

When the Kettle Calls the Pot Black

I CANNOT say that I ever liked Ehud Olmert. But now I almost feel sorry for him.

It is not pleasant to see how they pounce on him, like jackals and hyenas fighting over a carcass.

And that also raises some questions.

WAS OLMERT the only fallible human being in this paradise? Not at all. The stories about the envelopes stuffed with cash, the cigars and the luxury suites in posh hotels fire the imagination, but the hedonism of Olmert is no different from that of Benjamin Netanyahu or Ehud Barak. When Barak accuses Olmert it is like the kettle calling the pot black.

Netanyahu lived like a king in expensive hotels paid for by kind donors who, of course, ask for nothing in return, whose sole purpose in life is to allow him to revel in luxury. As for Barak - after decades of service as an army officer with a salary that did not reach the sky and some years as a cabinet minister with a similar income, he disappeared from public view for a short while and reappeared as a rich man. He bought a luxury apartment in one of the most expensive buildings in Tel Aviv, a structure that is a byword for ostentatious wealth. How does one get so rich in such a short time? Could it be by using connections acquired in the service of the state?

Olmert was a pioneer of this method. When still a very junior politician, just out of law school, he got rich through his connections with the heads of government departments which he made as a parliamentary aide.

The closer the connection between capital and power, and the more contact there is between local and foreign tycoons on the one hand and politicians and generals on the other, the more profusely corruption flowers. This is an almost automatic process.

WHAT DOES that say about our politicians? Simply: that none of them is a leader.

A real leader is not just a person with an aim. A leader is a person with one aim and one aim alone.

In the best case, that is a positive aim, to which he devotes all his life. In the worst case it is power as such he craves. But in any case, a real leader is totally devoted to the aim he has adopted, and pursues no other - not money, not enjoyment, not a life of luxury.

Such a person was David Ben-Gurion, and such was Menachem Begin. They did not have to decide to live "modest lives" and dispense with luxury - they were just not interested in luxuries, money or the easy life. For them, these things were quite unimportant. From the moment they opened their eyes in the morning until they closed them again at night, nothing interested them but their aim. One can add Yitzhak Rabin to the list.

The priorities of a mere politician are quite different: he wants power in order to enjoy the amenities it brings with it. Power as a means. The amenities of power - money, luxuries, high-class restaurants, prestigious hotels - are the aim.

According to this definition, the entire recent and current crop of politicians - Moshe Dayan, Ezer Weitzman, Shimon Peres, the two Ehuds and Netanyahu - are all just ordinary politicians.

WITH OLMERT the problem is specially severe, because of his personal background.

People ask themselves: What did he need it for? Did he not foresee that in the end everything would become public, that his friends and admirers would abandon him? Was it worthwhile to risk his whole future for a vacation in Italy, expensive cigars, luxury suites in hotels and upgrading his flights?

The conditions in which he lived as a child probably had something to do with his behavior as an adult. He grew up in the 50s in a neighborhood set up by the Herut party for ex-Irgun members in the village of Binyamina near Haifa. It was a poor neighborhood, and the children of the old-established village, which belonged to the political mainstream, looked down upon its inhabitants. Children can be cruel. In those days the Herut Party (today's Likud) was far from power and the national consensus, their members were still considered "outsiders" who did not belong.

When a person with such a background ascends the political ladder, the possibilities that open up before him are liable to intoxicate him. A world of pampering and pandering is there for the taking. And when an American "exile Jew" - an utterly contemptuous term for Jews abroad - a professional schnorrer, who considers it a great honor to support him, comes and offers him all the goodies, the temptation is just too great.

There is a special angle to the Olmert story. Perhaps because of his childhood feeling of not belonging, he desperately craves Haverim. "Haver" is a typical Hebrew word denoting comrade, friend, pal, army buddy. (Bill Clinton famously ended his eulogy for Rabin with the Hebrew words "Shalom, Haver!") Olmert needs many Haverim, Haverim all the time. Haverim who adore him, especially intellectuals and/or rich people, who admire and love him.

He loves to pamper his friends, to take them with him whenever he goes on journeys and vacations. He showers them with warmth and charm, slaps their shoulders, devotes time and attention to them. For him that was also of the attractions of power.

One of these friends, the lawyer Uri Messer, is mortified. Not because Messer broke the law. Not because he violated the norms of morality and democracy. But because Messer "ratted" on Olmert to the police. (Messer himself used the word "stinker", the Israeli equivalent of informer.) Like a schoolboy: one does not squeal to the teacher. He tortures himself. As Messer himself says, he is not a "psycho" but a self-tortured man who betrayed a Haver.

ANOTHER ANGLE to the matter: the relationship between Olmert and Morris Talansky, who supplied him for many years with the stuffed envelopes.

Talansky treated him as a slave treats his master. After some time, Olmert started to treat him as a servant. I almost said: as a colonial master treats an inferior native.

This is not unusual. Many Israelis treat the Jews of the Diaspora as if they were colonial subjects, who are obligated to serve and support the aristocrats of the "mother" country. Thinking and speaking about the American Jews, they inadvertently repeat anti-Semitic stereotypes. Talansky suits this stereotype perfectly. Olmert saw him like this, and that is how he saw himself. When Olmert came to America and honored him with his presence before his Jewish neighbors and acquaintances, it raised his status, and for this he was prepared to pay - and pay a lot.

A QUESTION presents itself: Why do these fatal scandals always break when a leader takes a step towards peace, or at least pretends to take a step towards peace?

I do not believe that there is a conspiracy. In general I don't tend to believe in conspiracies, though there are these, too.

But we have here, I believe, a more profound phenomenon. The main thrust of the current establishment is towards occupation, expansion and war. Therefore, when a corruption scandal concerns a leader moving in that direction, the scandal is smothered in its infancy. But when the scandal involves a leader who is making gestures in the direction of peace, the scandal reaches huge proportions.

That happened to Sharon on the eve of the dismantling of the Gaza Strip settlements. It is happening now to Olmert when he dares to speak about peace with Syria and the evacuation of the Golan settlements.

LORD ACTON is famous for his dictum: "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." In the same vein, we say that occupation corrupts, and total occupation corrupts totally.

Ehud Olmert is the typical product of the cynicism and lawlessness that have infected this country in the 41 years of occupation.

That does not mean that there was no corruption before. There certainly was.

In my view, the corruption was born together with the state, and not by accident. A lot has been said about the Naqba on the occasion of Israel's 60th anniversary. But one phenomenon that accompanied the Naqba is consistently ignored: the massive theft of abandoned Arab property.

In the course of the 1948 flight and expulsion, some 100 to 150 thousand Arab families abandoned their homes. Many of them lived in simple dwellings, but not a few were living in elegant houses in Jaffa, Jerusalem and Haifa. What happened to the interior of these homes? To the tens of thousands of expensive carpets, fauteuils, refrigerators, wardrobes, pianos? Where did the inventories of shops and stores go?

They disappeared.

Some of them did reach government storerooms and were distributed to new immigrants. I have never seen a report on this. The huge majority were just stolen.

Generally, not by the combat soldiers who captured these places. They fought and moved on. But after them came the rear echelon, the transport and quartermaster troops, the cronies of people in power, who came with lorries and trucks and loaded up everything they came across.

That was no secret. We knew and talked about this at the time. For years one could see the sofas and armchairs covered with velvet draping in private living rooms and offices. But the phenomenon was never investigated, and later on was smothered and suppressed.

I have spoken about this several times in the Knesset. I mentioned the Biblical story of Achan, the son of Carmi, who during the conquest of Jericho violated God's command not to plunder. As punishment, the Israelites were routed at the next battle. "Israel has sinned, and they have also transgressed my covenant which I commanded them: for they have even taken of the accursed thing, and have also stolen, and dissembled also, and they have put it even among their own stuff." (Joshua 7:11) Joshua executed Achan and his whole family by stoning. He was for genocide of the Canaanites but against plundering.

The theft in broad daylight of the property abandoned by individuals already violated the ethos that was accepted before the foundation of the state. The denial and suppression made it worse. But the large-scale corruption, whose bitter fruit we see now in all its ugliness, started indeed with the occupation in 1967.

The occupation is corrupt, and it corrupts by its very nature. It denies all human rights, including the right to property. It fills the occupied territories with an atmosphere of general lawlessness. It enriches the occupier and everybody connected with him. It creates a climate of wanton cynicism, an environment of "anything goes". Such an atmosphere does not stop at the Green Line. It permeates the state of the conqueror.

That's where the rot set in.