

ISRAEL'S DEMOCRACY: WHERE TO?

Robert Rockaway

Many years ago when I was writing my book on Jewish gangsters, I interviewed Meyer Lansky, considered to be the "Jewish Godfather" of organized crime. Lansky was still upset by the fact that he had been expelled from Israel in 1972. He blamed Yosef Berg, who had been the minister of the interior in Golda Meir's government. "Who the hell does he think he is," complained Lansky. "Does he think he owns the country?" My response was, "Meyer, there are some people in Israel who think the country is their private business."

My view has changed little since then. Israel has always considered itself a western style democracy. Yet we have politicians and wealthy business people, including Jews who live abroad, who treat the country like their private fiefdom. Our recent scandals involving Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and our former Finance Minister, Avraham Hirschenson are only the tip of the iceberg.

Olmert's fondness for the "good life" and unseemly high style of living have raised questions as to how someone who has spent years in political life, as a member of the Knesset, mayor of Jerusalem, and minister, became so wealthy. Now all his past "indiscretions" are being investigated, and there is a good chance he will be indicted for bribery, breach of trust, and money laundering. Receiving envelopes filled with cash from an American go-between, may have done him in.

Olmert's friend and crony, and the man he appointed finance minister, Avraham Hirschenson, is standing trial for thievery, bribery, breach of trust, and money laundering. His case is simpler to prove: he was caught red-handed with his hand in the till. He stole money from the pension fund of a worker's organization he headed. Hirschenson has been Olmert's friend for years, and they worked together in the Likud Party. Did Olmert not know anything about Hirschenson's unethical and illegal activities? Were there no rumors about the man? Or did it not matter to him. As they say, "Birds of a feather flock together."

Then there is the case of Aryeh Deri, a stalwart member of the ultra-Orthodox Shas party, who served as minister of the interior. Deri was convicted of receiving a bribe, fraud, and breach of trust, and served three years in prison. Israel has a law that states that a person who commits a crime that involves "moral turpitude" must wait seven years after the completion of their prison sentence before they can run for public office. Deri now wants the court to wave the seven-year cooling-off period so he can run for mayor of Jerusalem. What Chutzpah! A convicted thief believes he deserves the right to run for and be mayor of the capital of Israel!

A classic example of someone treating Israel as his own private concern involved Moshe Dayan. When he was defense minister, Dayan would declare

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an archaeological site a closed military area and dig for its archaeological treasures. He then placed what he uncovered his own private collection. After his death, his wife sold the archaeological items *back* to the State of Israel for over a million dollars. Dyan got away with it, because the public treated him as a military hero, someone special.

Nonetheless, all of the above leave a bad taste in the public's mouth. Does it build confidence in the proper running of our democracy? What does it say about the kinds of men who we have running for office, or occupying sensitive political positions? Israel is faced with serious and dangerous problems regarding our existence. And we must have total trust in the women and men who make the decisions affecting our lives and those of our children and grandchildren. Our politicians are the ones who make the decisions as to whether we go to war. If we have no confidence in them and if we believe that they act only for their own selfish interests, would we allow them to send our sons into battle? Democracy cannot exist if there is no trust between the rulers and the ruled.

Another serious problem affecting our democracy, with some labeling it a cancer that is eating away at Israel, is our 40-year occupation of the territories that began after the Six-Day War in 1967. Regardless of one's political or religious position, this is a situation that can destroy Israel as a democracy.

All the justifications for continuing to build settlements and rule over another people -- that the area is labeled a "disputed territory;" that it is the birthright of the Jewish people promised by God; that it is the ancient home of the patriarchs and the historic kingdom of Solomon; and that a Palestinian state would become a terrorist enclave and pose a mortal threat to Israel -- ignores what the occupation has done to us, individually, and as a nation.

History has shown that there is no such thing as a benign occupation. In order to exercise and maintain control over another people, harsh and sometimes brutal methods must be employed. This has a negative effect on the occupier, dulling their sensitivity to injustice and compromising their morality. The British learned this in India, the French in Algeria, and the Americans in the Philippines.

Unfortunately, Israeli governments have learned nothing from the experience of other nations, and we are paying a terrible price for this. The murder of Yitzhak Rabin and the attempt on the life of Professor Zeev Sternhell illustrate what can happen within Israel as a consequence of the occupation.

The impact of the occupation on Israel's humanity so dismayed a group of Holocaust survivors that they published a manifesto decrying Israeli society's descent into a "quagmire of violence, brutality, disrespect for human rights and contempt for human life."

The ongoing occupation and the methods we must use to perpetuate it, degrades and humiliates the Palestinians, as well as Israelis, and it poses a serious threat to our democracy. To paraphrase what a wise man once said: "Did Israel escape slavery in Egypt in order to enslave others?"

There are only two solutions to this problem: A Palestinian state in the territory we now occupy, or annexation of the territory into Israel. Those who reject both proposals on religious, nationalistic or messianic grounds can look forward to our having to face the reality of perpetually ruling over a population that will outnumber us. It will be worse than apartheid and will destroy our democracy.

Governmental corruption and the ongoing occupation both pose mortal threats to Israel's democracy. The question is whether a new government will take steps to solve these problems. Given our experience with past governments, I doubt if what needs to be done, will be done. But there is always the hope, and prayer, that it will.

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