

THE READERS SPEAK

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The IJN welcomes letters from our readers. Opinions are the author's, not necessarily the IJN's. Letters are subject to editing; must be typed, double spaced; must be signed, with return address and phone number; and must be addressed to 'Editor' — no 'open' letters, poetry, personal thank you's or third party letters (copies of letters written to someone else) accepted. Letters can also be submitted by e-mail to email@ijn.com

The myth of polio and sanitation

Editor:

I want to thank Andrea Jacobs for her heartwarming and compassionate story about the impact of polio on multiple generations of my family (**Generations**, July 1).

I am writing to clarify the relationship between sanitation and polio.

The first major polio epidemic in 1916 gave birth to the mistaken belief that polio, like tuberculosis and some other diseases of the time, was spread by poor sanitation. Public health officials blamed the newly arrived immigrant families, most of them Jewish, for carrying the virus to our shores and then spreading it to their neighbors.

It wasn't until the 1940s that scientists realized that just the opposite was true: that increased sanitation conditions at the turn of the 20th century actually spawned the first of many polio epidemics.

Prior to 1900, most children were exposed to polio at an early age, where the virus ran rampant in sewage and dirty water. Because of maternal antibodies, however, the disease did no harm and provided lasting immunization.

With improved sanitation, polio changed from an endemic disease — an ever-present virus that largely went unnoticed — to an epidemic disease — an illness marked by fast-spreading outbreaks.

ANNE K. GROSS, PH.D.
Englewood



Polio's most famous victim, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt

Engel brothers column

Editor:

I have greatly enjoyed "Dear Tzvilung," the column that the Engel brothers write for your paper.

Thank you for adding them to your regular content.

DANIEL HAYKIN
Denver

Knesset law a travesty of democracy

Editor:

Last Monday, July 11, the Knesset effectively outlawed peaceful protests against Israeli governmental policies, including settlements. The passing of this law is a travesty of democracy.

Many proud Israelis, including members of my large family of sabra cousins who live in Israel, are joining efforts to challenge this law.

They know so well what this law means to their country and their futures. They realize that it is not just their own ability to work for peace that is at stake, but the heart and soul of Israel itself.

This is *not* about boycotts or settlements. It is about stifling dissent and freedom of expression.

All of us who love Israel cannot remain silent.

RUTH LURIE
Denver

Israel needs a common citizenship

Editor:

I came to Israel inspired by my upbringing in Habonim, the Labor Zionist youth movement. I also came infused with values instilled in me as a Jew living in Australia, a multicultural society.

Prior to making *aliyah*, I worked as the director of communications for the Ethnic Communities Council, an umbrella organization of diverse groups active in Australian civil society. I honestly wasn't sure if my experience in engaging different groups and forging a multicultural society where everyone feels a part would have much use in my new life in Israel.

I was wrong. The challenges in this regard are probably more acute in Israel than in Australia.

Israel's rapid development under difficult circumstances meant that the country did not have time to

get some of the basics of democratic statehood right during its early decades, especially with regard to civic identity and citizenship.

There are important fundamentals that we did get right in Israel: voting rights, freedom of political association and a robust legal system, to name a few. But that's not enough, especially now.

As some of our neighbors move toward greater democracy, Israel cannot afford to go backward. We must strengthen our democracy by bolstering citizenship, encouraging acceptance of diversity and ensuring fair treatment for all Israelis.

As a businessman, I consider this to be a top priority for Israel. That is why I work with Merchavim, a nongovernmental organization with programming in more than 500 schools stressing these values.

In partnership with 15 NGOs and top business leaders and government, we have launched an initiative, "Kulanana," that goes beyond the classroom to spread these values among young people.

Kulanana will use a multi-pronged approach — educational initiatives, advocacy efforts, community projects and media campaigns — to increase public understanding of the critical importance to our society of ensuring equal opportunities, dignity and a sense of belonging for all Israeli citizens.

I work with high-tech start-ups for a living, so when I think about state building, I immediately think about how I identify potential in business. You start with a concept, maybe even a dream. Then you start building basics.

You don't necessarily have time at the beginning for all the details. But after your spark of an idea becomes tangible, you need to ensure its sustainability.

That's where we are in Israel right now: living an amazing dream. In order to sustain ourselves as a modern state and as a society, we need to ensure that our democracy is strong and that all of Israel's citizens feel included.

We haven't yet developed a discourse around what it means to be a citizen and what civil society is all about. I can tell you about this from personal experience. In conversation I will often hear someone casually talk about, for example, "Arabs and Israelis in Haifa," forgetting that Arabs are also Israeli

I want to use soybean 'sausage' and 'bacon' — is that wrong?

By YERACHMIEL D. FRIED

Special to the IJN

Dear Rabbi Fried:

I have recently begun keeping kosher and had a philosophical debate with a friend who doesn't. I want to use soybean sausages and bacon, like Morning Star Farms products that have kosher symbols, because as long as they're kosher, why not? But my friend argues that if I'm going to keep kosher, to eat "kosher treif" is just a loophole and not in the spirit of what I'm trying to do. Do you feel this contradicts the spirit of the law?

L. P.
Arlington, Texas

Dear L. P.,

Mazel tov on keeping kosher, and great question!!

The 12th-century sage Rabbi Moses Maimonides discusses the prohibition of consuming non-kosher foods. He quotes the Talmud which states, "One should not say, 'I don't want to eat non-kosher food,' rather one should say, 'I would like to, but what can I do, my Father in Heaven has decreed upon me not to.'"

Maimonides explains that this is a global statement which sums up much of the Jewish worldview, and specifically adds an important insight into the laws of kosher.

We should not refrain from consuming non-kosher food because it is disgusting or nauseating to us. To abstain from non-kosher items for that reason would not constitute a *mitzvah*. It would rather be a personal preference.

(I, personally, am challenged to fulfill this dictum concerning the abstention from consuming certain items, such as lobster, by saying I want to eat it but just

can't. When I see them crawling around in their tank, I have trouble, to say the least, having any yearning whatsoever to . . . eat one of those!)

The Talmud cites many stories of a pious and scholarly woman by the name of Yalsa. She would often seek out kosher foods that tasted like forbidden

foods. Yalsa once asked her husband, the renowned sage Rav Nachman, to find her something which tastes like blood, which the Torah forbids us to partake of. He cooked for her a piece of liver, which is permitted, but has a blood-like taste.

The commentaries are bewildered why Yalsa would often be looking for foods which tasted like forbidden ones!

One classical commentary, Maharsha, offers an explanation based on the above discussion of Maimonides. One should desire to eat the non-kosher, but refrain from doing so because of the decree of the Torah. Yalsa, in her great piety, aspired to fulfill the *mitzvah* of kosher only to perform the will of G-d. She therefore purposely created a yearning to consume forbidden foods by partaking in permitted items which tasted like them.

My family and I once took a tour of a non-kosher chocolate factory and at the end they offered a free taste of all the chocolates you can eat. I felt that we truly fulfilled the *mitzvah* by refraining

when that chocolate looked and smelled so good! (Needless to say, we were sure to make it up to the kids for their will power by rewarding them afterwards with other treats).

In summary, you are correct that there is nothing negative about eating imitation non-kosher food. By doing so, besides enjoying the taste, you have the opportunity to follow in the footsteps of Yalsa and enhance your fulfillment of the *mitzvah* of *kashrut*. Not only is this not contradictory to the spirit of the law, it's a chance to augment your performance of the *mitzvah*.

IFONDLY remember your exact question as one of the first questions I asked my mentor when beginning yeshiva studies in Israel, precisely about Morning Star bacon and sausage, and this (in greatly shortened form) was the answer I received:

It's important to mention one caveat to this concept. Maimonides points out that the desire to eat the "forbidden fruit" is considered a positive thing for certain *mitzvos*, like kosher, but not for all. There is a category of *mitzvos* which G-d has inculcated their self-evident nature into creation, such as murder. It is definitely not praiseworthy to say "I would truly love to murder that guy, but, alas, I must fulfill the command of G-d!" (even though we all might feel that way sometimes).

Murder, theft and other such *mitzvos* are called "*mitzvos sichlivos*," planted in our *sechel* or psyche that they be abhorred and not desired.

Rabbi Fried heads the Dallas Community Kollel.



Rabbi Fried

citizens.

The divisions, however, are not simply between Arabs and Jews. Growing up in Sydney, I attended a school where all streams of Judaism were accepted — and where religious and nonreligious Jews studied together.

In Israel, my children will not meet any religious Israelis until the army. My cousin did not have one meaningful interaction with a Muslim Israeli until he reached university at age 23.

A society whose young people don't learn together or serve together is a society whose citizens will not be able to live, work and thrive together.

Some will argue that we have to wait until we have resolved our regional conflict before we can effectively deal with Israel's internal divisions. But this may condemn us to postpone dealing with these issues for years. That would mean paying an entirely unnecessary price in our interests and values.

This argument should be turned on its head:

If we implement a model for providing fuller opportunities and respecting diversity inside Israel, it can be a catalyst and bridge for solving the regional problems.

An absence of action on these issues, however, would fuel anti-democratic trends that threaten to take Israel backward. It would risk undermining our claims to being the "only" democracy in the Middle East and fuel the campaign to delegitimize Israel.

Moreover, inaction condemns entire swaths of our country's population to poverty and alienation that will lead to social unrest.

When I ponder these issues, I am reminded of a 1992 speech presented by Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin via satellite to the World Jewish Congress. He argued that in dealing with the problem of global anti-Semitism, Israel needed to show that it treated its Arab minority fairly.

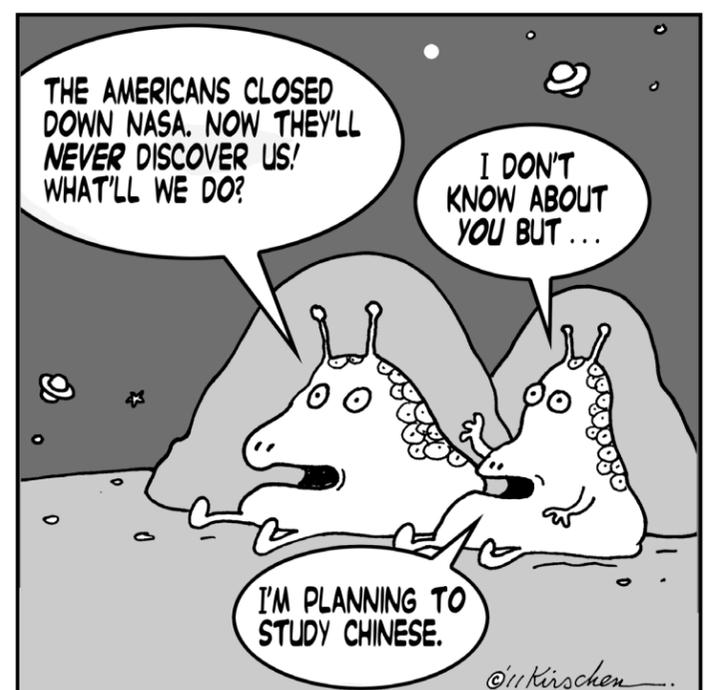
"I believe we have to prove once we are the sovereign power, we have to behave vis-a-vis the minority and other religious groups in a way we expect others to respect us," he said.

In 1992, Rabin knew that Israel could no longer use the regional threats it faced as an excuse for not providing a sense of meaningful citizenship for all Israelis. Nearly 20 years later, it's time for Israeli society to move forward decisively on this front.

GUY SPIGELMAN
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Dry Bones

SOMEWHERE ON MARS



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