

What to do about Tel Aviv

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We are already immersed in painful evaluations to identify the cause of the breakdowns in our decision-making processes and in rectifying the weaknesses in the IDF as a consequence of the recent war.

What went wrong?

The problem goes far beyond the failings of individual leaders. Nor, as is frequently alleged, is the primary source the pain and agony endured by successive generations of Israelis witnessing their children leaving for the battlefields to risk their lives in defense of the nation.

It is rather the logical outcome of a profound malaise which over the years has infiltrated the psyche of a significant proportion of what can vaguely be described as secular Israeli leadership elites.

One of Israel's most incisive and respected journalists, Ari Shavit, a secular, politically center-left *Haaretz* contributor, recently wrote exposing the core elements which he asserts paved the way for the current malaise.

Shavit maintains that the main lesson to be absorbed from the Lebanon imbroglio is that the shocking performance of our national leadership was a logical consequence of the erosion of the national spirit among Israeli elite circles. He writes that "we were drugged by political correctness," by a discourse dominated by the baseless assumption that "occupation" is the source of all evil.

According to Shavit, that resulted in the demonization of core values like heroism and fortitude. Military power became identified with fascism, and the army, the most hallowed icon of the state, was transformed into a dirty word. Those who warned that we were becoming weaker and our enemies stronger were mocked, as were those who dared question unilateral withdrawals.

Shavit notes that "The unending attacks, both direct and indirect, on nationalism, on militarism and on the Zionist narrative have eaten away, from the inside, at the tree trunk of Israel's existence and sucked away its life force."

THE DECONSTRUCTION of Zionist ideals led to the repudiation of practices considered sacrosanct by our founding fathers and undermined the spirit of volunteerism, one of the pillars of Israeli society. In these circles money was everything; they began to convince themselves that Tel Aviv was Manhattan.

Shavit failed to mention that in the reality of our lives civic-mindedness and an appreciation of the

justice of the case for Israel will not in itself suffice to provide the ideological motivation for a youngster to be willing to risk his life in order to defend the state. After all, why should a Hebrew-speaking Canaanite, devoid of Jewish roots and steeped in universalism, opt to live in a country permanently undergoing terror attacks and facing successive wars initiated by barbarians committed to its destruction?

Surely a person whose overriding objective is a life of self-gratification and the accumulation of money will, provided with an option, desert the country for greener pastures.

This undermining of national idealism in the "elite" sector of Israeli society is already highly advanced. One need only observe the increasing numbers from our secular political and business elites, including the children of leaders, who have already emigrated to the fleshpots of the United States, Canada, Australia and Europe.

BUT THAT represents only one aspect of the rot. It is now a given that a disproportionate percentage of soldiers in combat units comprise religious Zionists, kibbutzniks, moshavniks, Russians, Ethiopians and new immigrants.

The reverse trend seemingly applies to many yuppie types in Tel Aviv, the metropolis and largest urban center in the country.

There, it would seem that an increasing percentage of youngsters from affluent families attending elite schools are being discouraged by their parents from entering combat units and, in extreme cases, even shamelessly evading military service altogether.

Paradoxically, many parents of these draft dodgers were themselves leaders of combat units, at a time when failure to serve in the army was considered the ultimate social disgrace.

IDF Manpower Chief Maj.-Gen. Elazar Stern recently made the chilling observation that he paid proportionately fewer condolence calls to bereaved families in Tel Aviv than in the rest of the country.

If children of elite families become increasingly underrepresented in combat units, if a greater proportion than the norm evade national service, and if a higher percentage emigrate than from other sectors, warning bells require us to take drastic remedial action.

WHY DO religious Zionists and kibbutzniks proportionately represent the vanguard in combat units? Because the religious education of the former is motivated toward love of Eretz Yisrael and the emphasis of the latter is toward volunteerism and civic obligations rather than selfish consumerism.

Clearly the educational system is the only vehicle via which these negative attitudes can be reversed. Yet Education Minister Yuli Tamir is herself a classic embodiment of these elitist ideas. Not surprisingly, she has already announced that her objective would be to reinforce universal rather than national values in the school curriculum.

If she retains her ministry, Tamir would be well advised to reacquaint herself with the ideas of Ahad Ha'am, whose concept of a Zionist ideology was based on the utilization of traditional Jewish texts to create a secular Jewish national identity centered on Eretz Yisrael. She should revert to Ben-Gurion and the Zionist establishment of his era, who considered the Hebrew scriptures the cornerstone of the school curriculum, designed to generate love of the land and promote it as the core of a secular Jewish narrative and Jewish civilization.

She should also study the writings of her predecessor of the Sixties, Education Minister Ben-Zion Dinur, who launched the Jewish-identity curriculum in secular schools. Above all, she should urgently train teachers who are able to communicate these values, which constitute the core narrative of our people.

Forget that narrative, and we are doomed!

The Lebanon war demonstrated that in contrast to the "elites," the vast majority of Israelis remain fully committed to the nation and willing to pay whatever sacrifices are demanded to ensure our future as a Jewish state. However, if we fail to inspire future generations of secular Israelis with positive national ideals and inculcate them with a love of their Jewish heritage, the corruption of our national values restricted until now to segments of our "elites" will inevitably become a more widespread phenomenon.

TEN YEARS ago it would have been inconceivable to hear a contender for the leadership of the people of Israel say: "We have become tired of fighting; tired of being arrogant; tired of winning; tired of defeating our enemies."

That statement by Ehud Olmert will forever haunt him. But it encapsulates the extent to which the new elitist philosophy of consumerism and capitulation, bordering on post-Zionism, has been internalized in his circles.

If we fail to reverse such attitudes we will experience more examples of the national crisis we have just undergone, and probably worse.

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