

JERUSALEM LETTER / VIEWPOINTS

Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

No. 297 22 Tammuz 5754 / 1 July 1994

THE VACUUM IN MORAL LEADERSHIP IN ISRAEL AND THE ALTERNATIVES FOR FILLING IT

Yosef Goell

Has Life Gotten Nastier? / A Widespread Disgust with Politics / Much More to Steal / To Be a Light unto Ourselves / Individualism vs. Collectivist Ideals / Searching for Moral Leaders / The Role of Parents / Teachers Avoid Controversy / The Media as Moral Leaders / What Can Be Done?

[Editor's Note: The following critique of current Israeli society is all the more notable because its author, a well-known political commentator, writes from a secular perspective.]

Has Life Gotten Nastier?

Various aspects of life in Israel seem much nastier than they used to be. I refer not so much to politics, although politics figures in everything in Israel, but primarily to interpersonal relationships in small groups, in communities, and in the relationship between individuals and the larger collective of the nation.

Of course it is possible that things are not really nastier but that the media are reporting so much better on problems that were not highlighted many years ago, so that today we are much more aware and much more sensitive to things that were always there or were possibly even worse at some time.

Yet as someone who has lived in Israel since its inception in 1948 and thinks he has a relatively

good memory for atmospheres during this time, I believe that this is so. I do not buy the fiction of a "golden age" in the first years of the state when everything was wonderful, and that everything since then has been in decline. I remember the 1950s and they were far from being a golden age; yet in many aspects of life, that Israel was very different than the Israel of recent years; in many ways it was much better and much more optimistic in regard to the future.

A Widespread Disgust with Politics

Part of the thesis that things are nastier and more problematic is based on very widespread expressions of disgust with politics. People expected an immediate improvement following the adoption of the reform law providing for the direct election of the prime minister, which was triggered by the feeling of disgust expressed by the movement that pushed for the bill. Their feeling was: "We are fed up with you politicians and we want

Daniel J. Elazar, Editor and Publisher; Zvi R. Marom, Associate Editor; Mark Ami-El, Managing Editor.
13 Tel-Hai St., Jerusalem, 92107, Israel; Tel. 02-619281, Fax 972-2-619112. © Copyright. All rights reserved.
ISSN: 0334-4096.

The opinions expressed by the authors of Viewpoints do not necessarily reflect those of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

want a change." So far, the change has expressed itself only in legislation that has yet to be implemented and which will come into effect only with the next elections, so the national attitude toward politics and politicians has gone back to what it was before. In a sense this is really an expression of being disgusted with ourselves. This is our system, these are our leaders, regardless of which party we are speaking of. There remains a widespread sense that something in the system rubs very many of us the wrong way.

Much More to Steal

There is also a sense of growing corruption in different fields of life, certainly in politics, in the religious sphere, and in business. This might be attributed primarily to the fact that, if one wants to compare the Israel of today to a much earlier period, such as the 1950s or even the early 1960s, there is much more around to steal. One of the convenient things that made for a relatively honest Israel in the 1950s was that there was simply very little worth stealing or embezzling, but since then we have "progressed" quite a bit. There is a lot more stuff around worth stealing, so in various fields of public activity there has been much greater corruption. This growth in public corruption has also been highlighted much more in recent years by the media which focus on this particular aspect of reporting more than ever before.

In this regard, one of the ironic things about Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin is that during his first term as prime minister in the mid-1970s he was very often accused of being to blame for ushering in a new level of corruption in the country. The truth is that Rabin was the first prime minister who did not protect corrupt politicians. All the previous ones — the "sainted" David Ben-Gurion, Moshe Sharett, Levi Eshkol, Golda Meir — were all personally honest, but when it came to top people in the party who were caught with their fingers in the till, their general response was to hush it up and get rid of the offender without making any unnecessary scandal.

Rabin was the first of a new generation of politicians who was not sophisticated enough or perhaps not cynical enough for such behavior. When various well-known cases of political corruption came to light during his first term of office, he told the attorney-general and the police: "If you have a case, go to court. What do you want from me?" But the image remained that there was an increase in corruption during his period in office, which was simply not true. Actually, it was the

first time that these cases went to court and leading political figures were sent to jail.

It is certainly not my intention to imply here that we in Israel have become the worst of peoples in the world. All these problems are worldwide problems and certainly problems of modern, developed, and democratic states and societies. I would even argue that compared to such countries and their problems, we are among the best, not the worst. We may be worse than we used to be, but compared with various other comparable societies and systems such as the United States and those of Western Europe, we are, by and large, better. So the problem is not that there is some nice world out there to which we simply do not measure up. By many criteria we do measure up. Where we are worse is in comparison to ourselves, and certainly in comparison to what we like to think of ourselves.

To Be a Light unto Ourselves

I never bought into the "light unto the nations" (*or l'goyim*) thesis of Israel's ideal role, but I always thought we should set high standards for ourselves. It is in regard to such standards that we have fallen down. I would also argue that these problems present a greater danger to Israel than other countries and have greater implications for a country like ours.

One of the more dangerous aspects of this problem is that relatively large sectors of Israeli society are still divorced from the mainstream. We are a very divided society, and not only with regard to policy issues. If we count the Arab minority in Israel, which is about 17-18 percent, and part of the haredi sectors which account for about 10 percent, and then add the 10-12 percent of the population who are very recent new immigrants, we are left with a relatively narrow mainstream majority. The Arabs and haredim especially have proven relatively impervious to integration. The presence of such large sectors outside the mainstream is problematic in any society; when there is a breakdown of consensus on moral questions and on questions of lifestyle and the like, the situation becomes all the more dangerous.

Another complicating factor, something that all of us know but rarely pay attention to, is that Israel is an extremely crowded society, physically, with the heavily populated areas in the coastal plain constituting a dangerous potential for quite a lot of social friction. We very literally rub up against each other much more than is the case in other societies where there is more physical space for different peoples to do their own

different things without stepping on each others' toes.

Yet another factor is the greater potential in Israel than in most other modern societies for people who do not like matters to simply pick up and leave; to opt out of the society entirely. In Israel, according to periodic public opinion polls, there is a consistently large number of high school or army-age young people who say that when they get out of the army they would consider leaving the country. For some 20-30 percent of these respondents this is an acceptable idea and it has become socially acceptable to give such answers. What is missing, especially among younger elites, is the feeling that this is home, this is mine, this is where I belong naturally, and even if there are all sorts of things that I do not like about home, I can either lump it or try to do something about changing it. This phenomenon means that there is a potential for large-scale emigration if Israeli life becomes nastier and less pleasant, and especially among the younger elites of the country, which is very dangerous.

Ha'aretz recently featured a story about Hanoch Eyal, an Israeli teacher and psychologist who returned after living 17 years in the United States, who explained that he had returned to Israel because after all those years in the States he discovered the ugly side — the ugly face of what passes for success there. He noted the lack of caring for people and their troubles, the incidence of brutality and violent crime in the streets, 30,000 children who had been kidnapped or stolen. But after coming here and expecting to find something very different from the United States, a much more compassionate and better society, he found a minor colony and copy of that rich, cruel, and false United States. He asked himself if this was the country that our fathers had fought to establish.

Another recent article in *Ha'aretz* was by Abed Assad, an Israeli Arab, who responded to an earlier letter from an Arab feminist who had written about being a modern Arab woman in Israel and complained about Arab life. Assad accused her of blindly copying the United States. "I do not claim our Arab society in Israel is perfect. It is very far from it; but we are a society in a process of rapid change and therefore we have to be very careful in regard to anything that has to do with changes in our social morals and the like. For me, if the choice is between our Arab society today and between the idolatry of Coca Cola and Michael Jackson, I choose Arab society in Israel." So the problem and the malaise exist among Israeli Arabs as well.

Individualism vs. Collectivist Ideals

Can one speak at all of a moral leadership in a democratic society? Does such talk not smack of elitism and of an attempt to impose on others one's own concepts of morality? Yet, even asking the question in this way is one of the problems of contemporary America which is also becoming a problem in Israel because of the trends toward the superficial Americanization of Israel. Especially in the last decade and a half there has come into fashion, especially in the greater Tel Aviv area, an extreme individualism which is the opposite of Israel's earlier collectivist ideals. The clash is not so much in terms of formal, ordered ideologies, such as socialism or capitalism, but rather in terms of how people look at their own lives in the context of the society in which they live.

I have been a Zionist from my youth and was attracted to the ideas of Zionism, of the kibbutz, and of Israel because of the idealism which informed them. The Israel that was created by the Zionist movement is nearly the only example in the twentieth century of a successful revolution brought about by an idealistic movement; certainly more so than the Soviet Union, China, Cuba, or other revolutionary societies. It is specifically because of Zionism's success in its initial stage that succeeding generations ask, "What else is there?" Can such an idealistic elan be maintained and passed on from generation to generation? Probably not; and certainly not at the same level of intensity.

Searching for Moral Leaders

Can there be moral leaders in democratic societies? There is such a thing as moral leaders; people do take other people as examples. Such leaders do set norms, though not always officially or formally. Was there ever a time when there was an effective moral leadership in Israel? First of all, for the haredi population there have always been the rabbimates of the different sects to serve them as moral guides and moral leaders. For the rest, there may never have been a golden age, but in the early period of secular and national religious Zionism there were such people who could be called moral leaders who were deeply immersed in the political system, perhaps not necessarily the central political leaders at any time but very close to them. Examples include Berl Katznelson in Mapai and the Labor movement, Yitzhak Tabenkin in the Ahdut Ha'avodah party, Meir Yaari and Yakov Hazan in the Kibbutz HaArtzi movement — people who were accepted by significant parts of society as moral leaders and who were at the

same time very much involved in the political process. In the Revisionist movement Vladimir Jabotinsky was another such moral leader, and within the National Religious Party there certainly were figures who were seen as moral leaders of that movement. This has completely disappeared and collapsed today.

It would simply invite laughter to make the claim today that someone who happens to be prime minister or head of a party has the standing or authority to speak about morality, about how people should conduct their lives. Yet this used to be the case. Yitzhak Rabin, during his first term in office in the 1970s, spoke of *yordim* (emigrants from Israel) as despicable types who should be sloughed off by society. His comment was deeply resented by many but had little if any effect on the rate of *yerida*. Ten years earlier such a statement would have constituted the acceptable norm. A political leader speaking of such matters today would be nearly unthinkable.

Who then are the potential moral leaders for Israeli society? The rabbis? One of the aspects of the very great schism that has developed in Israel between the religious and secular populations is that whatever function of moral leadership rabbis do provide for the former is totally irrelevant for the large secular majority in the country. While large numbers of secular people do observe some aspects of Jewish tradition — lighting candles, eating kosher, having a Seder, going to synagogue on Yom Kippur — few of them would even think of asking a rabbi what one should do in various situations in one's personal life, much less accepting his opinion. For a large majority of the country, the rabbinical leadership is totally irrelevant.

Speaking for myself as a secular person, I regret very much the fact that the rabbinate has become so totally irrelevant. I believe, however, that the problem is not with the secular population but is primarily with a hidebound rabbinate which keeps itself totally oblivious to modern life, its problems and moral issues. So if not the rabbis, who then is there? To all intents and purposes, no one.

Given the lack of moral leadership, one of the surprising things is that so many things in Israel do work. Most people grow up with an innate feeling of wanting to do the right thing. Without there being anyone in moral authority to say this "yes" and that "no," many people do strive to do the right thing. Such an innate natural morality erodes over time if it is not reinforced and given direction by a moral leadership.

The Role of Parents

The main influence on new entrants into human society are parents. These days parents in Israel and throughout the modern Western world are very confused. One of the things about us as Jews, as a culture, is the Jewish emphasis on strong family life; the importance that parents place on children and on guiding them in the right way. This emphasis seems to be weakening among American Jews and among many parents in Israel as well. Parents continue to be moral guides, but much less than they used to be.

One very common problem in Israel today is the very great difficulty that Israeli parents have in saying no to their children, in setting limits and guidelines. This is especially noticeable in financial matters. So many Israeli children seem to have everything. Perhaps because today's generation of young sabra parents grew up in a much poorer Israel, there is a profound drive among them to compensate their own children for what they themselves lacked in their own childhood. In the more well-to-do part of Israeli society, this translates into the inability of parents to establish red lines for their children.

One trend common to the Western world that we in Israel are following very rapidly is the economic power of children; the fact that teenagers and even younger children have so much money of their own that they have become an economic factor in society. Various manufacturers and advertisers gear their messages to children who do not have the sophistication to handle such messages.

Teachers Avoid Controversy

Yet another problem involves the dilemma faced by school teachers who are very confused about what to tell their students. Part of the problem is political because the red-hot politics in Israel have become so intense that teachers have become very careful about what they say in class. Recent Israeli history is not taught in the schools; it is too touchy a subject. What interpretation of recent Israeli history and events does one tell the children? Often a teacher's decision may depend on who happens to be the Minister of Education, so the safest course is to avoid too controversial topics.

Surprisingly, one of the worst offenders in this regard is the present Minister of Education, Amnon Rubinstein, who for all his liberalism is trying to politicize the schools much more than any previous

ministers did, even the NRP's Zevulun Hammer. Teachers feel that they potentially can get into a lot of trouble and they simply don't bother. Most teach specific subjects — geography, chemistry, Bible — and very few venture beyond that in trying to serve as moral guides to their students.

The Media as Moral Leaders

Who, then, performs the function of moral leadership in Israeli society? The major force that does exist, although they would deny it, is the media — newspapers, television, cinema advertising. During election campaigns, the media are obviously very politicized but most Israelis are sophisticated enough about politics to know that they are being conned. Yet there are also the constant commercial messages and the ambience they portray in which life is one big shopping mall with incessant buying, and the importance of being "in." These are very powerful messages that dominate the media today, especially with the extension of a second television channel funded from commercial advertising.

Many of my colleagues in the media would not admit that they engage in obvious attempts to influence people's outlooks. They believe they are just doing their job, getting a scoop, reporting the "facts"; but nothing could be further from the truth. Where do people learn about life? The less they learn from their own parents and teachers, the more they learn from somewhere else. There is no vacuum, and television especially has become very important in this regard.

What Can Be Done?

Many feel that there is very little that can be done about this vacuum in moral leadership. This seems to be the way societies develop, and these are processes beyond our control. Yet, I would suggest that it would be very desirable to try to set up something like a modern Sanhedrin for the Jewish people expressly for this purpose; a body that would include leaders from different walks of life. Admittedly, it will be difficult to choose such people and even to decide who will choose them. Yet there is a need for such a forum which would provide a framework for people who are sensitive to these problems, who have the feeling of there being a society, of there being a people who need moral guidance. Such a body would include academics, teachers, rabbis, and media people, and possibly even politicians, though I would hesitate at them. This forum would bring together people who would consider not only the broad philosophical aspects but also the

implications for individuals and their day-to-day lives of some of these moral problems that have emerged in Israel, and what, if anything, can be done about them. This body would also serve, perhaps, as a balance to the political Knesset, a communion of people who would set themselves up as a moral leadership to consider these problems and try to come up with proposals for dealing with them.

I am not proposing that there be a Jewish Vatican here that would say "do this" and "don't do that"; but what is necessary are public discussions of these problems and issues. On some things such a body will not always be capable of reaching an operative conclusion. On some issues, however, such a forum of wise people, people who have a feel for what is going on in the society and for what makes a good society, could emerge with clear conclusions and guidelines. Some form of this idea should at least be tried. Doing nothing and expecting things to work themselves out automatically can prove very dangerous for Israel.

There has been a program on Israeli Arabic television for the past 15 years called "I Have a Question" that could serve as an example of the process I propose. Israeli Arabs have much greater problems than we do because in addition to being a troubled minority they are also involved in an extremely rapid and personally unsettling modernization process. The program features husbands and wives, children and mothers-in-law, who raise personal problems from their day-to-day lives which are then considered by panels of psychologists, doctors, teachers, social workers, journalists and religious leaders. I believe Jewish viewers could also benefit from such a program.

Who would bother paying attention? My first impression is that quite a number of parents, teachers, and media people would pay attention because many of these people are looking for guidance with regard to specific questions and no such guidance is being provided today in a society which is so totally immersed in the political problems of the day.

How does one convene such a body? Any initial stage would perforce be artificial but perhaps the Jerusalem Center might serve as a catalyst for thinking out such a proposal and getting it off the ground.

One of the tremendous advantages Israel has is its smallness. America's problems may be insoluble partly because of its very physical size and the variety of its population. One can come up with all sorts of theoretical solutions to problems but it often proves nearly impossible to apply them to 250 million people in such

a gigantic territory. Israel has the advantage of smallness, and of a tradition of a much greater degree of social solidarity which could make possible things that are impossible in a larger context.

One of the things that bother me as an Israeli is to see Jews or a Jewish state acting stupidly. Many other states and peoples do behave stupidly, but we do not have to emulate them. Rather, we should be learning from their mistakes. I would not be pessimistic about the possibility of an elite group of caring people here getting together and trying to set standards and norms. There may be more of a chance of this being accepted

in Israel than in other societies; not necessarily by everyone; but there are many people in Israel who are sufficiently concerned about these problems even though they may not know how to articulate their concerns.

* * *

Yosef Goell is a political columnist for the *Jerusalem Post* and a former lecturer in political science at the Hebrew University. This *Jerusalem Letter/Viewpoints* is based upon his presentation at the Jerusalem Center Fellows Forum.