

A General Overhaul

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THE JUDGE: “You are accused of murdering your wife and two children. How do you plead: Guilty or not guilty?”

The accused: “Your honor, I do not deal with the past. I think about the future!”

No, not a scene from a comedy. Something very similar really happened. That is how Eli Yishai, the Minister of the Interior, Binyamin Netanyahu and the other nincompoops responded this week to the accusations of gross negligence which resulted in the unprecedented giant firestorm that ravaged large parts of Mount Carmel and caused the deaths of 42 people.

THE EPITOME of chutzpah was reached by Eli Yishai (Shas). In bygone days, a Japanese minister would have committed harakiri on the very first day of the conflagration. But Yishai addressed the public on the last day and claimed that he was the victim of a lynching because he is “Orthodox and Sephardi”.

But even if he had been a blue-eyed secular Ashkenazi, he should have been thrown down the government stairs. And not only because of his “ministerial responsibility”, as the State Comptroller politely phrased it.

If Yishai had faced the judge mentioned above, he would have answered: “Your honor, all my predecessors also murdered their wives and children. So why do you single me out? Only because I am Orthodox and Sephardi?”

One shocking piece of evidence suffices to attach personal blame to this individual. When the fire broke out, Haifa airport, where the fire-fighting planes were stationed, did not stock a single kilo of fire-retardant material. The stock in the entire country was enough for the first 20 minutes only. Israel had to send SOS messages to all the countries throughout the world, including some smaller and poorer than us, to beg for the material.

Was that the responsibility of his predecessors in the 50s or the 90s?

Lately, Yishai has stood out as the compulsive persecutor of refugee children, in order to save the “Jewish” state. If he had invested in the fire-fighting services a fraction of the energy and enthusiasm which he invested in promoting the man-hunters of the “Oz” immigration unit, the fire would have been conquered within an hour, instead of blazing in unabated fury for three days. Not to mention his threats to break up the government coalition if the subsidies of the Orthodox were reduced.

In Yishai, some of the main traits that caused the disaster are concentrated: a blown-up ego, total devotion to the interests of his party, and complete indifference for the government tasks entrusted to him.

But, he asserted, he “warned”. All of the politicians “warned”. Every one of them keeps in the back pocket of

his trousers a bunch of letters he has written in the last few years to cover his ass. But the duty of a minister is not to “warn”. His duty is to act, and if he can’t – to resign.

THE MAIN responsibility, however, does not rest with Eli Yishai, but with Binyamin Netanyahu. It is he who appointed this good-for-nothing to this job, just as he appointed Avigdor Lieberman as Foreign Minister and Limor Livnat as Minister for Culture. And all the other ministers, almost all whom are quite unsuited for their tasks.

Netanyahu’s own conduct during the crisis, in which the entire country was glued to the TV screens for days, every hour of each day, bordered on farce. While the fire-fighters were busy trying to extinguish the fire, he was equally busy trying to extinguish the growing criticism of himself. He hurried from place to place, surrounded not only by a ring of bodyguards but by an even larger ring of photographers. He immortalized himself in every possible pose, each one expertly staged, following the example of the President of Chile during the rescue of the miners. He talked and talked, and from every word arose a strong smell of phoniness.

Nothing was spontaneous, nothing came from the heart. Everything a pose, everything unserious. One moment he entrusted Interior Security Minister Yitzhak Aharonovitch with the responsibility for the entire operation, the next moment he forgot all about him, as if he had never existed. The height of comedy was attained when he appointed the mayor of Netanya, appropriately named Miriam Feirberg (“Mountain of Fire”) as special commissioner for compensation. It was a moment’s flash of inspiration, without consulting anyone, without any staff work (there was no staff, anyhow). Even his closest advisers were surprised. Two days later he accepted her resignation.

Netanyahu also invented a substitute for a Commission of Inquiry: a press conference.

But it appears that Netanyahu knows his people. The polls show that a large part of the public has been profoundly impressed by his dynamic leadership.

BUT BEYOND the failings of individual politicians who pose as leaders, a frightening picture of the entire ruling establishment has been revealed.

For a moment, the curtain of the media flatterers, PR experts and assorted ass-lickers, who create an artificial reality, has been raised. The picture that has emerged is of total chaos. The flames shed light on only one accidental part – the fire-fighting services – but there is no doubt that a similar situation exists in almost all other departments of the government, from the defense ministry to the education system.

Until now, we surmised. Now we know for sure.

What was revealed this week for all to see was a shock-

ing landscape of incompetence and inability, irresponsibility and ass-covering, lack of planning and lack of foresight, lack of “staff work” and lack of coordination between the various government offices. Many years of party corruption have led to a situation where at every crucial point the wrong person occupies the wrong position. The crime of “political appointments” has crippled the civil service.

The lack of an efficient fire-fighting service, as described this week by the State Comptroller, is only a symptom of the disease. It was not discovered this week, and not this year. Already 42 years ago, on June 10, 1968, I warned the Knesset about this situation and demanded the setting up of a national fire-fighting force, like the national police force, with a single commander and a standing general staff. The establishment ignored the proposal. So did the media. Nothing was burning – until Mount Carmel turned into a flaming inferno.

We know already that the same situation prevails in the education system, which is producing a generation of ignoramuses, as was revealed this week by PISA, an authoritative international study. The pupils of the “Jewish State”, the sons and daughters of the People of the Book which always prided itself on its superior intellectual level, are now well below the average of the developed countries.

We do not know what is really happening in the army, whose officers are protected by a defensive ring of army spokesmen and army liars, censors and fawning journalists called “military correspondents”. Lebanon War II revealed a picture of a military not much better than the fire-fighting service this week. It is known that the present Chief of Staff, Gabi Ashkenazi, “has rehabilitated the army”. Everybody knows. How do they know? Anyone from the outside checked?

In order to turn Israel into a modern state, we need a thorough change in the entire establishment. Instead of busying ourselves with empty slogans, like “a Jewish and democratic state”, we should see to it that Israel becomes, first of all, a state capable of safeguarding the security and well-being of its citizens – all of them.

THAT BRINGS us straight to the overturned hubble-bubble (Nargileh in Palestinian Arabic).

From the first moment on, I was worried that the fire would ignite a huge conflagration of racist flames. After all, the fire did break out near an Arab locality (Yes, the Druze are Arabs, too). I asked myself: how long will it take until the racists are falling over themselves fighting to exploit this opportunity?

At first I was pleasantly surprised. In many ways, the disaster brought out the most positive sides of Israeli society, which are hidden in normal times. In this area, too, an unusual self-restraint prevailed this time. Common sense said that even the wildest terrorist would not start a fire next to his own home.

But the police – who are deeply stained by anti-Arab discrimination – could not restrain themselves for two whole days. Thus, at the height of the disaster, when the public was glued to the TV screen and emotions were running as high as the flames in the forest, the police released a sensational piece of news: they had caught two Arab boys, aged 14 and 16, who were guilty of starting the whole thing.

Even if this news had any foundation, it could have qui-

etly waited for two or three days, until the flames were put out. But the police were all aflame.

They announced at the top of their voices that the two brothers were having a picnic and their nargileh had overturned. That is a doubtful story to start with. But even if the boys had inadvertently caused the fire by their negligence, was there a need to treat them like hardened criminals, drag them brutally from their home in the middle of their family lunch, interrogate them harshly and try to get them to incriminate each other? In the end they were released and the police grabbed another boy of 16. All this was very different from the behavior of the police some time ago, when a group of Yeshiva students inadvertently started a large fire on the Golan Heights.

THE EVENT did actually have a racist face, but from a quite different perspective. Racism played a major role in it.

The fire started near Ussafiyeh. In this Druze locality, with its 10,000 inhabitants, there was no fire station. Nor was there any in the neighboring Druze locality of Daliyat al-Carmel, which has 15,000 inhabitants. The Arab local councils, which are discriminated against in most spheres, are disadvantaged in this sphere, too.

This week, racism revenged itself. If there had been fire stations in the Druze localities, the fire could have been put out in short order, even with the East wind and the dry trees, before it could develop into a disaster. The Ussafiyeh station could have safeguarded the whole Carmel area, which is always liable to burn. Look at the episode of the prophet Elisha and the prophets of Baal on the Carmel (1 Kings 18:38): “then the fire of the Lord fell. . .” But perhaps Eli Yishai and his folks don’t read the Bible as frequently as this atheist.

The neglect of the Druze localities had a dramatic effect on our ability to extinguish a fire on the Carmel. The 42 victims paid with their lives for this racism.

THE FIRE was a kind of dress rehearsal. In Israel, people don’t say “If a war breaks out” but rather “When the next war breaks out”. It is quite certain that if another war breaks out, it will dwarf the Carmel fire. Thousands of missiles will fall on all parts of Israel, causing many fires simultaneously.

No one is ready for that. The same government that is sabotaging all peace efforts and is leading us towards war – is not ready for war on any level.

Even without this danger, it is clear that the political establishment is in need of a general overhaul, nothing less. That is impossible with types like Eli Yishai and his master, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, who proclaimed this week that the courageous female police officer, Ahuva Tomer, and the 41 cadets who were killed by the fire died because they broke the sabbath. Neither with types like Binyamin Netanyahu and his cabinet, nor with the so-called “opposition”.

What is needed now is nothing less than an awakening of the “silent majority”. They must understand that by their indifference, they are no less guilty than the politicians who were, after all, elected by them. Nothing will move unless the passive public becomes active. Mass protests, big demonstrations, joint action by intellectuals and others. Only thus can civil society assert itself and bring about the total overhaul that has become a burning necessity.