
A Conversation With Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg



Bush Is Lying . . . On Democracy, Social Security

Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg is well known as a historian of Judaism and of American Jewry, a feisty intellectual, and a voice of influence in the fight for justice in the United States and Israel. Now retired, he is Bronfman Visiting Professor of Humanities at New York University.

In the course of his long career, Hertzberg served as president of the American Jewish Congress (1972-78), as vice president of the World Jewish Congress (1975-91), and as a leading representative of world Jewry in interfaith dialogues. His most recent books are The Fate of Zionism: A Secular Future for Israel and Palestine (HarperSanFrancisco, 2003) and A Jew in America: My Life and a People's Struggle for Identity (HarperSanFrancisco, 2002).

Rabbi Hertzberg spoke with EIR's Michele Steinberg and Marjorie Mazel Hecht on Jan. 27 and 31, 2005.

EIR: We just inaugurated the President, who thinks he has a mandate as the “war President”? What is your perspective on the second Bush Administration?

Rabbi Hertzberg: I think on the question of this war President—if he’s a war President, I’m the commander of the American Air Force.

In fact, I have more *right* to think of myself as a commander of the American Air Force, because I actually *served* 26 months, during the Korean War, in uniform, as an Air Force chaplain. That is true! I don’t have to fiddle around, with “where are the documents?”

Now, the point of the matter is, this man is a war President, by dint of being a *liar*, and *surrounded by a lying inner circle*—which is now becoming the Cabinet.

Look, the great war Presidents of our country, and I’ll think only of the 20th Century: The war Presidents were, who? They were Eisenhower. They were, before that, Roosevelt, who had been Secretary of the Navy. They were, after that—let’s be perfectly honorable about it—both Nixon and Kennedy, who actually served in World War II.

This man *was not* on active duty! What gives him the mandate of being the war President? And I say this, as someone who *did* serve!

My perspective on the second Bush Administration is, that for all of his big talk, it’s going to be a failure. He is *not* going to get out of Iraq with clear-cut victory or clear-cut reconstruction, during his second term. It’s going to take

longer, if at all. *And*, he is not going to re-make our domestic agenda. He’s not going to gut Social Security, because the country won’t let him. He doesn’t have the support. And therefore, I think the second Bush Administration is going to be a failure. And probably, a disaster.

EIR: Please say more on the question of Social Security, because you were a young man, and close to the Franklin Roosevelt inner circle, when Social Security was enacted. And that’s being destroyed right now. As one who was there, tell us how important Social Security was, for the elderly poor.

Rabbi Hertzberg: The Roosevelt suggestion, the Roosevelt enactment of Social Security *was a moral revolution* in our country: We were assured that we would never reach the very depths of poverty. And to be told, that we are now going to gamble it, on Wall Street, is nonsense!

May I tell you a personal story? About 25 or 30 years ago, when I was getting old enough to think seriously about making provisions for my older years, the man who line advised me—a very great man, a great Wall Street financier and a man of great moral principles—said to me the following: “I will let you put half on Wall Street, and I will invest it for you. But, remember, you can lose it, as well as make money on it. The other half, you’re going to put into bonds, you’re going to put into the safest possible kind of investment, so that if everything else goes to hell, you will still be able to eat.” I have followed that principle. And I know funds I have backing the secure money, plus the worth of my Social Security account, is what I know I will always have to eat on. Everything else is speculative.

And to be driven into speculation, by this guy—who, by the way never made any money on Wall Street, either! It was handed him, by family friends. To be driven into Wall Street, unless I can go into it with a clear head—it’s a gamble.

My daughter, by the way, started off her Wall Street career after business school by being an intern first, at Goldman Sachs. And she was an intern on the trading desk, and was on the trading desk for 15 years. She never forgot that the man who was running the trading desk, beside whom she sat—he was mentoring her—he used to welcome them all when they came in about 7 in the morning, with a well-known formula: He said, “Welcome to the Grand Casino.”

EIR: Another question that came to mind, from your remarks about the Bush Administration being a failure, despite grandiose talk, is one that's always coming up: What can honorable people do? They see a malaise, especially because of the Gonzales nomination, not only because it affirms a policy of torture, but because Gonzales again says the President is above the law, even the Constitution.

Rabbi Hertzberg: On Gonzales—I've been thinking about him. And I think, that we cannot sit around and simply deplore it. We can certainly support the Democrats who are going to make life harder for these people. But remember, on a partisan vote, Gonzales won his confirmation, essentially, from the Senate Judiciary Committee, 10 to 8.

Therefore, no, I think that the battle is going to be in the courts. I don't think that Gonzales should be allowed to do anything to maintain that the President is above the law or the Constitution. But, they're in power, and they can do what they want, *without raising it as a Constitutional question.*

Now it's all very true, that we are not necessarily in front of a friendly court. But, I know enough people in that court, through the years, to know one thing: There's always somebody who surprises you, who rises above what they thought they appointed him for, and stays with the separation of powers, and with the right of the law to decide.

I was thinking, this morning, after I got your interview questions, about Hugo Black—who had been a Ku Klux Klan member? You know that, don't you? And yet, he was critical to the Supreme Court's unanimity on race. I was thinking again, of Earl Warren, who as Governor of California sent the Japanese to concentration camps, and as Supreme Court Justice was thoroughly ashamed of it.

And I think that there is, within the American spirit, something which doesn't let it go that far. I think for instance, now, of the swing votes in the Supreme Court: Sandra Day O'Connor. Remember, she was a Republican local state chairman, etc. But she has been pretty firm on civil liberties. I knew Souter, somewhat, when he was on the bench in Vermont, I was then at Dartmouth, next door. Souter was appointed on the idea, that he was a conservative. He ain't.

Therefore, I continue to have hope in the Supreme Court. And I would keep this guy, Gonzales, tied up in the courts, defending what he's doing.

EIR: Let me ask you to comment a little bit further, on some of the policies he's responsible for. Seymour Hersh has written a book about Abu Ghraib, and he just recently delivered a lecture in New York at the Stephen Wise Free Synagogue.

In his lecture, Hersh discussed the investigative work that he did on the My Lai massacre in Vietnam. I was very moved by this, because he said, now, 35 years later, "I'm again visiting the parents" of young soldiers who came back killers. He interviewed some of Calley's compatriots, who would not shoot, who didn't want to shoot the civilians. And, there's a lot of cases out there. . . .



Rabbi Hertzberg (right) with Father Landranco Serrini and the Venerable Lungril Namgyal in the cloisters of the Franciscan monastery next to the St. Francis Basilica in Assisi, in 1986. They were at a meeting on the religious imperatives for conservation.

Rabbi Hertzberg: I'm on Hersh's side. He's a great man! I'm on Hersh's side. I just mailed off a letter to Barbara Boxer, wrote it this morning. I wrote two political letters this morning—as a retired country gentleman, who now teaches at the university, and writes books.

May I, semi-sidebar, tell you this? I said to Barbara Boxer that I had the privilege of meeting her once, some 25 years ago, when she was a young member of Congress. She hadn't yet ascended to the Senate. And I was towards the end of a six-year tenure as president of the American Jewish Congress, a most left-wing organization, in the establishment. I wrote Barbara, and said: Look, when I met you first, you were the one member of Congress who was gung-ho for something for which no one else quite had the courage then: Which was to create in Washington, a Jewish lobby, a Jewish representation, of people who were opposed to then-Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir's anti-Arab, anti-Palestinian views. (Remember, he was the very hard-line Prime Minister.) But, you were the most forthright of the lot. And nothing that you have done since, including what you have been doing lately, undercuts the attitude of the young woman I first met 25 years ago. May I express my complete support and offer you whatever help I can, in the causes in which you are fighting. More power to you, and may God bless you.

I sent Sharon a letter that will surprise him. I sent him this message verbally, but I also wrote him.

I'm paraphrasing: Dear Mr. Prime Minister, I've been in opposition to you for a lifetime. But, I find you now, as the

one person in Israel, who is capable of leading Israel towards peace and living together with the Palestinians. And, for that change, you are in the process of being beaten up within your own Likud party, but you are now the national leader of the Jewish people. More power to you. And again, if there is anything I can do to be helpful, please feel free to call on me.

EIR: Do you think Sharon is in the process of making the kind of change that Rabin made?

Rabbi Hertzberg: Nobody is in the process of making any changes that we can be specific about. But, he is in the process of saying, “I cannot sit on Gaza. And I cannot ultimately sit on the West Bank, except maybe I could chisel a little bit here or there. I have got to accept the idea, that the Palestinians are here to stay.” And that is an important acceptance.

I don’t know what the shape of the peace, that he may block out, will be. It’s going to come after a lot of back and forth, with his Palestinian partners — and yes, with the United States. But, something is happening which we did not predict.

EIR: I know the last time we spoke [*EIR*, April 23, 2004], you said —

Rabbi Hertzberg: I was very, very angry.

EIR: Yes. You said, he and Bush would burn in Hell.

Rabbi Hertzberg: Well, obviously, he is going to burn on a much gentler fire.

EIR: Aha! So, you’ve lowered the temperature on Sharon.

Rabbi Hertzberg: I don’t know where Bush is going — yet.

But, Sharon obviously — I wrote somewhere in the last several months, that Sharon has adopted, essentially, the position of the Labor Party: that the Palestinians are here to stay. Let’s see what kind of deal that the majority of Israel could live with, we can make with them. I think that’s what’s going on, at the moment.

EIR: Many American Jews think that the survival of Israel depends on supporting a tough stand against terrorists who kill Jews, and that there’s no Palestinian partner for peace. What do you say to them?

Rabbi Hertzberg: If you support that attitude toward Israel, then you are going to have war forever. There is no opportunity for peace, and, at the end of it, you are outnumbered.

As a matter of fact, Sharon has come around to understanding that there has to be a two-state solution, that there has to be some decent equality for the Palestinians, and that most of Israel understands that. There is now a stable two-to-one majority in Israel for a Palestinian state. And as a matter of fact, Sharon has moved to that majority, and he is now having trouble with his own Likud Party, which is split because he is too reasonable in their view, and he has turned too liberal.

EIR: In your most recent book, *The Fate of Zionism*, you talk about the two-state solution, returning the Arab lands that were taken in the 1967 war, as the only way to peace.

Rabbi Hertzberg: Look, the hard-line Jewish position is based, to this day, on the idea that the Palestinian Arabs somehow or other will either accept third-class status, or they will pick up and go away. Now, this *isn’t happening*. There are several million Arabs in the undivided land of Israel — the numbers are a matter of dispute, but the numbers are substantial. The Palestinians aren’t going away, among other reasons, because the Arab states are not admitting them with any great enthusiasm. Therefore, unless there is a solution which gives the Palestinian Arab a stake in the region, which is not worth destroying, you are not going to have peace.

EIR: In the post-war years, you worked with Nahum Goldmann, the head of the World Jewish Congress, and others who were Zionists but who opposed the Israeli expansionism we’ve seen in recent decades. Can you talk about this earlier period?

Rabbi Hertzberg: Well, you remember that I tell the story in my most recent book, *The Fate of Zionism*, that I heard David Ben Gurion give a lecture in Israel right after the Six-Day War in 1967, where I had given the warm-up speech, in which he said that if we don’t give back almost everything except East Jerusalem that we have conquered in the Six-Day War, it will lead to disaster.

I have never been a dove because I’m some kind of woolly-eyed liberal. (I am that too, but that hasn’t led me to my conclusion.) I have been a dove from the very early period, because I recognized that the Palestinians weren’t going to go away, and they weren’t going to remain passive. And all of these predictions were correct. And we’d better now act on them and make peace. And evidently now, we’re beginning to move in that direction.

EIR: It’s about time. . . .

Rabbi Hertzberg: Now, Sharon himself has adopted *our* policy. Sharon has moved toward a two-state, peaceful solution. . . .

I was one of the founders of Peace Now. I was then a resident in Israel. In fact, the first announcement of the formation of Peace Now was an ad in 1980 in an Israeli newspaper, signed by professors and intellectuals. I was the only one who was listed in that ad, who didn’t carry an Israeli passport. I was then visiting professor at the Hebrew University, teaching Jewish history. And in the mind of Israel now, and to some degree even then, I’m not quite an outsider.

EIR: Natan Sharansky, the former Soviet dissident who is now Israeli Minister of Social and Diaspora Affairs, has emerged as a “resident philosopher” at the Bush White House and the Rice State Department, with his book *The Case for Democracy: The Power of Freedom To Overturn Tyranny*.

I regard Christian and Jewish fundamentalism, and all other forms of fundamentalism, as the enemies of God—and I hope you'll quote me on that: "As the enemies of God."

What do you have to say about this?

Rabbi Hertzberg: This is pure and unmitigated nonsense on both sides. First of all, let's talk about Sharansky. There has always been the question of how did he get out of the Soviet Union. I mean, he's the only one they ever let out in return for a spy of their own. And, do you know, that there has been at least one Israeli author, who wrote a book arguing that Sharansky was a double agent? There was a libel suit about the book; the author lost it, and the publisher paid Sharansky some reparations.

But, some 15 years ago, I went to the Soviet Union, and I was one night the guest of that great man Sakharov, in his house. It was a surreal occasion, because a Russian government car drove me there; I was a guest of the Russian Academy of Sciences. And the condition of my coming was that I could freely move about and see whomever I wanted to.

I was in Sakharov's house—and this has never been printed—and I asked Sakharov about Sharansky, with whom he had been, years before, very close. He and his wife, Yelena Bonner, who now lives in Boston, told me that their relationship with Sharansky was over. I pushed a little, and they would say nothing more than that. But they no longer felt that Sharansky was quite the fighter for human rights that he had been, or that they thought he had been, when he was younger.

So, now, let me tell you what is my problem with the Sharansky position. This prating nowadays by both the Israelis and the Americans about wanting democracy is pure and unmitigated nonsense.

Israel does not want democratic elections in Jordan, or in Egypt, or anywhere in the Arab world. The proof is that the Palestinians just had a democratic election the Sunday before last in Gaza. And what did that democratic election produce? Do you know?

EIR: A Hamas win.

Rabbi Hertzberg: Exactly. It was 60-plus—between 60 and 70% Hamas, and 30% al-Fatah. Hamas would win an election in the West Bank. If it were totally free, Hamas would win an election in Egypt. It would win one in Jordan. I know these two Arab countries.

What Israel wants is friendly states which can be dealt with. And anyone who says anything else, including Sharansky, is making myths.

Now, what about the Americans? Do the Americans want

democracy in the Middle East? Do the Americans want the oil wells of Iraq and of Saudi Arabia controlled by regimes which are revolutionary, and which are Islamic fundamentalist?

Mr. Bush wants that like he wants a hole in the head. And therefore, this conversation about democracy is pure, unmitigated, public posturing. Both these states want a Middle East under reasonable control for their purposes: America for oil, Israel for states on its border which are not warlike. At the moment, there is some parallelism of interest, but the parallelism has nothing to do with democracy, and both Sharansky and Bush should get Condoleezza Rice to take some Listerine with which they should wash out their mouths.

EIR: She could use some too. . . .

Rabbi Hertzberg: What's left over, she can use herself.

I'm saying that they're lying. They are lying on both sides. Sharansky is an opportunist of the first order. What is this business that "Israel wants democracy in the Middle East"? It wants a democratic election in Jordan? To bring in Hamas? Who are they kidding? Who is Sharansky kidding? Do the Americans want democratic elections to bring in Hamas? Hamas is the popular majority now in the Arab world—Hamas and the like. Is it to our American interest? Is it to our Jewish-Israeli interest? Of course not.

EIR: I'd like to go to a subject that we discussed a bit last week: the question of religious fundamentalism, rising across major religions.

Rabbi Hertzberg: That is a horror. Let me tell you a story. Some 10 or 15 years ago, I was invited to Tokyo—the only time I've spoken in Tokyo, to an inter-religious meeting, of a variety of opinions in the traditions which are not Biblical. And the question was: What is it, that Biblical religions hold in common, and more important still, that they have in common with the *non*-Biblical religions?

And I said: The great disaster is, that we are now increasingly identifying ourselves by what we assert as *our* truth, *our* virtues, *our* right, *our* powers. And therefore, we are making war, and not peace. That the function of religion, at its most serious, is *not* to encourage the believers to say, "I'm right and you're wrong," because "I'm right and you're wrong" means war, means holy war, and the most disastrous of holy wars. I think what we must change over to, is the notion that what religions have in common, is their duty, and their



Rabbi Hertzberg (center) meeting with the vice rector of the Zagorsk Monastery of the Russian Orthodox Church in 1987. At right is an interpreter from the Oriental Institute.

passion for defending the defenseless, whoever they are, whatever tradition, wherever they come from.

And therefore, I regard Christian and Jewish fundamentalism, and all other forms of fundamentalism, as the enemies of God—and I hope you’ll quote me on that: “As the enemies of God.”

Jewish fundamentalism, Christian fundamentalism teach them, that they are right about everything, and we and those who don’t agree with them, are going to fry in Hell. Jewish fundamentalism is teaching that Jews can fight with guns and with civil war, against being relocated off the West Bank, and disobey the orders of their government. That is the call to *jihad*, to several kinds of *jihad*.

Moral values, if you want to use them correctly, *begin* with love of your fellow man. And if they teach, not love, but hatred; if they teach you to be certain that your fellow man is part of what the Christians once called, when they wanted to beat up on Jews, a part of the “Synagogue of Satan,” then it is the call to *war*, it is the call to *fascism*, and *it makes God into Hitler!* Quote me.

It is one’s religious duty to stand up to all of this.

EIR: If you think of how Rabin was killed, he was killed by a Jewish fundamentalist—

Rabbi Hertzberg: Who had been encouraged by a rabbi! And the rabbi taught him, that Rabin, by being willing to give back some land that God had personally given to the Jews, was a traitor, a religious traitor.

There are 250 rabbis who have said that lately, about giving back the bulk of the West Bank. And that’s got to be stopped! That kind of religion has to be called what it is: It is the *religion of religious fascism*, whether it’s Christian fundamentalism in America, or Jewish fundamentalism in

Israel, or Muslim fundamentalism in the Hamas, etc.

EIR: You’ve said it all, right there!

Rabbi Hertzberg: It’s got to be fought in every one of its manifestations. And I say this, not as a secular person, but *as a rabbi*. Emphasize that. I am a rabbi. I am an Orthodox rabbi. I was *ordained* an Orthodox rabbi, at the age of 18. I am writing a book on the Talmud, right now. This isn’t being said, out of some liberal prattle: It’s being said from the very essence and the heart of our religion.

May I tell you a story?

It’s a Talmudic story and a magnificent one. The Torah reading of this weekend—the weekend passed by—is the passage in the *Book of Exodus*, which talks about the drowning of the Egyptian army, which chased after the Jews as they were crossing the sea. Now, the water came down; it was held up for the Jews, and then came down on the Egyptians. And then, the Bible itself has the song of triumph and of gratitude to God, that the Jews sang when they saw this miracle.

But the Midrash, the moralistic part of the Talmud, says, that the angels up in Heaven joined in this song. And God said to them—follow this carefully—God said to them, “Shut up.” And they said, “Why?” And He said, “My children have just drowned in the sea. Never mind that they’ve done wicked things, but they are still My children. And you stand here, and sing songs of triumph?” And so, the very passage in the Bible, of the song that the Jews sang, when they were triumphant over the Egyptians and saw them drowned, is *denied* in the Talmud, which says, that God didn’t let the angels sing the song.

EIR: That is a story that I wish the President and his Christian fundamentalist supporters could understand.

Rabbi Hertzberg: May I make a point? The President gives Prayer Breakfasts. He almost invariably has at them, from the Jewish community, the most Orthodox hard-line rabbis he can find, or that can be found for him (the few of them). The liberals are under-represented, or not represented at all.

Now, I have no eagerness, whatsoever, to be invited to the Bush White House. But, I find it strange, that in four years and innumerable religious exercises at the White House, someone as un-anonymous—*un-anonymous*—as I am in American religious life, as a leader of Jewish thought, and state, and opinion, has never been asked.

That’s not a comment on me. That’s a comment on him and the people who advise him! That’s a comment on his desire *not* to hear the story from the Midrash.

EIR: Well, it reminds me of something else: Some time ago,

I was extremely impressed by your intervention—you were interviewed by National Public Radio, after you had been in communication with a number of Christian ministers, including from Bush’s own denomination, who had tried to speak to him about peace, instead of war. And, if I’m not wrong, he refused an audience.

Rabbi Hertzberg: Absolutely! They don’t want to hear, what doesn’t back up their prejudices. And religion in America is not hard-line religion. . . . Religion in America, is religion in which we take each other seriously, and allow each other to be who we are.

EIR: I’d like to discuss some of the solutions we’ve been examining. *EIR* just held a seminar in Berlin on the economic crisis facing the whole planet. There, Mr. LaRouche pointed out that a call for a religious dialogue isn’t going to bring peace. Instead, he proposed a new Treaty of Westphalia, based on the benefit of the other, through economic development.

You have always insisted that economics is essential, but how do we get there?

Rabbi Hertzberg: Well, may I make a comment on that?

I think that the Peace of Westphalia is an excellent image, but we can’t take it far enough. The Treaty of Westphalia was among specific people all of whom belonged to the Christian tradition. . . .

The difficulty is, that what we are trying to make peace with right now, are people of the West, Western religion, who have undergone the Renaissance, the Reformation, and who now live with a very healthy sense of the need for economic development in the less-fortunate parts of that world; and the Muslims, who have not undergone that history, or very much of it. Therefore, we have got to emphasize economic development, hoping that *that* will trump the aces of fanaticism.

In other words, I am working right now, in two or three projects with friends of mine, where they are trying to get Jews, and Israelis, and Palestinians to work together, in joint endeavors. And some of this has become fairly successful. I think the emphasis has to be now, on education and economic development. This is the long journey, that is shorter than preaching at it. Than preaching, “Hey you guys! Why are you so fundamentalist?”

You see, a large part of the problem, is that young people are being born into the world and growing up without much hope. And so, they become murderers, they become suicide bombers, etc. We have got to increase the amount of hope.

EIR: I think you know that LaRouche’s program for Mideast peace certainly had the economic component, in terms of development, water—

Rabbi Hertzberg: I believe that profoundly. And it will make a very good subject for him and me to talk about, when next we’re at lunch.

Intense Senate Fight Weakens Gonzales

by Edward Spannaus

After three days of Senate floor debate on the nomination of Alberto Gonzales for U.S. Attorney General, 35 Democrats and one Independent (Jim Jeffords of Vermont) voted against the confirmation of Gonzales—far more than anyone would have imagined when Bush first offered the nomination. Only two Attorney General nominees in U.S. history have received more opposing votes.

On the first day of debate, Minority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) announced that there would not be a filibuster, but that there was a consent agreement which would allow ten full hours for Senate Democrats to debate the nomination. When asked what kind of a message this sends to the President, Reid responded: “I think it sends a message that the chief legal advisor to the President has a real problem when he starts.” After the agreed-upon three-day schedule was announced in the Senate, Judiciary Committee Chairman Arlen Specter (R-Pa.) took to the floor to acknowledge that Gonzales was being weakened by the debate: “It is still my hope he will be confirmed with some bipartisanship, but it will not be the kind of strong vote that would have given him a much stronger position as Attorney General.”

For weeks after Nov. 10 announcement of the Gonzales nomination, not a single Democrat had expressed an intention to oppose it, and a number of Judiciary Committee Democrats even spoke favorably of the nominee. Although Lyndon LaRouche immediately called for blocking the Gonzales nomination (see *EIR*, Nov. 26, 2004), his call was not echoed by any Congressional Democrats until the point of Gonzales’s confirmation hearing on Jan. 6; when the Committee finally voted on Jan. 26, all eight Democratic Senators on the Committee voted against the nomination—unexpected even the day before.

How the Fight Developed

What had happened? First, the White House and Gonzales himself were their own worst enemies. Their stonewalling of the Committee’s questions and document requests—and particularly Gonzales’s implausible memory lapses regarding crucial decisions involving prisoner interrogation techniques—created a backlash.

Secondly, during December and January, new revelations about prisoner abuse and torture kept pouring out. Most damaging were the documents concerning the pervasive torture and abuse at Guantánamo, many of which came from FBI