



Israel in Wonderland

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These days, I feel a little like Alice falling down a deep dark hole and landing in a world turned so upside down that right is wrong and wrong is everywhere. Just when you think it can't be any more topsy-turvy than it already is, the president addresses the nation with nonsensical shrieks and accusations in a parody of leadership so bizarre that you wonder if the Jewish State has turned into Wonderland. Even in a country accustomed to shocking news, a culture permeated with ad hominem attacks; even for us Israelis, this was beyond belief. The man ostensibly safeguarding Israel's moral authority is defending himself against charges of rape and sexual harassment, and trying to bring down the whole house of cards -- the legal, security, political and media establishment -- with him. Transformed before our very eyes from mediocre president to raving megalomaniac, from small town mayor to Mad Hatter, Moshe Katsav tried to thrust the entire nation into an alternate reality.

The first casualty of the Katsav rampage was Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, whose address to the Herzliya Conference was unexpectedly and completely upstaged by the nearly hour-long tirade. Scheduled to conclude the four-day gathering devoted to exploring Israel's national strength, security and diplomatic horizons, Olmert, himself under investigation for unlawful influence in the sale of Bank Leumi, chose to speak about Iran and thus avoid mention of the more problematic areas related to his performance, namely the war in Lebanon or the peace process.

Olmert's focus fit in well with the overall tone of the conference -- the clanging of alarm bells for our national and Jewish future. From raging anti-Semitism in Europe to the threat of genocide from Iran, speaker after speaker warned that today we Jews are living in a watershed period, one of the most dangerous times in our history. With his declaration, "Anyone who threatens us, who threatens our existence, must know that we have the determination and capability to defend ourselves, to respond with force, with discretion and with all the means at our disposal as necessary," the prime minister made clear that this time our muscles are flexed. "I do not suggest anyone err and conclude that the restraint and responsibility that we are displaying will affect our determination and our ability to act when this is required," he cautioned.

But for the man or woman in the street, Iran is a long-term problem, a strategic horizon, a geopolitical issue. Of greater immediate concern are the scandals at home. Temporarily titillated though they may have been by the President's surreal performance on live TV, Israelis came away with a new dose of demoralization. A modest list of some of the other figures currently under investigation includes not only Olmert but Finance Minister Hirschson, Justice Minister Ramon, Head of Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee Tzachi Hanegbi, and top officials of the Israel Tax Authority. And then there's the hard-working Winograd Committee, which will eventually tell the public which leaders are to blame for last summer's botched war in Lebanon.

Small wonder, then, that a new survey on patriotism presented to the Herzliya conference by Prof. Ephraim Yaar of Tel Aviv University indicated a significant erosion of public confidence. While patriotism is an abstract category, Prof. Yaar's reasonable assumption was that "the strength of the state cannot be assessed without addressing the patriotic component of its citizens." The good news in his report was that despite the difficult events of the past year and a half, including both the Lebanon War and disengagement, "not only did the degree of patriotism of the Jewish public not weaken, the emotional affinity to the state even strengthened." But, he continued, "the bad message is that an unprecedented decline was measured in regard to the public's confidence in the government and the Knesset. Moreover, there is a steep decline in the confidence in the defense forces, which have always enjoyed a high level of support." Noting that there is a contradiction between the high assessment of the steadfastness of the civilian population and the low estimation of the leadership, Yaar explained: "The public draws a line between the society and the state, especially the leadership. The public says -- we are patriotic, we love our country, don't get us involved in your failures, and we need to rectify the situation." Indeed, more than 80% of the Jewish public is proud to be Israeli and more than 90% are ready to fight for their country. The IDF, traditionally a chief source of pride, is now in third place in the public's estimation, following Israel's scientific and technological accomplishments, and artistic and cultural achievements. In 2005, 88% of the population was proud of the IDF; in 2006 it dropped to 64%. In last place, in the public's view, are government institutions and the Knesset.

There are practical consequences to these shifts in opinion. Following the resignations of Brig. Gen. Gal Hirsch and

Major Gen. Udi Adam, Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Dan Halutz resigned two weeks ago, and Major Gen. Gabi Ashkenazi, former Head of the Northern Command and Deputy Chief of Staff, was confirmed this week as his replacement. President Katsav was temporarily relieved of his duties and the race to succeed him is well underway. Tax Authority officials were placed under house arrest, banned from re-entering their offices. And, finally, there is a petition to the Supreme Court to publicize the Winograd hearings so that this entire sorry mess can be made public, play by play.

Meanwhile, the country is at a standstill. With everybody fighting indictments and facing commissions of inquiry, we have a right to ask who is worrying about the vital matters of state. The suicide bomber that killed three people in an Eilat bakery this week reminds us that even when quiet abounds for nine months, we cannot begin to pretend that the conflict has been resolved. Peace requires courageous leadership and vision, focus and dedication. In this time of deep national crisis, when the external threats are indeed enormous and when terror has once again burst into our reality, we are suffering what Prof. Yaar calls a critical "breach in confidence." It may well be that the corruption from within is more terrifying than the enemy from without. The time has certainly come for the country to regain its balance, rehabilitate moral and legal boundaries, and set a new political table, tea cups and all.
