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Correspondence

Moral Leadership and the Middle East

To the Editors: I can well understand and appreciate the political and economic exigencies that have produced a one-sided rhetoric in which all concessions must come from Israel and that finds Israel being intransigent in the Middle Eastern conflict. It appears that it is in the American interest to pursue a policy of accommodation with Arab oil powers. Nevertheless, one element I think is essential is blatantly absent from such discussions on Israeli policies as those of Mark A. Bruzonsky ("U.S.-Israeli Policies: Reading the Signs for '77," *Worldview*, September) and Bruzonsky and Israel Singer ("Dependent Israel: The Two Options," *Worldview*, April). This aspect is morality. Oddly, only Rabin and the Israelis are faulted; America may justifiably pursue a self-interested course of action. But when our friends (and Israel is politically and morally a friend) seek their national security, we quickly lose patience. It is interesting to note that Bruzonsky and Singer find someone such as Rabbi [Henry] Siegman to be courageous in his stand because he joins the many critics of Israel, rather than those who remain steadfast in their belief in the justice of Israel's cause.

It is unfair to reduce the relationships between the Arabs and Israel to an equality of insecurity, hysteria, and mistrust. It is dishonest to "forget" that in Israel's twenty-eight years and four major wars the Arabs either instigated the conflict or openly attacked Israel, as in '48 and '73. To speak of atrocities and belligerence on both sides is tantamount to equating offensive fighting with defense, comparing the bully to the victim.

The Holocaust is not only the central event of modern Jewish history, it is relevant to contemporary civilization. Thus it is a legitimate pivotal point in international thinking. The Israelis are constantly being asked to listen patiently to Arab rhetoric—to "under-

stand" their style of hyperbole and appreciate the Palestinian consciousness. Yet we never demand of the Arabs that they give care to Israel's unique experience and its historic context. Can a legitimate Middle East settlement be based upon such an incongruous intellectual position? How far can appeasement go before we abandon our moral credibility? We have convinced many Israelis and a great number of Americans (Jews included) that Israel's current diplomatic position is unacceptable. They now join the popular parade of those "appreciating the Arab position" on Palestinian rights and territorial demands. We have succeeded in undermining a people whose only real defense against hostile enemies was their spirit of belief in the ultimate justice of their cause and the morality of their existence. Perhaps we are so ruthless with Israel because we, as Americans after Vietnam and Watergate, are no longer so sure of ourselves. The Vietnamese experience has shaken our ability to see others clearly, while Watergate has upset our own moral sensibilities. We are admittedly in a state of confusion. In a very acute observation about American foreign policy Nathan Glazer has pointed out that we are unique in relating American values to our policy decisions.

We can no longer continue to be smug in our demands upon Israel. We must listen to its needs. Concessions are not necessarily the answer; let us remember that concessions failed to appease Hitler, and they will also fail to satisfy the Arabs, who have only one legitimate concern: the effects of another war that may invoke catastrophe by pushing Israel to the limits of its psychological capacity to cope with the nagging specter of Jewish insecurity.

It is apparent that most observers think that Israel must agree to significant political and territorial compromises and concessions. However, even in asserting this, we are aware that these concessions are linked to the realities of power politics and, in effect, constitute what Kissinger has derided as the moral mortgaging of Israel. We must ask, at least ourselves, about the justice, legality, and morality of coercing Israel into concessions that mean, in effect, we are negotiating over the very survival of Israel. Granted that this may eventually become a reality, but we

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must not delude ourselves into believing that this is also honest. In pursuing such a course we forfeit our integrity and our historic claim to moral leadership.

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Mark Bruzonsky Responds:

Rabbi Goldman commits two historical sins that so color his perceptions that he fails to recognize the moral-political linkage Israel Singer and I outlined in April ("Dependent Israel: The Two Options"). As for my more recent article ("U.S. and Israel: The Coming Storm"), it is primarily an analysis of political realities—which Rabbi Goldman seems to acknowledge—but not *ipso facto* advocacy of immoral policies, as he charges.

For his first sin Rabbi Goldman seems to believe that only Jewish history is tragic. Comparing tragedies is useless, and besides, the Holocaust does indeed stand by itself. But if the Holocaust, either unconsciously or for self-serving reasons, is now turned into an excuse for moral myopia toward others and for politically motivated Sampson-like threats, then we Jews of today become guilty of a form of sacrilege. Furthermore, I hope Rabbi Goldman will attempt a future-orientation considering the possibility of tragedies even surpassing the Holocaust should we continue to be unable to use reason to dominate passion, intercultural understanding to counter chauvinistic impulses. I hope the Rabbi will ponder the implications of the passage I quote in my Excursus in this issue: "Observers with different opinions on the substance and process of the conflict are coming to agree that nuclearization could happen very suddenly, if indeed it has not already happened." As Secretary Kissinger has indicated, "We do not underestimate the dilemma and risks that Israel faces in a negotiation. But they are dwarfed by a continuation of the status quo."

The Rabbi's second sin is his insistence on comparing Hitler with the Arabs, the Holocaust with contemporary Jewish survival, and American

policies with Chamberlain-style "appeasement." Such linkages, of course, are meant to justify the Rabbi's uncompromising positions—but they simply lack intellectual or historical validation. Who is really being dishonest?

This said, Rabbi Goldman still could, logically, have a valid charge in his primary assertion that today's political reality does not conform with moral imperatives. Fortunately, I think he does not—for if he did, choosing between them would be of utmost difficulty. I also think Rabbi Goldman should ponder why Israeli Foreign Minister Yigal Allon chooses to make the case for Israeli policies strictly on security grounds, not on morality, in his recent *Foreign Affairs* article (October).

The central moral imperative in the Middle East is a just reconciliation between the two peoples who have struggled over Palestine in modern times. Rabbi Goldman's reference to the "one legitimate concern" of the Arabs may have been a slip, but it is accurate if he means that both sides in the conflict have right on their sides. The greatest tragedy of Israel's history is the inability of its leaders to face this primary issue, largely because it calls into question in some people's minds the very creation of the Jewish state. That Palestinian leadership has failed to understand Jewish aspirations is hardly an acceptable Jewish excuse for refusal to open the door to a settlement today.

The justice of Israel's cause, the rightful existence of a Jewish state, is not in question between us.... Choosing the road to a secure, peaceful, progressive future for Israel and for its neighbors is what divides us. And this moment requires absolute candidness. I believe Rabbi Goldman's views threaten unending conflict between Israel and the Arab world, increasing international isolation for the Jewish state, the nuclearization of the Middle East, serious tension between American Jewry and the U.S. Government, and probably eventual catastrophe for Israel. I believe my views offer hope for a more positive future; they indicate that certain Israeli concessions are politically, historically, and morally imperative. And I further believe that it is the responsibility of the U.S. to attempt to create the conditions requisite for reconciliation, not to allow itself to be manipulated through domestic politics, as has just happened during the election

campaign. American friendship with both Israel and many of the Arab states offers Israel an historic opportunity that Israel has not yet come to grasp.

Rabbi Goldman's letter reminds me of an Israeli friend's attempt to illustrate the Israeli dilemma: "I'm sitting on the roof of a burning house that the fire department can't put out," Professor Mordechai Abir of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem explains. "Either I jump to certain death or I wait it out,

hoping the fire will die down or that some way will be found to fight it." My response to this is similar to my feelings about Rabbi Goldman's letter. First, there is reason to believe that the very intensity of the flames and the panic of decision have distorted the view of what lies below. Second, Israel has many friends, friends who in this case need to be encouraged, not hindered, to join in fighting the fire with maximum effort. These friends, especially in the United States, are prepared as well to offer Israel meaningful supplementary commitments and "guarantees" to accompany an overall settlement to insure Israeli security.

At least Israel should be seriously considering the alternatives to the status quo, which offers little hope but for continual, more devastating conflict. False historical parallels and self-serving appeals to morality over politics are not reasonable substitutes for historical honesty, creative diplomacy, and a vision of reconciliation.