

The Roots and Implications of Discomfort

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Public discomfort in Israel is often rooted in the difference between the grand promise and expectation that the Jewish State would become an “ethical entity”—a beacon of social justice and political morality for Jews and non-Jews, as perceived by its founding fathers and described by romantic philosophers and theologians after its establishment in 1948 and especially after the Six-Day War in 1967—and the awakening to the troublesome realities of “normalcy,” the market economy, lack of consensus and ideals and the apparent deterioration of standards of honesty and integrity. To a great extent, this discomfort originates in the extensive changes in social, economic, and political priorities. Israel has begun to feel more certain of its military and economic invincibility and has become an integral part of the democratic, pluralistic, affluent West with its post-material values of self-fulfillment, its amorphous role models, and their equally nebulous moral authority.

The Yom Kippur War was a watershed for the Israeli culture of self-admonition, yielding severe, venomous criticism of politics and the armed forces. During the 1970s, the discomfort and self-admonition culture established themselves as dominant elements in society. Israelis became particularly bitter and petulant, incessantly denouncing politics and politicians while shifting rapidly between

* Translated by Zvi Ofer.

criticism of functional failure and condemnation of personal ethics and morals. Many Israelis complain of the decline of ethics in public life and politics, demanding greater power and presence for civil society and governmental agencies charged with supervising political functionaries and demanding rectification of their malfeasance.

At times, Israeli self-admonition culture is expressed in loud, open, outspoken conflict with the establishment and the political leadership, nurtured by particularly cynical media that disparage and deride politicians, and especially by the “corruption discourse” that has largely replaced raging disputes over key ideological issues.

Certainly many people in the world challenge the legitimacy of the Israeli state, including, of course, the morality of its very existence, and both domestic and foreign aspersions cast on Israel’s moral leadership have become more strident and threatening over the past few years. The country’s moral status as a Jewish and democratic state is questioned repeatedly because of its ostensible inability to achieve balance between its security needs and the civil freedoms and human rights of its citizens and residents. Worldwide criticism of Israel does not focus solely on core state issues; at times, it also includes damning statements taken from the language of corruption. It is not only the enemies of Israel who point to political corruption as yet another manifestation of the country’s moral flaws; even its supporters may express amazement and concern over the Israeli media’s constant stream of reports and critical pieces concerning political corruption.

As it experiences inordinately difficult political challenges and complex moral dilemmas, the Israeli public—often incited by scandal-craving media and encouraged by active, demanding, and especially invasive control and investigation systems with a deep sense of mission—has apparently increased its interest in the numerous crimes and ethical missteps of its elected officials. Consequently,

many Israelis claim that their confidence in democracy is steadily declining. Israel's extended state of war, possibly surpassing those experienced by all other democracies, renders the question of political leadership and moral authority particularly significant. Many Israelis believe that a moral personality, a sound reputation and a track record, particularly in wartime, is essential for leadership (Vital 2008). Furthermore, Israeli discomfort with political corruption is closely linked with broader issues concerning the cultural and moral nature of the political and social systems, several of which are described below.

Israeli Democracy in the Age of Capitalism

No one denies that post-Six-Day War economic prosperity engendered a dramatic shift that transformed Israel from a government-controlled, agriculture-based state economy to a Western consumer society exhibiting market economics and a rapidly rising standard of living. This development propelled individualistic morality—that sanctifies “the good life”—to the forefront and accorded legitimacy to rising inequality. From the 1980s on, Israel underwent a rapid process of liberalization and receptivity to foreign cultures and global media, leading to a radical change in standard of living, lifestyle, job distribution and—above all—value priorities in virtually all aspects of life. The result was a moral cacophony that has difficulty shaping consensus on values and ethics in politics and public life. In such situations, judicialization and the test of criminal law have become key factors in assessing public morality.

As Israel joined the global economy, rapid abandonment of traditional industries and transition to science-based industries encouraged individualistic and even hedonistic values and cast a pall on the collective and egalitarian ethos of the early years of the state

(Ben Porat 2008). The decline in collective values is also a direct consequence of the state's consolidation and especially the broad processes of democratization that it underwent as mass immigration changed the demographic face of society. Furthermore, democratic growth and normalization eroded the status and dominant culture of the founding elite and helped expand the political system and render it more accessible. This process empowered new forces in society and reduced the distance between elected officials and their constituents. At the same time, the lack of dominant successors to the heroic founding generation and transition to a more open political system naturally led to social, moral, and cultural pluralism that shifted the morality burden from the old political leadership to other spheres and new elites in a more variegated Israeli society. The dominant elites in Israel of the 1950s and 1960s, that included the ruling political party (Mapai/Labor), the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), the kibbutzim, the Histadrut (trade union) and labor leaders, were replaced in time not only by new political factors but also by major forces in civil society, civil service, the media, the judicial sphere, prominent figures in the economic sphere, and the wealthy.

As in other Western affluent societies, nurtured by values originating in the commercial media, many of Israel's more recent cultural heroes are "celebrities," "winners," or the fabulously rich, whom many perceive as role models. Nevertheless, as a collective, it appears that many Israelis are still seeking egalitarian values and ethical role models and view wealth among political functionaries with suspicion. Some will say that in Israeli culture, the game is always zero-sum: "If the other guy is rich, chances are it's at my expense." In reality, even though the Israeli economy and society are developing free market trends, much of the public, the media and the intellectual strata continue to pay lip service to the culture of austerity and the egalitarian ethics of the first years of the state—as if some

moral authority still remained—and demand that political leaders and public servants display a less flamboyant and ostentatious lifestyle. Consequently, in late 2009, when a proposed law called for exposing Knesset members' assets, legislators vied to present themselves as poorest in resources and property, calling on their colleagues to emulate them in an act ostensibly attesting to proper democratic "transparency" and political "purity." The obvious conclusion was that any elected official who amassed assets and perhaps acquired wealth will almost automatically be tarnished with suspicions of corruption and dishonesty (Zarhiya 2009).

Religious Zionists—who are among the last remaining ideological groups in Israeli society to reject secular values and criticize mainstream hedonism—and many non-religious Israelis as well, including residents of cooperative/collective agricultural villages, describe the individualization of society and worship of the fleshpots as a sign that the pioneer spirit is flagging and the values of Judaism have been lost, resulting in moral weakness and bankruptcy. Some say that the deterioration crisis affecting the political system is part of the overall disintegration of society, claiming that Israelis have lost their common moral foundation. There are even prophets of doom who bemoan the failed melting pot or the disappearing tribal campfire. Parallel to its secular elites and morality, Israel also has religious Zionist and Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) communities with their own independent spheres of morality, establishment elites, and role models. Many religious Zionists and even some Haredim experience normative duality and are planted firmly in both worlds: that of Jewish religious law and secular. Nevertheless, there are some who claim, as Yedidia Stern wrote, that the initial inclination among the religious and non-religious alike is "no longer a search for common ground, compromise or reconciliation, but a quest for achievement, extracting the truth, sharpening differences and

denouncing flaws,” a trend that encourages “a puritanical arena for deciding the *Kulturkampf*,” channeled into the language of corruption (Stern 2002, 202, 221).

“Occupation Corrupts”

The *Kulturkampf* in Israel between religious Zionists (and some of the Haredi groups) and secular leftists and centrists is channeled into the language of corruption not only regarding ethical leadership and democracy issues but also the essence of sovereignty and identity, especially concerning the occupation (of land conquered in the Six-Day War). While the religious Zionist right considers itself a moral leader in the battle against corruption in Israel’s democratic-liberal system and considers its commitment to settlement in Judea and Samaria to be a manifestation of pioneering Judaism, groups on the left and in the center of the Israeli political map often consider the Judea and Samaria settlement enterprise to be the core of corruption in Israeli society. The dispute over the corruption that the occupation causes, especially the slogan “Occupation corrupts,” became a key element in Israeli left-wing discourse. The Israeli left believes that the occupation has corrupted the values of the individual, the economy and the political system, claiming that Israelis have become inured to the suffering of another people and have turned into hedonist colonialists who lack social sensitivity—not only toward the Palestinians but also toward foreign workers. They are said to have adopted a violent culture in their daily lives that they acquired and intensified in the process of oppressing the Palestinians.

The contention that occupation corrupts deeply penetrated broader political discourse, even at the center of the political map and in part of the Israeli right wing, in which some claimed that the left had abandoned its national loyalty by denying Israel’s harsh security

realities, tending to sacrifice the good of the state and the people on the altar of alleged human rights for the Palestinians.¹

In the dispute between religious Zionist and conservative circles on the one hand and left-wing bodies on the other, the former maintain that true destruction is not caused by the occupation but by adoption of the ethical-social approaches and cultural norms of corrupt, affluent society. According to Rabbi Elisha Aviner, these norms turn minor needs—whose fulfillment is not essential to our existence—into a *sine qua non*, whereas conquest and redemption of the land is the formula for restoration of “the true moral commitment of the Jewish People to its land” (Aviner 2007).

Excess Democracy

Liberal democracies tend to reject over time the rule of the old elites and “wise men” when formulating policies and making decisions, and demand increases for the participation and self-expression of individuals, interest groups and—during the past few decades—identity groups as well. This situation leads to discrepancies between expectations and realities, as well as to some confusion regarding outstanding figures, particularly politicians. During times of crisis and emergency, there is a natural tendency to yearn for strong leaders, but such feelings pass rapidly, making way for the natural democratic dynamics of “normal times,” that aim at stripping leaders of their halos and auras of mystery and presenting them as mere politicians. This tendency is reinforced in cultures without remnants of a clear

1 Naomi Hazan, currently president of the New Israel Fund’s International Board, was accused recently by right-wing factors of according a seal of approval to the left’s betrayal of the homeland under the guise of activism in civil society.

social hierarchy, in which authority and authoritative institutions are less respected. At times, when social norms are vague and flexible, the boundaries of law and discipline become blurred and lax, possibly deteriorating into a truly chaotic state (Leibowitz 2008).

Israel is a country with a cultural tendency to challenge, undermine, or shatter former foregone conclusions concerning virtually every sphere of human activity. This attitude nurtures a more extensive lack of discipline and scorn for institutions and authorities in the public sphere, along with manifestations of disrespect that some perceive as encouragement of illicit behavior. The close and at times aggressive contact that public servants and elected officials maintain with the Israeli public and the informal ties formed among people are familiar to all Israelis and even to many tourists.

Such unmediated ties obviously encourage close relations between politicians and their constituents that have intensified significantly since the 1970s, as the status of politicians within parties became more and more dependent on the party members who elect their representatives. The empowerment of party voters and the increasing dependence on external financing gradually dulled the public halo of political aristocracy and even paved the way for the introduction of shady figures into the system, as “good people” were deterred by the humiliation that primary elections entail.

The Money-Power Nexus and the Structure of the System

Expansion of the public discourse that recognizes relations between the wealthy classes and government officials as a threatening moral scourge is a key characteristic of the discomfort and the conceptualization of corruption that prevail in many democratic

countries. Since the 1990s, emphasis in the corruption rhetoric has shifted from criticism of the concentration of resources and economic power by the state and by party and public institutions to criticism of corruption originating in the concentration of resources among a few rich moguls.

Naturally politicians want to promote ideologies and interests as well as fight for the benefit of their supporters who elected them to their positions and whose votes they seek for future reelection. The political-moral dilemma of Israel concerns the extent to which cronies and constituents can buy influence with money and to which political activity on their behalf is conducted at the expense of overall public interests, possibly affecting these interests adversely or even undermining the very foundations of the democratic system itself.

In Israel, expansion of the political corruption concept to cover various types of political gain intensified criminal court involvement and thereby nurtured public discourse of uncertain delineation. Just as *mediated corruption* is a controversial term in academic and public discussion in the United States, it is often difficult to evaluate the extent to which Israeli politics (including the connections between elected officials and business persons, deals, appointments and interests that are part of its ethos) is capable of passing the tests posed by both ethical considerations and criminal law. Many scholars involved in assessing the boundaries of political corruption focus on value judgment rather than empirical scientific criteria.

The Leadership Crisis and the Moral Hierarchy

The perceived “leadership crisis” in Israel engenders a feeling that “you can’t count on anyone.” Furthermore, description of democratic politics as an activity that requires expert professionals (technocrats) and is shaped by an institutional structure, regulations, and rational

rules tends to reduce the value of ideologies and the importance of elected officials, thus eroding the concept of political leadership. The administrative approach which describes politics as “an unglamorous, mundane business, working out its allocations in bits and pieces everywhere,” contrasts with the deep and virtually instinctive insight shared by most people, declaring that politics is not just procedures and administrative gloom but one of the high points of human activity: “A significant, momentous order of social business, involving major actors and taking place at the very center of society” (Poggi 1978, 3). Such insight, however, appears to be overshadowed and obscured by routine challenges that accord priority to socioeconomic issues over major political decisions.

Discomfort with the political leadership is imprinted deeply in Israeli society and culture. Political cultures in democracies differ from one another in terms of internal order, discipline, and respect for the chain of authority and rule. If cultures are ranked according to social boundaries and respect for hierarchies, Israel will find itself well toward the bottom of the scale. Israelis are known (or perhaps notorious) for their rough-edged directness, aggressiveness, and domineering nature.

Obviously, in some strange way, the problematic characteristics of Israelis are always combined with such likable features as creativity, warmth, family ties, loyalty, a special kind of friendliness, powerful empathy for others, and sincere hospitality. Although many people lament the lack of more rigid social boundaries, Israeli realities are often praised even by its most outspoken critics, who emphasize nonetheless that the country maintains a vibrant democratic society conducive to lively and open discussion of all kinds of difficult issues and in which citizens feel close to their elected officials.

Multiculturalism

One difficult question facing culturally divided societies such as Israel's concerns the presence or absence of widely accepted common values and standards of social morality and personal and political ethics. Democracies with broad subculture spectra (multicultural societies) generally exhibit a dominant culture that shapes social consensus. This culture is manifested not only as a mandatory hegemonic factor but also as a culture perceived as appropriate by most citizens, such that it enables the country's democratic institutions to provide sufficiently extensive self-expression to cultural subgroups without compelling them to lose their identity.

The call for unification of national-Jewish values, based on Zionism as a vision and act of fulfillment, rejected the notion of unbridgeable cultural relativism in Judaism. The coalitionary system of political parties sought to express these values and constitute a procedural framework through which conflicts originating in the multiplicity of cultures might be resolved. By contrast, however, one may also claim that it is impossible to bridge over moral conventions among the different groups constituting Israeli society and certainly unrealistic to find ethical standards acceptable to all components of the country's social and political sub-groups.

Assessment of options for common ground in Israeli politics and society requires recognition that the public vision of civil virtues that characterized the formative years of the state has been replaced gradually by divisive, multifaceted cultural and ethical realities. Two trends should be examined: (1) whether and how cultural and social groups in the Jewish population have assimilated commitment to the public good, and (2) what is the centrality of these commitments relative to the dominant principles and obligations of the early years of the state.

In a nutshell, the Israeli collective ethos (that is fundamentally Jewish) of the formative period has apparently been replaced gradually by:

1. Western secular and capitalistic approaches of the “live and let live” genre.
2. Jewish separatist sectarianism with a right-wing religious orientation, linked primarily with Haredi sectors in Jerusalem and a considerable share of Shas (an ethnic religious party) supporters.
3. Provincialism, including people far removed from the Western cultural ethos, often called the “ugly Israelis.”
4. Religious Zionists (many of them belonging to the “Orange Camp,” so called because of the color that symbolized the settlers and their supporters in the protest against disengagement from Gaza in 2005). A sizable share of this group claim that they are the true heirs of the Zionist pioneers.
5. Remnants of the secular center that once typified residents of collective/cooperative agricultural villages. Members of this group maintained the agricultural roots of the pioneer era, now strongly combined with a capitalistic market, well demonstrated by the dramatic changes in the Kibbutz Movement.²

2 For many years, the kibbutz had been recognized and even revered throughout the world as Israel’s most innovative social/moral experiment. Until 1977, leaders of the Kibbutz Movement played a central role in Israeli politics, but the crisis of kibbutz debts during the 1980s, the massive aid that the kibbutzim received from public funds, the mass departure of young people from kibbutz life, and above all the transformation of the kibbutz into a semi-capitalistic entity constitute a most dramatic example of the change in values and norms of collectivism in Israeli culture. See Ben Rafael 1997.

6. Left-wing and post-Zionist principles that adhere to universal human values and reject so-called narrow Jewish-Israeli commitment. Many Israelis perceive members of this marginal but highly outspoken camp as traitors.

Each of these groups has its own special reasons for preaching political rebuke, rendering the language of corruption elastic, all-inclusive, and multifaceted.

Blaming the System

Some inconsistency is evident in the behavior of Israeli citizens and their incisive moral judgment of the politicians for whom they voted and from whom they are quick to dissociate themselves. Prof. Ira Sharkansky (2007), who examined corruption discourse in the 2006 elections, noted that despite the severe criticism and unbridled language of corruption expressed by the Israeli media and public, behind the curtain at the polls, most Israeli voters are not seriously troubled by what national reformers call “corruption.” Uri Avnery (2006) expressed surprise that although public opinion polls show that the Israeli public has lost its faith in politicians, people never admit that they are to blame for voting them in. His response states, “That would be an unpleasant admission. What they say is: It’s not our fault. So who is to blame? The ‘system,’ of course.” Critics of the repeated demand for structural changes in the Israeli governmental system include people who claim that the source of corruption is not in the intimate ties between plutocrats and politicians, nor even in the decline of society’s collective ethos, but rather “in the structure of the system itself, in Israel’s unique democratic system . . . [that bears] direct and comprehensive responsibility for the corruption of public life in Israel, hence the need to assess its damages and consider its replacement before it is too late” (Asael 2008).

Since the early years of the state, Israelis have been engaged in a heated debate over the need for a constitution and electoral reform. Over the past few decades, discussions have regularly included terms taken from the war on corruption. The failure of electoral reform calling for direct election of the prime minister, as practiced during the 1990s, constitutes a clear example of the manner in which public protest, accompanied by anti-corruption rhetoric, is liable to have serious but entirely unintended consequences.³ The direct election experiment turned out to be an alarming failure that severely distressed the political system. Less than a decade after the 1992 Direct Election Law was passed, the Knesset decided to readopt the original system, which is similarly far from satisfactory, especially to people who blame it for all the political and ethical ills of the system as a whole.

Comprehensive comparative studies conducted over the past ten years examined the influence of democratic government and electoral systems on the extent of political corruption and discovered weak correlations between extent of corruption and nature of elections. Several researchers note that the transition from proportional to majority representation has a marginal effect on the ethical and moral patterns of politicians' behavior, rejecting the claim that personal elections render elected legislators "more sensitive" to their constituents than those placed in office according to closed party lists (Persson,

3 The Israeli public, anxious over the bargaining and negotiating in the Knesset, took to the streets in their tens of thousands, repeating the slogan "Corrupt ones! We're sick of you!" The movement, led by a well-organized group of researchers and activists, eventually impelled the Knesset to adopt a constitutional change, without considering the situations the change was purported to address. Yitzhak Rabin's well known rebuke of Shimon Peres (his despised Labor Party colleague at the time) for initiating the "dirty trick" in the Knesset, belongs to the anti-corruption pantheon of Israeli politics. Direct election of the prime minister was enacted in 1992 and first implemented in 1996, then in 1999 and 2001 and was subsequently canceled.

Tabellini, and Trebbi 2003). By contrast, other studies found certain correlations attesting that proportional elections are more sensitive to corrupt acts of favor-seeking than majority elections, although the researchers admit that their results are far from conclusive. The most outstanding observation noted by senior American scholars who reviewed data pertaining to most democratic countries showed that presidential systems are more sensitive to political corruption than proportional parliamentary systems like Israel's. At times, absolute win-lose presidential elections may be more conducive to the crossing of ethical and criminal boundaries than multi-party and coalitionary electoral processes (Kunicova and Rose-Ackerman 2005).

“Know Before Whom Thou Art Destined to Render an Accounting”

Many scholars reject the theory that links the type of government with the problematic ethics they discern within the political system. A few claim that the breakdown in governance is not institutional but is the result of the particular political culture and the personalities who make up the political system. In other words, Israel has to undergo a “public cleansing” process and redesign its political culture, with thorough attention to unethical behavior and political corruption (Zubida and Mekelberg 2008). Accusing the political system, type of regime, or political culture of malfeasance intensifies the increasing demand for accountability. One popular Israeli view maintains that public servants in Israel have no clear conception of reward and punishment or of accountability.⁴ That the very term accountability has no proper

4 Some even lament Israeli indifference and compassion that gives politicians a second and third chance even when they fail again and again (see Kampf 2007).

translation into Hebrew ostensibly attests to conceptual, cultural, and behavioral malfunctions. The public does not demand that its leaders render an accounting of their deeds before the elections and thus misses the mark regarding several of democracy's most important objectives. In some democratic countries, the mechanism of public shame and apprehension over failure at the polls due to inclusion of undesirable personalities suffices to weed them out of the candidates' lists and to bar their inclusion in governing institutions. Israel should place greater emphasis on accountability, as it will reinforce democracy to a considerable extent. According to this theory, it is reasonable to assume that once the public is more aware of the principle of accountability, it will demand that it be practiced in everyday political party activity.

Many critics claim that Israeli politicians are “glued to their seats” and will not resign, unlike their counterparts in other democracies, despite serious flaws in policymaking and personal ethics. Thus, the judicial arena “remains the only way to punish those who in other places would be punished by public opinion.”⁵ Nevertheless, a comparative examination of the democratic world reveals that the resignation rate due to assumption of responsibility in the top political and bureaucratic echelons is no less than that of many other democratic countries in which the concept of accountability is ostensibly well rooted and familiar. Numerous senior Israeli politicians, including prime ministers and major cabinet ministers, have taken responsibility and resigned after policy failure, public criticism, ideological or value disagreements and/or exposure of personal ethical shortcomings. Golda Meir, it should be recalled, was cleared by the Agranat Commission, which examined the events

5 Cited by Kampf (2007, 91 n. 96). For a discussion of this issue, see Arieli-Horowitz (2006b, 5–7).

leading to the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War. Although neither Meir nor then Defense Minister Moshe Dayan were held personally accountable, she assumed public and moral responsibility for the failures of that war, even after having won another mandate from the public in elections that took place immediately thereafter. A short time after the battles died down, Justice Minister Ya'akov Shimshon Shapira demanded Dayan's resignation. When his demand was not met, Shapira resigned from the cabinet on October 30, 1973, thereby clearly manifesting the concept of accountability. Yitzhak Rabin resigned after his wife Leah's dollar account in the United States was discovered. Menachem Begin, who was only mildly censured by the Kahan Commission over incidents at the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Lebanon, resigned as prime minister on August 30, 1983, despite repeated calls by his fellow coalition members to continue his leadership. It is widely believed that the loss of soldiers in Lebanon and the protests in front of his house hastened Begin's resignation, which he announced by saying "I cannot go on." Ariel Sharon was compelled to resign as defense minister because of what happened at Sabra and Shatila but effectively forced his presence on Begin as a minor minister in his cabinet. The above review, although only partial, clearly indicates that ministerial responsibility is an integral part of Israeli political life.

Criticism and suspicions directed toward politicians obviously give rise to populistic demands that policymaking not be entrusted to "corrupt officials" and that direct public influence on democracy be increased. Some maintain that the "moral bankruptcy" of politicians demands reinforcement of moral gatekeepers. Such claims empowered the numerous critical factors then gathering strength in Israel, repeatedly contending that they represent morality, ethics and judicial and economic rationality, as opposed to "corrupt politics." These elements include the courts and prosecutors, the

State Comptroller's Office, key bureaucratic bodies and civil protest movements, including sound governance organizations, assisted by investigative journalism that purports to represent "public interest," "the public's right to know," "the national interest," and "quality democracy." Their protests, both direct and indirect, oppose the modern form of representative democracy that is ostensibly led by politicians who lack the backbone of integrity. At times, these critics seek to acquire authority ordinarily reserved for the political system (Arieli-Horowitz 2006b, 4–6).

Israeli parliamentary democracy has several major advantages, although it also embodies numerous difficulties and is not without its critics. One common complaint about parliamentary politics concerns the large number of parties vying for coalitionary power within the framework of a "soft constitution," encouraging a culture and behavioral patterns that hardly earn respect for the political hierarchy (Linz 1990, 84–91). We are familiar with the popular expressions of revulsion regarding coalitionary negotiations or the epithets hurled at Knesset members who "desert" their parties (e.g., "Coalition—a rotten mission," "chair brokers," "they won't give up their chauffeurs and Volvos" and of course, "Corrupt ones, we're sick of you!"), all of them constituting an integral part of political corruption dialogue in Israel. Criticism of Israeli parliamentary democracy tends to blur the boundaries between personal ethical misconduct and the kind of questionable political activity that evokes disgust with the system.

In Israel, corruption discourse is always interwoven with broader moral arguments, including those concerning the essence of the Israeli-Jewish polity, market economy, and class issues, behavior during wartime, the occupation, attitudes toward the Palestinians in the administered territories—and all these issues as they apply to Israel's war on terrorism. The rhetoric of the war on corruption is applied also

to questions of religion and state, the status of military service, family morals, and above all, the function of the “rule of law.”

Undermining of Values and Agents of the New Morality

In the late 1960s, pundits noted that the Israeli soul is divided between the desire for self-fulfillment and commitment to the civil-pioneering virtue of defending and nurturing the collective. This dilemma, wrote Amos Elon, evoked a “moral vertigo” among many young people. Some began wondering whether the existential threats to Israel and the sociopolitical vision that guided the idealistic founders of the state were keeping them from living in the present. This tension, which increased during the 1970s, was expressed in the political struggle and public discourse concerning four interrelated core issues affecting Israeli society: Peace, the future of the occupied territories, the Jewish majority, and the democratic quality of governance. Ideological debate and public and political discussion of these issues has undergone many changes over the past few decades, but definition of the “order of priorities” continues to constitute a considerable share of the “essence of Israeli politics” (J. Shamir and M. Shamir 2000, 3; Arian 2005, 425).

Many Israelis, who tend to think of themselves as exceptional, will be surprised to find out that their concern over “loss of values” and especially their apprehension about the low level of political behavior and the decline in quality of political leadership is shared by many citizens of both long-time and newer democratic countries, who also tend to lament the waning of civil-national commitment, solidarity, and family values. People in nearly all democratic societies complain about contemporary ills, including erosion of the family unit, loss of discipline among the younger generation, a decline in

respect for elders and for authority, erosion of ethical standards among professionals and public servants, increasing violence, unrestrained media, drugs and alcohol, egoism, greed, and of course, political corruption. All these phenomena belong to a virtually permanent list of social pathologies in Western democratic discourse (see Himmelfarb 2000). In this era of “new values,” morality agents and purists (from within and without public systems) act out of deep and usually authentic concern, condemning the moral failures of society. Agents of morality tend to seek out issues that threaten the well-being and mores of society, exaggerating their severity as they provoke moral panic—a by-product of the ailments of our times.

Post-Material Society

As free market expansion led to growth and economic well-being, as well as greater physical security (despite the broadening of social-economic gaps), many citizens of affluent societies adopted new priorities and values that social scientists call *post-material*. Findings gathered for the World Values Survey since the 1960s indicate that post-material values express an extended change in priorities and world views, especially among the second generation after World War II: From traditional communalism and concern for security and survival to increasing attention to self-expression. Sociologists tend to describe these developments as an integral part of modernization and as a nearly linear developmental process in which the image of the individual and his or her desires rise on the scale of priorities as other family, civic and community values decline. In time, this process leads to a decline in civil trust of ruling and political systems whose missions naturally diminish in scope when economic and personal security appear to be assured (Inglehart 2000). Scholars examining value systems in affluent societies emphasize that they

manifest “widespread feelings of social mistrust, citizens turning away from prime institutions and political authorities, and engaging less in informal interactions are seen as indicators of the decline of the traditional civic ethic.” They also report erosion in the ability of the traditional political parties to rally the masses to political activity, a lessening of traditional ideological polarization between left and right (that prevailed until the 1980s), a “yellowing” of public life and preference of mediagenic politicians over the lackluster older variety. All these developments combine in a trend toward “adoption of new political values” that emphasizes “self-expression, post-materialism, gender equality, environmentalism, feminism and ecologism.”⁶ Research assessing the value priorities of Israelis in light of these theories and in comparison to findings from other countries determined that Israel is at the center of the value map in terms of its citizens’ assimilation of post-material values (Yuchtman-Ya’ar 2003).

Many citizens of modern affluent societies (including Israelis) speak of politics cynically and derisively and suspect politicians of dishonesty and a lack of integrity. At the same time, they also recognize, perhaps intuitively, that only politics and politicians can guarantee the physical and economic security that are basic and necessary conditions for post-material life. Hence they expect major accomplishments from their politicians during difficult times, such as the recent global economic crisis.

In Israel, existential questions that demand political responses arise daily, rendering dependence on politics and politicians especially necessary and intensive. Sociologist Ephraim Ya’ar found that *security culture* often leads Israelis to regress from emphasis on post-material values of self-fulfillment to adherence to basic

6 For a detailed discussion of the change in political values, see Halman (2007), from which the preceding quotations were taken.

survival values. Political scientist Stuart A. Cohen wrote that this return to survival values, which inspires Israelis to rally en masse and act patriotically in times of war and crisis, repeatedly contradicts researchers (including those whose perception of reality originates in their feelings) who announce the end of the era of Israeli heroism and offer gloomy predictions about post-modern and post-Zionist norms taking over the life of the nation (Cohen 2008, 60–61). These findings facilitate understanding of the Israeli political system, particularly regarding the public's attitude toward politicians. On the one hand, public discourse on the decline of values in Israeli politics and the quest for “spirituality” are an integral part of the trend characterizing affluent Western societies, but on the other, such discourse affects and is affected by local realities including assessment of global post-material realities, as well as such Israel-specific issues as extended public debate over security, national borders, and control of the occupied territories.

Alternative Agents of Morality

The search for a unifying core and role models is a significant component of the quest for identity in a pluralistic society. In “normal” democratic realities, in which there is no overt, universally accepted moral leadership, “moral entrepreneurs” emerge. They often attempt to instill values and outlooks and to introduce moral behavioral codes, thereby seeking to accumulate power and status in the public arena and in public discourse. These agents of morality often act by stirring up “moral panic,” defined by sociologists as a political and social device to rally the masses, strike echoes and attack rivals, identifiable according to five key criteria:

1. *Threats*: Rising public concern over the behavior of a group that adversely affects the public good, as expressed in public opinion polls, editorial comments, legislative change proposals, and the rise of protest movements.
2. Increasing *hostility* toward the group whose behavior is perceived as harmful and damaging to values, the public interest, and at times the social structure itself. There is a tendency to differentiate between this group and those who seek “good.”
3. Broad *consensus* regarding the threatening phenomenon and the need to handle it seriously and immediately.
4. *Disproportion*: The term “moral panic” includes an intrinsic assumption that public perception of the threatening phenomenon’s scope and the number of people who perpetrate it is exaggerated and that people tend to see the suggestion of a threat as the threat itself. Those who spread panic try to prove the threat’s severity using problematic “scientific” indicators that nearly always lack foundation and validity.
5. *Volatility*: The issues that fuel moral panics change, causing their intensity to fluctuate. Some such issues, however, become part of the routine and the measures taken to address them become institutionalized, thus fueling the panic itself (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009, 33–39).

In the early 1980s, sociologist Nachman Ben-Yehuda, a pioneer of worldwide academic discussion of moral panic, identified the increasing Israeli tendency in this direction as part of a decline in identification with the public and with collective values and a concomitant strengthening of liberalism. The formula is clear: More democracy leads to more moral confusion that leads to more panic.

As indicated, the decline in status and weakening of the old political elites and their moral monopolies yielded new agents of

morality that battle for control of the public space and discourse in the name of democracy and the public good. These moral agents tend to use the rhetoric of corruption to condemn politics and politicians. They exist in the justice system, civil society, and the media, and are part of established political bodies. In wartime and the presence of existential threats, they generally remain silent, although for no longer than a very brief period of time, noted Ben-Yehuda.

The Hubris of Self-Righteous Officials

Emphasis on normal politics, or as political scientist David Easton (1953) put it, “politics as allocation,” perceives the legal-rational bureaucracy as superior, thereby effectively diminishing the significance of political players and increasing that of appointed government officials, who at times (without the public realizing it) turn into bureaucrats who assume the function of policymakers.⁷ The bureaucratic outlook is quintessentially technocratic, characterized by an apolitical and even antipolitical spirit. C. Wright Mills (1967, 88) noted that liberal-practical agents of bureaucratic morality tend to describe politics and politicians in such suspicious terms as “pathological” or “corrupt.” For example, in May 2009, Ram Belinkov, budget director at Israel’s Finance Ministry, resigned in protest over a budget deal between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and other players in the Israeli economic arena that bypassed the Ministry’s recommendations (i.e., those of appointed officials). Before his resignation, Belinkov was overheard complaining to Attorney General Menahem Mazuz that the budget process “simply can’t be run this way. Can I allow that

7 Max Weber is perhaps the greatest critic of bureaucrats as policymakers; the ensuing analysis is influenced by his writings.

in the agreement with the Histadrut they will demand to separate the fictitious invoices, when we are trying to fight the crime world, because they want to buy [Histadrut Chair] Ofer Eini?" Concerning Ehud Olmert, he added: "Prime ministers have been sent home for less than that. This is bribery" (Weisman et al. 2009). These remarks, recorded by a TV reporter's microphone, were repeated in all news broadcasts as a reflection of corruption in politics. But even more than attesting to corruption, this affair demonstrates that Israel, like many other democracies, has a broad spectrum of players, individuals and institutions that lay claim to the crown of rationality and morality to counter the lack thereof among "politicians." Expressions of this type are often uttered during disagreements over allocation of public funds. In Israel, finance ministry officials have the power to dictate moral priorities regarding social services, education, religion and even security. This power does not derive exclusively from their official function as economic experts but also from the implicit (and at times even explicit) claim that while technocrats are entirely loyal to the public treasury and public needs, politicians tend intuitively towards waste and haste because of purely personal-political interests or even corruption.

In his classic analysis of bureaucracy, Max Weber (1978, 1422–1423) warns society against arrogant technocrats, calling them officials with powerful personal drive and egos, who gain publicity as they spew incisive criticism of corrupt politics and politicians, presenting themselves as extraordinarily bold and righteous public servants who always act according to objective public interests.

In Israel, the clearest example—that may well fit Weber's description best of all—is the case of former Accountant General Yaron Zelicha, who became a well known public figure because of his highly publicized war on corruption against Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. Thanks to Zelicha's key position in Israel's economic system,

his words gained massive exposure and his harsh accusations rendered him a true celebrity and leading figure among corruption fighters in Israel. Many of Zelicha's colleagues in the Israeli bureaucratic system considered his behavior to be mere arrogance for purposes of self-promotion and publicity. In an unprecedented measure, top Finance Ministry officials expressed their reservations about the damage Zelicha caused and his refusal to resign on conclusion of his term because "We have no other Ministry of Finance. We're all living in a world [governed by] term of office: 3–4 years is a reasonable time period for service and no one is holding on for dear life," said Ministry Director-General Yarom Ariav.⁸

In January 2010, State Comptroller Micha Lindenstraus published a scathing report on the deviant conduct of Yaron Zelicha when he served as accountant-general, including problems involving false reports about an additional job he held when he was working as a civil servant.⁹ This report led to criticism of corruption fighters' "false purism."

Agents of Morality in Civil Society (Domestic and International)

The concept of *civil society* has become a significant part of political discourse in democracies and a common expression throughout the world, especially because of the energetic activity of civil movements against Communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the subsequent democratization and liberalization of those countries.

8 *ynet*, September, 6, 2007. [Hebrew]

9 Zelicha's Celebration, *Globes*, January 13-14, 2010. [Hebrew]

Organization in civil society is generally identified as the “third side” (or “third sector”) of democracy, differentiated from political/party organization and activity derived from the administrative echelons of the state.¹⁰ While politics is characterized by power struggles among parties and political elites and the economic arena by commercial and financial forces and private enterprise, civil society, at least in theory, comprises volunteer forces that promote civil and social matters without seeking financial profit or political power [alone].¹¹

The multiplicity of organizations active in civil society is considered a reflection of vibrant democratic activity, providing a civil system of checks and balances against the power of the state and the politicians. Civil organizations are perceived as bodies that encourage participation and supervision of other systems; they nurture a democratic culture of tolerance and negotiation, serve as rallying points for establishment of pressure and interest groups among peripheral sectors, and function as channels of communication for transmission of messages from citizens to the central government. Activists in civil society are considered a viable cadre for political and public leadership.

Political thinkers also note that civil society differs from the political and economic arenas because it lacks internal division between dominant elites and “the masses.” The prevailing claim is that

- 10 Some even separate it theoretically from organization on a purely economic basis (the “fourth side”).
- 11 Somewhere between civil society and the economic and political arenas, political scientists also identify workers’ organizations (such as the Histadrut) and organized, institutionalized economic interest groups (such as the Industrialists’ Association). At times, there is some overlap among these three spheres, all of which, of course, exist within the framework of the sovereign state. (See Howard 2003.)

in civil society, members exert control through their organizations, whereas in politics and economics, the elites dictate both policy and values.

Although the activity of civil movements and volunteer organizations that criticize politics and politicians and serve as the watchdogs of democracy is nearly always perceived as something that strengthens the elected democratic establishment of the state, studies show that such activity may also have a negative and possibly destructive effect, particularly in time of crisis, in which presenting the authorities as weak and politicians as hollow and lacking legitimacy endangers political stability, impedes the democratic process itself, and adversely affects decision making and implementation of the policies of public officials. In Israel, volunteer bodies that present themselves as civil social agents and are perceived as such, may act according to an overtly political platform and even serve as covert political branches of the bodies, right-wing and left-wing alike, that finance them (often from overseas), weakening and even destroying the politicians' positions and personal status.

Over the past few years, many NGO's were established in Israel, including think tanks and civil organizations focusing on rectifying the ethical "failures" of Israeli democracy and on the struggle against political corruption. These bodies acquired decision-making influence covering a range of issues extending beyond their declared areas of activity. In time, they gained the status of new moral elites, especially in the legal sphere.

Organizations fighting corruption make extensive use of the media, the State Comptroller's Office and the legal system—that is open to petitions on behalf of the public—to expose ethical misconduct and political corruption, demanding that the legal norms applying to errant public officials be rendered more stringent. As indicated, fighting political corruption through the courts raises

some pointed questions regarding the difference between the *ethical threshold* representing ideal behavior suiting politicians and the *legal threshold*, below which activity is subject to criminal charges. Some corruption-fighting public petitioners representing civil social organizations call for congruence of the two thresholds, so that acts situated below the ethical threshold, now perceived as “inappropriate” only, will be considered illegal, leading to invalidation of the errant politicians through criminal sanctions imposed by the courts and attaching disgrace to unethical acts that deviate from norms of sound behavior.

Israel’s corruption-fighting civil social bodies, like those of other countries, often succeed in alarming the political system by forming ties with the legal and law enforcement systems and the media, as well as with international bodies, that have rendered political corruption an important global issue since the 1990s. Israel, too, maintains branches of Transparency International (TI) that is largely responsible for transforming the worldwide war on political corruption into what Yves Dezelay and Bryant Garth (2000) called “the imperialism of virtue.” TI, that is active throughout the world, has succeeded in turning normal governance and the scourge of corruption into key elements of international legitimization discourse. Similarly, its Corruption Perception Index (CPI) is presented as a scientific yardstick that condemns or approves of regimes that seek international assistance (see Navot 2008, 144–145). The international struggle and the CPI indeed assisted in the campaign to discredit cumbersome governing systems, primarily in the Third World, but the Index itself has become the object of denunciation in many democracies, particularly in Eastern Europe, where many have begun to question the rhetoric of the war on corruption and its destructive implications for the development of politics and new democratic institutions. Critics of the international war on corruption claim that the language of corruption constitutes lip

service to justify excessive involvement of civil social agencies and international organizations, adversely affecting national sovereignty and democratic processes. The language of corruption and the incitement campaigns against politicians were also condemned for according questionable justification to an extreme neo-liberal economic policy that demands removal of barriers and “corrupt” political supervision in favor of a free market. Researchers claim that accusations of corruption against politics and politicians proved to be exaggerated and often without foundation and have even helped foster a populistic antipolitical atmosphere that enabled international economic powers and questionable and antidemocratic factors to take control of public resources and morality discourse.

In Israel as in other democracies, the party newspapers and some committed press gradually lost their splendor and were defined as “propaganda” and an overt reflection of antidemocracy, even though key newspapers and magazines today still adopt ideological positions clearly identified with specific platforms and political figures. In terms of principle, contemporary journalists are ethically committed to their profession and to “the public’s right to know.”¹² The media’s function as a watchdog of democracy has been replaced by an increasing tendency to seek sensations, belittle politicians, spread

12 The Public Committee on Press Laws, headed by Justice Haim Zadok, defined four functions of the press in a democratic society: Exercising the public’s right to know, exercising freedom of expression, providing commentary, and offering criticism. The last item concerns investigative journalism, stipulating that “investigative reporting is capable of professional and responsible revelation of facts that at least ostensibly raise questions concerning the soundness of conduct of a significant functionary or a body with great public power . . . In such cases, publication is likely to motivate the lesson-learning process . . . Thus the free press plays a role as a mechanism of social criticism.”

cynicism regarding their motivations and present them as corrupt, egoistic and manipulative people who are contemptuous of the public interest (Schudson 2008).

Throughout the democratic world, issues that were once the province of yellow journalism have gradually become an integral part of mainstream media. In England, for example, political scandals that were once covered only in local tabloids began to penetrate the front pages of key newspapers and leading television channels such as the BBC and ITN News, undermining public trust in politics and politicians (Schudson 2008). Researchers in Eastern European countries that only recently went over to democratic regimes report that corruption discourse in the media constitutes another channel for expression of (inevitable) disappointment with awakening from the heroic struggle against communism to the realities of democracy that cannot always meet the public's high expectations. As many people forget that democracy cannot cure all ills contracted under the old authoritarian regime and that elected officials and the democratic process itself are sometimes limited in their handling of issues requiring governmental efficiency and distributive justice, these weaknesses metamorphosed into media slogans against the new corruption, thereby polluting the democratic political area and serving the interests of new authoritarian forces. A similar phenomenon may be discerned in Israel. Renowned media expert John Lloyd of Oxford University, who writes a column for the *Financial Times*, said that he feels the Israeli media overdo their contempt for politics, which still functions rather impressively despite all its flaws.¹³

13 Remarks at the concluding discussion of an international workshop entitled *Anti-Politics: Citizens, Politics and the Political Profession*, held at the Israel Democracy Institute in Jerusalem on December 19, 2008.

As noted earlier concerning TI corruption surveys, one significant reflection of the problematics facing the public when determining key issues on the public agenda is the flood of surveys, indexes, and public opinion polls cited repeatedly in the media. They purport to provide the Israeli public and its decision makers with the most important issues as ranked by the people polled, but actually serve as rating boosters for the media or their suppliers. This phenomenon becomes particularly outstanding in the case of surveys dealing with political corruption, an issue often presented as the key threat to Israeli democracy. In fact, the surveys provide the sensation necessary for research institutions and especially for the media in their competition for “hot” headlines. The results ostensibly constitute an authentic reflection of the situation in the country, even though, in the best case, they are only an expression of changing public feelings evoked by reports disseminated in the same media.

Israel has recently witnessed a vast increase in the number of pollsters and research institutes (some academic and some private) measuring political corruption and in the number of consumers of surveys for advancement of social issues, political positions, and of course, economic interests. To justify its existence, the war on corruption industry has to continue dramatizing the country’s acute situation.

Finally, it should be recalled that over the past few years, the Israeli media consumer has become an economic consumer who acquired such quantitative terms such as “indexes” and “factors,” supplying the illusion that one may quantify politics in the same way as one does economic data. The language of corruption in Israel has thus turned into a negotiable stock of known value at any given date and time.

Law Enforcement and Judicial Authorities

The function and status of the judicial and law enforcement authorities and the courts as agents of morality (gatekeepers) in society constitute a most pressing and controversial issue for democratic society in general and Israeli society in particular. Debate over the relationship between the judicial system and morality in the country has heated up over the past few years, especially because of the increasing tension between the political sphere and the state prosecutor and Supreme Court. The dispute concerns relations between procedural and essential democracy, i.e., the function of the courts when the democratic procedure is allegedly distorted or when judges claim that the output of the democratic process adversely affects the liberal values that ensure the spirit and essence of democracy.

Virtually no one disagrees that the Israeli courts engage in judicial activism. Over the past few decades, they have assumed a central role in the ideological-moral leadership of society as a “defender of liberal values.” The courts also expanded their involvement in the political sphere “in the narrow or aggressive sense, i.e., in decisions that aspire toward dividing political positions of power and political resources (through appointments, budgets and coalitionary agreements) and not necessarily to achieve an ideological goal. “The Court was able to increase its activity as protector of governmental integrity by exercising controversial judicial control and adopting amorphous yardsticks of “reasonability” and “proportionality” (Barak-Erez 1999).

The Supreme Court assumed a prominent place in public discourse as the pioneer of Israeli human and civil rights liberalism and has even gained international recognition, due in no small measure to the status and rulings of Supreme Court President (Emeritus) Justice Aharon Barak. During the three decades in which he served on the Supreme

Court, including eleven years as president, the Court gradually took the place of traditional institutions, such as the kibbutz and the IDF, as the symbol of Israeli values. The Supreme Court's involvement in shaping Israeli values, especially in matters of human and civil rights, in Israel and beyond the Green Line, increased markedly following the enactment of two Basic Laws: The Freedom of Occupation Law and the Human Dignity Law that the Knesset passed in 1992 and that Justice Barak called a "constitutional revolution." Judicial activism also intensified after petitioners were allowed to appeal to the highest instances without having petitioned lower courts first and without requiring proof of possible personal or palpable damage.

Over the past decade, relations and balances of power between the judicial system and politicians (the Knesset and the Cabinet) became more conflictual and hostile than is commonly accepted in other countries. One key element of this dispute concerns public ethics and the status of the cabinet and Knesset in the courts. Many people claim that the courts tend to perceive politicians as morally flawed and consequently in need of particularly energetic gatekeepers. The rivalry between the Court and key political and intellectual figures in Israel reached new peaks of vulgarity during Ehud Olmert's term as prime minister, when former Justice Minister Daniel Friedmann, the sharpest critic of judicial activism, was accused of "destroying the system of the rule of law" and Supreme Court justices and their supporters were called "the rule of law gang." Aharon Barak claimed that Friedmann was trying "to castrate and belittle" the Court through "legislation that bypasses democracy." Friedmann condemned the courts and their judges (including retired ones) for their elitist approach to democratic procedure and their overly intense involvement in politics and in shaping Israeli morality. He claimed that the judges, who present themselves as the ultimate defenders of the values of democracy, adopt an anti-democratic approach that

impedes the functioning and public status of elected officials in the Israeli political system. Friedmann also maintained that Supreme Court Justices express monolithic thought and believe that they always offer better solutions than the legislature.

The struggle between Israel's legal authorities and political system over authority and power is thus a major and well-publicized issue that is closely intertwined with the struggle over boundaries of language of corruption control.

Judicial supervision and activism may express the ethical preferences of the judges and courts, who are opposed to the output of the political system. In many cases, however, such activism is a direct consequence of "problematic" democratic systems that choose, for various reasons, not to make decisions on controversial issues, leaving the "hot potatoes" at the court's doorstep. Serving as a political adjudicator for issues such as identity, legitimacy, and security, as well as distributive justice issues, has forced many courts into public debates that they tried to avoid. Similarly, numerous democracies display an increasing demand for extraparliamentary investigative bodies to examine policies and decision-making failures. Such are nearly always staffed by judges cast into the eye of the political storm with the power to determine political fate and adjudicate issues of policy, morality, and ethics.

Anthony King (2007, 136, 138) notes that in England the introduction of judges to extraparliamentary investigative committees that engage in political criticism and the frequent appearance of active and retired judges in the media have adversely affected the aura of neutrality, the power of "judicial distance," and above all, the status of the British courts and their judges.

Criticism of judicial activism in Israel is no longer the sole province of political right-wingers, the religious and the ultra-Orthodox, who perceive the Court as adhering to the ideological-political agenda of

the non-religious and the Israeli left, which have lost their power in the electoral arena. In time, reactions to “ideological” judicial activism were also voiced by liberals at the center of the political map and even by key jurists and intellectuals who are sharply critical of the Court’s involvement in purely political-moral issues, including overt matters of security and economics.

From Law to Codes of Ethics

It is widely claimed that Israel’s boundaries concerning matters of poor judgment and violation of trust are porous and amorphous. Consequently, it would be advisable for the political system to adopt clearer ethical principles to avoid being dragged into criminal cases. The greater the criticism of the Court’s involvement in controversial political issues, the more intense is the debate concerning the link between ethical and criminal thresholds in Israel. In this context, Prof. Suzie Navot maintains that “judicialization” leads to judging actions according to whether they are legal or illegal, not whether they are appropriate or not (Navot 2009, 148).

Israeli politicians, who are becoming more and more wary that their inappropriate actions will be translated into criminal terms, ostensibly prefer to apply a code of ethics to themselves. In a comparative study of the effect of instituting codes of ethics and submission of transparency reports in parliaments throughout the democratic world, Denis Saint-Martin shows that these tools have become weapons in the hands of political rivals and accelerate creation of social supervision systems staffed by new gatekeepers, who accumulate power at the politicians’ expense. All these developments impel elected officials to behave defensively and unimaginatively on matters of policy and decision making. Above all, extension of the ethical violations debate provides fuel for a more

aggressive investigative press whose reports bear a cynical tone and whose civil criticism of politics is more incisive than ever.

Promotion of ethical behavior has not led to any real improvements in the political systems of the advanced democratic world, nor has it bettered the status and image of elected politicians as perceived by the public. On the contrary, such activities have given rise to bureaucratic systems that nurture the language of corruption and intensify disgust with politicians while creating an increased demand for supervision, additional codes and even intensified criminal law enforcement. Various studies found that democratic systems have achieved “ethical saturation” and that the demand for increased exposure of elected officials has become part of the political process itself without guaranteeing integrity or increasingly efficient parliamentary work and governance (Susser and Goldberg (2005; Saint-Martin 2006).

Escapists, Nationalists and Populists

Since the late 1970s, secular-bourgeois groups in Israel have been organizing in new political entities, which political scientists Bernard Susser and Giora Goldberg call “escapist parties.” These political bodies began operation as social movements calling for a change in the system of government and aspiring toward the incorruptibility of politics. Like “new politics” populism in other Western countries, Susser and Goldberg note, Israeli escapist politics is saturated with the rhetoric of corruption, covering up the absence of real solutions to the difficult issues that face the country (Susser and Goldberg 2005). Escapist parties appeal to educated people in the middle and upper middle classes and are headed by “clean” leaders from outside the political system, including people from the academic world, the media, and at times, former military officers. These candidates tend to promise voters that they will not be tempted by the delights of ruling

power, noting that they are not committed to ideological blocs but primarily to clean government and an unrelenting war on political corruption.

Especially prominent were the populistic campaigns against Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and his successor Ehud Olmert. During the disengagement from Gaza (2005) and the Second Lebanon War (2006), right-wing critics, especially settlers and their supporters in the Knesset, accused both Sharon and Olmert of endangering the national well-being of Israel in an attempt to divert public attention from the corruption scandals looming over their heads, claiming that the corrupt policies of the two prime ministers, which bordered on “treason,” constituted a direct continuation of their personal greed. Sharon was attacked severely by Knesset members and both right-wing and left-wing activists, who joined forces (each group for its own reasons, of course) in condemning Sharon as the most corrupt politician in Israel’s history. Effectively, these moralistic voices from the right and left repeated their incisive attacks against corruption and the weakness of the country’s political leadership, leading Israelis to the clear conclusion that the objects of this invective were “failed leaders who lack both the moral courage and the strategic wisdom to defend the country” (Glick 2008).

Such populism is common among the Israeli right, which opposes evacuation of settlements and agreements with the Palestinians. The left, by contrast, used the populistic language of corruption as an expression of political purism, contrasting with the political pragmatism that was viewed as false, corrupt, and too quick to grant a seal of approval to suspicious money-power ties. War on corruption campaigns often entails incisive criticism of Zionism in general and the “corrupting Occupation” and its attendant mistreatment of Palestinians in particular.

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