misunderstood the entire theme of A.B. Yehoshua's address. I am skeptical that they even heard it or read a transcript. The editors' piece does not accurately reflect Yehoshua's views. In fact, as even a cursory reading of a transcript of the speech indicates, Yeshoshua anticipates many of the editors' criticisms, and responds with a far more nuanced and compelling argument than the editors' misleading characterization thereof might indicate.

The editors argued that Jews have continued to survive in the Diaspora, that they are materially successful, involved in social action, and that Jewish culture and religious life have persevered, albeit in the face of assimilation and intermarriage. In short, they wanted to show that Judaism, in one form or another, still

exists in the Diaspora.

While it is of course true that Jewish practice and expression exist in the Diaspora, this does not counter Yehoshua's argument. In fact, he even stated that point himself. But he quickly moved on to the main focus of his address—the point that the editors missed: given that Jews are clearly surviving and contributing to society outside of Israel, “I want to change the conception of the survival, and put it on another level, on the *content* of survival, on the totality of the elements that you are responsible for” [emphasis mine].

He expressed that every decision that Jews make should be influenced by, and have an impact on, their lives as Jews. He did not imply that all Jews should live their lives in adherence with a Jewish legal code—Yehoshua himself is religiously unobservant—but he stated lucidly and straightforwardly that we should start treating Judaism as an irremovable fiber of our being; in his words, more like our “skin” and less like our “jackets.”

What Yehoshua meant—in light of the totality of his address and of other discussions of the matter, as opposed

to de-contextualized fragments such as those cited by the editors—is in line with what Hillel Halkin (correctly) stated in response to Yehoshua’s speech:

Israel is the only place in the world in which one can live a Jewish life that is total—in which, that is, there is no compartmentalization between the inner and the outer, between what is Jewish and what is not. It is the only place in the world in which Jews are totally responsible for the society they live in, for the environment that surrounds them, for the government that rules them. It is the only place in the world where Jewish culture is not a subculture in a greater culture but is rather that greater culture itself. It is the real thing and by comparison, Jewish life in America, or anywhere else in the Diaspora, as dedicated and committed as it may be, indeed seems like a kind of play-acting.

Yehoshua was referring to the way in which Diaspora Jews view their lives and their identities as Jews, a paradigm he sees as problematic, and the editors proved his point. They stated that “Jews living outside Israel

need not...think of themselves as living in exile, but rather as proud Diaspora Jews.” Does Judaism really give so little value to where a person chooses to live? In Yehoshua’s words: “If in the end of the time...there will be still a Jew in the moon...praying ‘Next year in Jerusalem’ on the moon, the last Jew—you will see that as success.” To what extent should we live detached from our land, the very name of which we share with our self-definition?

The editors stated that we should be proud of the achievements of Jews in the Diaspora because “Jews have made some of the largest contributions to the world.” Specifically, they cited Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Albert Einstein as models of the ideal Diaspora Jew. But in his address Yehoshua anticipated such an argument when he said, “So when you look backwards, don’t count only the Nobel Prizes that we got. This is not important at all...” What is important in his eyes? Making Judaism part of the fabric of your life, and not just being a Jew who contributes to the world.

You wrote that “Jews have

integrated (some charge assimilated) into American society, and feel 'at home' in America." That is exactly the problem. We have integrated. We have lost touch with our roots. We have even stopped using the word "exile," which refers to the unique situation of the Jews, and we have begun to use the generic "Diaspora," which could refer to any number of ethnic, cultural, national, or religious groups no longer occupying a land they once did.

The concepts of "*Tikkun olam*" and "*ohr la'goyim*" are fine and good, but to claim that they epitomize Jewish values, as the editors do, is sorely mistaken. When we get down to the real issues, Yehoshua has a broader, more intellectually honest, and more fulfilling vision for how to "ensure a collective Jewish future." It is time to get back to our roots, and to stop minimizing the role of the Land of Israel and the State of Israel in our lives.

Sincerely,
Isaac Dayan
The Wharton School
Class of 2008

Sarah Breger Responds

We thank Mr. Dayan for his passionate comments on our Editor's Note in Kedma Issue 3. However, as readers of both A.B. Yehoshua's remarks to the American Jewish Committee, as well as the subsequent responses—we have a different perspective from that of Dayan.

Dayan quotes Hillel Halkin's supportive article of Yehoshua in which he states that "Israel is the only place in the world in which one can live a Jewish life that is total... It is the only place in the world where Jewish culture is not a subculture in a greater culture but is rather that greater culture itself... by comparison, Jewish life in America, or anywhere else in the Diaspora, as dedicated and committed as it may be, indeed seems like a kind of play-acting." I would point Dayan to the seventh paragraph of the Editor's Note that he criticizes which notes that there are those in Israel whose Jewish identity can be threatened by the "Jewish State." A homosexual Jew may have a harder time connecting to his Judaism in Israel, where a recent gay pride parade ended in violence,

than on Penn's campus where JBaGeL (Jewish Bisexuals, Gays and Lesbians) hosts a monthly Friday night dinner. A Reform rabbi may view Judaism as the center of her life but be alienated in a country that does not recognize her ordination. And let us be frank, North Tel Aviv is replete with "post-Zionists" who view themselves as Israelis rather than as Jews. We see no reason to retreat from our earlier observation.

Yehoshua reiterated his point again in an article published six months later in the leading Israeli daily newspaper Haaretz where he wrote, "A religious Israeli Jew also deals with a depth and breadth of life issues that is incomparably larger and more substantial than those with which his religious counterpart in New York or Antwerp must contend."

Dayan would no doubt agree with that point but is it really true? Religious Jews in Israel do confront large and substantial issues of religion and state that give meaning to living a Jewish life. Yet the Jew in the Diaspora struggles with issues of Jewish identity no less meaningful if not as "large"—

the Jew who must explain to his co-workers time and time again why he will not be able to go to work because of a Jewish holiday or who refuses to go out to dinner with a client because of dietary restrictions; the student who must contend with a teacher who threatens to fail him or her for missing a midterm on Yom Kippur; the pro-Israel student who is called a racist in front of his entire political science class—all these Diaspora Jews are struggling and grappling with their Jewish identity. These are struggles Diaspora Jews must contend with all the time and these tests often strengthen one's identity and do not detract from it. If Diaspora Jews wear their Judaism as a "jacket", it is one for all seasons.

To be sure living as a Jew in Israel is a unique experience (as some of us who plan to make *aliyah* know well). Only there, can one have the opportunity of religiously and culturally submerging oneself in one's Judaism. I agree with Dayan that this opportunity to live a "full" Jewish life is not being transmitted to American Jewish youth. The fact that in a survey

conducted two years ago by Steven M. Cohen, a sociologist at New York's Hebrew Union College, only 17% of American Jews called themselves Zionists, is a shame.

It is unclear what Dayan means when he argues that we need to "get back to our roots", and to "stop minimizing the role of the Land of Israel and the State of Israel in our lives." Is it that all Jews should make aliyah and move to Israel? Or is it that we should just say so. Dayan seems to believe that to support Israel one has to (verbally) negate the Diaspora. We believe that sort of win-lose approach to Judaism is self defeating for both Israel and for Diaspora Jews.

Many Jewish organizations in America are working around the clock to ensure that our generation feels a connection to Israel through programs such as Birthright and Hillel Israel experience. And this is extremely important. But, unlike Yehoshua, if I came to the Diaspora in 100 years and there were no Jews I would cry. And if it came to it, I suspect he would as well.

Pass Panel

On February 12, The Penn Arab Student Society (PASS) sponsored a panel discussion on the topic of international law in The Palestinian-Israeli Conflict. The panel featured student representatives from PASS, Penn Students for Justice in Palestine, UNICEF, Amnesty International, and Kedma and was structured as a forum for people to come speak about the conflict and listen to different perspectives.

To the Editor:

While all the speakers in the PASS-sponsored student-led discussion panel agreed that they wanted peace, not all of them agreed on the best way to achieve it. Most believed that the first step was Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 borders, but others stressed the necessity that the change start from within each side. Despite differing views, however, the discussion was anything but contentious. As was evident from the atmosphere in the room before the panel started, Kedma and PASS members saw each other as friends, not opponents, and were able to maintain this air of friendship

even when sensitive topics were being debated. Although it may have been difficult for either side to convince the other of what the “true” or “best” answer to the conflict is, the necessary elements to arriving at a mutually beneficial solution were there. Both sides understood that it was not about compromising but about collaborating. It was not about negotiation but about dialogue. It was not about concession but about comprehension. If the setting of the panel was the same setting under which the leaders on each side discussed the conflict, Israeli mothers would not have to worry about their children getting on buses and Palestinian families would live on more than one meal a day and would not have to worry about their houses being torn down. Nevertheless, the reality of the conflict is harsh, and if we hope to see a brighter future for all those involved, it is not enough to discuss solutions; we must also try to achieve them. We all know it is easy to argue for something; the real challenge is living up to what we argue for. Accordingly, just as PASS and Kedma members viewed each other as equals and friends during the discussion, so

must the Arab and Jews view each other. To do so, however, requires that there be equality for both sides in terms of territory, human rights, and legal, civil, political, economic and social rights.

Reem Kassis
Vice President
Penn Arab Student Society

Science and Jewish Law

To the Editors:

I really enjoyed Kedma’s past issue. The article “Immovable Giants?” by David Faleck did a great job exploring the rabbinic approaches to science and *halakha*. It seems that as technology becomes more embedded in our lives, *halakhic* conflicts will become more acute, forcing us to choose a method to reconcile the two. Mr. Faleck provided a concise summary of how our predecessors dealt with similar issues, and at the same time gave a solid framework for our generation to continue the discussion.

Sincerely,
David Ezon
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