

# The Next Zionist Revolution

**Gerald Steinberg**

The first Zionist revolution, led by Theodor Herzl and his colleagues, was hugely successful. The reestablishment of Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel was and continues to be necessary for the survival of the Jewish people and culture in the modern world.

But there is no denying the obvious failures: Ahad Ha'am's call for a spiritual and moral renaissance has not been heeded, and the State of Israel is far from being the model of moral behavior or the "light unto the nations" that was envisioned. The scandals involving the president and other public figures are absurd, traumatic and embarrassing.

There are many explanations for the numerous incidents of corruption and immorality among Israeli leaders and public officials. No one and no sector is immune - secular humanists or ultra-orthodox rabbis; Ashkenazi or Sephardi; veteran sabras or new immigrants; men or women.

One undeniable contributing factor is stress from the constant wars and terror that devour much of our society's energy. It is difficult to turn your attention to internal reform when you are struggling for physical survival. But bad and corrupt leadership can lead to disaster on that front as well, as the recent war with Hizbullah demonstrated.

In addition, an antiquated electoral system encourages corruption and mediocrity among public officials, driving away the best and the brightest. And it is important not to underestimate the challenge of instilling norms of ethical government in a population of refugees. For many the Western liberal concept of separating the private realm from the public one, though long part of the Jewish code of ethics, is foreign.

The Second Zionist Revolution will have to reverse this situation and invest far more in promoting the moral and ethical principles of the Jewish prophetic tradition - in contrast to the kings and priests of the First and Second Temples, whose behavior was no better than that of the current group.

THIS PROCESS must take place from both the top down: from the religious and secular political leadership, and from the bottom up - in the family (which remains largely intact in Israel) and the school system.

It will not be easy or quick, requiring the creation of new institutions based on transparency, due process and mutual respect, including an end to sexual harassment and other forms of exploitation. On this basis an entirely new generation of leaders must be encouraged to enter public service.

The responsibility for leading the process falls on all dimensions of society. While many Israeli journalists, academics, writers, artists, film makers and other public figures have claimed the mantle of the Prophets and imitate the fiery biblical rhetoric, it is often wasted on false prophecies, including "solutions" to the Palestinian conflict or baseless attacks against religious or secular groups.

In parallel, much of the religious leadership has focused on divisive and political causes and false messiahs. In order to play a leading role in the Second Zionist Revolution these public figures will need to focus their attention on the crucial, internal, societal issues that cut across all sectors and groups.

IN THIS process, Diaspora Jewry, a partner in so many aspects of Israeli life, can play an important supporting role. Unfortunately, for many years, Jewish donors based in North America and Europe have also selected the wrong objectives, providing huge amounts of money to support their own agendas rather than core Israeli needs.

For example, many confuse the conflict between Israeli Arabs and Jews with the Civil Rights movement in the US during the 1950s and 60s, in which they participated. Many of the fringe groups they fund promote radical causes and the replacement of Israel by a "state of all of its people" - in other words, the dismantling of the accomplishments of the first Zionist movement. This money should instead be provided to workable programs that promote the real needs of Israeli civil society, including public ethics, transparency in government, a revamped police force based on due process and similar principles.

The funds provided by generous Diaspora Jews to religious institutions and education in Israel should also be used to support programs promoting ethical standards. In Israel, the mix of religion, politics and public funding is highly corrupting, while the moral authority of the religious leadership is essentially non-existent. Foreign donations made "off the books" to avoid taxes reinforces the norms of illegality. (The corruption and harassment that characterize government tax offices do not encourage altruistic behavior.)

By supporting programs that encourage moral leadership among rabbis and educators, world Jewry can help Israeli society to a much-needed new beginning.

But, as Israeli citizens, we are responsible for the heavy lifting in the Second Zionist Revolution. As in our army service, the war against corruption and immorality in public life will require personal involvement and sacrifice across the board in all sectors of society.

In contrast to Herzl and the leaders of the first Zionist revolution, we are already here and do not need to meet in foreign capitals, or plead for the assistance of potentates in the Ottoman or British empires.

Our fate and future are now entirely our own responsibility.

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