

{JANUARY 07 2005}

A NAPOLEON, MADE IN ISRAEL

From early youth, he was totally convinced that he was the only person in the world who could save the State of Israel. That was an absolute certainty, free of any doubt. He just knew that he must achieve supreme power, in order to fulfill the mission that fate had entrusted him with.

This belief led to a complete integration of personal egocentrism and national egocentrism. For a person who believes he has such a mission, there is no difference between the personal and the national interest. What is good for him automatically becomes good for the nation, and vice versa. This means that anyone who hinders him from attaining power is really committing a crime against the State. And anyone helping him to come to power, is really doing a patriotic deed.

This belief directed all his actions for decades. It explains the dogged determination, the tenacity, the unbending perseverance that became his trade mark and earned him his nickname “the bulldozer”. This attracted admirers, who fell completely under his influence.

It also explains his attitude to money matters. It has been said that he “does not stop at a red light”, that “laws are not for him”. More than once he was accused of accepting millions from rich Jews abroad. On the day before his fateful stroke, it came out that the police had formally accused him of receiving a bribe of three million dollars from a casino-owner. (It is quite possible that this raised his blood pressure and helped to cause the massive stroke.) But not all these millionaires expected a return. Some of them believed, as he did himself, that by supporting him, they were actually supporting the State of Israel. Can there be a more sacred duty than to provide an assured income to the Israeli Napoleon, so that he can devote his entire energy to the fulfillment of his historic mission?

On his long journey, Sharon easily overcame such hurdles. They did not divert him from his course. Personal tragedies and political defeats did not hold him up for a moment. The accidents that killed his first wife and his oldest son, his dismissal from office after being convicted by a board of inquiry of “indirect responsibility” for the

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Sabra and Shatila massacres, as well as the many other setbacks, failures and disappointments that struck him throughout the years did not deter him. They did not divert him for an instant from his endeavor to achieve supreme power.

And now it was all coming true. On Wednesday, January 4, 2006, he could be certain that in three months time he would become the sole leader of Israel. He had created a party that belonged to him alone and that was not only on track to occupy a central position in the next Knesset, but also to cut all other parties into pieces.

He was determined to use this power to change the political landscape of Israel altogether and introduce a presidential system, which would have given him an all-powerful position, like that enjoyed by Juan Peron in his heyday in Argentina. Then, at long last, he would be able to realize his historic mission of laying the tracks on which Israel would run for generations, as David Ben-Gurion had done before him.

And then, just when it seemed that nothing could stop him anymore, with cruel suddenness, his own body betrayed him.

What happened resembles a central motif of the Jewish myth: the fate of Moses, whom God punished for his pride by allowing him a glimpse of the Promised Land from afar, but having him die before he could set foot on its soil. On the threshold of absolute power, the stroke hit Ariel Sharon.

While he was still fighting for his life in hospital, the myth of “Sharon’s Legacy” was already beginning to form.

As has happened with many leaders who did not leave a written testament, every individual is free to imagine a Sharon of his own. Leftists, who only yesterday had cursed Sharon as the murderer of Kibieh, the butcher of Sabra and Shatila and the man responsible for the plunder and slaughter in the occupied Palestinian territories, began to admire him as the “Man of Peace”. Settlers, who had condemned him as a traitor, remembered that it was he who had created the settlements and kept on enlarging them to this day.

Only yesterday he was one of the most hated people in Israel and the world. Today, after the evacuation of Gush Katif, he has become the darling of the public, almost from wall to wall. The leaders of nations crowned him as the “great warrior who has turned into a hero of peace”.

Everybody agrees that Sharon has changed completely, that he has gone from one extreme to the other, the proverbial Ethiopian who has changed his skin, the leopard who has changed his spots.

All these analyses have only one thing in common: they have nothing to do with the real Ariel Sharon. They are based on ignorance, illusion and self-deception.

A look at his long career (helped, I may add, by some personal knowledge) show that

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he has not changed at all. He stayed true to his fundamental approach, only adapting his slogans to changing times and circumstances. His master-plan remained as it was at the beginning.

Underlying his world view is a simplistic, 19th century style nationalism, which says: our people stands above all others, other people are inferior. The rights of our nation are sacred, other nations have no rights at all. The rules of morality apply only to relations within the nation, not to relations between nations.

He absorbed this conviction with his mother's milk. It governed Kfar Malal, the cooperative village in which he was born, as it also governed the whole world at the time. Among Jews in particular it was reinforced by the horrors of the Holocaust. The slogan "all the world is against us" is deeply anchored in the national psyche, and is applied especially to Arabs.

On this moral base the aim emerged: to establish a Jewish state, as large as possible, free of non-Jews. That could lead to the conclusion that the ethnic cleansing, begun by Ben-Gurion in 1948, when half the Palestinians were deprived of their homes and land, must be completed. Sharon's career began shortly after, when he was appointed to lead the undercover commando Unit 101, whose murderous actions beyond the borders were designed mainly to prevent the refugees from infiltrating back to their villages.

However, Sharon became convinced quite early that another wholesale ethnic cleansing was impossible in the foreseeable future (barring some unforeseeable international event changing conditions altogether.)

In default of this option, Sharon believed that Israel must annex all the areas between the Mediterranean and the Jordan without a dense Palestinian population. Already decades ago, he prepared a map that he showed proudly to local and foreign personalities in order to convert them to his views.

According to this map, Israel will annex the areas along the pre-1967 border as well as the Jordan valley, up to the "back of the mountain" (an expression particularly dear to Sharon). It will also annex several East-West strips to connect the Jordan valley with the Green Line. In these territories that are marked for annexation, Sharon created a dense net of settlements. That was his principal endeavor throughout the last thirty years, in all his diverse positions - Minister of Agriculture, Minister of Industry and Trade, Minister of Defense, Minister of Housing, Foreign Minister, Minister of Infrastructure, and Prime Minister - and this work is going on at this minute.

The areas with a dense Palestinian population, Sharon intended to hand over to Palestinian self-government. He was determined to remove from them all the settlements that were set up there without thinking. This way, eight or nine Palestinian enclaves would have come into being, cut off from each other, each one surrounded by

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settlers and Israeli army installations. He did not care whether these would be called a “Palestinian state”. His recent use of this term is an example of his ability to adapt himself, outwardly and verbally, to changing situations.

The Gaza strip is one of these enclaves. That is the real significance of the uprooting of the settlements and the withdrawal of the Israeli army. It is the first stage in the realization of the map: this small area, with a dense Palestinian population of a million and a quarter, was turned over to the Palestinians. The Israeli land, sea and air forces surround the strip almost completely. The very existence of its inhabitants depends at all times on the mercy of Israel, which controls all entrances and exits (except the Rafah crossing into Egypt, which is monitored by Israel from afar.) Israel can cut off the water and electricity supply at a moment’s notice. Sharon intended to create the same situation in Hebron, Ramallah, Nablus, Jenin and the other areas.

Is this a “peace plan”?

Peace is made between nations which agree to create a situation where all of them can live in freedom, well-being and mutual respect and believe that that is good for them. This is not what Sharon had in mind. As a military man, he knows only truces. If peace had been handed to him on a platter, he would not have recognized it.

He knew perfectly well that no Palestinian leader could possibly agree to his map, now or ever. That’s why he did not intend to have any political negotiations with the Palestinians. His slogan was “we have no partner”. He intended to realize all the stages of his plan “unilaterally”, as he did in Gaza - without dialogue with the Palestinians, without considering their requirements and aspirations, and, of course, without seeking their consent.

But Sharon did indeed intend to make peace - peace with the United States. He considered American consent as essential. He knew that Washington could not give its consent to his whole plan. So he intended to obtain their agreement phase by phase. Since President Bush has submitted to him entirely, and no one knows who will succeed him, Sharon intended to realize the main part of his plan within the next two or three years, before the end of the President’s term in office. That is one of the reasons for his hurry. He had to come to absolute power now, immediately. Only the stroke prevented this.

The eagerness with which so many good people on the left embraced the “Sharon Legacy” does not show their grasp of his plans, but rather their own longing for peace. They long with all their heart for a strong leader, who has the will and the ability to end the conflict.

The determination with which Sharon removed the settlers from Gush Katif filled these leftists with enthusiasm. Who would have believed that there was a leader

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capable of carrying it out, without civil war, without bloodshed? And if this has happened in the Gaza Strip, why can't it happen in the West Bank? Sharon will drive the settlers out and make peace. All this, without the Left having to lift a finger. The savior, like Deus, will jump ex machina. As the Hebrew proverb goes, "the work of the righteous is done by others", who may be something quite other than righteous.

Sharon has easily adapted himself to this longing of the public. He has not changed his plan, but given it a new veneer, in the spirit of the times. From now on, he appeared as the "Man of Peace". He never cared which mask it was convenient to wear. But this mask reflects the deepest wishes of the Israeli people.

From this point of view, the imaginary "Sharon Legacy" can play a positive role. When he created his new party, he took with him a lot of Likud people, those who had come to the conclusion that the goal of "The Whole of Eretz Israel" has become impossible to attain. Many of these will remain in the Kadima party even after Sharon has left the tribune. As a result of an ongoing, slow subterranean process, Likud people, too, are ready to accept the partition of the country. The whole system is moving in the direction of peace.

The "Sharon Legacy", even if imaginary, may become a blessing, if Sharon appears in it in his latest incarnation: Sharon the uprooter of settlements, Sharon who is ready to give up parts of Eretz Israel, Sharon who agrees to a Palestinian state.

True, this was not Sharon's intention. But, as Sharon himself might have said: It is not the intentions that matter, but the results on the ground.

AVNERY | SHARON'S SKIN AND BUSH'S SPOTS