

Amnon Dankner: Decline to brutality – I am ashamed

14 January 2011

IOA Editor: It is good that Mr. Dankner has finally awakened from his self-inflicted vacuous state of mind, as former editor of Maariv, one of Israel's two most popular rags. Unfortunately, the extent of his appreciation of Israel's decline is remarkably limited. Indeed, very little and very late. Yet, the fact that a figure who spent decades at the heart of Israel's propaganda machine expresses regret and disappointment in the state of the Jewish State is somewhat reassuring, despite the repulsive feelings one is overwhelmed by when reading his statement.

By Amnon Dankner, Ma'ariv [p.B22] - 7 Jan 2011

Hebrew: www.nrg.co.il/online/1/ART2/197/845.html

English: <http://australiansforpalestine.com/36359>

Translated from Hebrew by the Hebrew Press translation service of the Israel News (Daily Summary of the Hebrew Media) for embassies and journalists. English version published by Australians for Palestine.

It was truly wonderful to spend the past few years without publicly expressing any opinions. I published stories in these pages every week in which even the finest minds could not find a connection with the stormy current affairs, and had a feeling that people changed their attitude towards me, and now harboured various degrees of animosity and hostility towards me not because of my opinions, but simply because I was generally an annoying person. [...]

However, if I am denying myself the pleasure of writing a story this week and denying it to those of you who became accustomed to reading my stories here, and I am daring to stand up and voice an opinion and even voice it loudly and pound on the table once or twice—this is because I have felt lately that it has become shameful to be an Israeli, and a decent person must feel this shame and blush deeply and clear his throat and whisper to himself the question, what should we do, what should we do, for heaven's sake, and perhaps even reach far-reaching conclusions.

Because it is fairly clear already that if our life here continues as it has been developing, then decent, moderate, balanced and humane people will not be able to live here. Before our eyes, with growing speed, Israeli society is changing, the political culture is changing, balances are disrupted and checks are tossed to the blazes, in the terrible wind that is blowing in our lives and quickly colouring them in darkening shades of black.

It seems that things that were bottled up in the Israeli soul, well hidden due to the shame, are suddenly erupting with a sense of release and capering in a disgraceful manner in full view. It is now permissible to be a racist, and permissible to take pride in it, and it is permissible to kick democracy and take pride in that, and it is permissible to cause injustice and exploitation and trample people's rights, if the people in question are Arabs, and it is permissible to take pride in this too. There are MKs that engage in all this with great skill, and with smiles that cannot fail to send a shiver down one's back. There are entire parties whose colour and music arouse shocking and horrific memories.

Sometimes I try to do the following exercise: To think that I went to sleep sometime in the 1980s or 1990s, and what I have been experiencing here recently is no more than a nightmare. After all, this cannot be. Not here. Not among Jews. And yet—it is happening.

When people comment on this venomously around the world, we object almost instinctively and say, no, that is too much already. It is only anti-Semitic hate propaganda. But with a hand on the heart — are we not becoming, from year to year, more and more like our monstrous caricature, which is drawn by our worst enemies? For really, where are we going? Think for yourselves, as unpleasant as this may be: Are we becoming more or less racist? More or less democratic? More or less decent? And alas, in our decline to brutality, within this terrible deterioration, if only we could at least take comfort in the fact that we were perhaps becoming worse and more contemptible, but also safer and better protected. But once again, with a hand on the heart: Is this true, or is it exactly the opposite?

For it is not only a disgrace to be an Israeli today, it is also deathly frightening. I have lived here for many years. In fact, I think I am already teetering on the verge of being defined as an old man, and I have never observed in those around me such a peculiar sense of real existential fear hidden under a thin veneer of complacent pleasure in the

<http://www.israeli-occupation.org/2011-01-14/amnon-dankner-decline-to-brutality-i-am-ashamed/>

good life. The Israeli suppresses and suppresses the horrific images that tickle the bottom of his consciousness, and yet they rise to the surface.

Everyone knows that the next war will be waged mainly in our home front, and to a large degree will be decided there. Everyone knows that tens of thousands of missiles are aimed at this home front, just as everyone knows that it is completely unprepared for this kind of war. When the public is notified, on one hand, that it must re-equip itself with gas mask kits, and on the other hand, it is told that nearly half the population will have to manage without them, this certainly does not strengthen the confidence in the leaders of the establishment; in any case, one's hair stands on end when recalling that in the past months they were engaged mainly in dirty infighting and various intrigues between the bureaus of the defence minister and the chief of staff.

When such a terrible war is expected, it is no reason for displays of defeatism – that is true. However, it should spur the government to make every reasonable effort to prevent the war and improve the state's international standing and its strategic ties with the United States. But clearly, what is really happening is the opposite. It has been years since Israel's standing in the world has been in such decline. It has been years since its relations with the US have been so poor. It has been years since there was such a complete freeze in what is known as the "peace process."

Following the cliché that Israel has no foreign policy, only domestic policy, it would be accurate to say that a government such as the one in power, which relies on too many racist characters with fascist tendencies, who speak in a tone of thugs that are suddenly peering out from the worst pages of history — is being propelled by the tailwind of racist invective and fascist tendencies far from a path of political arrangements and towards the direction of aggressive and rigid entrenchment.

Another terrible thing is that the Israeli elite and intelligentsia has become weary in the face of all this, and it has long since thrown up its hands in despair. I am referring to its large mainstream, and not the extremist fringes that have long since become lost to us and intermingled with our worst enemies. This elite no longer mobilizes for any effort, not for petitions, not for rallies, not for demonstrations, not for protest vigils, not for sit-ins.

Conversely, for many years it has largely ceased to make a significant contribution to the state in the important area of enlisting in IDF field units. It lolls in the large cities and luxurious garden suburbs, and pins its hopes on one draft year after another of national-religious youth, Russian immigrants and residents of development towns and Ethiopians, to guard it in that army of theirs.

The Israeli elite and intelligentsia has not succeeded in producing any significant sign of life that would signal that they are willing to fight for the image of the state and society in Israel. Take, for example, the demonstrations being held in Sheikh Jarrah in East Jerusalem and in Bilin, near the separation fence. These are two acts of injustice and exploitation that are great and serious. Acts of injustice and exploitation on a Biblical scale. Acting in the way of Sodom towards helpless populations. Acts by which every decent person's heart should be outraged.

But here, in the face of these things, the better part of Israeli society (and I am not referring here to political affiliation - in my eyes, decent right wingers should also object to all this) is not capable of producing large and impressive demonstrations of thousands and tens of thousands, or an impressive chorus of voices with compelling moral strength. Here and there, there are demonstrations of several hundred people at best, and the arena is left to activists from extremist streams, who lack legitimacy in Israeli society, and therefore their acts convince no one.

In Sheikh Jarrah, for those who do not recall exactly, we are talking in brief about the principle that property in East Jerusalem that was Jewish before the War of Independence, and has been inhabited by Arabs ever since, will be evacuated and returned to its Jewish owners, whereas property in West Jerusalem that was Arab before the War of Independence and has been inhabited by Jews ever since, will be property to which its Arab owners have no rights. Here is what a law of Sodom permits in a state of Sodom.

And in the same state, under the guise of security considerations, lands of Palestinian villages are confiscated for the purpose of building the fence, when the real plan is to build on the land a residential neighbourhood of a new ultra-Orthodox city, and when the High Court of Justice intervenes and orders that part of the land be returned to its owners (for Israel is Sodom with sudden flashes of justice), the authorities ignore it.

Cannot one fail to be ashamed of a state that does such things? Of a state whose laws enable such acts? Of a state in which such things pass with an indifferent reaction of an overwhelming majority of the public and an overwhelming majority of the elite and intelligentsia?

<http://www.israeli-occupation.org/2011-01-14/amnon-dankner-decline-to-brutality-i-am-ashamed/>

The terrible thing is that one cannot, with all fairness, fail to be grateful to the few people, some of them haters of Israel from around the world, some of them Israelis with opinions that are very far from reasonable, who keep the flame burning and remind us of our sins in their weekly demonstrations. I do not like them, and I am averse to the violent path that they sometimes employ, but they are there instead of all of us, in our place, we who are immersed in our hedonistic indolence and clinging to the last days of the great illusion.

All the fine things that we say about ourselves, all the correct things that we say about the conflict, shatter in the face of our actions, which join together greed and an appetite for land, arrogance and cruelty and stupidity and malice, and wickedness and discrimination and exploitation of the poor. How is it that there are so many terrible people, in high-placed and influential positions, who are capable of perpetrating these things? We are not talking about things that are done under pressure, in distress, under battle conditions, when the cannons are thundering, but rather decisions that are made in rooms in which the only noise heard is the whir of an air conditioner.

How is it, for example, that there are people who sat down and counted items that serve to pamper children and took them off the list of goods that it was permitted to bring into the Gaza Strip? They sat down and sorted candy and halva and toys, and who knows what else, and crossed out with a pen and marked an X and explained to us that it was important for toppling the Hamas regime, and we took these malicious idiots seriously and believed them, and after what happened with the *Mavi Marmara* we lifted the candy blockade and even permitted them to bring cilantro into the Gaza Strip, and no disaster happened except for the fact that we left a huge shame lying before the gates of Gaza, the shame of our own stupidity and malice.

And what is most terrible is that the lion's share, the extremist, fulminating and wicked share of the stupidity and malice wears a kippa on its head, and is an observant Jew, and its ugly head surfaces in rabbis' letters and murderous books and racist pamphlets and a rebbitzens' letter and riots in Arab villages and neo-Nazi statements in the Knesset; and how infuriating is the position that is voiced all too often by one rabbi or another, who does us a great favour by disapproving of all this, on the grounds one does not have to say everything that one thinks. This means that it is permissible to think this way, it is all right, and only for fear of the evil eye should one be silent until the day comes when it will be permissible to speak already, and then we will be able to stick it to the Gentiles all the way.

I call this the most terrible thing, because for a person like me, who hoped for years that the national religious would sober up from the dream of the greater Land of Israel and the settlements, and that the ultra-Orthodox would stop emulating them in the insane nationalism that has adhered to them in the past decades—for a person like me, who feels a special affinity with this public due to the way he was raised and educated, the sense of despair upon seeing it drift into the ugliest realms of our life is particularly stinging.

This sense of despair is compounded by the assessment that Israeli society, due to demographic processes, is becoming increasingly religious, and this necessarily means — woe is the linkage! — increasingly nationalist and benighted, increasingly racist and venomous, increasingly violent and isolationist.

For a man of my age — who wasted significant portions of his life writing in the newspapers about these matters, and now sees that he did so due to a large amount of false hopes, illusions, wishful thinking and naïveté — what is happening now is a particularly bitter kind of sobering up. Seeing Israeli society quickly changing its face and taking on a form that you never thought you would see outside your nightmares — that makes the heart shrink. Starting to become ashamed of being an Israeli, and knowing with some degree of certainty that the shame will continue to grow, that is heartrendingly discouraging.

Amnon Dankner is an Israeli newspaper editor and author. He was the editor of the mass-circulation daily Ma'ariv for six years. In the 1970s, Dankner was the spokesman of the Israeli Ministry of Education and the Jewish Agency.