

Asleep and drifting toward the falls

Three decades of 'business as usual' are bringing us to the brink of disaster. It is time for us to come to our senses

By Dan Ben-David

"Our boat is drifting, and the sailors have all fallen asleep... If they don't awaken, how will the boat reach shore?" Most of us Israeli's grew up with Natan Yonatan's song "Dugit Nosa'at", but its words take on a special meaning for me these days. We are all in Yonatan's boat, though it is not the gentle currents of the Jordan river that are caressing the sides of our vessel, but rapids that are more reminiscent of the Niagara river leading us to the great falls ahead. Even if our sailors, Arik, Fuad, Silvan and company, were to awaken, there is no sign that they have internalized the awesome power of the current into which our little craft has drifted.

In the three main spheres of our collective life – the socio-economic, the religious-secular, and the political-defense – we are on trajectories that are rapidly bringing us to the point of no return, beyond which neither paddles nor even an outboard motor will be enough to save us from the powerful current leading to the huge falls. Our current position and our rate of progression along these trajectories makes it essential that we discard the ideological straightjackets of left versus right, religious versus anti-religious, and so on.

The socio-economic sphere, which determines the strength and ability of Israeli society to stand up to external threats, is characterized by income inequality within the country that is among the highest in the West. While the income gaps within us continue to grow, the gaps between Israel and the leading economies in the world are growing as well, with Israel's low growth causing the country to fall more and more behind in relative terms. These two processes are occurring in conjunction and both have been steadily worsening over a period that is not measured in years, but in decades.

The main problem is that an increasing portion of Israel's population is unable to successfully compete and thrive in a modern economy. When the percentage of families living under the poverty line (according to their gross incomes) rises from 28% to 34% of the entire Israeli population in just two decades – and this despite a real increase of nearly 300% in transfers during that period – it should be clear where this trajectory is leading us. But who among Israel's

current stock of self-serving and inept politicians even understands or comprehends this in a political environment that substitutes serious and professional treatment of problem sources with a lethal combination of short-sighted and amateurish treatment of symptoms only?

In the religious-secular sphere, another mystery: Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics data indicate that just 20% of all working-age ultra-Orthodox men participate in the labor force. The proportion of ultra-Orthodox that are willing to serve in the armed forces is also disproportionately small, and this is occurring while we as a nation are fighting for our very survival. Are these facts that could be imaginable in any other normal country. Is there no shame here? Are political parties who castigate everything religious on a permanent basis the only ones in this country who believe that something patently immoral is occurring in Israel?

Add to this the fact that just 22% of working-age Arab women participate in the work force. According to a report by a committee headed by Tzvi Tzameret (director of Yad Ben Zvi) at a recent conference in Herzlia, one-half of all children in first grade are in the ultra-Orthodox and Arab educational systems. Given the disproportionately high birth rates of these two population groups, is it not clear to their leaders where this trajectory is leading them and us – and at what rate? Who in the next generation will be able to finance these combined populations at the rates that they are accustomed to receiving transfers? Is it not possible to wake up and smell the roses before the whole system blows up and brings disaster upon us all?

In the political-defense sphere, there is nothing new under the sun, and that is simply unacceptable. The traditional debate between left and right is no longer relevant. On the one hand, we are pitted against a Palestinian leadership that chose to respond to unprecedented peace offers with an unprecedented armed struggle and cries of "jihad" (holy war) and "hakelouda" (right of return), a leadership that made it unequivocally clear what their ultimate goal is.

On the other hand, the Israeli Right is adamant about implementing our historic right to the land of our forefathers. But what comes after that? What is the vision? To spread our sovereignty to all the historic Land of Israel as decreed in chapter 1.b of the Likud covenant? There are 5 million Jews and 1 million Arabs in Israel. Another 3 million Arabs live in the territories. In less than a decade, there will be equality between the Jewish and Arab populations that live between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan river. This is a fact – and it does not square with the concept of a Jewish and democratic State of Israel. Those who do not understand this are invited to visit Rhodesia – as it was called then, Zimbabwe today – or South Africa, so that they may get a glimpse of the kind of future that awaits the stubborn who prefer blindfolds to eyeglasses.

Add an economic perspective to the political-defense sphere, one of a Palestinian population living under conditions of miserable poverty and corruption who want to enjoy the fruits of the

modern world just across the road or wadi, and the direction that our present trajectory is leading us becomes even more apparent. Only a withdrawal to areas with strong Jewish majorities and the construction of a modern-day version of the "Great Wall of China" along more defensible borders can significantly reduce the ability of Palestinian terrorists and migrants to infiltrate our borders – something that they do nearly at will today.

Israel's withdrawal will place the country in a position that puts its back to the wall, and there is no elegant way to sweep this under the rug. We know this, the Palestinians know this, and the West knows this. But when the back is to the wall, the hands are no longer tied – and that too should be obvious to all.

In any event, the relevant question facing us under the current circumstances, is not what is good for the Palestinians, but what is good for us. Our withdrawal to more secure and defensible borders surrounding a large Jewish majority is a necessity from the combined perspectives of defense, economics, and our very survival as a Jewish and democratic country. If, as it happens, our withdrawal also serves Palestinian interests, then our wishing to avoid giving them satisfaction does not qualify as a sufficient excuse for shooting ourselves in the foot.

This and more: if everyone becomes better off as a result of our withdrawal, then this could serve as the basis upon which future agreements might be made which could let us all live here in peace. Since our confrontation with the Palestinians is boiling over into dimensions that have begun to cause major concern for Western countries, then they may become more receptive to the possibility of helping to bring some quiet and stability to the region by buying from us the extensive infrastructure that we built – towns, roads etc. – and donating them to the Palestinians so that they will be able to get a head start on sovereignty with a ready-made modern infrastructure, while enabling us to finance the huge relocation costs that will accompany our withdrawal to our new and diminished borders. The financing aspects of this package deal could presumably be widened to include Arab oil-exporters who need to do some serious repair work to their image in the West since the events of September 11th. It's time that they became a part of the solution instead of continuing to be a part of the problem.

Three decades of "business as usual" in the socio-economic, the religious-secular, and the political-defense spheres have brought us to our current sorrowful state of affairs. It is time for us to come to our senses. Our inability to change the course of dismal trajectories that began in the early seventies is not due to a lack of resources but rather to our abject inability to define and implement a set of national priorities that reflect the collective long-term goals and needs of Israel.

This is a country that gives children allowances to all, including more than a billion shekels per year to families in the upper three income deciles, while subsidizing the college tuitions of these

families' children – instead of channeling the money toward improving the educational attainment and job skills of the truly needy. Our educational system concentrates on fashionable courses of studies – that belong in after-school programs, universities, or yeshivot – rather than focusing on the fundamentals and on affirmative action education aimed at reducing dropout rates, two critical objectives that will enhance the ability of today's pupils to find work in an increasingly competitive world. This is a country that finances large and rapidly increasing segments of the population to the extent that 80% of those populations who are of working age simply prefer not to participate at all in the work force – not to mention their non-participation in the physical defense of their own country, whose very survival is at threat. This is a country that has spent, since the early seventies, exorbitant amounts of money on settlements and infrastructure in areas in which there was never any chance that they could be a part of a democratic and Jewish state of Israel. There is no free lunch. We have paid an enormous price for our lack of vision and political courage – and the ultimate price is still ahead of us.

Israel has an excess supply of politicians, but not even one true leader. A true leader does not give excuses why something is not politically feasible, but enlists all means at his disposal to garner the public support necessary to do what must be done. I believe that we still possess the collective spirit of togetherness as a people and the sense of mission that keeps most of us here – still – and provides the well of support and strength from which a true leader can draw upon for the sectoral concessions needed for the general recovery of a society that is currently on three trajectories to ruin. We are brothers in this little boat called Israel, but our destiny will be the great falls – if we don't come to our senses immediately and start paddling in the same direction to the safe harbor that is still within our reach.

Dr. Ben-David teaches economics in the Public Policy Program of the School of Government and Policy at Tel Aviv University.