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YITZHAK SHAMIR AND THE CHANGING OF THE GUARD

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The Last Underground Leader

In the summer of 1991, a small elderly man marches briskly up Eliezer Kaplan Street while three larger men and a blue Chevy Caprice trailed close behind. The man is 75 years old but he likes to boast that he can outpace bodyguards who are three times younger than he is.

Yitzhak Shamir is the most fascinating and, in a curious way, the most unpredictable of Israelis. In the last five years of Israel's history, he was unquestionably the most pivotal figure. Yet he is a man his own aides and colleagues did not seem to know very well, a leader whose rise and fall both seem puzzling and unexpected — yet offer many important signposts in explaining both Israel's past and its future.

By 8 a.m. Shamir would be sitting in his office, reading overnight intelligence reports and awaiting the arrival of his advisers. One by one, almost never in a group, they would meet with him. Like an underground commander, he listened and gave tasks to each. Assignments were compartmental-

ized. Everything was on a need-to-know basis.

Shamir is a barrel-chested man, with bushy eyebrows hovering above a rubbery, almost asymmetrical face and a wispy, almost-invisible mustache. Although he is barely five foot two, Shamir does not appear frail nor easily intimidated. He gives the impression that he is serenely indifferent to what others think about him. Nothing is personal.

This is a creature of habit who seldom varied his routine. At 2 p.m. he would go home for lunch, prepared by his wife of 46 years. It was always a full meal. He does not like sandwiches — they are somehow "uncivilized," he says. Then he would nap for at least half an hour. By four he would be back in the office. Some of his advisers made secret fun of his zeal for routine; others understood that he was in essence a man of the old world who clung to routine as his anchor in the new one. He never learned to drive a car and struggles with the buttons on his new telephone. Never, he has confessed, has he even tried

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to use a computer. And in an age of self-scrutiny and confession, he keeps his feelings to himself. Talk can be harmful, for enemies are constantly listening, probing for weakness. Emotion shows vulnerability; it too is a dangerous luxury.

Shamir is restrained, reticent, even monosyllabic, and he seldom lets down his guard. But there are times when the mask drops and a careful observer can steal a glimpse of the open wounds beneath. At a public gathering commemorating victims of the Holocaust in 1989, his voice trembled and his hands shook slightly as he described how his father had escaped from the Nazis in Poland only to be killed by fellow Poles. And he read out a list of names: his father, Shlomo, his mother, Pearl; his sisters, Miriam and Rivka; their husbands, Mordechai and Yaacov, and their children — his entire family wiped out.

More than four decades later, their memory in many ways still governs Shamir's life: his belief that the world is a dangerous place for Jews, a world of enemies and betrayal. That it is important to have friends but that, in the end, you can only trust yourself because even friends may sell you. And most important, his belief that in such a world, Jews can rely only on themselves.

His heroes are men of iron will like Lenin and Mao, strong-willed leaders who believed in themselves and in the power of ideology. Without ideology, men are lost. Tactics are meaningless by themselves. Shamir harkens back to his days in the Jewish underground. In the new Israel of cable television, microwave ovens, air conditioned Subarus and frozen yogurt, Shamir is in some ways a dinosaur. He is the last underground man.

Shamir knows his ideology is a hard sell to modern Israelis, that voters are buying the Likud's populist economics and hawkish defense policies, not Eretz Israel and settlements. But he became Israel's longest-serving prime minister since Ben-Gurion not just because of luck and timing. There was something about Shamir's innate caution, his restraint, and his toughness that spoke to the deepest fears of Israelis. Frozen by suspicion, and perhaps as well by self-doubt, Shamir was the appropriate custodian for a suspicious, self-doubting nation during the frozen days of the Cold War. Unlike Menachem Begin, he had no wish to make Jewish history, only to preserve it. "Nobody does nothing better than Yitzhak Shamir," noted one commentator.

Sometimes Israel paid a big price for Shamir's reluctant brand of leadership. The Palestinian uprising

caught his government off guard in late 1987. So did Yasser Arafat's widely reported "decision" to renounce terrorism and recognize Israel's existence a year later. In both, Israel's response was sheer incredulity and denial. But sometimes being restrained works. The same sense of stubborn caution that kept Shamir from taking risks to make peace also stopped him from waging war when Iraqi Scuds began landing on Tel Aviv.

It was tragically ironic that this man of passive conviction and innate caution found himself by the summer of 1991 embroiled in a dramatic test of will against Israel's only friend in the world, the one country Shamir wanted not to alienate. Though most of Shamir's people give President Bush credit for getting the Syrians, the Palestinians and the Israelis together at Madrid essentially along the formula that Shamir himself had proposed, Shamir came to believe that George Bush and James Baker were trying to force a confrontation that would drive him from office and drive Israel back to its pre-1967 borders. And he was prepared to risk political suicide rather than accede to a freeze on Jewish settlements.

Was Shamir the world's toughest bargainer, which is the image that the Americanists in his inner circle sold? Or was he its last ideologue, a man prepared to go down with the ship for the one thing, the only thing, he really believes in? Do we believe the story reported in *Maariv* that he would have stalled for ten years until 500,000 Jews had been settled in the territories? Was it all a big confidence trick, a giant game of bluff with the Americans?

Yitzhak Shamir vs. George Bush

Journalists are like ghouls — we sift through the pieces of the wreckage for clues about what happened, the state of mind of the victims as the plane plummeted toward earth. Most people will tell you that the moment of truth for Yitzhak Shamir came on September 12, 1991, when George Bush stunned Israel and the American Jewish leadership by lashing out publicly against their efforts to get \$10 billion in loan guarantees passed by Congress despite Bush's demand for another delay. After that, the guarantees and a settlements freeze were inextricably linked. Congressional support for Israel collapsed like a beach chair in a hurricane. And Likud's 15-year run of having its economic and ideological cake and eating it too was about to end.

Around March 1990 Shamir made the final determination that Bush and Baker, alongside Peres and Rabin, were out to get him. He ignored the advice of Arens, Meridor, Olmert, etc. and rejected the American peace

effort, causing the national unity government to fall. He lost Rabin, his natural ally, and instead he got Sharon, Rafal, Yuval Neeman and, eventually, Rehavam Zeevi. That shotgun marriage was one that Yitzhak Shamir had always sought to avoid. He was right to do so, because in it lay the seeds of his demise.

A year later when U.S. Secretary of State James Baker returned to Jerusalem after the Gulf War was over, the geopolitical equation under which Shamir had thrived for seven years had changed. The Cold War was over, the Russian aliyah was on. But for Shamir the emotional equation remained exactly the same. Although he prided himself on his pragmatism, Yitzhak Shamir had no intention of selling his deepest beliefs and no stomach for taking risks. He was not about to make concessions to an enemy he neither respected nor trusted. And the enemy this time was not the Arabs; it was the Americans.

A State Still Defining Its Identity

Like Yitzhak Shamir, Israel too faced a crucial moment of truth in the late 1980s and early 1990s. It lurched through a period of history that challenged its essence, redefined its values, made some parts of its society stronger and did others lasting damage. Sometimes it moved in very clear, predictable ways, other times in new, uncharted and unknown directions. And because Israel's history, identity and power were linked so intimately to that of the United States, those in the U.S. played a role in its crisis, becoming a force for better or worse, an actor on the stage yet simultaneously a critic in the front row.

The past five years, taken together, constitute a moment that for Israel was as critical as 1948 and 1967, only this time, it was not the survival of the Jewish state that was at stake, but its future.

Israel is an unfinished story. There have been remarkable achievements: it has absorbed more than double its original population in immigrants, turned vast amounts of desert into productive farmland and factories, pioneered technological breakthroughs in industry and agriculture. It boasts one of the world's highest rates of literacy and book publishing.

Yet 44 years after its birth, all of the basic questions of Israel's existence remain unresolved and its very survival still sometimes seems tenuous. Israelis have yet to decide on the size, shape and character of the state they live in. They cannot agree on who they are and who should qualify to be a Jew. They have not determined how they feel about the Jews who live outside their state, or about the non-Jews who live within.

They fiercely cherish their independence yet have come increasingly to rely on the largesse and support of a foreign power in Washington whose interests often do not coincide with their own.

Most of all, they have not answered the fundamental question of what it means to have a state in the first place. Is Israel a fortified haven for Jews to hide from a relentlessly hostile world behind high walls and loaded weapons? Or is it a nation among nations, with embassies and alliances, friends and enemies, a homeland where the Jewish people can take their place in the community of nations?

These questions have been on the agenda since the state was founded. But over the past five years they have taken on new urgency and force as Israel has struggled to cope with the challenge from the Palestinians under its control. They were the fundamental question between the two Yitzhaks, Rabin and Shamir, in the June election.

Ideology vs. "Normality" in the Israeli Elections

The election was about many things, but I see it primarily as a struggle between two different visions of Israel. On the one side was the Shamir/Sharon notion of a young, struggling country in need of heroes and ideology and a ruthless attitude in defining friends and enemies. On the other was a great cry for normality, for Israel to become a country like other countries.

These rival visions were summed up best in the inaugural addresses to the Thirteenth Knesset. Rabin put it this way: "We are no longer an isolated nation, and it is no longer true that the entire world is against us." Shamir replied: "The Jewish state cannot exist without a unique ideological content. We will not exist for long if we become just another country that is most devoted to the welfare of its residents. We must provide our sons and daughters with a motivation of value and challenge."

Shamir's speech was a cry from the heart not only against Rabin and Labor but against the modern ethos. Shamir was very much afraid of a modern bourgeois Israel because he saw it as a valueless Israel that would forsake its dual mission of settling the land and returning the exiles. To me this is a fundamental split, one from which other categories of conflict emerge such as hawk versus dove, left versus right, religious versus secular. Indeed, there are times when this split transcends the other divisions.

Take the curious alliance within the present coalition government between ultra-Orthodox Shas and ultra-liberal Meretz. The differences between them are

obvious, but there are some striking similarities. Both are highly suspicious of the goals and effectiveness of military power — in a recent Cabinet meeting they teamed up with Labor doves to thwart a major IDF thrust into Lebanon. Both are striving, within their separate worlds, to create more pluralistic societies. Shas is asserting Sephardi power within Haredi society, while Meretz is pressing for a more liberal democratic secular world. While each displays degrees of intolerance toward the other, there are visionaries in each who express more tolerance and understand their common goals. Ultimately, both are post-Zionist: although their ultimate visions may conflict, both want to escape the ideological framework that the founding fathers and Shamir, the last of the Zionist ideologues, imposed so successfully for so long.

Obviously, the old Israel is not about to disappear, not so long as the school system and the IDF have 18 or more years of control over the children of the state. The state will continue to teach school children a story about itself, about the founding of Israel, its history and historical purpose. But, as in the United States, the motivating myth these youngsters learn may begin to recede from day-to-day adult life, as may the willingness of people to sacrifice for that myth. As is the current fashion, young men may continue to volunteer in massive numbers for special IDF combat units as a demonstration of their patriotism and manhood. But their willingness to die in those units, to take the kinds of risks their fathers and grandfathers routinely took, may well diminish. And as the army cuts back its size and budget, its role as the entry gate to acceptance as a full-fledged member of Israeli society is certain to shrink.

This is not the end of history nor of ideology — bourgeois "normality" is itself a powerful ideology. But it is the end of the power of the old Zionist norms. National security still comes first on the list of Israeli priorities. That is why Rabin, with his superior military credentials, may have been the only Labor candidate who could put together a winning vote. But after security, the next thing voters wanted was comfort in the best sense of the word: prosperity, a chance to raise their children and give those children more opportunities than they themselves have. We could call it the American dream: it is certainly part of an Americanization of Israel's political culture accompanying the more obvious American influence on popular culture. Tel Aviv will never become New York; but neither will it be the city Ben-Gurion built.

Decisions in a democracy are seldom a matter of

dramatic single moments, especially in a society as conservative politically as Israel's. The earth seldom moves. Instead it is a slow process of accretion, accumulation, one step forward, 7/8 of a step back. So it is hard to stand up close, with your nose against the glass, and see much movement, and it is very hard to tell if what you see is a trend, or a brief hiccup. Is that a dove in the Israeli sky, or a hawk with a few white feathers stuck on its rear?

Was this election a temporary blip or a U-turn? The new Israel or an old Israel with a new facade? Let me confess I have no easy reply. Rabin may fail. Likud, with a fresh new Americanized facade called Bibi Netanyahu, may rehabilitate itself and offer more populist economics and less Eretz Israel. In a funny way, the June result was the companion piece to the 1977 defeat of the old Labor establishment. That election marked the demise of the founding set of Zionist ideologues. This one finished off their rivals. The Zionist past is now duly exorcised. Israel now has nothing but its future.

Looking at the Future

Yitzhak Rabin has a conceptual problem. He campaigned for prime minister as the candidate of change, running a personal, presidential-style race that raised high expectations among Israel's politically bruised and skeptical electorate. But as prime minister, Rabin is saddled with a decidedly non-presidential system of government in which intricate trade-offs and deals still play a central role. Rabin has to cope with the usual array of coalition problems at the same time he has to deliver on his promise of change. He also faces the task of somehow engineering sweeping reforms of the country's economy, health care industry, and military-industrial complex — which together constitute one of the world's last Bolshevik economic systems — while heading a Labor establishment that founded, nurtured, and operates that system and has a deep institutional interest in preserving it. Can the leader of Labor preside over the demise of Labor's own cherished institutions? Or can Israel expect four years of grudging incremental change that could deepen its long-term, structural problems?

For many Israelis, Rabin's first 100 days were not encouraging. There was no sense of dynamism, no push for massive reform, and no major innovations or breakthrough in the peace process. Instead, it seemed like politics as usual, reflecting Rabin's essentially cautious, incremental style of management. At least in that sense of style, it turns out, he is more like

Shamir than either man might care to admit.

The new government's inertia would provide a great opportunity for a united, revitalized opposition. But so far Likud is bogged down in a nasty contest to replace Shamir. Its struggle is to shed the internal rivalries, infighting and decadence that cost it the election in the first place. The switch to a primary system of selecting prime ministerial and Knesset candidates, plus the ascendancy of a new, younger, more dynamic leader — frontrunner Netanyahu appears to be the favorite — may solve part of the problem. But Netanyahu is a political warrior, not a healer. His instinct is to destroy his enemies within Likud, not reconcile with them. And they in turn seek to destroy him. So the bloodletting may well continue long after the new leader is chosen. And like Labor in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Likud may find that the road back to power is not a straight line but a long and twisted trail.

Of course, it matters greatly to Israelis which party and which leader governs their country. But there are long-term trends influencing Israel — the end of the Cold War, the changes in the Arab world, the gradual decline in American aid, the demands of the Soviet aliyah, the quest for a more "normal" economy and society — that will make their impact felt no matter who is in power. These trends are interrelated; prime ministers of either party ignore them at their peril.

A Change in the Tone of Press Coverage

Let me add a small confession about myself and my colleagues. If one read closely the pages of the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Los Angeles Times* in the mid-1980s, one would have detected a subtle but measurable change in the tone of coverage from Jerusalem. It was, I believe, less knee-jerk in its criticism, less inclined to automatically assume Israel was always to blame, more interested in explaining Israeli fears and concerns and motivation. At a time when the Lebanon war had receded and the intifada had not yet begun, I think we attempted to portray Israel more as a three-dimensional country with other concerns besides the Arab-Israeli conflict. That struggle receded in coverage, while the war between the Jews — religious versus secular, hawks versus doves, American Jews versus Israeli Jews — increasingly became the focus.

This was partly a reflection of the times — the success of the first national unity government in lowering the ideological volume and coping with 500 percent inflation and withdrawal from Lebanon. It also reflected in part the personalities of the correspondents. For

the first time both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* sent Jewish reporters to Jerusalem as their bureau chiefs, although what I am describing was certainly not confined to Jewish journalists alone.

An Intercommunal Struggle or the March of Colonialism?

As we looked at this new Israel with our slightly different eyes, we needed a theory to fit the Arab-Israeli conflict into the more sophisticated, more complex world we thought we were seeing. The most attractive one for many of us was Meron Benvenisti's concept of intercommunal struggle between Israelis and Palestinians. Benvenisti argued passionately and persuasively that the 20-year occupation had become a de facto annexation of irreversible force, that the Green Line had disappeared to a new generation of hawkish young Israelis who had never known the pre-1967 borders, that Likud had become the natural party of government and that the rightward trend in Israeli politics was also irreversible.

His concept was brilliant and iconoclastic. Better still, it came from a man of the left, who had no ax to grind and in fact regretted much of what he was describing. And it fitted our own more hardheaded, more realistic view of what Israel was and would be. The old journalism had portrayed Israel as the dream that died, bemoaning the loss of an idealistic little nation that never really existed outside the pages of *Exodus*. In contrast, we thought we saw Israel as it really was, and we wanted to portray it and to understand it.

Then came the intifada and many of our concepts got blown sky high. Suddenly the war among the Jews receded and the war between Arab and Jew returned with a vengeance. Lo and behold, so did the Green Line. Even in Teddy Kollek's united Jerusalem, a few rocks quickly reestablished the psychological and physical border. My family and I used to go eat at a little place called the Karavan restaurant in Arab Bethlehem on Saturday behind a mob of Israeli diners. Once the intifada began, the mob disappeared. It never returned.

There was, of course, another model. While Benvenisti saw Jerusalem as Belfast, Avishai Margalit saw it as Algiers. Margalit says Israel's relationship with the territories was basically one of colonial master sending colonists to a contiguous periphery. It was not a shepherd's war, and not a return to the conflict between the Yishuv and the Arabs in the 1920s and 1930s because one side has a state and an army.

If recent history tells us anything, Margalit argued,

it is that seemingly stable structures can crumble, sometimes overnight. Lenin in March 1917 said of the Russian Revolution, I won't see it, my son won't, but maybe my grandson will. Things that look stable can collapse in a day — the Berlin Wall, the Soviet Union, even perhaps the Histadrut.

I need not choose between Benvenisti and Margalit, both of whom have enriched our understanding of the sometimes contradictory forces at work. But I would suggest that Likud's eclipse may indicate that the old model, the primordial conflict between Arab and Jew, is no longer the guiding principle for many Israelis. Sometimes it is hard to remember, especially during a week when a katyusha has hit Kiryat Shmona, but there have been radical changes inside Israel. Many Israelis no longer feel themselves to be part of this conflict and do not want to be part of it. The Israel of cable television, shopping malls, and the Russian aliyah is another, very different country.

Look at the Russian immigrants — they are serious, cultured people, committed to living in Israel, concerned about security, but they do not care about religion. Zionism as an ideology means as much to

most of them as anarchosyndicalism. These new immigrants are the Israelis of the future. They seek a professional, modern, comfortable bourgeois life and clean, accountable government. Yitzhak Shamir and Ariel Sharon offered them a free apartment in the desert, a six-lane Trans-Samaritan Highway, and an aliyah supervised by ultra-Orthodox Rabbi Yitzhak Peretz. That is why Shamir and Sharon are gone. Yitzhak Rabin will have to do better or he will be gone too.

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Glenn Frankel was the Jerusalem correspondent of the *Washington Post* between 1986 and 1989 and winner of the 1989 Pulitzer Prize for his reporting on Israel and the territories. He recently returned to Jerusalem to write a book on Israel to be published in 1994 by Simon and Schuster. This *Jerusalem Letter/Viewpoints* is adapted from his presentation to the Jerusalem Center Fellows Forum and is Copyright 1992 by Glenn Frankel.

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A Double Bond: The Constitutional Documents of American Jewry

Daniel J. Elazar, Jonathan Sarna and Rela Geffen Monson, eds.

This volume is a joint effort of the Center for the Study of the American Jewish Experience of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion and the Center for Jewish Community Studies of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. Part I discusses the overall content of the constitutional documents and the values exemplified by them. Part II applies content analysis to specific genres of constitutions in order to illuminate small parts of American Jewish history. Part III includes examples of constitutional documents of synagogues, major Jewish organizations, federations, and immigrant associations, reflecting the several eras in American Jewish history. (JCPA and University Press of America, 1992) 479pp.

Resisting Reform: A Policy Analysis of the Israeli Health Care Delivery System

Gerald Steinberg and Etta Bick

On a per-capita basis, Israel has the largest number of physicians in the world, and as a percent of GNP, its spending on health care is comparable to Western Europe. Nevertheless, the system is characterized by chronic overspending; frequent strikes and work stoppages by physicians, nurses and other personnel; and long waiting periods for diagnostic and surgical procedures. Over three-quarters of the Israeli population is insured by and receives primary care from the Histadrut's Kupat Holim Clalit (KHC; General Sick Fund), and this organization is examined in detail. Also analyzed are the structure and operations of the other major health service providers. In addition, for the first time, the changing role of Israeli health consumers is considered. Many commissions have been formed to recommend changes in the health care system, and many reports and recommendations have been issued, but with little impact. This study sought to understand the sources of this resistance to change and recommends measures based on this analysis. (JCPA and University Press of America, 1992) 245pp.