

On shame and dignity in and around Gaza

'We don't want aid; We want dignity'



By Slavoj Žižek
Political philosopher

OPINION

Psychoanalysis is often misunderstood in two ways: a pseudo-leftist view that advocates for abolishing all forms of repression to fully liberate sexuality, and a conservative view that suggests a certain level of repression is necessary to prevent social disintegration and maintain public morality. Jacques Lacan presents a surprising perspective by defining the goal of psychoanalytic treatment in our permissive era as the restoration of a minimum of shame. The true opposition, according to Lacan, is not between free sexuality and repression but between shamelessness and dignity. Lacan's stance holds significant political relevance: protesters often attack the shamelessness of their opponents and demand to be treated with dignity.

This discourse extends beyond shameless populists like Donald Trump. A poignant example occurred when a photograph captured IDF bombs, made by the US, destroying Gaza buildings while US parachutes delivered food and medicine. The tension in this image — where the same country produces bombs and aid — culminated in a tragic event: when a parachuted food package killed a boy. On October 20, 2024, a 3-year-old Palestinian boy was killed by air-dropped aid in Khan Younis, as reported by his relatives amidst the humanitarian crisis caused by the Israeli offensive, which exacerbated severe hunger across Gaza. "We don't want aid. We want dignity," said Ayyad, the boy's grandfather. "Enough with the humiliation and insult that we are receiving from the Arabs, not just the Israelis. Those who have no mercy on us — look at our children, our women, our elderly."

Ayyad's plea highlights the humiliation of receiving aid from the air when pressure could be applied on Israel to allow more provisions to reach Gaza on the ground. Typically, provisions are delivered by parachute when an enemy surrounds your units or allies, as seen in 1942 when German forces were surrounded in Stalingrad; however, here the US acts on both sides. Ayyad's plea also underscores another critical aspect: despite massive hunger and medical crises in Gaza, he asks for dignity rather than more aid. This appeal to dignity is global; despite poverty, hunger, and violence, protests from Chile to Turkey and Belarus to France have consistently evoked dignity. Conversations with friends in Istanbul revealed that their main slogan was dignity: they found it intolerable how the Erdogan regime humiliated them by treating them as idiots. "Dignity" emerges as a popular response to the open cynicism of those in power, specifically their shamelessness. As Peter Sloterdijk noted nearly half a century ago, today's ideological formula is not "they don't know what they are doing, but they are nonetheless doing it," but rather "they know what they are doing, and they are nonetheless doing it."

A recent example of utter shamelessness occurred in July 2024 when several ministers and Members of the Knesset criticized an IDF military police raid on the Sde Teiman base for arresting reserv-

ists accused of abusing imprisoned Palestinians. These arrests followed public revelations by horrified Israeli reservists about security personnel torturing Palestinian prisoners with metal sticks. Peter Osborne highlighted this issue in a Knesset debate clip:

"This is insanity; someone thinks it's possible to arrest soldiers for things they do to Nukhba (Hamas Elite Unit) terrorists." An interjection questioned if inserting a stick into a person's rectum was legitimate. The response was chilling: "Yes, if he is Nukhba, everything is legitimate." Osborne also showcased an Israeli TV debate where suspicions of soldiers raping a shackled prisoner were dismissed with indifference: "I don't give a rat's arse what they do to that Hamas man. The only problem I see is that it's not state policy to abuse detainees. First, they deserve it, and it's a great form of revenge. Secondly, maybe it will act as a deterrent."

This is the lowest point of shamelessness one can envisage — although maybe things will go even further, and we will get a live TV transmission of such torture. (Public tortures were a common practice until the 18th century!) However, just imagine the outcry if Hamas or Hezbollah were publicly boasting of doing the same to some of the remaining captives in Gaza. Would they not be accused of being less than animals? This, then, is what we get from "the only democracy in the Middle East"! Can one even imagine what our reac-

tion would have been if the same thing were to happen in Russia?

Another example: we learned that Eliran Mizrahi, a 40-year-old father of four and an Israeli military reservist, returned from Gaza deeply traumatized by what he had witnessed and what he did in the war. He was struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder at home, and before he was due to redeploy, he took his own life. During his deployment in Gaza, Mizrahi was tasked with driving a D-9 bulldozer, a 62-ton armored vehicle that can withstand bullets and explosives. Guy Zaken, Mizrahi's friend and co-driver of the bulldozer, said:

"We saw very, very difficult things. Things that are difficult to accept." In testimony to the Knesset, Zaken said that on many occasions, soldiers had to "run over terrorists, dead and alive, in the hundreds." This is the true cause of Mizrahi's post-traumatic disorder: massive brutal killings that he not only witnessed but also committed. An IDF psychologist said that "one of the ways the military helps traumatized troops resume their lives is to try to 'normalize' what they went through, partly by reminding them of the horrors committed on October 7." The aim of such "therapy" is thus to normalize profoundly abnormal criminal brutality, to make Mizrahi's massive crimes into normal justifiable experiences — in short, to obliterate the last remainders of shame and unbearable guilt in his subjectivity and make him a



Israeli protesters gather in support of nine Israeli military reservists, who were detained following the suspicion of sexually abusing a Palestinian detainee at the Sde Teiman detention camp, the Occupied Territories, on July 29, 2024.
● AMIR COHEN/REUTERS



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Destroyed buildings in the Gaza Strip are seen through the window of an airplane from the US Air Force that was to drop humanitarian aid, on March 14, 2024.
● AP

person who will be able to run over hundreds of dead and alive persons in cold blood.

The mystification here is double: not only is Mizrahi's criminal activity ethically neutralized into a "traumatic experience," the focus on his inner suffering also ignores the painful death of hundreds overrun by his bulldozer. We are here only one step from helping the perpetrators of the Holocaust to "normalize" what they went through (pushing bodies into gas chambers, etc.) Shamelessness reigns fully here.

One can recognize a pattern in how we again face the fact that the IDF is doing itself what it accuses Hamas of doing. For a year, we listened to the mantra that Hamas is using Palestinian civilians as a human shield on the battlefield (which is why so many civilians were killed in Gaza). However, Israeli media reported on October 23, 2024, that the IDF has forced Palestinians to enter potentially booby-trapped houses and tunnels in Gaza to avoid putting its troops in harm's way — a soldier reported: "We told them to enter the building before us. If there are any booby traps, they will explode and not us." It was so common in the Israeli military that it had a name: "mosquito protocol." When the same soldier questioned the practice, one of his commanders told him, "It's better that the Palestinian will explode and not our soldiers." Where does shame enter here? In his seminar "The Reverse of Psychoanalysis" (1969-1970), Lacan's reaction to the May '68 events makes a much more important point than the decried provocative statement: "What you aspire to as revolutionaries is a master. You will get one." In his critique of protesting students, he surprisingly says, "All you are lacking precisely is a bit of shame." Lacan repeatedly varies this motif, like saying that students "fear they might be carried away by buffoonery. Let us start rather from the fact that buffoonery is already there. Perhaps by mixing in a little shame, who knows, we may be able to hold it back." And he even concludes the Seminar with: "What I put forward for the majority of you is just that: I manage to make you ashamed — not too much but precisely enough."

Jacques-Alain Miller provides the background for this statement by pointing out that we have to read contemporary shamelessness from the perspective of a certain mutation in capitalism — no longer a capitalism that relies on 'repression of enjoyment,' as in Max Weber's famous analysis — but rather one marked by permissiveness where what can sometimes be difficult is prohibiting prohibitions. Lacan doesn't advocate here for a minimum level of morality or repression necessary to prevent social disintegration; on the contrary, he draws attention to what members of the Frankfurt School referred to as "repressive de-sublimation": Today, we witness generalized perversion (openly doing what hysterics only dream about), and as Freud knew well, nowhere is the Unconscious more inaccessible or repressed than in perversion. The catch is that desire is inherently inconsistent and self-contradictory — traversed by what Freud called "primordial repression," which is why permissiveness ends up in self-destructive deadlock giving birth to calls for new Masters. As ongoing waves of new populism demonstrate aptly enough, this new Master's shamelessness far exceeds those old Leftist protesters' shamelessness.

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