

Blog Post: The Essential Causes of Israel's Self-Destructiveness

A correspondent (in our most recent go-around) writes, “the essential cause(s) of Israel’s self-destructiveness remains a mystery to me “ So I am going to try to demystify it (them).

1. The original slogan of Shalom Achshav was “The Occupation Corrupts.” In truth, that was a remarkable insight to have had so early on. Forty years sine the Occupation began and 28 years since SA was founded, it is now obvious to all save the willfully blind (of whom there are more than a few). It is the sort of thing, however, that even people with 20-20 vision prefer to ignore or repress. And in time what was once outrageous becomes the norm. One gets used to that. The West Bank was once called, in Hebrew, “hashtachim” – “the territories.” These days, you’re far more likely to hear reference to Yehudah and Shomron (Judaea and Samaria), the Biblical names for the area.

Take a 19 or 20 year-old kid and plunk him down at a checkpoint in the West Bank, with authority over a swarm of people seeking to pass, people including pregnant women and old men, tell him he must be tough but remain humane and then wait and see how soon he coarsens. Take the settlers of Modi’in Illit, mostly *haredi*, ultra-Orthodox, who live on West Bank land but within the security barrier (“the fence”) and ask whether they feel any compunction about the residents of Bil’in, an adjacent Palestinian village, and count the affirmative answers on the fingers of your right hand, which you will find to be more than sufficient for the task. Or, more immediately, go see the remarkable film, *Encounter Point*, due out in DVD in June, a rare and deeply moving glimpse – no, a long look – at sorrow and hope.

The Occupation corrupts.

2. Power corrupts.

That’s an old one, of course, and actually a deviation from Lord Acton’s original formulation: “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” It’s also a bit dangerous, since it seems to suggest that impotence is a virtue. It isn’t; impotence, too, corrupts.

But it may be that when impotence is transformed into remarkable potency in the blink of an eye – or, more precisely, that when a people accustomed to impotence wakes up from that nightmare to find itself, its tiny self, the fourth mightiest power in the world, there’s a bit of an adjustment problem. We know about the *nouveaux riches*, vulgarly conspicuous in display of their new wealth. Why not as well the newly empowered, overplaying their steel hand?

It’s all so new. The story that captures it, at least in part, goes this way: A Jew comes to England (from Poland, let’s say) after the war, makes a new life for himself, does very well, and some years later, is invited for the weekend to the country estate of one of England’s wealthiest men. The estate is renowned for its magnificent lawns; some say, the most remarkable lawns in the world. The weekend is delightful. As they sip their port just before the somewhat dazzled guest is to leave, he asks his host, “How do you do it? How is it that your lawns are so perfect?”

The host replies: “Truth to tell, our seed is imported from a remote province of Nepal, our fertilizer from Madagascar. The irrigation pipes are of titanium, imported from Finland. We have a staff of 19 lawn-keepers, of whom 5 have Ph.D.’s from the University of Wisconsin, one in agronomy, two in horticulture, specialists in turf, and two in landscape architecture. And to top it off, our annual budget is four million pounds.

“Now, if you’d like lawns like these, it’s really not that hard: Bring seed from Nepal, fertilizer from Madagascar, irrigation pipes of titanium from Finland, hire at least a dozen lawn-keepers, including not fewer than three Ph.D.’s (I highly recommend Wisconsin), invest no less than four million pounds, wait four hundred years and you, too, can have spectacular lawns.”

Israel has not waited 400 years. Power is new to it. (And now a wealthy – very wealthy – class, as well.) And it does not handle it gracefully.

(Having written that, I now wonder: Who does handle power gracefully? No nation comes immediately to mind.)

3. The electoral system, of course.

The political system is out of control in a variety of ways, and chief among them is the virtually total lack of transparency. I’ll not elaborate on this, since the defects of the electoral system are well known. But it is worth noting that the system as currently structured tends to attract – with some noteworthy exceptions – neither the best nor the brightest. (Then again, who is an American to say that of another system? With 300 million people here, Bush and Kerry were the best we could find?) The solution most observers favor is a mixed system, half the Knesset elected according to the present method (proportional representation, with the entire country being one district) and the other half representing geographic constituencies. I don’t expect that to happen any time soon, nor am I certain – no one can be – that such a change would have a dramatic impact on the political culture.

4. Finally (for the time being), I want to challenge the assumption that underlies the originating question. America, in my view, has been engaged for these last four years in a remarkably and tragically self-destructive war. Ah, you say, that is only a blip. Well, it follows by not that many years the blip known as Vietnam. And then there was the sideshow in Central America. And, going back a bit, a series of episodes; think Mossadegh, for example. Count ‘em up, and the best you can say is that we here can absorb more stupidity than most. After all, we have – even though I think getting past Iraq will be a very different and far more difficult challenge.

Look at the historical record. Is it not littered with examples of self-destructive behavior in very many nations?

There have been moments of brilliance in Israel’s short history, and moments of luck, and notwithstanding the current miasmatic condition, I am not ready to give up. The citizens of Israel have taken a beating these last dozen years are so, a beating for which they bear a significant share of responsibility. That’s what’s meant, I think, by “self-destructive.” And not just at the highest political level. I am more disconcerted these days by the erosion in the educational

system, where Israel's precipitous decline (as measured by international testing) is alarming. And then . . . well, then just about every other sector save only the stock market. Nor is there any white knight on the horizon – and, even if there were, we have learned not to place our faith in white knights. They've come and they've gone and they've invariably disappointed. Nor do I subscribe to a mystical cyclical theory that holds that any period of self-destruction begets a period of self-correction. No, my hope rests mainly with that large (but not yet large enough) number of people in Israel who share the concerns so often expressed here in our ongoing conversation. Some of them, dispirited, have retired to their gardens or their hobbies. But there is, there really is, a new generation of such people. And if in fact this, right now, is – as in some ways it seems to be – a defining moment, then there's a chance they will rise to the occasion and shake the system to its senses. That's the hope; that's what requires of us our attention, our tangible support, our energy. No?

I realize this last is a statement of faith, perhaps even of desperate faith. But it is not blind faith. Yes, I am aware of the very substantial population groups within Israel who see things quite differently, who imagine that Israel can make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. But I not only don't think that can be done, I am also aware that such a purse would not be kosher. And I am surely aware that the Palestinians, too, have messed up and continue to, each side making it easier for the other to vilify it. The Third Commonwealth was not born with a certificate of immortality. Still, it is not fantasy that impels me. I've watched the first generation of peaceniks grow old. Most, to their credit, remain committed, devoted, active. That's comforting, but not longer crucial. Leadership has passed to a younger generation, and there's another just behind them. The ranks have been replenished. So I, sitting here in Boston, know what is required of me – to wit, my best efforts on their behalf and my continuing informed faith in their ultimate success.