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LETTERS

December 12, 2003

'Beyond Walls' Editorial Is Beyond the Pale

The November 28 editorial "Beyond the Walls" is aptly titled; it crosses a journalistic barrier that has, until now, allowed the Forward to be perceived as a neutral forum with regard to different expressions of Judaism.

"Protesters" within the Orthodox community unhappy with what they perceive as abuses in Orthodoxy, suggests the editorialist, "can simply walk away." They may have "been taught that beyond the wall [of Orthodoxy] is an abyss of amorality and apostasy." But "that's not true. What's on the other side is the vast, richly complex world of non-Orthodox Judaism."

Put aside the irony of the fact that the event that triggered these editorial musings was a New York appellate court ruling that dismissed a woman's lawsuit against Orthodox rabbis who allegedly accepted bribes in releasing her husband from their marriage, in which the secular tribunal concluded that the allegation of bribery "was unsubstantiated and speculative, and conclusively refuted by defendants' documentary evidence." Put aside also the cynicism of the notion that deeply held religious beliefs should be discarded when a believer encounters aspects of religious practice that he may not like.

What ought not be put aside, however, is the editorial's emphatic "that's not true" dismissal of Orthodox Jewish belief. Like it or not, Orthodox Jews by definition believe in certain core theological principles that have been rejected or abandoned by the non-Orthodox movements. From the perspective of Orthodoxy, such rejection or abandonment is indeed apostasy, a fundamental corruption of our precious Sinaitic legacy.

Obviously, non-Orthodox Jews are of a different view, and might well be expected to assert a "that's not true" retort to the categorical perspective of Orthodoxy. But since when does a supposedly neutral Jewish media organ like the Forward take editorial sides in a theological debate among Jews?

Rabbi Avi Shafran

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I must confess that I am at a loss to see the "injustice" or "abuse" against which a November 28 editorial protests the dismissal of a woman's suit against the Orthodox rabbis who allegedly dissolved her marriage without her knowledge ("Beyond the Walls"). The state appellate court found no evidence of malfeasance or bribery on the part of the rabbis in question. Is "abuse" then defined by the sole criterion of the woman's dissatisfaction with the verdict? If so, most civil suits, in which there is a winner and a loser, must constitute an "abuse."

That a small but vocal group from within Orthodoxy has been infected with a virulent strain of radical feminism, so typical of the "amorality and apostasy," to use the editorialist's words, which lie "beyond the walls" is, unfortunately, not unprecedented in Jewish history. But neither, thank God, is the unyielding and principled stand which the Orthodox rabbinical leadership takes in the face of the challenge.

It has been wisely said that the difference between the heterodox movements the editorialist admires and authentic Jewish tradition is that while they strive to adapt the Torah to the times, Orthodoxy seeks to adapt the times to Torah. That difference, between a view of Judaism as a human-engineered cultural matrix and a view of it as Divine revelation, is an unbridgeable gap.

Rabbi Avi Zarmi

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Lawsuits not Precluded By Restitution Accord

In his capacity as the American government's lead representative in Holocaust-related matters, Stuart Eizenstat was a master of every item that played a role in the complex negotiations that led to the \$4.5 billion German restitution agreement. However, he misstates several things in his December 5 opinion article on the lawsuit of our client, Simon Rozenkier ("Imperfect Justice, or None at All: 'Legal Peace' on Holocaust Claims").

First, Eizenstat writes that "the lawyers agreed to drop their lawsuits and not to bring ones in the future." This is half-right. The written agreements signed by the lawyers did pledge to drop the lawsuits that had been filed and this was done; but they did not include an agreement to abstain from filing future suits. The agreements specifically contemplated that if later suits were filed, the American government would file legal papers urging — but not requiring — that the cases be dismissed.

Second, Eizenstat seems willing to overlook that in implementing the deal we struck, the German Bundestag unilaterally changed the key term of the aspect of the settlement involving compensation to victims of medical experimentation. Rather than such claims being handled individually, with payments to be made based on the severity of the injuries inflicted as we had agreed, the Bundestag changed the rules so that each applicant would receive the same payment, irrespective of the nature of their injuries. This was, and is, outrageous — all the more so because the federal judge presiding over the consolidated slave labor class-action lawsuits dismissed those cases in part because of Eizenstat's sworn statement that victims of Nazi medical experiments would receive individualized treatment.

We can agree that no amount of money would compensate Simon Rozenkier for his suffering. But we must also insist that the Germans live up to their agreement, even if our government is willing to give them a free pass.

Carey D'Avino

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Torah and the Internet Not Mutually Exclusive

Rabbi Yaakov Perlow's comment that the Internet invades the Jewish home and "makes moral disaster," as quoted in the November 5 In Other Words column, is pretty stupid and above all disgusting ("Rage Against the Machine").

I have learned more Judaism and Torah in two years through the Internet than in my whole life. Through the Internet I am able to read the weekly Torah portions, interpretations from many different rabbis, explanations of Kabbalah fundamentals and interesting articles about world Jewry, not to mention the Forward.

To study the Torah — no matter how — is a mitzvah.

Manuel Gwiazda

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Rabbi's Courage Sheds Light on Abuse Issue

Thank goodness for people like Rabbi Yosef Blau ("Rabbi Blau Weighs In on Custody Case, December 5). It takes courage to demand justice on behalf of sexually abused children caught in the custody battle their abusing parent decided was the winning legal strategy.

The Neustein case is infamous; one of the most meticulously documented cases of (alleged) child sexual abuse, it sank beneath a sea of indifference mixed with "business as usual" networking in the family courts. Closer scrutiny reveals the indifference as an unapologetic tolerance for child sexual abusers and not a shred of sympathy for the child victims.

Those of us who work as advocates for children, and for battered women, are aware that there are thousands of tragically similar cases across the country. We know the children who, despite the substantiation of the sexual abuse, are dragged kicking and screaming to visit their abuser or who have grown so depressed that they want to die. In school they were told that if anyone ever hurt them, they should tell and keep on telling and someone would help them. They were told they were special and that no one had the right to hurt them. Maybe that's why it hurts so much when they tell and no one listens.

Perhaps one day our media will give as much attention to the nationwide cover-up of child sexual abuse in the family as they have to sexual abuse scandals in religious institutions. Until then, parents who sexually abuse their children will continue to use the family courts to control and silence their young victims.

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Religious Ruling Akin To Anti-Rabin Rantings

The "religious" ruling of 250 nationalist rabbis branding participants in the Geneva Initiative traitors is reminiscent of the fulminations against Yitzhak Rabin before his assassination ("Israel Rules 'Treason' Label Rude But Legal," December 5).

It is remarkable that the signatories to this ruling set themselves up as the only legitimate judges of which policies endanger the lives of Israelis and threaten the future of Israel. How about the scores of soldiers who have been killed and maimed defending tiny settler outposts?

And what do these religious leaders have to say about the impending disappearance of the Jewish majority in Israel? The diffusion of settlements throughout the West Bank will soon make separation impossible. Jews will become a minority in their own state. If this does not constitute danger to life and to national existence, what does?

William Berman

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