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### FROM BEGIN TO SHAMIR: THE IMPLICATIONS OF HERUT'S SUCCESSION STRUGGLE

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*Likud regroup. The contenders. Shamir garners support. Levy's challenge. Shamir's advantage. A harmonious contest. Herut gains stature. Shamir as a leader.*

Menachem Begin's decision to resign from his post as Prime Minister brought to the surface long latent questions about the future of Herut, the party he had founded and dominated for thirty-five years. Foremost among these questions was whether Herut would be able to continue functioning as a united party or whether it would fragment into quarreling factions in the absence of Begin's leadership. Herut's ability to face up to its first major post-Begin challenge — choosing his successor — gives us an indication of the party's viability and direction in the near future. The party's choice of Foreign Minister Yitzchak Shamir over Deputy Prime Minister David Levy provided Herut with a smooth transition which left only surface scars among the top leadership and indicated that Herut's membership still adheres closely to the basic positions pursued by Begin.

#### LIKUD REGROUPS

Whether he had fully intended it or not, Menachem Begin submitted his resignation two weeks after his seventieth birthday (according to the Western calendar) thereby fulfilling a longstanding promise. Whatever the reasons behind it, the fact of the resignation coming at a time when the Prime Minister was obviously incapable of continuing to function, was a salutary act. Even more salutary was the way in which the Likud came together to choose his successor, fairly, democratically, and with grace.

For years the political pundits have emphasized the likelihood that the Likud and even the Herut would fall apart after Begin departed from the scene. They claimed that the party was so much his creature that it could not survive the loss of his personal leadership. Begin's authority over Herut had been so complete that during his tenure he was approved time and again as party leader by acclamation, without a general vote in the central committee. The only challenges to

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Begin's control of Herut — by Shmuel Tamir in 1964 and by Ezer Weizman in 1977 — were both crushed, with the result that Begin emerged stronger than before. Moreover, Begin was careful not to groom any successors and, indeed, to cut down any potential rivals within his party. Those who suggested that Herut had acquired a wider base, particularly in the years since their first electoral victory in 1977, and a group of potential contenders worthy of the title, despite the Prime Minister's best efforts, were looked upon with great scepticism.

## THE CONTENDERS

Even without Begin's encouragement, by June of 1982 there were five contenders for his job. Within the government itself, Defense Minister Ariel Sharon was the most aggressive in his pursuit of the office and presumably the most popular member of the government other than Begin himself. Rumor had it that Foreign Minister Yitzhak Shamir was Begin's choice. Finance Minister Yoram Aridor, secretary-general of the Herut Party Executive and architect of the 1981 Likud victory, who opened the floodgates of consumption in Israel, saw himself as one who could almost buy his way into the prime ministership. Housing Minister David Levy, the strong man of the Herut Party organization, was just becoming a contender as his talents began to be recognized by ever-wider segments of the public. Finally, Moshe Arens, Israel's Ambassador to the United States, had quietly launched his pursuit of the office by building up a cadre of supporters within the party.

The Peace for Galilee operation proved to be the graveyard for the political ambitions of Ariel Sharon. As it became apparent that his reach had exceeded his grasp his popularity began to decline, only to plummet after the Lebanese-Christian massacre of the Palestinians in September, 1982. While he will never give up his striving for the prime ministership, he was effectively knocked out of the box by his own efforts. In the meantime, Sharon had succeeded in knocking Shamir out of contention at the time by eliminating him from the foreign affairs aspects of the Lebanon operation early in its course. Sharon seized control of the negotiations surrounding the Lebanese conflict, leaving Shamir nowhere to be seen.

In the fall of 1982, despite murmurings against his policy, Aridor still saw himself as being in the running, although, in fact, the added economic burdens of the Lebanese operation had already sealed his fate. David Levy's strong stand with regard to the necessity for a full-fledged investigation of what happened in Sabra and Shatilla, plus the information that reached the public about his earlier stand in the Cabinet trying to limit the extent of the Lebanese operation, made him a serious contender in the eyes of the public for the first time, but still not one strong enough to assert a clear claim to the office.

Then in February 1983, the removal of Sharon from the post of defense minister in the wake of the Kahan Commission report, opened the door for the fifth contender, Moshe Arens, to return to Israel to replace Sharon at the Defense Ministry. Given his own ambitions, Arens clearly had to be considered a contender from that moment on, but because he was not a member of the Knesset (he had to resign to accept the ambassadorship) he could not be an active contender until the next elections, whenever they might be held. Arens strengthened his position as a result of his extraordinarily effective performance in the Defense Ministry from his first day in office. In the meantime he also brought Shamir back into the picture by convincing Begin to send the Foreign Minister to Washington to try to resume the US-Israel dialogue which had suffered so

much all during that fall and winter. In one fell swoop, Arens undercut Sharon's last possible power position and brought in Shamir as his preferred interim candidate until he could make his own bid.

Meanwhile, Aridor's antagonistic behavior during the doctors' strike further weakened his public image, virtually eliminating him from contention. His situation continued to worsen as the economy went from bad to worse as a result of his policies. So it was well-nigh inevitable that, when Begin announced his resignation, Shamir and Levy should appear as the two leading contenders for the succession.

#### SHAMIR GARNERS SUPPORT

What followed was no surprise on one level, but a very pleasant surprise on another. On the first level, Arens, looking to protect his future against a competitor whose relative youth and strong party position would have made him very difficult to remove once he was in the Prime Minister's office, and Sharon and Aridor, both hoping that their fortunes would be reversed in the future, all united behind Shamir, whose age and lack of party base made him an ideal interim candidate in their eyes to hold the position until one of them was ready to make his move.

#### LEVY'S CHALLENGE

The above three cabinet ministers joined all of the other Herut ministers, except for Levy himself, in support for Shamir's candidacy. In fact, Shamir attempted to gain a unanimous endorsement from the Herut ministers in order to present the decision to the central committee as a *fait accompli*, so that no vote would be necessary. Thus, a massive coalition confronted David Levy and his supporters. Levy, however, held out against his fellow ministers and forced the decision into the nine hundred-member central committee.

The significance of Levy's action reached beyond the immediate framework of his contest with Shamir. In effect, it marked the culmination of a process of internal democratization within Herut. This process had begun in 1977, when the party decided to choose its Knesset delegation by a vote of the four-hundred-member party convention rather than by decision of the fifteen-member appointments committee. Levy's persistence meant that Herut's central committee had to conduct the first secret ballot leadership vote in the party's history.

Levy had reason to believe that his chances of winning the vote were favorable. Because of his years of experience as head of the party's Histadrut faction, he enjoyed a strong measure of popularity within the central committee. Indeed, during the 1981 party convention, Levy had outpolled Shamir and had been chosen as number two man on the party list. Furthermore, in the months preceding Begin's resignation, Levy's abilities as Deputy Prime Minister had earned him the reputation of an effective manager of domestic policy.

#### SHAMIR'S ADVANTAGE

Shamir, however, enjoyed many advantages over his rival. Foremost among these was the strong support he received from his fellow ministers, who used their influence to obtain votes for Shamir in the central committee. A further advantage was Shamir's expertise in foreign affairs in contrast to Levy's inexperience in that field. Moreover, Shamir's experience as commander of

Lehi (Lohamei Herut Yisrael – the Stern group) during the pre-State struggle for independence earned him the support of Herut's old guard of underground fighters. Finally, Shamir's hard line positions regarding the administered territories and the Palestinian question draw the hardliners to him rather than to the more moderate Levy.

Before the voting, the two candidates took pains to indicate that regardless of the outcome, they both would be able to continue working together in the same cabinet. Each candidate offered the post of Deputy Prime Minister to his opponent, in the event of victory.

#### A HARMONIOUS CONTEST

The party leaders decided that the best way to resolve the competition between the two candidates was through an open, free and fair election in which all factions and sub-factions of the party would have the opportunity to vote.

The contest was conducted according to the rules, in the best sense of the term, and in such a way that the party and relationships among its leaders would be minimally damaged. Issues were confronted directly and attacks on persons were avoided. When the election was held, Shamir with his grand coalition won by an almost two-to-one margin, which surprised many, but, in fact, demonstrated what great strength Levy had developed over the years, especially in light of his starting-point as the butt of crude jokes reflecting his Moroccan origins. Most important of all, good relations were preserved among all the participants, so much so that in the aftermath of the vote, Shamir could ask Levy to undertake the task of putting together the coalition which he needed to form a government.

#### HERUT GAINS STATURE

Herut came out of the succession struggle much strengthened as a party and in the eyes of the discerning public. It had demonstrated its capacity to govern by having a leader who knew when to resign, others waiting to take up his responsibilities, and a way of conducting its affairs that was in the best traditions of democratic government. Herut looked especially good when contrasted with the Labor Party, where the struggles between the party leader and the contenders for his position remained as messy and self-defeating as ever.

Although both candidates succeeded in ensuring that their contest provided an essentially smooth transition for Herut, it would be incorrect to claim that the Levy/Shamir competition left absolutely no rifts within the party. For example, within the Finance Ministry, tensions increased between then Minister Yoram Aridor and Deputy Minister Chaim Kaufman because the former supported Shamir while the latter supported Levy. Such divisions were by no means confined to the Finance Ministry. Deputy Minister of Agriculture Michael Dekel, who helped coordinate the Shamir campaign, did little to hearten Levy supporters when he stated that Shamir's victory would have "administrative and power consequences inside the party." The precise nature of these consequences, as well as Shamir's ability to hold together a troublesome coalition in the face of daunting economic and international problems remain to be seen. For now, however, Herut has emerged intact from the most serious challenge in its thirty-five year history and has demonstrated its continued viability in the post-Begin era.

## SHAMIR AS A LEADER

While Shamir may have garnered support for his candidacy because many expect him to be an interim figure, it is unlikely that he has accepted the task in that spirit. He is very much his own man, who has already demonstrated that he intends to govern as if his majority were secure (as did Begin), a sure sign of leadership capability. He will be, at one and the same time, tougher than his predecessor in some ways and more conciliating in others. We have already seen some signs of both.

Shamir's effort to bring the Labor Alignment into a national unity government was genuine and, apparently, he was most forthcoming in his discussions with Labor. The idea fell through because of Labor's insistence that Likud, for all intents and purposes, repudiate all of the policies its governments have pursued since 1977 and go back to the policy positions of Labor prior to the 1977 elections — an obvious impossibility and, even more than that, something of an affront to the Likud as the governing party. Nevertheless, Shamir's speech to the Knesset presenting his government was full of conciliatory nuances, suggesting that he is not likely to bait and provoke the opposition in the way Begin liked to do but would seek to work with them, especially in matters of vital common interest to Israelis.

On the other hand, since he is less of a formalist and can be more flexible, Shamir is likely to be even tougher in foreign policy matters when he feels Israel's basic security interests are threatened. But he will be tough in a quieter and more soft-spoken way. This was almost immediately made evident in the Shamir-Arens trip to Washington and the resultant agreement with the Reagan administration for US-Israel "strategic cooperation" which signalled a new "era of good feeling" in relations between the two countries. It was also indicated in Shamir's surprise visit to the Israeli troops in Lebanon, something which Begin had not done and which attracted much favorable attention in Israel.

At the same time, Shamir confronts serious economic problems which he has inherited and which are not amenable to rapid resolution. Nor is the Shamir-Levy contest over. Levy extracted a promise from Shamir to be given the Foreign Minister's portfolio when the latter will relinquish it, but Shamir, under pressure from Levy's rivals to keep him out of that position, does not seem in any hurry to do so. This has angered Levy, who tried to raise the issue publicly in November but backed off when the media response was unfavorable. At this writing, there is a truce between the two men but, in the way of politics, it may or may not last.

Political rivalries being what they are, such competition is part and parcel of the democratic process — indeed, a sign of health in a democracy. What is most important in the larger picture is that the rivalry is being conducted with decency and grace, as it has been all along.

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