

Exchange of Letters with Bruce Ramer

October 2006–January 2007

The exchange of letters between Leonard Beerman and Bruce Ramer was an annual ritual. Ramer is a prominent Beverly Hills lawyer with deep involvement in the Jewish and non-Jewish communities. He was also a member of Leo Baeck Temple who admired Leonard Beerman greatly and considered him a good friend. That said, the two held to very different political views, especially on Israel. Typically, Ramer would attend the rabbi's Yom Kippur sermon and then write a letter filled with criticism, but also containing an affirmation of his love and admiration. Beerman would respond in kind.

Below is an exchange that took place after Beerman's 2006 Yom Kippur sermon. It begins with Beerman's response to Ramer, which contains an elaboration of the rabbi's support for his friend, Dr. Hathout. Ramer followed suit some three months later with a point-by-point response. The exchange exemplified the kind of serious, candid, and civil debate that Beerman valued.

October 11, 2006

Dear Bruce,

That is indeed true friendship. You have given me the better deal. I get your love, respect, and adoration to the end of your time, and you get all of the same from me (at 85) to the end of my time. Whatever—we will both be able to indulge in some mischief along the way.

Maybe it's the white Yom Kippur robe, or that I'm standing elevated above the congregation, but I am more of a creature of doubt than you may imagine, well aware, along with you, that everything human is complex and especially everything Jewish. That nothing Jewish can ever be simple is a principle inserted into

the process of creation at that suspended moment between the end of the sixth day when God completed the work, and the beginning of the seventh when God rested. Your letter said this in a different and certainly more concise way, but start with the premise that all things human are flawed—you and I, Hathout, AJC, Human Rights Watch, Israel, America, Steve Emerson and Lawrence Rose, even the *Wall Street Journal*, which I was reading every morning when I began this letter, and you have at least the beginning of some humility. I think we both could use a little more of that, and so too, the causes we represent.

You are troubled with my views and my friends. Where to begin? I had read the Lawrence Rose correspondence some time ago, and actually was expecting to attend a meeting with him and some Human Rights Watch people; but the meeting was cancelled. I thought he made some interesting points, but fuelled as they were with so much zeal to undo the findings, I didn't find them persuasive. One must begin these discussions with the understanding that no one engaged in them will live long enough to know the truth about this war in Lebanon. After all, we are just learning new truths about Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln—and the Bible, and the Mona Lisa, and Pluto, not to mention the weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. The horrors perpetrated by Israel are indeed pale and puny compared to the outrages of other nations, but they are nonetheless real. Yet I had been impressed that HRW [Human Rights Watch] had had the courage to issue its report on the war crimes of Israel and Hizbollah. I dread the revelations still to come. These little wars are great for testing out new weapons.

As for Steve Emerson, I have always been skeptical of his reliability. I remember his utter certainty on CNN that Muslim terrorists were responsible for the Oklahoma City bombing. But if you, the AJC, and the *New Republic* can forgive Emerson, why not my friend Maher Hathout? Maher was also a friend of my colleague Rabbi Alfred Wolf, and was one of two non-Jews (Msgr. Royale Vatakin, the other) invited by Alfred's family to speak at his Wilshire Boulevard Temple funeral. Is it only the AJC, the JFC, the ZOA, and the JDL that have not been duped by him? Hathout is not a Jew, and he is not a Zionist, so his views can never be fully at one with ours, and have on occasion been offensive, but this much is a certainty: Every single outrageous word he has ever spoken about Israel has been uttered by Israelis themselves.

This is the place I reached on October 21. I no longer remember what rose up to block me from going further. I do know that we traveled to New York, saw the new Tom Stoppard play, *The Coast of Utopia*, the first of a nine-hour trilogy, based on the life and thought of some of the great Russian intellectuals of the mid-nineteenth century. Stoppard was stimulated to take up this subject by reading Isaiah Berlin's *Russian Thinkers*, which has long been one of my favorites.

There is a quotation that appears in the introduction to the book; it's from an author Berlin did not identify. In some way I would like to think it applies to you

and me, maybe to you and me at our very best: *"To realize the relative validity of one's convictions and yet stand for them unflinchingly, is what distinguishes a civilized man from a barbarian."*

I'll leave you here, hoping that we will continue this discussion ad meah v'esrim (to 120), and knowing that our friendship will always accompany us along the way.

With love,
Leonard

January 2, 2007

Dear Leonard:

It may be the difference between being a Rabbi and being a lawyer.

Either way, I truly enjoyed and, more importantly, respect your response of October 11, whenever completed.

Let me respond, however, very briefly:

1. Quite accurately, the love, respect, and adoration is, as you say, mutual and forever (in the context of human life).
2. Life, Jewish and otherwise, is complex and perhaps too often perplexing.
3. Lawrence Rose made more than some interesting points.²

His first letter did it well enough. But the abject failure of the Executive Director of Human Rights Watch, who wrote a long, empty, and non-responsive letter, prompted Mr. Rose's second letter. Between them, he seriously devastated the processes, procedure, and credibility of HRW, at least in this report (and by implication, since they defended their procedures, others). HRW does some good work, but this was not it. Lawrence did not set out with "zeal to undo the findings." Indeed, he has been a long and active supporter of HRW and was deeply distressed by what he read in their report on Israel-Hezbollah. Any court or unbiased reader would have agreed with him.

4. I have a great deal of respect for Steve Emerson, his longstanding concerns, his objectivity, and his methodology. He was not alone, indeed nearly the entire country believed that Muslim terrorists were responsible for the Oklahoma City bombing. The next day, when he and most others discovered otherwise, he said so.

In this instance, while I could not find it to send to you, he had undercover tapes of Mr. Hathout, so his credibility is certainly not an issue in this instance. I also question your contention that "every single outrageous word he has ever spoken about Israel has been uttered by Israelis themselves," although I suppose one can find anybody anyplace to say anything about anyone. He certainly, at least in the view of many of us, did not deserve recognition of a Human Rights Award, whether from LA County or anyone else.

5. I unconditionally love the final three paragraphs of your letter—. You never cease to amaze me with the depth of your knowledge and your thinking.

With love,
Bruce

COMMENTARY BY BRUCE RAMER

Leonard Beerman was unique. Yes, an icon but a unique one. Rarely does one find a person with total intellectual integrity, an advocate par excellence, with opinions and positions, some easy, most difficult, held and voiced by him with passion and conviction. My disputes with him (actually honest debates)—the rabbi and the lawyer—were serious but enjoyable, fiercely held by each of us and similarly advocated, and embraced by each of us to the end.

Debates with Leonard were always substantive, authentic, respectful, and civil. Leonard had a rare gift. Taking a page from his lifelong love of tennis, you had to be on your best game with him. Our debates were not discussions. They were spirited challenges, each to the other. Leonard was living proof that the most important words in a democracy are, I disagree.

But always with great love, admiration, and respect for the other—at least mine for Leonard. He was a rare and beloved community treasure. I shall forever miss our exchanges, whether written or over lunch. As we get to say once in a while, they don't make them like that anymore.