

**Prof. David Harel, President of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities,
“Uncovering the Political Façade”, 9.9.2025**

Introduction

The past twenty-four hours have brought yet another surge in unbearable violence. Just yesterday, we discussed the proliferation of weapons in public spaces, and today—six people killed in an attack near Ramot. Dozens more Palestinians have died from airstrikes, starvation, and fires at aid distribution centers run by the GHF. The fate of hostages remains unknown. Hundreds of thousands in Gaza have received evacuation orders and begun the arduous process of displacement—for the umpteenth time. Two weeks ago, we heard from Nawa Al-Masri, who described being forced to move repeatedly with a newborn daughter. One of the flotilla ships bound for Gaza was attacked in Tunis with a flare bomb. Meanwhile, in the West Bank, pogroms and ethnic cleansing continue unabated. Relief seems nowhere in sight; only collapse and moral ruin. What is our place in the face of this? What responsibility does the Israeli academy bear in the midst of such destruction? What can—or must—we do?

To explore these questions, we are joined by one of the most senior and authoritative voices in our academy: Professor David Harel, computer scientist and president of the Israeli Academy of Sciences and Humanities. Thank you, David, for joining us. As a reminder, Professor Harel will speak for eight minutes, followed by a short discussion.

Talk

Thank you, Ayelet, and hello everyone. Ayelet spoke quickly; I will speak even faster, as eight minutes is short. Just a few basic facts, which one almost doesn't need to state, but which set the context. What is happening in Gaza is unacceptable, unbearable, and horrifying. The same is true for the West Bank in recent weeks, and perhaps soon we will face another war with Iran. I sit here in my office at the Weizmann Institute. Behind me is a window covered with plywood, and another left open. There is no ceiling. Our building was not directly hit by an Iranian missile, but the neighboring building, 20–30 meters away, was. Structurally, our building is fine, but nearly every office has been destroyed. And this is nothing compared to what may happen if Israel launches further attacks. All this comes atop a governmental coup and the hostile takeover of cultural and academic institutions orchestrated by the Minister of Education, Yoav Kish. In my view, this government is not just eroding the state we cherish—it is accelerating the process day by day. The blows inflicted upon citizens multiply and intensify. I fear what may happen if David Zini is appointed head of Israel's Security Agency.

A few weeks ago, I spoke at two protests about “The Silent Ltd.” as I call them—senior people with influence who remain silent. They may say something here and there, but they do not speak up as they should, as public figures with public responsibility and influence must: that this government is responsible to what is happening. We are being dragged into places from which we may not return, and the government must take responsibility and make way for a better one. By “Silent Ltd.,” I do not only mean former officeholders—ex-Mossad chiefs, former heads of Israel Security Agency, ex-Chief of Staff, past university presidents, former heads of the Israeli Academy, police commissioners—but also those currently in office. Here lies the essence of being a state figure, of public responsibility, of what is expected of me as a public figure. Because, as a public figure I hold a stately role. My role as president of the Academy is truly independent: members elect the president; the official appointment comes from the President of the State.

To my great sorrow, President Herzog today leads “The Silent Ltd.” I refrained from criticism in recent years, partly because he signed my appointment. He is not directly responsible for the war, but he cannot remain silent. He must speak up clearly about the state of affairs. I sometimes write speeches for demonstrations and ask myself: why it is me who deliver them? Why not him, or someone like him?

When I was elected four years ago, almost a year after the general election in Israel, there was strong opposition to my appointment. Articles attacked me in *Israel Hayom* newspaper, and Knesset speeches tried to prevent President Rivlin, and later Herzog, from signing my appointment. I was labeled a “stinking leftist.” I told the Academy at the time that I would refrain from activism—no petitions, no opinion pieces—but that was before Netanyahu returned to power. Over time, all my layers of an a-political figure had eroded. Today, none remain. I do not claim fearlessness; of course, I am afraid. I could be called by the police tomorrow, framed for something I never did. But I no longer restrain myself. I speak up, write, and lecture freely, as public figures must. I hold no personal criticisms—university presidents such as Ariel Porat, the president of Tel Aviv University, do excellent work, others less so. They face enormous challenges: unions, donors, student bodies, administrative pressures. My concern is broader: anyone in public office who can speak up must not remain silent. Silence leads us all to doom.

A colleague who visited Heidelberg University was shown archival protocols where three or four professors opposed the Nazis’ early actions. Today this is a source of pride for the university. I hope every leader, now and in the future, can show their descendants that they opposed injustice—some more forcefully, some less, but they opposed. This is the standard of responsibility I uphold.

Finally, when I communicate abroad, I cannot defend Israel as ambassadors or foreign ministers are expected to. Yet I represent an Israeli body, and the most effective approach I’ve found—one I recommend to others—is to carefully distinguish three types of reactions abroad: antisemitism (“that Jews should disappear”), anti-Israelism or anti-Zionism (“that Israel should disappear”), and opposition to the current government’s actions in Gaza and the territories (“that this government should disappear”). I fight the first two to my last drop of blood, but I support critique of the third. This distinction is clear, principled, and necessary. It presents a person who is against the government. And I take in this a very determined line.