OPINION | **In Gaza, Israel Is Racing to the Moral Abyss – Michael Sfard, Ha'aretz**

Moral corruption is a mechanism that fuels and justifies itself in a cycle that can become endless without powerful and insistent intervention.

For us Israelis, the 75 years of refugee status that we've imposed on millions of Palestinians, the 56 years of occupation that we've imposed on millions more, and the 16 years of siege that we've imposed on the millions of Palestinians in Gaza have eroded our moral principles. They have normalized a situation where there are people worth less. Much less.

Corruption usually moves into the depths of the abyss at a constant speed with frightening periods of acceleration, but there are also moments of hope for a slowdown – until the black Saturday of October 7.

The incomprehensible cruelty that we've been exposed to – which proves the degree to which the occupation and the siege corrupt the occupied as well as the occupier – has penetrated our soul. And like nuclear fuel, it has spiraled us on our way to a moral hell.

It took a few days for a day of unbridled and systematic slaughter of civilians – children, women, the elderly and men – by members of an organization that has lost any shred of humanity to lift some of the barriers that we still seemed to have.

Israel today is a country and society where calls to erase Gaza aren't only the province of pathetic and marginal people leaving comments on social media. It's a country where lawmakers from the ruling party are openly and unashamedly calling for a "second Nakba," where the defense minister orders a denial of water, food and fuel to millions of civilians, a country whose president, Isaac Herzog, Israel's moderate face, says that all Gazans are responsible for Hamas' crimes. (If I hadn't seen this part myself I wouldn't have believed it.)

In Gaza with its 2.3 million inhabitants, over half of them children living under a government combining totalitarian dictatorship with religious fundamentalism, our president couldn't find a single Gazan – man, woman or child – who wasn't responsible. It's a good thing no news channel has ordered a survey to find out what percentage of the Jewish community supports ethnic cleansing in Gaza.

And maybe not only in Gaza; why stop there? When the political and military leadership loses all restraint and approves ideas about a massive blow to civilians, we're creating a society where the process of stripping away the humanity of the people on the other side of the border has been completed.

And when that happens, the inferno is near. On October 8 we carried out a giant leap in our campaign of moral corruption, and we are now dangerously close to the black hole. It's no wonder that there are thousands of dead in Gaza – thousands! – and the voices asking if we've done enough to prevent harming the innocent are barely heard in the Israeli public debate.

And that's not all. No social moral corruption is only directed outward. There is always the enemy within – the same enemy the police commissioner declared war on last week when he ordered his subordinates to forcibly prevent protests against the war in Gaza and against harming innocent people there. And he proposed that we deport the protesters to Gaza.

It's likely that expressing sorrow at the death of children in the Strip (there are already over 1,700 of them) won't only earn you a spot on one of the police commissioner's buses. It will also get you suspended from work or university, as has happened to dozens of people in the past two weeks.

And that’s not the worst scenario, because compassion for the children of Gaza could also end in a lynching attempt by a fascist mob, as happened to journalist Israel Frey. (Full disclosure: I’m proud to say that he’s a friend of mine.) In short: How will we define the regime of a country that treats its critics that way? I know how not to define it.

Not far from us, on their own way to the black hole, hover those who call themselves members of the “progressive left.” They're finding it hard to unhesitatingly condemn – and without fleeing to the “context” – a satanic orgy of destroying civilian Israeli communities near Gaza, along with their residents. Some are even blabbering something about decolonization being an ugly process; that’s what happened in Algeria and Kenya, for example.

I read that and die of shame. Maybe you didn't understand, but the struggle to end the occupation and achieve independence for the Palestinian people is part of the universal struggle to defend everyone's human rights, not vice versa. The idea of the sanctity of human life, the noble idea that every person has basic rights that shouldn't be undermined, isn't a tool for implementing Palestinian independence but the other way around. Palestinian freedom and self-determination are designed to advance a reality where people enjoy protection of their rights and are free to conduct their lives as they desire.

Those who are confused about this issue aren't humanists. Those who are confused about this issue aren't expressing a complex and profound moral thesis, they're simply sliding into support for terror.

Being humane is hard work. Remaining humane in the face of inhumane cruelty is far more difficult. Despite what we often think, humaneness isn’t a natural human trait. Much more natural is the desire to take revenge, to blame everyone on the other side, to drop thousands of bombs on them, to erase them from the face of the earth. Human history is full of examples, and apparently we haven’t learned a thing.

These are terrible times. We have experienced a horrific trauma perpetrated by human beings who have lost their humanity, and now we’re bombing, killing and starving people, and mainly hardening our hearts to stone. Moral corruption is no less dangerous to our survival than Hamas.