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The Moving Hand Writes

The answer is: Yes! Yes! And, again Yes!

The question is: "During recent weeks, we have been asked to write to our Congressmen about anti-boycott legislation and excessive arms to Saudi Arabia. We have been asked to call the local Soviet Consulate about Yuri Vudka. We have been asked to write to the Argentine consul about anti-semitic attacks on Argentine Jews. Is all this communicating really worth-while?"

Every Congressman understands that the number of letters received is a better index to the constituency's state of mind than a public opinion poll. A thousand people may hold a certain opinion, but none of them may care much one way or another. If forty people take the trouble to write, Congressmen know that they care. That signals the emotional strength of the issue, the tip of the iceberg.

There is also the negative effect of non-writing. If even a friendly Congressman does not receive any letters asking him to support anti-boycott legislation, then he can re-order his priorities.

One way or another, the letters you wrote had some relationship to the fact that Congress placed anti-boycott measures in the Tax Reform Act; and some relationship to the fact that the Senate International Relations Committee cut down the arms sale to Saudi Arabia.

It's not that letter-writers always win. It's just that they win more often than non-letter writers. And that goes for phone-callers.

Mae Heller of San Rafael, responding to a recent column, called the local Soviet Consul General about Yuri Vudka, who was finally released from prison, but whose safety and emigration status are matters of grave concern. She got a consular official whose name sounded something like Barashkinov." He said he didn't know any Yuri Vudka. She enlightened him, and asked if she could tell her Vudka's status.

"Mr. B _____ said he did not know," reported Mae Heller. "I courteously persisted; could he please find out for me. I asked whether a month's time would be sufficient, and I asked this man to spell his name for me so that I could ask for him when I called. He refused to do this."

Worthwhile? Any Soviet Jew will tell you, emphatically, that it was. Every such call makes it that much less likely that Yuri Vudka will disappear from the face of the earth. And if enough attention is paid to Vudka, then Soviet bureaucrats might just figure that he'd be less trouble in Israel. It's worked that way in a large enough percentage of cases, to make it a sound working principle.

It is not necessary to write a learned treatise. Public officials look to these letters and phone calls for a signal, not for an education. Often they read just enough to find out whether the writer is "for" or "against." A few sentences will do. (As long as they are the writer's own sentences. Mimeographed cards or letters, or exactly duplicated sentences tend to be discounted because the senders obviously don't care as much as those who take the effort to write their own).

Thus, someone recently complained that not enough information was given on which to base a letter to the Argentine Consul. But, in that case all that was required was a letter saying: "I hope your government is going to take all necessary action to contain those anti-semitic groups which, according

to the papers, are committing violence against the Jews of Argentina." That would do it nicely. The message goes to Buenos Aires: " Hey, this office received 72 letters from Americans wanting us to do something about the attacks on Jews. Maybe, in the interest of public relations...."

You may even want to get off a letter to President Ford and Candidate Carter (address: Plains, Georgia), suggesting that in their next TV "debate" here, on foreign affairs, you would want to hear them address themselves to the Helsinki agreement - whereby the Soviet Union sort of promised to abide by human rights covenants which guarantee free emigration, as well as freedom of cultural expression. They might just pay attention, for that occasion or another. After all, you're the public that, in their minds, they're lusting for.