

Before it's too late

By Aviad Kleinberg

More so than dealing with fate and the relationships between sons and their parents, Sophocles' "Oedipus Rex" deals with the nature of knowledge, with the human tendency to suppress what we don't have the tools to cope with.

The play opens with a search for the murderer of the king, Laius, Oedipus's father. The search ends almost immediately. Already at the beginning of the play, the blind seer Teiresias is brought to Thebes; and following a brief and sharp exchange of words, he explicitly says to Oedipus: "Thou art the man,/ Thou the accursed polluter of this land .../ I say thou art the murderer of the man/ Whose murderer thou pursuest .../ I say thou livest with thy nearest kin/ In infamy, unwitting in thy shame."

Oedipus and the people of his city receive a direct answer to the question they ask; and the play should end there. But it is not to be. The explicit words fall on deaf ears. Oedipus rejects the accusations outright; he accuses the seer of lying and conspiring with the queen's brother, Creon. And then Teiresias goes from making explicit statements into the language of riddles more characteristic of prophecies. Oedipus and the people of his city accept the riddles with reverence and concern. The search for the murderer continues all the way through to the tragic ending of the play. The unpleasant truth is arrived at through a gradual and painful process of disillusionment.

The walls in Israel are filling up with writing and neon signs are flashing shrill announcements of history: Soon, it will be too late. The disregard for them is almost absolute; everyone is acting "as if there is no tomorrow." The government of Israel is dealing with the existential problems of the state by means of suppression and whitewashing. There is no serious discussion on any issue of significance - from the budget to security policy. Instead of a political struggle, we have the Peres festivities; instead of debate, we have faith.

Without cutting ourselves off from the Palestinians, we are destroying the moral basis of the State of Israel. Continuing to oppress them won't bring quiet but hundreds of years of terror instead. But it will be okay. Support for Israel among the EU member-states is dwindling. Sweeping American support is no longer guaranteed and comes with a heavy political price. But it will be okay.

The very same attitude is taken with regard to the fact that the economy, which is in need of root canal work, is being treated with aspirin; that the army dictates a shortsighted and wasteful security policy; that the slack threads binding Israeli society are gradually coming undone, as the poor are getting poorer and the rich are choosing to opt out and realize profits on safer shores; that the Arab Israelis feel alienated and the immigrants are starting to look for alternative solutions. But why solve problems when there is no entity in the state - neither the obedient media, nor the parliamentary "opposition" - that demands an account?

It's not only the elites; most residents of Israel believe things will be okay. According to a survey conducted by the Central Bureau of Statistics, 83 percent of adult Israelis are "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with their lives. The results of the survey are less surprising than they appear at first glance. Israeli optimism is a desperate step in the essence of denial, of social privatization.

The option of digesting harsh information and bravely and frankly dealing with a crisis depends on man's ability to translate problems into terms of action. Because the Israeli public realm is devoid of forces or alternative solutions, it chooses the optimism of those who have lost all hope. A typical phenomenon of a society locked in a deep existential crisis is the abandonment of the loathsome public realm and a desperate attempt to enjoy the private - instead of politics, a cultural blossoming, the bursting forth of energies directed toward "impractical" channels. The iceberg toward which we are sailing cannot be stopped, but the orchestra continues to play joyfully. It is easier to accept the reality than to try to change it.

There is something awful about the moral and political paralysis that grips Israeli society. The clear signs that things are going to get very bad should have aroused energetic counter responses; but the forces that were supposed to have led the struggle for reform are in a coma. An astounding expression of this is the fact that months after their election failure, the Labor party and Meretz have not managed to elect a new leadership. The "peace camp" is busy: Peres has a party, while Sarid is writing poetry.

The State of Israel's window of opportunity, and not only for peace, is closing. If it is impossible to convince the Israeli public of an alternative vision for Israeli society, and of authentic groups - also, and perhaps primarily, outside of the existing parties - working to turn this alternative vision into a reality, the public will continue to express desperate optimism rather than rage, apathy instead of action.

The most urgent national task of the day is the establishment of a fighting opposition that will begin a battle for the image of the state, that will allow the public to understand just how bad it is now - so that it doesn't get any worse.