

ISRAELI CORRUPTION A WARNING SIGN

“What’s happened to our country?”

This is the question reverberating in the halls of the Knesset, as well as in many Israeli living rooms and numerous packed coffee shops.

“Is there a curse hovering over us?” asked some, who look at events with rational eyes and found nothing more rational than a curse to explain what’s going on.

In just one month, the IDF chief of staff resigned as a failure; the president has been publicly disgraced, as has the former justice minister who was convicted over his indiscretion.

Now, to top it off, public investigators have determined that organized crime elements have infiltrated the Israel police, leading the police commissioner to resign in shame.

Even his hastily appointed replacement is reluctant to take the job for fear that skeletons will be found in his closet.

Through the noxious fumes that hover over every news bulletin, Prime Minister Olmert comes across as the

modern-day Job, with many problems and misfortunes, but without the accompanying clarifying dialogue with his Creator.

What makes matters so fascinating is that several pundits have grasped upon this series of calamities to point out that virtually all of those whose careers have been eliminated, including Prime Minister Sharon who still lies in a coma, were those who played major roles in the Gaza disengagement and its resultant expulsion of 8,000 Jews from their homes.

True, it’s impossible to ignore what appears to be the *Hashgachah* in all of this. On the other hand, it would be tunnel vision to attribute it only to the giveaway of a portion of Eretz Yisrael. There is no doubt that something much deeper is going on here and this is slowly becoming apparent to the residents of this land. One need not be a prophet to internalize the fact that the events unfolding clearly indicate that we are

standing at a critical crossroad in our history.

Yes, the disengagement was a crime, but the price being paid is surely for something worse that has been perpetrated. Every week, another idol of secular Zionism is smashed, while its wretched followers sweep away the broken pieces in shock. The problem is not only that the government gives land to the Arabs, but rather that it is a government that has spurned the time-honored, G-d-given values of the Jewish people.

One thing is for sure: From one day to the next a huge question mark is hovering over “the State of Israel.” Citizens are asking themselves honestly how long it can survive in its present construct. It pays to elevate oneself above the narrow strip of Gush Katif coastline to realize that the settling of accounts is part of a larger, more panoramic picture.

— *Yossi Elituv, Mishpacha’s chief political correspondent*

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Photo: Mishpacha archives

UPDATES

Israel’s government appears to be finally making good on its promises to aid the Gush Katif evacuees. Under a bill working its way through the Knesset, each of the 1,800 evacuated families will receive an average of approximately \$400,000 — more than double what was originally allotted. Knesset members proposing the legislation say that the evacuees should be given enough money to replicate the lifestyles they had in Gush Katif inside Israel’s current boundaries.

The US may have a secret weapon in its war of nerves against Iran, and that weapon could be Saudi Arabia. Professor Barry Rubin of the Global Research in International Affairs (GLORIA) Center in Herzliya contends that Saudi Arabia feels threatened by a powerful Iran and “can do more to pressure Iran on the nuclear issue than any single country by threatening to further cut into Iran’s income.” How? By keeping a lid on oil prices, as the Iranian economy is highly dependent on oil revenues for its economic survival.

Rabbi Avraham Ravitz returned from his mission to America, confident that he has placed the plight of Israel’s 40,000 kollel members on the front burner. In a brief trip to the US, Rabbi Ravitz approached many well-known donors with his idea of creating a fund that would guarantee Israeli *avreichim* the country’s minimum wage of 3,500 shekels (\$800) per month. “I didn’t ask for checks; I was merely seeking partners for my idea,” Rabbi Ravitz told *Mishpacha*.

While Rabbi Ravitz was returning from the US, Shas Knesset Member Meshulam Nahari was arriving, at the behest of Rav Ovadia Yosef, to find ways to remedy the problem of at-risk youth. For the past year, Mr. Nahari has established youth programs in Israel to combat the phenomenon in both the chareidi and modern Orthodox circles. In the US, Mr. Nahari is meeting with officials of the OU, Brooklyn’s Sephardic community, and was scheduled to arrive in Lakewood to be hosted by Mr. Meir Hertz.

— *Yossi Elituv and Yitzchak Lavie contributed to this report*

IN THE NEWS



Photo: Reuters

Ground Zero in New York, the site of the former World Trade Center

AL QAEDA: WHY SO QUIET?

More than five years have passed since the devastating terrorist attacks of 9/11.

While there have been several elevated terror alerts in the United States and fear of another such attack is palpable, thank G-d it has not materialized.

Terrorism Monitor’s Chris Quillen offers three theories as to why al-Qaeda has yet to follow up with attacks it has threatened with either chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear (CBRN) weapons.

Disruption, deterrence, and patience.

Quillen contends that the US invasion of Afghanistan disrupted al-Qaeda operations by forcing the dispersal of terrorist leaders and operatives to multiple locations. He also credits, among others, British law-enforcement officials with foiling several plots in their latter stages of planning. In the meantime, al-Qaeda has been trying to rebuild a new operational base in Pakistan. While doing so, says Quillen, “The terrorist organization appears to be deterred from launching another major attack on the US homeland or a significant CBRN attack against US interests by the threat of a US invasion of Pakistan.”

Regarding the patience factor, Quillen says that al-Qaeda may also just be biding its time, “Building its capabilities in anticipation of a great victory and will not rush to act just for the sake of acting.”

As an example, he cites the case of a planned attack on the New York City subway system with an improvised chemical device that was called off shortly before the terrorist operation was to take place. Many reasons have been advanced for the cancellation, including the fact that authorities were tipped off in advance by an informant, but Quillen contends that al-Qaeda leaders decided there would not be enough casualties and appear to be waiting to commit an even more devastating attack as a follow-up to 9/11.

Whether al-Qaeda is on the run, somewhat intimidated, or simply biding its time, says Quillen, America and the rest of the world must remain on high alert for the foreseeable future.

TURKISH JEWS KEEP LOW PROFILE

Relations between Turkey and the Jews have always been complex.

A Muslim nation, Turkey's government, since gaining its independence in 1923, has been run by secular rulers who look over their shoulders at an even more secular army, which has stepped into the picture periodically to oust rulers whom they found not to their liking.

Geographically, Turkey straddles Europe and Asia. While Turkey has never shied away from being a regional ally of Israel, even at the risk of antagonizing Arab nations, in the past year it has become increasingly vocal in its public criticism of Israel's foreign policy, especially during Prime Minister Olmert's visit to Turkey earlier this month.

Trade between the two countries averages about \$2.5 billion per year. When Israel experienced severe water shortages early in the decade, Turkey offered to sell Israel fresh water. Now that Turkey is experiencing problems with its public health system, it has turned to Israel for assistance.

This last factor is of historical interest, as many Jewish doctors expelled from Spain in 1492 settled in Turkey, bringing their medical expertise with them. Jews have lived in Turkey since the days of the Roman Empire.

Dr. Rifat Bali, who has authored nine books on the history of Turkish Jewry, says that despite the Turkish Republic's strong relations with Israel, the Turkish Jewish community of some 20,000 maintains a very low profile in a country that has often enacted discriminatory laws against its Jewish citizens.

In the current edition of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs ongoing series, *Changing Jewish Communities*, Bali expresses his concerns for their future. "The community's future depends very much on whether the Nationalist and Islamist trends presently threatening Turkish society will eventually subside and whether Turkey will continue to develop as a liberal democracy without changing its secular character," writes Dr. Bali.

DON'T STRESS DISABILITIES

While awareness of learning disabilities helps improve academic achievement, paying them too much heed may cause anxiety and a decline in achievement. This according to new research conducted by the University of Haifa's Department of Learning Disabilities.

Eight-five elementary school children with reading disabilities participated in the study which evaluated not only the child's actual awareness of his disability but also the amount of emphasis placed on it. While knowledge of the disability resulted in improved achievement; continuously dealing with it caused general feelings of anxiety and poorer performance.

"As a result of the anxiety, the information processing systems become overloaded and the result is a decline in academic achievement," contends university researcher Mrs. Liat Feingold.

In practical terms, the university study warns against repeated clinical evaluations and different treatment methods which may actually disrupt and harm the chances of academic success.

BUSINESS

It's not what you know, but who you know that plays a major factor in determining who gets a job. A new Hudson survey found that almost three-quarters of all managers say their company typically looks first at its current employee roster when looking to fill a vacancy before considering outside candidates. Results of the survey also show that networking is one of the most common ways to get hired, as more than one-fourth of the employees who responded to the survey say that's how they secured their current jobs.

China's booming stock market and growing dollar hoard is creating some dilemmas for the world's most populous nation. Its stock market, which surged 130 percent last year, is still sizzling this year, leading to speculation that the government may take measures to cool the pace of its advance. China, which holds more than \$1 trillion in foreign reserves, is also considering selling some of its dollars to diversify its foreign currency holdings, a move that might make the Fed raise interest rates to defend the dollar's value on international currency markets.

Israel has made significant progress in reducing the sum of money it owes to other countries. At the end of 2006, Israel's foreign debt stood at 86 percent of its total economic output. That is still significantly higher than the 60-percent standard preferred by international economists, but also represents the first time it has ever fallen below the 90-percent mark.

The Palestinian Stock Exchange (PSE) is planning an \$18 million dollar public offering of 30 percent of its shares this spring. The PSE, which was established in 1997, three years after the signing of the Oslo agreements, fell 46 percent in value last year as a result of the Palestinian Authority's poor economy, corruption, and infighting between rival Palestinian factions. Some 34 companies are currently listed on the exchange.

THE LAST WORD

THE LAST OF THE CHALKIS JEWS

Among the hundreds of pretty little houses in the narrow alleyways of Chalkis, Greece, isn't difficult to locate the "Jewish Church," as the local Greek residents call the ancient synagogue of one of the oldest Jewish communities in the world.

These Jews were exiled from Eretz Yisrael directly to Rome by the Roman conquerors themselves, and from there they made their way to Greece. Thus they are known as Romaniotes.

The island city of Chalkis is clean and well kept, with an air of old-world simplicity. The shops, too, are small and modest. The strong wind, carrying the scent of salt water, enlivens the atmosphere, reminding us that these streets are almost entirely surrounded by the Aegean Sea. And indeed, if you extend your gaze in any direction, you'll see water, dotted with fishing boats and yachts. In the afternoon, throngs of fishermen are seen returning home from their day's work, hauling crates of fish ashore.

Walking uphill on one of the quiet little streets, we arrive at the town's synagogue. It doesn't look very ancient; although it has stood here for some two thousand years, it has been refurbished many times, and its exterior has an up-to-date look.

The entire Jewish community now consists of three middle-aged Jews; the Cohen brothers, Ezra and Yisrael, and Mrs. Rivka Kostir.

Although there hasn't been a minyan here for many years, the trio of Jews still living here remain enthusiastic about their shul. Holding a mop, Rivka tells me in halting Hebrew that she is "cleaning the Mishkan Hashem."

The shul's courtyard is lovely, featuring the trees and shrubs of the *arbaah minim* of Succos, alongside a large communal succah. There are pomegranate trees, too, for Rosh HaShanah. The garden is obviously tended by a loving hand all year round.

— Aharon Granot

A FRANK EXCHANGE OF LETTERS

Was anti-Semitism the motivating factor, or was the US State Department concerned that allowing mass Jewish immigration from Europe during World War II would create a "fifth column" of disloyal citizens?

Historians have, and will continue to debate this issue, especially in light of letters and official documents just discovered and released by the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. The documents include correspondence between Otto Frank, the father of Anne Frank, who hid from Nazi persecution in Amsterdam during World War II, and his college friend in America, Nathan Straus, son of the owner of Macy's department store chain.

In one of the letters, Otto Frank asked Straus for \$5,000 so he could obtain a visa. According to a *New York Times* report, the two men exchanged letters revealing the maze of obstacles and a tortuous immigration process that prevented the Franks and many thousands of other European Jews from escaping the Nazi's clutches.



A picture of Nathan Straus, alongside correspondence between him and Otto



Three Jews remain on the island city of Chalkis, Greece, which has one of the oldest synagogues in Europe