

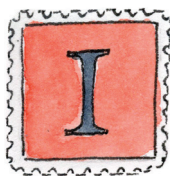


Letters

Readers respond

The letters below respond to our Aspiration issue of Winter 2026. Additional letters can be found on our website at sapirjournal.org/letters. We welcome your responses to the current issue at letters@sapirjournal.org.

To the Editor:



TYPICALLY agree with Mijal Bitton 120 percent. Her scholarship is invaluable, and her voice is essential in American Jewish discourse. It pains me to write this letter, but I feel compelled when I believe she gets something fundamentally wrong.

By basing her argument on Ashkenazi versus Sephardic paradigms, Bitton has undermined what could have been a powerful thesis about Jewish communal resilience. Instead of focusing on actual communal attributes—family-centeredness, institutional boundaries around peoplehood, embodied spirituality, and internal confidence—she’s wedded these insights to ethnic categories

that play into the very stereotypes that have plagued our people for generations.

The well-worn canard that Ashkenazim prioritize assimilation while Sephardim value preservation isn't just reductive—it's historically false. Syrian Jewish insularity in Brooklyn developed in America, not medieval Damascus. Persian Jews in Los Angeles have pursued the very elite institutional validation that Bitton critiques. Hasidic communities (which Bitton mentions only in passing) exhibit precisely the "Sephardic" characteristics she champions, yet they're thoroughly Ashkenazi. The communal orientations she describes don't map cleanly onto geography or ethnicity—they map onto choices about Jewish continuity.

More troublingly, this binary reinforces destructive intra-Jewish divisions at precisely the moment we need unity. When Bitton writes that the next century must be Sephardic, she inadvertently suggests that one Jewish community must triumph over another rather than that all Jews might benefit from certain communal practices. This gets us nowhere.

The real question isn't whether we become "more Sephardic" but whether American Jews—regardless of origin—will prioritize family transmission over institutional outsourcing, peoplehood boundaries over radical inclusivity, embodied practice over intellectualized distance, and internal confidence over external validation. These are choices available to any Jewish community willing to make them.

Bitton's four reforms are genuinely valuable. But they didn't need ethnic branding. By tying them to Sephardic identity rather than to communal choices that transcend ethnic origin, she's made it harder for the very Ashkenazi Jews she hopes to reach to embrace these practices without feeling they're abandoning their own heritage.

Our shared Jewish values—*ahavat Yisrael*, commitment to *am Yisrael*, reverence for tradition, and confidence in our covenant—belong

to all of us. Let's focus on strengthening those bonds rather than perpetuating divisions that serve no one.

JONATHAN ZEMMOL

Brooklyn, New York

Mijal Bitton responds:



MY RECENT essay “The Future Is Sephardic” seems to have struck a nerve—and the conversation it has generated is exactly what I hoped for.

Jonathan Zemmol's critique cuts deepest of those that I've received, so let me be direct: He's right that I shouldn't essentialize, which is why I referred to the Ashkenazi–Sephardic binary I drew as “admittedly provocative and exaggerated.” But his objection goes further—it implicitly questions whether group-level cultural patterns are meaningful at all, and whether the behaviors I describe are distinctively Sephardic rather than broadly Jewish. Here, I'll push back. Sociology and cultural anthropology rest on exactly this premise: that we can identify meaningful trends within groups without claiming that every individual conforms to them or that other groups cannot share the same traits.

American Jewish life needs to reorient around family, peoplehood, and the kind of internal confidence that doesn't collapse when the surrounding culture turns hostile. Call it Sephardic, call it something else—if we agree on the direction, *dayenu*. It is that shared inheritance—not the label—that I'm fighting for.



To the Editor:



YAROM ARIAV is right to sound the alarm about Israel's brain drain, but not every departure is a loss. For a small country, scientific excellence depends on deep integration into the global research ecosystem.

Training abroad has always been central to Israel's academic success, allowing Israeli scholars to develop expertise in emerging specialties and build enduring professional ties. These relationships become strategic assets for Israel: colleagues in academia, industry, and government whose understanding of Israel comes from direct collaboration rather than distant narratives.

Now more than ever, Israel benefits from having its best and brightest working side by side with peers around the world. The challenge, therefore, is not preventing Israelis from leaving. It is ensuring that movement abroad becomes a cycle of learning, connection, and return.

In our experience, those ties endure when they are embedded in not only Israeli networks but also broader academic communities that actively value collaboration with Israel. This requires deliberate effort: cultivating vibrant communities of Israeli scholars and allies at leading institutions while creating credible pathways for return.

In the aftermath of October 7, we co-founded Kalaniyot, a faculty-led initiative that supports Israeli scholars in advanced training and collaborative research at top universities around the world and that brings together a broad community of faculty and institutional partners who actively welcome Israeli collaboration.

What began as a refuge from campus hostility soon revealed a deeper opportunity to build a global intellectual community where connections to Israel are strengthened. Launched at MIT, the initiative has expanded to chapters at universities including Harvard, Dartmouth, Penn, Columbia, Cornell, and USC, and it continues to grow. These international networks accelerate discovery and lay the foundation for long-term collaboration and innovation.

We have already seen Kalaniyot Fellows return to Israel to establish laboratories, bringing with them cutting-edge expertise and global collaborations. Just as important, many in our community remain deeply engaged with Israel while abroad by co-supervising

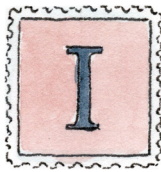
students, building joint research programs, and strengthening institutional ties.

Programs that support Israelis training abroad should therefore be seen not as concessions to brain drain but as investments in Israel's long-term intellectual infrastructure.

Israel's greatest resource has always been its human capital. Sending Israeli scholars abroad is an investment that, if managed wisely, can yield extraordinary returns. What looks like brain drain can become brain circulation—and ultimately brain gain.

PROF. OR HEN & PROF. ERNEST FRAENKEL
Kalaniyot co-founders and faculty members at
the Massachusetts Institute of Technology

To the Editor:



WAS a student activist before I became an educator. What drew me then, and what I have spent decades since trying to teach, was not a story of Jewish suffering—though there was plenty of that. It was a story of Jewish defiance and the hope that made that defiance possible.

In “How to Teach the Jewish Story,” Dara Horn has done us a great service by naming the trap. Too much of what passes for “positive” Jewish education quietly accepts antisemitism's core premise: that Jews must prove their worthiness to a skeptical world. Horn is right that this is a surrender dressed as a celebration. But her most important insight—that the real Jewish story is one of principled nonconformity, of refusing to bow to tyrants—is not merely a framework for the future. It is also a living history that most Jewish educators have simply overlooked.

The Soviet Jewry movement is the case study that Horn's thesis is waiting for.

Consider what this movement actually was. The refuseniks—Jews inside the Soviet Union who applied to emigrate, were denied, and then refused to disappear quietly—were doing something that should sound familiar to anyone who has read Horn’s account of Daniel standing before Nebuchadnezzar. They were saying, to one of the most powerful tyrants in human history: *We will not serve your god, we will not worship your statue.* They did not beg to be accepted. They did not argue that they were useful. They demanded their rights as Jews, on Jewish terms, and they paid an enormous personal price for it. Ida Nudel, standing before a Soviet court that had already decided her fate, did not plead for mercy. Her closing statement needs no commentary: “I have learned to walk proud and erect, both as a human being and a Jewess. . . . These seven years will warm my heart with the knowledge that my life has not been without purpose.”

And then there were people like me—ordinary teenagers and college students who organized, rallied, adopted refusenik families, and marched on Washington in numbers that shook a superpower. We were not Jews justifying our existence or proving our worthiness to a non-Jewish public. We were Jews—young Jews—acting for Jews, animated by hope, with the full conviction that it was the right thing to do and that it could work.

It did work. That is the point.

The Soviet Jewry movement is a story of collective action, Jewish solidarity across every denominational and political line, and young people discovering that standing up to tyranny is not only possible—it is their inheritance. It embodies every quality that Horn argues Jewish education should cultivate: curiosity about Jewish nonconformity, pride in Jewish agency, and the visceral understanding that Jewish civilization is not a museum piece but a living force.

I would urge every Jewish educational organization seeking to empower young Jews with pride in their heritage to look closely at

this history. The materials exist. The archives are preserved. The story is extraordinary. All that is needed is the will to tell it.

SIMON KLARFELD

Executive Director, Soviet Jewry Movement Education Project

Dara Horn responds:



AM GRATEFUL to Simon Klarfeld for his comment, especially because I have great news for him: The Tell Institute's curriculum covers exactly what he proposes. One of our case studies is specifically about Soviet anti-Zionism and the refusenik movement. It is long past time to make the basic facts of this history common knowledge. *