

Petty Corruption

Uri Avnery

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MANY YEARS AGO I received a phone call from the Prime Minister's office. I was told that Yitzhak Rabin wanted to see me in private.

Rabin opened the door himself. He was alone in the residence. He led me to a comfortable seat, poured two generous glasses of whisky for me and himself and started without further ado—he abhorred small talk—“Uri, have you decided to destroy all the doves in the Labor Party?”

My news magazine, *Haolam Hazeh*, was conducting a campaign against corruption and had accused two prominent Labor leaders, the new president of the Central Bank and the Minister for Housing. Both were indeed members of the moderate wing of the party.

I explained to Rabin that in the fight against corruption I could make no exceptions for politicians who were close to my political outlook. Corruption was a cause in itself.

THE FIRST generation of the founders of Israel was free of corruption. Corruption was unthinkable.

Indeed, purism was carried to extremes. Once a prominent Labor leader was criticized for building for himself a villa in a Jerusalem suburb. There was not the slightest suggestion of corruption. He had inherited the money. But it was considered scandalous for a Labor leader to live in a private villa. A “comrades’ court” decided to expel him from the party, and that was the end of his career.

At the same time, an official residence was built for the Foreign Minister, so he could receive foreign dignitaries in decent surroundings. The minister at that time, Moshe Sharett, believed that it was wrong to hold on to his own private apartment, so he sold it and donated the money to several charitable associations.

THE NEXT generation was quite different. It behaved as if it owned the place by divine right.

Its most typical representative was Moshe Dayan. He was born in the country and David Ben-Gurion appointed him Chief of Staff. In this capacity he directed several “retaliation raids” across the border and then the 1956 attack on Egypt which ended in a resounding victory (helped by the Franco-British invasion of the Suez Canal area behind the back of the Egyptian army).

Dayan was an amateur archeologist. He stuffed his pri-

ivate villa (by that time, villas were already allowed) with ancient artifacts that he dug up all over the country. That was strictly illegal, since unprofessional digging destroyed historical evidence, making it impossible to define the date. But everybody winked. After all, Dayan was a national hero.

Then my magazine published a shattering revelation: Dayan did not just keep the artifacts in his garden. He sold them all over the world, with a personal signed note that shot their price up. This revelation triggered a huge scandal and inflamed a lot of hatred—towards me. In a public opinion poll published that year I was chosen as “the most hated person” in the country, beating the chief of the Communist party to the title.¹

Dayan's brother-in-law was Ezer Weitzman, the general responsible for the air force that won the fabulous victory in the 1967 Six-day War. It was an open secret that Weitzman was kept by an American Jewish millionaire and lived in a luxurious villa in Caesarea, the most prestigious place in the country (where Binyamin Netanyahu now has his own private villa).

FOR SOME years this has been a general fashion. Every Jewish millionaire in America had “his” Israeli general, whom he kept in style and who was his pride and joy. For rich Jews, having an Israeli general at family feasts was an obligatory status symbol.

Ariel Sharon, for example. The son of poor parents, inhabitants of a cooperative village, he finished his army career and lo and behold—he suddenly was the owner of a huge ranch. It was given to him as a present by an ex-Israeli American multi-millionaire.²

That was at a time when Israeli generals were not only heroes at home, but all over the world. Moshe Dayan, easily recognizable by his black eye-patch, was a hero in Los Angeles no less than in Haifa.

All these generals (except Ezer Weitzman, who came from a rich family) grew up in very straitened circumstances. Their parents were members of *kibbutzim* (communal villages) or *moshavim* (cooperative villages), all of which were at the time extremely poor. Sharon, a *moshav*-boy, told me that he walked every day for half an hour to his high school and back to save the bus fare.

¹Such polls have since been discontinued.

²Rumors had it that the millionaire deducted the money from his US taxes.

That was true for the next generation of leaders, too. Ehud Olmert, the ex-prime minister—now in prison for corruption—grew up in a very poor neighborhood and became obsessed with owning expensive things. The ex-president of the state, Moshe Katzav, who shares a prison with him, was sentenced for rape, not corruption, but also grew up in poverty as a new immigrant.³

Ehud Barak, a former Chief of Staff and Prime Minister, is now amassing a large fortune by "giving advice" to foreign governments. He grew up in a poor village.

I myself was spared this craving for money, though I, too, lived in utmost poverty after coming to Palestine at the age of ten. Luckily, before that I grew up in very well-to-do circumstances in Germany. Since my family and I were much happier in Israel than in Germany, I learned that happiness has nothing to do with riches.

ALL THIS crosses my mind because we are bombarded almost daily with accusations of corruption against Binyamin Netanyahu and his highly unpopular wife, Sarah.

Sarah'le, as she is commonly called, a former air stewardess who met her husband on a flight, seems to be a shrew who tyrannizes the staff of the official residence. Some of these have sued her. They revealed that she pilfers the public purse for her private needs.

But what is really disturbing is that Sarah Netanyahu, who was not elected by anyone, seems to be in charge of all senior public appointments. No one can reach these heights without being interviewed and approved by her personally.

She has appointed all three senior law-enforcement officials: the Legal Advisor (actually the Super-Attorney General), the powerful State Comptroller and the Chief of Police.

If so, this was an act of foresight. Because now the three of them are sitting day and night and consulting each other about what to do with the flood of disclosures about the Netanyahu family's financial affairs. They desperately want to avoid indicting the Netanyahus for anything, but that becomes increasingly difficult, since they are subject to the supervision of the Supreme Court.

I have already reported on some of these disclosures, but new ones pop up every week. It has become a kind of national sport.

It began with the disclosure that before becoming Prime Minister, at a time when he was in and out of government, Netanyahu used to be paid twice or thrice for his first-class air tickets by different unsuspecting institutions, without declaring that as income. This is now called in Israeli slang "Bibitours".

Since then he has been involved in all kinds of affairs bordering on criminal corruption which are in various stages of "examination". New ones are added to the list all the

time. The three Netanyahu-appointed legal officers are in constant consultation about whether to order a criminal investigation, which might compel him to leave office at least temporarily.

The climax was achieved when a Jewish financier accused in France of colossal fraud disclosed to the court that he had privately donated to Netanyahu a million Euros and paid Bibi's extremely expensive hotel bills in many cities, including the French riviera. The exact sums are in doubt, but it is not denied that Netanyahu received from the man, who was already under suspicion of corruption at the time, large sums of money.

The generous Israeli taxpayers (including me) paid for the five days of Bibi's stay in New York last fall, to the tune of some 600,000 dollars. This sum—more than 10 thousand dollars per day—included the payment for his private hairdresser (1600 dollars) and his make-up woman (1750 dollars). The purpose of the trip was to address the UN General Assembly. I wonder how much each word cost.

The information was disclosed by order of the court under the Freedom of Information Law.

The Israeli public laps it all up. No one seems to get angry. Jokes abound about the "royal couple".

For many of Netanyahu's own voters, mostly poor people of Oriental Jewish origin, the disclosures only show that he is a clever person, who knows how to exploit opportunities as they themselves would love to do.

HOW TO treat these disclosures, which dominate so many TV news programs and newspaper headlines?

I must admit that I treat them with some disdain. What are these instances of petty corruption compared to Netanyahu's actions and non-actions which have a direct influence of the fate of Israel?

I consider Binyamin Netanyahu as the grave-digger of our state, the man who sets the course towards catastrophe, the man who obstructs any chance for peace. Just this week Netanyahu proudly told his party colleagues that he will "never" agree to conduct negotiations based on the Arab 2002 peace initiative, which includes the end of the occupation, the setting up of the State of Palestine and the evacuation of settlements. Many people believe that this refusal is fatal.

Facing these calamities, why get excited about some little corruption?

But then I remember the case of Al Capone, the gangster who was responsible for huge crimes, including the cold-blooded murder of many people, but who was finally convicted and sent to prison only for income tax evasion.

If Netanyahu can be convicted of petty corruption and compelled to resign—isn't that just what the country needs?

³The current joke has it that after a concert in prison the warden announces: "Everybody remain seated until the President and the Prime Minister leave."