

On Values and Settlers

by

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Who could disagree with Israel Harel when he wrote last week: “An increase rather than a decrease in the number of teachers will not resolve the fundamental problem – namely, the lack of a binding system of values ... that leads some of the country's youth into an irresponsible, and sometimes even licentious and violent, way of life.” (“The Most Dangerous Criminals,” June 2)

How refreshing it is to hear such a candid appraisal from one of the leading settler leaders who would have undoubtedly added, had he been given additional space, that it is high time that these parents provide their children with a basic lesson in civics – for example clarifying to them the significance of laws passed by a sovereign parliament in a democratic country to disengage from Gaza, and on the fact that sending one's children to blockade main traffic arteries is, as the attorney general put it last week, “sedition and a breaking of the tools of the democratic process.”

Harel continues: “The acts of corruption among the wealthy and the powerful are also born out of corruption at the highest levels of government. It begins with the prime minister ...” If only it were possible to allow Harel to leave in his article what he must certainly have had to delete because of space limitations – namely, that he is referring to the same Ariel Sharon whose earlier exploitation of the same political culture enabled him to channel for decades on end, through intentionally veiled and circuitous routes, huge budgets for building settlements, amounts that it is impossible to identify to this day in the country's formal budgets.

A small example from a research project by Yuval Erez and myself: Three billion shekels were distributed in 2003 to local municipalities as “balancing funds”. These are general budget items – given in addition to funds for education, welfare and security – that can be spent in any way that the municipality wishes. Despite formal guidelines in the ministry of the interior for allocating the money, towns outside of the 1967 borders received funding per capita that was 2.1 times the amount received by Jewish towns of similar size and identical socio-economic ranking – who unfortunately, for them, happened to be located in the Negev.

As Harel surely knows, the wholesale diversion of huge budgets since the 1970s in his direction and that of his friends had to have come at the expense of someone somewhere. On their way from Kiryat Arba to Gush Katif, they should drive through Sderot, Ofakim and Netivot so that they may see some of the results. On their way back to Kiryat Arba, they might want take a small detour along the roads connecting Beer Sheva, Arad and Dimona and get a glimpse of the residents who filled many of the Negev's hitherto open spaces with permanent buildings during the years that the cream of the Jewish youth was directed towards small settlements amidst millions of Arabs on the other side of the Green Line. Maybe someone should inform Harel and company what has also been occurring during this period in the Galilee?

“Values” are a code word used by the settler leaders to distinguish between themselves and the other citizens of Israel that they view so contemptuously. When they violate the law as they build one illegal outpost after another, it is all done in the name of “values”. Only when others treat the laws of the land in an identical fashion, but within the Green Line, is Israel Harel reminded about “the vacuous post-modern education that serves as a substitute for unequivocal and binding values.”

For dozens of years, settler leaders have provided a substantial contribution to the corruption of the country's political culture and to a seismic transformation in the core values of Israeli society. The change in national priorities that they led since the 1970s was a primary contributor to the steady multi-decade decline in Israel's standard of living relative to the leading western countries, to the steady increases in poverty and inequality to western peaks, to governments whose reckless disregard for the concept of budget constraints led to three-digit hyper-inflation unknown in the industrialized world since World War II. The settler-supported

governments were also responsible for 18 blood-soaked years in Lebanon that resulted in the crowning achievement of replacing Palestinian terrorists with ones from the Hezbollah, to an unnecessary endangerment of our children for thirty years as they protected with their bodies – and often returned home upon completing their tours of duty with newly acquired questionable behavioral norms – settlements that, without a doubt, could never be part of a Jewish-democratic country in another generation.

The main casualties of the settlement movement's leadership are the settlers themselves, the large majority of whom are real salt of the earth, honest, people. Instead of directing them to settle in the Negev and the Galilee, instead of guiding the sense of mission deeply imbued in the primarily devout settlers toward fulfillment of the Jewish spirit by aiding those down on their luck in poverty-stricken neighborhoods and development towns, the settlers were maneuvered astray as insignificant pawns by an unprincipled leadership – yes, one without values – to fulfill an unrealistic messianic vision that endangers not only the settlers, but also the very existence of the third temple.

Time to take a look in the mirror, Israel (Harel). Occupation corrupts.