

Erel Shalit: The Sacred and the Profane in One Small Space

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Israel is in every sense a small country – not only geographically (the local bus in Ra’anana, where I live, will take you the nine miles cross country from the sea to the border), but *everything* is close, nearby. People are close, sometimes too close to each other – a reason for many to take off to the comfortable anonymity of New York, and the ever-present stream of events may drive you to flee into the tranquility of New Zealand.

The closeness also means a sense of familiarity, of being from the same village, as a classical Israeli song goes. Strangers discover mutual friends, and the cousin of my wife is married to your uncle’s sister-in-law (I guess I got that a bit wrong, it must be like this...). Foreigners and Yekes (German Jews) might feel apprehensive about the widespread, indiscreet lack of distance, as when the saleswoman asks her customer where she bought her necklace, how much she paid, and, yes, it’s nice, but you paid far too much, and at the very least you should have asked to pay in installments, and anyway, says the saleswoman, she has a friend in Rishon who could have given you a much better price.

And while you might believe you walk on solid ground, you may suddenly discover you’re treading archetypal soil. The dividing line between personal and collective, between profane and sacred is thin and sometimes invisible. You just need to hear the siren sounding on Holocaust Remembrance Day or in remembrance of the fallen soldiers, to know that you are inevitably and inextricably part of a greater whole, or see the orthodox protesting excavation of archeological sites, to sense the ancestral link.

Like in a Chagall painting from the shtetl, what realistically should be on the ground, floats in the air, and the heavenly may cover the ground like pearls of morning dew. Sometimes, though, all there seems to be is general disorder and bad manners, as if the spirit put on its wings and left for somewhere else, finding a more comfortable dwelling than the noisy and tumultuous crowd that moves through the busy marketplace.

However, at other times, elevated by the spirit, the Holiness and Wholeness of Heavenly Jerusalem blinds the visitor of Earthly Jerusalem, divided by conflict and strife. Suddenly the dullness is gone, and Herman Melville's dry impression of Jerusalem, which he visited in 1857, that there are "stones to right and stones to left ... stony tombs; stony hills & stony hearts... too little to see and too much dust," is replaced by a colorful spectacle of reincarnated Biblical figures. The close proximity between everyday matter and transcendent spirit is sometimes a cause of confusion, and often a cause of concern. It is at night-time that some hear the voices of the saints and the prophets. As if outside of time, the personal merges with the archetypal, internal with external, in what is called the *Jerusalem Syndrome*. (See Elisha Porat's article with this title in *Midstream's* May/June issue of 2007.) In the nocturnal light of the moon the stones of Jerusalem come alive and play out their lunar spectacle. At the plaza in front of the Wall, where centuries of tears squeeze between the cracks, you may find King David playing his harp, or you may welcome the Messiah who has just arrived, or, at Via Dolorosa, you may come across a suffering but resurrected Jesus, who adamantly refuses to rest quietly in what some claim is his family tomb. (Where else, by the way, would you possibly find the tomb of Jesus next to a suburban apartment building? Well, obviously nowhere else, since Jesus did not take sail from here until Paul carried his ideas to the corners of the world.)

For some it seems like the sacred bush in the desert is always burning, yet tempting to come dangerously close; “And the angel of the Lord appeared to Moses in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush; and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed.”

Israel as a state and a country is induced with tremendous projections of an archetypal nature. From the very inception of modern Zionism, Mother Earth in the Land of the Fathers had to be saturated with awe-inspiring desire, in order for the pioneers to overcome the hardships of an all too harsh reality. But also today, Israel is soaked with archetypal projections, whether expectations of redemption or anti-Semitic demonization. One segment of the population prays for *yemot ha-mashiach* (the days of the messiah) while another segment, undoubtedly a larger one, is beset by fears of the madman president of Iran who publicly hopes to wipe Israel off the map.

The very proximity to the archetypal dimension is dangerous, “And God told Moses, Do not come any closer; take off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground.” Like those caught up in the Jerusalem syndrome, there is an increased danger for the individual to identify with those greater forces, leading to a sense of personal inflation. This is of particularly great concern as regards individuals in public positions, who may identify with and be inflated by the role they fulfill. The very requirement of identification manifested for instance in Ben-Gurion’s call to those in state service to Hebraize their names, as part of the process of molding a collective identity. This may strengthen the sense of motivation, feeling induced by a spirit of service. It does, however, require humbleness and integrity, a sense of gratitude of being able to serve an important task. This may pave the way for great statesmanship, as seen for instance in Ben-Gurion or Abba Eban.

This condition, combined with the fact that the issues at stake every day in the exceptional reality of Israel are of immense proportions and consequences as regards war, peace and survival, poses an enormous challenge and burden on the shoulders of holders of public office and political leaders. Too few may possess the personal ability and capable personality to mantle the enormous task, without becoming inflated beyond their 'natural size.' What happens, then, when someone equipped more with a drive for power than an integrated personality, attains positions of authority and leadership? The risk of hubris lurks in every fiber of power and leadership, and when there is no one around to whisper, as in Roman times the old man in the victorious hero's chariot did, "Thou art mortal," the danger increases.

A talented small-town politician, Moshe Katzav, rises through the ranks of party politics because he is the guy with whom the less talented easily can identify with. Inferiority complexes and feelings of neglect are exchanged for the need to gain power and challenge the "elite." But it rings absurd when the President of the country, unlike the braggart of Iran, even if he was manipulated by petty party politics to become citizen number one, feels inferior to "the elite." Then, in a position of power, one may compensate by identification with the position, forgetting one's mortality, and that as an individual, one remains merely an equal among mortals. In so far as the accusations of Katzav's sexual conduct and abuse, at different stages of his political career, are proven true, he has exploited his position and in an elitist sense degraded dependant women. Even the very different case of the behavior of former Minister of Justice, Chaim Ramon, bears a similar stamp of inflation, in so far as he may have believed that a seemingly naïve young female soldier really did desire him. Furthermore, his lack of judgment is reflected in the fact that his infamous and certainly superfluous kiss takes place immediately prior to

a government meeting, following the Hezbollah attack in the north which left soldiers killed and kidnapped, leading to the second Lebanon War.

And so, in case after case, we find expressions of *hubris*, whether financial corruption, abuse of power, sexual harassment. The requirements on any person in positions of power and leadership are heavy. In Israel it is even more extreme. It requires integrity and skills that not everyone possesses to cope with the enormous issues at stake in Israel where almost every decision may be fateful, after having fought the way to the top echelons of power in an aggressive political environment.

The fact is, that in Israel there are quite a few such people around. There is a wealth of talent, charisma, beauty and integrity – even among some who choose the hazardous ascent in politics. Today, the public eye scrutinizes every facet of society with merciless candor, which ensures not only a necessary educational process, but brings hope that a new generation of politicians will lead the country through the challenges ahead. Increasingly, the media and the courts have taken the role of saying out loud what in Rome the old man whispered to the conqueror, leading inflated politicians to realize that they are mortal. Often they are taught, in painful and embarrassing ways, that they should keep respectful distance to what does not rightfully lie within their realm and to which they do not have divine right. Abuse of women, of public money and positions of power, leads to the downfall deep into the abyss of shame,

“How art thou fallen from heaven, O Shagar, son of the morning! ...For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend to heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: ... I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most high.” (Isaiah, 14:12-15)

And so, a hasty decision and an indecisive war-operation captured the Israeli leadership in the trap of a committee of inquiry.

On July 12, 2006, Hezbollah carried out another unprovoked attack against Israel, shelling towns and villages, crossing the international border, killing and abducting patrolling Israeli soldiers. This time Israel responded swiftly. For instance, the following day the Israeli Air Force destroyed fifty-nine intermediate and long-range missile launchers in a thirty-four minute raid, effectively preventing missile strikes against central Israel. Nasrallah seems, indeed, to have been quite shattered, declaring that if he would have known the Israeli response, he might have refrained from attacking.

Does this not seem to justify the claims that Israel's mistake had been not to respond to previous attacks? But the Winograd committee's interim report criticizes the Prime Minister for having made up his mind hastily – yet, wouldn't a delayed response have been utilized by the Hezbollah for instance to move the missile launchers, and reliance on impotent UN diplomacy be the cause, as well, for another commission of inquiry?

Published in April 2007, the Winograd interim report, centers on the background of the second Lebanon war, the decision to go to war, and the first five days, up to the Prime Minister's July 17 speech in the Knesset, in which he presented the goals of the military campaign, for which there was broad general parliamentary and public support.

The commission states that the military response was not based on a detailed military plan. Furthermore, the Prime Minister neither studied the complex features on the Lebanon front, nor did he consider alternative options. He did not set out clear and careful goals; rather, his declared goals were not feasible. He failed in judgment, responsibility and the need for cautiousness.

In fact, not every military decision is based on detailed military plans, but when possible, that should unquestionably be the case. Likewise, if

any alternative to war can be considered, this should of course be the case.

The inexperienced Minister of Defense failed to question and examine operational plans, to check preparedness, consider reservations, and to weigh the goals against the presented modes of action. Thus, states the commission, Peretz failed as Minister of Defense, and impaired Israel's ability to respond properly to its challenges. During the war he vowed to make Nasrallah remember his name. This kind of cheap and ill-chosen demagoguery reflects inappropriate shallowness, which in the past has brought shame on Israel's enemies.

Furthermore, the committee concludes that the only way to effectively respond to Hezbollah's massive missile attacks was an extensive ground operation, and the difficulties this would entail were not raised with the political leaders before the decision to strike was taken. Not considering the full range of options amounts to failure in strategic thinking, says the report.

Every Israeli suffered through this war, not only because war entails so much more suffering than glory, and not only because many of us had sons and friends in the war zone, but also because of the indigestible hesitancy. The prolonged and horrendous confrontation with terrorists and guerillas spread over the villages and the countryside of southern Lebanon, in which the soldiers were exposed to an often better equipped and well-trained enemy, with complete knowledge of the territory, hiding underground, seemed unbearable. Reserves were not called-up in time, and as it turned out, the army was unprepared, resulting in logistic failures and shortages. Yet, in practically every battle the Israeli soldiers overcame the Hezbollah, which is a hybrid between a Syrian-backed militant organization and an Iranian front-commando. At the level of the fighting soldiers and officers, amazing devotion and bravery were

exhibited. One example was Major Roy Klein, commander of a unit fighting near the village of Bint Jbail, who saved his men by absorbing the blast of an exploding grenade, calling out “Shema Yisrael.”

But the fighting was commanded in a hesitant and indecisive manner. The Chief of Staff was convinced the Air Force could do the job without the need for a ground operation. He did not account for the effects on civilian society by heavy missile shelling, causing thousands of wounded and thousands of homes destroyed. The reluctance of the leadership to go ahead with a full ground operation can be understood, especially considering that reserves had not been mobilized in time, the army was unprepared and had not been trained, and the outdated operational doctrine of the Chief of Staff, that Hezbollah could be dealt with entirely from the air. The result on the ground was that the army units fought completely on Hezbollah premises, over and over again sent to unlock the traps of terror, searching for individual rocket launchers, rather than being guided by a serious and creative leadership that would have taken account of the political, military and civilian complexity.

According to the Winograd commission, some of the political and military leadership assumed that Israel is beyond the era of wars, possibly because, as said in the report, the country has not experienced a war for twenty-five years. This seems to reflect the commission’s faulty conceptualization. The first Intifada, then in 1991 when Iraqi Scud missiles held Israel captive in sealed rooms (a prelude to the Second Lebanon War, which was a prelude to next time when missiles might rain from the north, from Gaza and the West Bank, and possibly from Syria and Iran), and the War of Terror that lasted five years, are all traits of a war that constantly changes its face, providing the Israel Defense Forces with constantly new challenges. We need to remember that it took quite a

long time until Israel found the means to extinguish the fire of terror that swept the country, and which is sure to return in different ways.

The spirit of Israel is far from lost. To witness the commitment and courage of the young at the front, and the dedication and stamina of civilians during the War of Terror as well as the Lebanon War, induces hope and confidence. But the excellence of the average Israeli was counterbalanced by the incompetence, dullness and arrogance of the political and military leadership during this war. The findings of the Winograd commission did not bring into the open anything new to the Israeli public, but it exposed how the pieces of the kaleidoscope fell into a pattern of arrogance, to which the very self-scrutiny of their work is a healthy antidote.