

Bread and the Circus

I WAS surprised when, towards the end of 1975, I received an invitation from the Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin, to meet him at his residence. He opened the door himself, poured me a glass of whisky, poured one for himself, and without any further ado asked me: "Tell me, Uri, have you decided to destroy all the doves in the Labor Party?"

Some weeks before, my magazine, Haolam Hazeh ("This World"), had started to publish disclosures about the corrupt dealings of the candidate for President of the Central Bank, Asher Yadlin. On the eve of the conversation, we had also started to publish suspicions concerning the Minister of Housing, Avraham Ofer. Both were leaders of the Labor "doves".

I answered that, unfortunately, I could not offer immunity to corrupt politicians, even if their political positions were close to mine. These are separate matters.

I TOLD this story this week at a conference held by Tel Aviv University devoted to a new book by Prof. Yossi Shain, "The Language of Corruption".

The panel was very mixed. There were two former Ministers of Justice – Yossi Beilin, the chairman of the "Geneva Initiative", and Daniel Friedman, a right-winger whose unrestrained attacks on the Supreme Court had aroused public indignation; Yedidia Stern, a national-religious intellectual who is advocating reconciliation with the secular camp, and retired General Yitzhak Ben-Israel of the Air Force and the Israeli Space Agency, a member of the last Knesset for the Kadima party. I was introduced as the creator of Israel's investigative journalism, who was responsible for the exposure of the first big corruption affairs that rocked the nation.

Prof. Shain vigorously attacked those who fought against corruption - including judges, police officers, prosecutors and such. He claimed that they endanger Israeli democracy and undermine national strength. These two words – "national strength"- are typical of the Right.

And indeed, everybody knows that corruption affairs are currently occupying the center of the public stage. A former President of the state is awaiting judgment in a rape trial. A former Prime Minister is suspected of accepting fat bribes. A former Finance Minister is in prison. A former senior minister has been convicted of indecent conduct for forcing his tongue into the mouth of a female army officer (it happened on the day the government decided to launch Lebanon War II). The Foreign Minister is under investigation. A long list of assorted politicians, senior civil servants and army officers are in various stages of investigation and prosecution.

Shain's book does not deal with the affairs themselves, but with the place they occupy in public discourse. He

believes that they should be taken off the headlines and removed from center stage.

His arguments deserve consideration.

IN THE headlines, corruption scandals often fill the space that should have been devoted to the matters that are crucial to our future.

Take, for example, two topical cases.

Case 1: A Knesset committee has just adopted a law that enables "reception committees" of "communal localities" with less than 500 families to refuse would-be residents not to their liking.

The law, which will come into force in a matter of days, is designed to circumvent the judgment of the Supreme Court forbidding the refusal to admit Arabs. The wording of the law is a masterpiece of verbal acrobatics, in order to avoid the use of the word "Arab". But the meaning is clear to everybody.

An investigation by the Arab "Adala" organization has shown that the 695 agricultural and urban communities to which the law will apply occupy the greater part of the lands that belong to the government (most of which, by the way, were expropriated from Arab owners after the foundation of the state). Almost all the real estate of Israel belongs to the government.

This is a clear case of racial segregation, of the kind that existed in the US against Jews and blacks. There it disappeared 50 years ago. It concerns the very essence of the State of Israel. It turns the status of Israel's Arab citizens, 20% of the population, into a time bomb.

(Lately, the chief rabbi of Safed, a government employee, has decreed that selling or letting apartments to Arabs is a sin. Before 1948, Safed was a mixed town with an Arab majority. Mahmoud Abbas was born there. The day before yesterday, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, the unquestioned leader of the Oriental Jewish community, also decreed that selling land to "foreigners" – meaning the Arabs who have been living here for more than a thousand years before the venerable rabbi himself was brought to this country from Iraq – is expressly forbidden by the Jewish religion.)

Case 2: A senior army officer has distributed a document that describes an alleged plot by the incoming Chief of Staff (Yoav Galant) to smear the present Chief of Staff (Gabi Ashkenazi). The document is a forgery, and many signs indicate that it originated in the immediate surroundings of Ashkenazi. It appears that the forger is a personal friend of Ashkenazi and his wife. The State Comptroller is now investigating the matter.

A juicy affair, by any standard. An intrigue in the highest echelons of the army.

How were these two matters covered by the media? The first one was mentioned a few times. The second has occupied the headlines for months now, with no

end in sight.

NO DOUBT, the big corruption scandals help the media – and the public at large – to push aside the central problems of our existence: the occupation, the elimination of the chances for peace, the enlargement of the settlements, the continuing blockade of Gaza, the racist laws against the Arab minority in Israel proper, all the dangers connected with the ongoing 130-year-old conflict between us and the Palestinians.

The public does not want to hear about this. It wants all these matters to disappear from its sight, so as to be left to enjoy life. This is a national exercise of escapism. It is much more convenient to deal with a forged document in the safe of the Chief of Staff, Ashkenazi, than to deal with the war crimes committed in the course of the “Cast Lead” operation, whose commander was Ashkenazi.

It is much nicer to pursue the private affairs of public personalities who are caught in flagrante: the Philippine maid illegally employed by Ehud Barak, the air ticket fraud of Ehud Olmert, the long tongue of Haim Ramon, the fat bribes handed out to municipal leaders in Jerusalem for a permit to build an architectural monstrosity on a hill overlooking the center of the city.

The rulers of ancient Rome gave the masses panem et circenses (bread and circus games) to take their minds off matters of state. Our corruption affairs, which follow each other in quick succession, are ersatz circus games.

ALREADY WHILE serving as editor-in-chief of Haolam Hazeh, when we were conducting the fight against government corruption, I was conscious of the dangers inherent in such a campaign.

More than once I was troubled by the thought that when we reveal the repulsive doings of corrupt politicians, we may be encouraging the public to detest all politicians, indeed politics as such. Are we not helping to create a public climate of “they are all corrupt” and opening an abyss between the public and the political system?

If politics stinks, good people will not opt for a political career. Politics will be left to people of low intelligence, bereft of talent and ethical standards, even criminal elements. The results are already obvious in the present Knesset.

The loathing of politics and politicians can pave the

way to fascism. Fascist movements all over the world exploit the contempt for politicians in order to arouse the longing for a “strong man”, who will turn the rascals out.

ALL THIS may lead to the conclusion that we should reduce the fight against corruption, or at least refrain from talking about it.

But this is a very dangerous idea.

A society that confers immunity on corrupt leaders is digging its own grave. That is the way the Roman republic rotted and imploded. This has happened to many states since then, even in our lifetime. It is not the talk about corruption that destroys democracy, but corruption itself. Corruption cannot be swept under the carpet for long. Even if the media were to stop dancing around it, rumors would get around and undermine trust in government even more.

When ministers fill public positions with their political protégés or their relatives, the management of public affairs and monies is turned over to the incompetent and/or the dishonest. The best and the brightest are pushed aside by “political appointments”. When politicians are bought – quite simply – by business tycoons, they are compelled to serve them against the public interest. The quality of leadership goes down, and incompetents decide our fate in matters of life and death, peace or war.

This is not a specifically Israeli problem. Corruption rules many countries. Some believe that the US is more corrupt than Israel. Just now the Supreme Court there has opened the gates to corruption even wider, allowing large corporations to buy politicians almost openly. True, unlike us, Americans kick out politicians who have been caught. (Remember the immortal words of Vice President Spiro Agnew: “The bastards changed the rules and didn’t tell me!”)

THE STRUGGLE against the occupation and the fight against corruption do not contradict each other. On the contrary, they complement one another.

The occupation destroys our ethical standards. A society that loses its repugnance of the daily cruelty in the occupied territories loses also its resistance to corruption.

The occupation is a life-threatening disease, corruption is “simply” nausea. But if the patient is nauseous, no medicine will stay down.