

What is Wrong in Israel

Corruption is an evocative word. Its original usage in Latin was something spoiled or ruined, mainly comestibles but in Christianity, the human flesh. Now it has come to refer to financial dishonesty and a political degradation of one's original moral ideals. It is a universal curse that no society is free of.

However much I love Israel and support it, the extent of corruption in Israeli life pains me. With a government that includes a thrice-convicted thief (and an ostensibly religious one) in charge of the finances. It is like putting a fox in charge of the chickens. Am I surprised? No. After all, Israel has the unenviable record of a convicted President, Prime Minister, and Chief Rabbi amongst many others.

Israel this past year recorded its worst-ever score in Transparency International <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021/index/kor>, of public sector corruption worldwide. The nonprofit group produces an annual Corruption Perceptions Index using data "collected by a variety of reputable institutions, including the World Bank and the World Economic Forum," which placed Israel 36th on its 180-nation list.

Among the 37 OECD members, Israel is now 36 and falling, though still deemed a little cleaner than Italy and Poland. The UK is in 11th place, Canada 13th, the US 27th, Iran 150th, and Lebanon 145th, cold comfort.

You may have heard how its Supreme Court is threatened but anyway in Israel judges often place and maintain unwarranted gag orders on those few cases that do get to court. Which discriminates against victims since it protects the alleged criminals and keeps their names out of the public eye and allows their scams to continue to flourish. The military courts are failing to deliver fair courts or due process. The Chief Rabbinate has a stranglehold on religious authority and courts that enable fraud and bribery to flourish.

What makes it worse for me, as a religious person, is the fact that religious political parties play an important part in perpetuating and encouraging this corruption. The main reason that Israel has not signed up for the international conventions on money laundering is that the religious parties know that so much of the money that comes to them is filtered through questionable sources and charities. They do not want to come clean about how they spend the money that they get. Because in many cases that money is going into private pockets rather than into the so-called purpose that they stand for. <https://www.themarker.com/law/.premium.HIGHLIGHT-MAGAZINE-Orthodox>

As the Book of Kohelet says not that money is the root of all evil but that money covers up evil (10:19). And that was three thousand years ago. And yet the Charedi world provides so much free education, charities, and support structures and it supports Torah study and religious values in numbers like no other time in our history. It has much to commend and it is not as if the secular world is so spotless. Of course, it has its crooks and its saints.

Which community does not? But there are clear indications of change even if it is happening slower than we would like.

As for the howls about the new rightwing government of Israel, from Jews and non-jew, Israel is a democracy dammit. If that's what the majority voted for one ought to accept it. I do not like extremists of any kind. But I despise the way that in the US as in Israel when one party wins a democratic election the other screams it's a disaster and the end of the world. And promptly wastes money and energy by being negative and destructive and undermining instead of trying to work together.

All countries are inadequate. Britain turns a blind eye to nefarious financial transactions. Its banks shelter ill-gotten gains and its libel laws protect and favor criminals. The USA is notorious for its pork barrel politics and financial corruption. And that's nothing compared to China or most members of the pathetic UN. Of course, two wrongs do not make a right. But the whole point of having a Jewish state is not just the negative (if important) reason of being a place of refuge for Jews, but also to try to set a moral example of how a state should be run. And in this, it is failing.

Ironically there's another international list of the United Nations World Happiness Index. And here for years Israel has performed spectacularly well and rose two spots in last year's position, in last year's survey, to that of 12th. What does this tell us that corrupt societies don't produce happy people? Israel has so much to be happy about.

I have just returned from Israel. I felt it was a happier and healthier place than the USA. The vibrancy, the immense amount of charity, cooperation, ecumenicalism, cultural vibrancy free of the dead hand of conformity, and many more exciting religious developments (all outside of the establishment of course). There is much to dislike, but it depends on whether you want to focus on the bad or the good.

Such excitement despite the nightmare of Israeli politics. Israel is a State like no other. So many different ethnicities and communities, living under constant threat of rockets, stabbings, and shooting. Yet it faces enmity from over the world from non-Jews and Jews trying to impose their compromised and failing values on Israel and refusing to acknowledge its right as a democracy to make its own decisions for better or worse.

Dreams and ideals have always had to give way to sordid reality. Israel is not yet "The light to the nations" the prophets hoped for. But Israel will sink or swim not because of its politicians but because of the many good, brilliant, caring, universal, and moral citizens. After all the Talmud says it only takes 36 saints for Israel to survive. And there are many more than 36 living in Israel today. We tend to forget when we see its failings that so much that's being done to heal breeches to make up for the failures of political society that get very little publicity. This is one reason why I'm so reluctant to belabor the failures of the state of Israel precisely because there is so much good.

Yet it is also crucial to encourage national resilience and values. This is

why we must take corruption seriously and not just shrug it off. The Biblical prophets did not just advocate universal morality and excoriate corruption. They also preached the Torah and the importance of living a good religious life. In both areas, it is up to individuals to make the appropriate moral decisions and not leave it up to politicians.