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AMERICAN JEWISH ARCHIVES

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Box 54, Folder 7, American Jewish-Israel Relations Task Force,
1987.



F → 9/22/87
for 10/2/83



The American Jewish Committee

Institute of Human Relations
165 East 56 Street
New York, New York 10022-2746
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July 30, 1987

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Mr. Marc Tanenbaum
165 East 56 Street
New York, NY 10022

Dear Marc:

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We would like to invite you to join a new AJC Task Force on American Jewish-Israeli Relations.

This task force, which we consider a priority AJC project for 1987-88, will aim to clarify and enhance the relationship between American Jews and Israel. It will have two products: a major statement on the current status and needs of the relationship and a set of program recommendations for improving it.

- Honorary Presidents
- Morris B. Abram**
- Howard I. Friedman**
- Arthur J. Goldberg**
- Philip E. Hoffman**
- Richard Maass**
- Elmer L. Winter**
- Maynard I. Wishner**

We are launching this task force at a time of confusion in relations between the world's two largest Jewish communities. Troubling debates have broken out on the Pollard affair, the controversy over who is a Jew, where Soviet Jews should be resettled, and other issues. At the same time, American Jewish support for Israel remains solid. On issues such as foreign aid or arms sales, American Jews continue to demonstrate deep attachment to Israel.

- Honorary Vice-Presidents
- Nathan Appleman**
- Martin Gang**
- Ruth R. Goddard**
- Andrew Goodman**
- Raymond F. Kravis**
- William Rosenwald**
- Shirley M. Szabad**

Ever since the creation of the State of Israel, the American Jewish Committee has had a special interest in American-Jewish Israeli relations. In 1950, we published the Blaustein-Ben Gurion exchange of correspondence clarifying this relationship. Over the years, we have sponsored seminars, dialogues and publications on American Jewish-Israeli interaction.

- Max M. Fisher**
Honorary Chair,
National Executive Council

Five years ago we initiated the Institute on American Jewish-Israeli Relations which has served as our major instrument in furthering understanding between Israeli and American Jews through education, exchange programs, research and publications. The task force will be working closely with the Institute, drawing on its resources.

- Executive Vice-Presidents Emeriti

- John Slawson**
- Bertram H. Gold**

We will seek in this task force not only to analyze American Jewish-Israeli relations, but also to make constructive proposals for each community and for AJC's program. We will explore what can be done in areas such as economic development, tourism, social service initiatives, political action, cultural exchange and intellectual dialogue to advance the interests of both communities.

To chair the task force, I have appointed Sholom Comay of Pittsburgh, who currently serves as our national treasurer. In addition to the national task force, chaired by Sholom and which we are inviting you

to join, task forces will be appointed in each of our chapters. These task forces will consider the same questions as the national task force. In this way, we plan to conduct a national-local dialogue on American Jewish-Israeli relations for the duration of this project.

ok

The first meeting will take place on Tuesday, September 22 from 10 AM to 3 PM at our New York headquarters. We will be sending you an overall introductory paper setting out the concerns that need to be addressed and a background and decision memo on the issues that will be discussed at this session. For the convenience of many of our out-of-town members, this meeting will take place the day after our Board of Governors session. Whenever possible, we will schedule our meetings to coincide with important national AJC events.

I hope that you will join this important task force and that we will see you in September. A reply card is enclosed to indicate your intention to attend.

Sincerely,



Theodore Ellenoff
President

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Elise D. Waterman

Max M. Fisher

Honorary Chair,
National Executive Council

Executive Vice-President Emeritus

John Slawson

August 14, 1987

TO: Members of the American Jewish-Israel Relations Task Force

FROM: Sholom D. Comay, Chair

RE: Task Force Background Paper

AMERICAN JEWISH

Attached is the background paper written for our Task Force on American Jewish-Israeli Relations by Gary Rubin, AJC's Director of Programs who will staff the task force. We hope it will provide a common information base for our work

We are looking forward to seeing you at our first Task Force meeting on September 22 at AJC headquarters. About a week before that meeting, you will receive a special decision memo on the issues we plan to discuss at this meeting.

Many of you have asked about the relationship between our Task Force and AJC's Institute for American Jewish-Israeli Relations (IAJIR). Our Task Force is an ad-hoc group charged with developing for AJC a statement on the current status of American Jewish-Israeli relations and a set of policy recommendations for the agency to adopt. It will go out of existence once our task is completed, in about a year. The IAJIR is an ongoing Institute which produces research and programming on this topic. In developing our statement and making our recommendations, we will be drawing heavily on the resources of the IAJIR. Bert Gold, who directs the Institute, has been instrumental in developing our Task Force's papers and plans. We look forward to working together to develop a truly significant statement for our agency.

SC/edl
Enclosures

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*The Committee of American
Jews and Christians for Israel*

request the honor of your presence

at the

Reception and Banquet in Celebration of Israel

Program participants include

*The Honourable Morris Abram, Ambassador designate
to the European office of the United Nations*

*The Honourable Richard Halverson, Chaplain
of the Senate of the United States of America*

*Leaders of American Christian and Jewish Organizations
serving on behalf of Israel*

*at seven o'clock on Thursday the fourth of May
one thousand nine hundred and eighty-nine*

*The Mayflower Hotel
in the City of Washington*

*Black Tie
Dietary law observed*

R.S.V.P.

219-540-6391

THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

date September 17, 1987
to Bert Gold
from David Singer
subject Siah Mesharim, A New Israeli Magazine

The attached article describes Siah Mesharim, a new Hebrew-language magazine published in Israel. The magazine, edited by Prof. Zev Falk, a leading modern Orthodox intellectual, seeks to function as the Israeli equivalent of Shma. It is open to all points of view and actively promotes debate about key issues of the day.

There may be an opportunity here for the AJC. Currently, Siah Mesharim "receives no financial support from any institution or organization", but seeks to "widen the circle of its readers". Might we not consider taking the magazine under our wings in some fashion? Certainly, the magazine is promoting the type of pluralistic outlook that we would like to see in Israel.

David S.

cc: Shimon Samuels ✓
Marc Tanenbaum ✓
George Gruen
Shula Bahat

Siah Mesharim: Israeli Dialogue and Diversity

Theodore Friedman

Our letter this quarter is devoted to a report and an analysis of a new, unique magazine entitled *Siah Mesharim*. Its founder and Editor is Zev Falk, Professor of Jewish Family Law at the Law School of the Hebrew University and the author of a long list of learned works dealing with various aspects of Jewish law in its relationship to modern problems. The uniqueness of the journal derives from the fact that each issue, in the main, is devoted to a single theme on the public agenda. No less significant is the fact that the contributors to the magazine are drawn from the widest possible spectrum of viewpoints. The Editor's lead article expresses the consensus of the Editorial Board. Finally, the issues presented for discussion are viewed in the light of the tradition. The latter, in turn, is interpreted liberally in the light of the history of the particular halakhah involved. At times, a dissent is taken from the Halakhah as codified. Thus, broadly speaking, the ideological posture falls between the stance of those for whom the Halakhah as codified—the various factions of Orthodoxy—should be determinative in matters of public policy, and the position that the tradition has no relevance to the current problems of the state and its society. In the late Professor Mordecai Kaplan's felicitous phrase, the position is that "the past has a vote but not a veto."

But it is not alone the unfreezing of the Halakhah that is called for on a variety of issues; similar emphasis is put on renewal and creativity in religious and social practice. As indicated, not all the journal's contributors share this viewpoint and that is what makes this little magazine unique among the plethora of Israeli journals. Now there is hardly a movement or organization on the local scene that does not maintain its own publication. These are dedicated to setting forth their own point of view and polemicizing against their ideological opponents. But, as the

RABBI THEODORE FRIEDMAN, a former president of the Rabbinical Assembly, lives in Jerusalem and is a regular contributor to our journal.

Editor points out in the first issue of *Siah Mesharim*, invariably the discussion is a monologue, not a dialogue. There is no serious reckoning with opposing positions: they are simply dismissed out of hand. The whole is an exercise in scoring points by attaching objectionable labels to the ideas one rejects. *Siah Mesharim* is intended to provide a platform for dialogical thinking and expression. Here, the Editor aptly quotes the comment of the Maharsha on a Baraita (*Berakhot* 58a): "He who sees a multitude of Jews pronounces the blessing: Blessed be the Knower of secrets for each one of the multitude has his own opinion." Maharsha writes: "According to the conclusion of the Gemara a huge multitude consists of no less than six hundred thousand, each of whom holds his own viewpoint. Six hundred thousand refers to the number of Israelites who were present at Sinai at the giving of the Torah. Hence, the Torah includes all these points of view. That is why the Sages say a viewpoint expressed by a scholar of a later generation was already included in the Torah." All of which is to say that only through a genuine give and take of ideas can we hope to approximate the truth of Judaism.

Accordingly, the first issue of the magazine is devoted to the question "Is A Discussion on Matters of Religious Belief Desirable?" In response, an Orthodox professor of Jewish thought at the Hebrew University writes that though he acknowledges the sincerity of non-Orthodox rabbis, he cannot engage in theological dialogue with them, something that he can do with secularist Jews. The paradoxical statement, typical of Israeli Orthodoxy, is readily explainable. The non-Orthodox religious Jew offers an alternative to Orthodoxy and thus challenges the latter. Unconcerned with matters of Jewish faith and practice, the secularist offers no such threat. The Orthodox can find common ground with the secularist Jew beyond the parameters of Jewish religion, e.g. nationalism. In any event, the question raised is basic and must be pursued if our society is not to fall into the abyss of mutually hostile camps certain to fracture our sense of common identity and destiny.

The second number of the journal takes up the issue that, at the time, evoked a public storm of protest—the decision of the Chief Rabbinate that the newly arrived Ethiopian Jews who intended to marry would have to undergo the ritual of conversion. A public opinion poll revealed that an overwhelming majority of the respondents, including a surprisingly high percentage who denominated themselves as "*dati*," disapproved of the Chief Rabbinate's decision. Interestingly enough, the percentage of those who disapproved was highest among university graduates, while those who most approved were people with no more than an elementary school education.

Some years before, Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef, at the time the Chief Sephardi Rabbi had written a responsum on the question of the status of the Ethiopian Jews. In it, he based himself on several responsa on the

question written by Rabbi David Ibn Zimra, the noted halakhist of sixteenth-century Egypt and one by his pupil, Rabbi Jacob Castro. On ancillary issues involved in the halakhic status of the Ethiopian Jewish community, Rabbi Yosef, as is his wont, quotes abundantly from responsa literature. His conclusion we quote verbatim from his responsum published in full in this issue of the magazine: "There are no grounds for suspecting that members of the Ethiopian Jewish community might be halakhically ineligible to marry into the Jewish community (*psulei hittun*). Therefore, they are permitted to marry into the Jewish community without need for prior conversion."

The decision of the Chief Rabbinate comes in for critical scrutiny at the hands of the Editor and is rejected on a number of counts. One of the latter is the fact that in the halakhic tradition, a *gezerah* is issued (and *giyur l'humra* is a *gezerah*) only where there is a possibility that a similar situation might arise in the future. The possibility that another Jewish community might be in the same situation as Beta Yisrael simply does not exist.

AMERICAN JEWISH ARCHIVES

The position of women in Judaism today serves as the theme for the magazine's third issue. Paradoxically, while a woman sits on the bench of the Supreme Court here, (a situation that has evoked no public demurral) a woman may not serve as a witness in a Rabbinical Court except in cases involving a disappeared husband (*iggun*). How far even the extreme Orthodox rabbinate (the *bet din* of the *Edah Hareidit*) has long since gotten beyond the traditional codified halakhah on certain matters involving women is to be seen from the following: according to the halakhah as codified both by Maimonides (*Hilkhot Talmud Torah* 1:13) and the *Shulhan Arukh* (*Yoreh Deah* 246:6), it is forbidden to teach Torah to women. For several generations now, Agudat Yisrael has been conducting schools for girls. One more example may be offered in this context: In the 1920's when the late Golda Meir ran for the office of Mayor of Tel Aviv, members of the Mizrahi party were called upon to boycott the election. The reason? Because of Maimonides' statement (*Hilkhot Melakhim* 1:5) that only men are to be appointed to public office. However, for several decades now, it has been the practice of Mafdal to include a woman among its list of candidate for the Keneset. These departures from halakhah aside, the position of women in the synagogue, with the exception, of course, of non-Orthodox synagogues, remains what it has been for the last 1500 years or so; it continues to be a secluded, non-participatory role.

In no area is the inequitable position of women more blatant than in the law of divorce as practiced in our Rabbinical Courts. Decisions are still based, especially in cases where the woman petitions the court to compel her husband to grant her a divorce on Talmudic assumptions (*hazakah*) that are patently totally unrealistic; for example, the assumption that a

woman prefers any kind of husband to no husband at all (*Yevamot* 118b) or the assumption that a woman is more eager to marry than a man (*Ketubot* 86a). Rather than compel a husband to grant a divorce, the courts are more inclined to induce a recalcitrant husband to grant a *get* by persuading the wife to forego her legitimate claims for child support. Only a throughgoing liberal reinterpretation of the traditional law of divorce can bring it in line with the Western democratic assumption of the equality of all persons before the law. Incidentally, the issue is now exercising a number of women's organizations including an Orthodox woman's organization.

A number of women contribute to this issue of the magazine, including an Orthodox feminist who favors a special minyan for women in which women will fulfill all the roles involved in a traditional service. (Not too long ago, the Law Committee of the Rabbinical Council of America declared such a minyan halakhically impermissible).

On no question in recent years have there been more appeals to Torah and halakhah than on the issue of Jewish settlement on the West Bank. While the *Eretz Yisrael Hashleymah* movement has secular adherents, the shock troops of the movement are the enthusiasts of Gush Emunim who are ready with chapter and verse. The issue is formulated by *Siah Mesharim* in a series of questions. "Which is to be preferred? The whole of Eretz Yisrael or the principle 'great is peace'? Does the principle of *lifnim meshurat hadin* apply to relations between peoples? Can directions for foreign policy be derived from the Torah?" We cull from the discussion a quotation cited from Nahmanides (Deuteronomy 6:18) "Do what is good and right in the sight of the Lord." Nahmanides writes: "The command implies the willingness to compromise and to go beyond the requirements of the law in all one's relations with one's neighbors and in the relations between communities and states."

A democratic Jewish State presents a challenge to Jewish thinkers who take the tradition seriously. The challenge is taken up in an issue of the journal devoted to Judaism and Democracy. The nub of the challenge lies in the question of authority. Is the "consent of the governed" compatible with the authoritative character of the Torah and that of its interpreters? There are indications in the tradition that permit a qualified affirmative reply to the question. The indications are to be found in the tenor of such statements as the following: "The custom (the practice of the people) sets aside the law" (*Yerushalmi Yevamot* beg. ch. 12) "No decrees are issued which a majority of the people cannot abide" (*Bava Kama* 79b). Moreover, one ought to take note of the process of democratization within the history of Judaism that resulted in a shift of authority from an hereditary priestly class to a democratic class of Sages. Finally, we have

Isaac Abarbanel's statement (Introduction to the Book of Kings) that the monarchy in ancient Israel proved an abysmal failure from the point of view of Judaism. Most of the kings of both the kingdoms of Judah and Israel were idolators who incited their people to idolatry. The ideal form of government would be the rule of God as mediated by prophets. Failing this, a republican form of government is to be preferred. The quotations from the sources may readily be multiplied. However numerous and varied, they still leave the problem of aligning the tradition with the basic values of democracy.

In the face of the protracted wrangling in the Kenesset over a bill aimed at banning racial incitement, it was inevitable that the journal devote an issue to Judaism and racism. At the insistence of the Orthodox parties the bill was enacted into law carrying a provision stating that any act or statement aimed at maintaining the exclusivity of a religion shall not be construed as racist. Taken at face value, there is no denying that statements and positions appear in the Talmud drawing a sharp distinction between attitudes towards Jews and non-Jews. But then, what tyro in Talmudic studies is not aware that some of the most authoritative interpreters of the Talmud—the Tosafists and Rabbi Menahem Meiri—long ago declared that these laws do not apply to Gentiles who observe the seven Noahide commandments? And yet, while Orthodox fundamentalists read and understand the Torah in the light of its traditional interpretation, they refuse to apply the same criterion in their understanding of the Talmud. In any event, this particular issue of *Siah Mesharim* offers a counterweight to the rabid "anti-goyism" found in right-wing circles.

According to traditional reckoning that goes back to Maimonides, the year 5747 is a Sabbatical Year. In modern times, the question of the observance of *Shemittah* arose towards the end of the nineteenth century with the founding of the early agricultural settlement. It was Rabbi Yizhak Elchanan Spektor of Kovno, with the approval of a number of other noted East European Rabbis who devised the *heter* of a fictitious sale of the land to a non-Jew in order to permit Jews to use the produce of the Sabbatical Year. Rabbis Diskin and Salant of Jerusalem sharply disagreed, and declared the *heter* invalid. Similarly, Rabbi Kuk's *heter* by means of a fictitious sale to a non-Jew was declared invalid by Kuk's arch-opponent, Rabbi Sonnenfeld. To this day, the kibutzim and moshavim of Poalei Agudat Yisrael observe the law of *shemittah* to the letter and draw their livelihood during the year from a special fund set up by their party. In the cities, the *haredim* buy fruits and vegetables grown by Arab farmers.

The objection to this method of circumventing the law is twofold. Selling the land of Israel to a non-Jew, even fictitiously, simply goes against the grain. Too much "blood, sweat and tears" have gone into

acquiring the land to dispose of it, even if only *pro forma*. Moreover, the *heter* completely fails to take into account the social purpose of the law, a purpose expressly spelled out in several passages in the Torah; e.g. "The land at rest shall yield your food: for you, for your male and female slaves, for your hired and bound laborers . . . and for your cattle and the beasts in your land" (Leviticus 25:6, 7; cf. Deuteronomy 15:1,2,4) Clearly, the aim of the law is to prevent permanent poverty and a permanent debtor class.

What is needed, as several writers in this issue of the magazine suggest is a moral-social equivalent of the Sabbatical Year. Such a plan would involve both farmers and our city-dwellers in sharing their assets with those living below the poverty line, of whom unfortunately there is no lack.

The ninth issue of the magazine addresses itself to the demographic threat to the Jewish people in the Diaspora. (Here, we enjoy the highest Jewish birthrate in the world; the kibbutzim stand first in this regard). The problem is grappled with by a number of writers, some of whom come up with practical suggestions. This contributor, for example, suggests that the advent of a Jewish child be officially recognized in some tangible form by the local Jewish community as being no less important say, than a contribution to the UJA.

The last issue, as of this writing, takes up the problem that next to national security may be said to preoccupy the Israeli public consciousness—the twin problems of *aliyah* and *yeridah*. These two are the systole and diastole of the Israeli heartbeat and, at the moment, they show grave irregularity from the standpoint of the Zionist idea. The statistics are gloomy enough. What is to be done?

In addition to essays in response to the latter question, there are two pieces from two fairly recent *olim*; one, a Russian woman and the other Professor Emil Fackenheim. We quote from his essay on "Why I Came on *Aliyah*." ". . . what if the great enterprise (the establishment of the Jewish state) were to fail because not enough Jews came? That is one question I cannot fail to ask of Diaspora Jews, even at the risk of disturbing their sleep. . . . There are great moments in the life of the state in which one cannot but feel that one is happy that one came. One such moment occurred this year when Natan Sharansky went to the Wall. . . . An Ethiopian Jew, himself a recent arrival went up to him, shook his hand and said: 'Welcome home from one *oleh* to another.'" Moments such as these should inform the lives of Israelis and Jews everywhere."

From the foregoing, it is abundantly clear that the Editor and his co-workers are wrestling with the fundamental problem of seeing the questions of the hour in the light of enduring Jewish values. How to make

the tradition relevant and viable in a modern sovereign state is a high and serious task. Hopefully, there are answers. On them the Jewish character of the state will depend.

P.S. Since the magazine receives no financial support from any institution or organization, it is dependent upon subscriptions. Understandably, it is anxious to widen the circle of its readers. A year's subscription (\$12.00) will bring the reader ten issues. Subscriptions may be forwarded to *Siah Mesharim*, 10 Harav Berlin, Jerusalem.

