

{APRIL 15 2006}

“THE TREES WENT FORTH”

Today, Ehud Olmert has become the Prime minister of Israel. No longer just a “Deputy Prime Minister”, but now a real one. One hundred days after Ariel Sharon sank into a coma, the job and the title were taken away from him, as the law demands. Olmert is now the acting prime minister of the transitional government, and in a few weeks hence, with the establishment of the new coalition, he will become the head of a regular government.

All this is happening without any real debate about Olmert. The man, who has been a public figure all his life, is really unknown to most citizens. For the public, it suffices that he is the “Heir of Sharon”.

Yet it is difficult to imagine a bigger difference between two people than that between Sharon and Olmert. It’s the difference between a lion and a fox, between the king of the animals and the most cunning (according to the fables). Sharon is an extraordinary person, an adventurer, a leader of armies, a man of war, the originator of grandiose designs (generally with weak foundations), a creative, strong, dangerous and charismatic leader. Olmert is a politician is a politician is a politician.

The perfect description of a politician was written more than two thousand years ago, about a person who lived (according to legend) almost a thousand years before that: Abimelech king of Shechem (today’s Nablus).

As described in the Book of Judges (Chapter 9), Abimelech was the son of a great leader. After the death of his father, he killed his 70 brothers “upon one stone” and became dictator.

Only Jotham, the youngest brother, escaped the massacre. He came and stood on the top of mount Gerizim, which overlooks the city, and recited to the men of Shechem in beautiful Hebrew an immortal fable, that starts with the words: “The trees went forth to anoint a king over them...”

They approached their fellow trees, one after another, and offered them the crown. When they came to the olive tree, it refused the offer with contempt: “Shall I leave my fatness, wherewith by me they honor God and man, and go to be promoted over the

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trees?" The proud fig tree, too, declined: "Should I forsake my sweetness, and my good fruit, and go to be promoted over the trees?"

And so, each in its turn, the trees preferred to do useful things rather than going into politics. Only the bramble, which has no fruit, no fragrance and no shadow, agreed to rule, on one condition: "If in truth ye anoint me king over you, then come and put your trust in my shadow – and if not, let fire come out of the bramble and devour the cedars of Lebanon."

The biblical story-teller meant that the ordinary politician is a useless fellow, and everyone who has a creative talent should stay away from this profession. That is now a widespread view in Israel and the world at large. But that suggests a simple question: If so, who will do the job? Because politics is a necessary profession - somebody has to attain wide agreement for fulfilling tasks, enact laws and administer society. And if the olive and the fig trees do not deign to volunteer for the job, it is left to the bramble. That's to say, one whose most outstanding trait is the hunger for power.

As is known from his biography, Olmert suffered in his childhood from much deprivation. A group of old-time Revisionists (members of the most right-wing Zionist movement, the antecedent of the Herut party), built themselves a neighborhood on the edge of Binyamina, south of Haifa, whose veteran inhabitants treated them with contempt. This may be what instilled in the boy Ehud the urge to stand out, to attain public recognition and also to get rich.

I met him first in the 60s, when I was a Member of the Knesset. The young Olmert was the apprentice and servant (literally) of another Member: Shmuel Tamir.

One could learn a lot from Tamir. He was a talented egomaniac, who believed that providence had marked him from birth to be Prime Minister. He had a gift for attracting people, turning them into his devoted slaves, using them as much as possible and then throwing them away like squeezed lemons. He had much personal charm and was a genius in public relations. There was always a bunch of journalists ready to serve him. Almost all of them later became his enemies. His political life was a crazy zigzag between various parties, splits and unions, dovish and hawkish positions, until he reached the post of Minister of Justice and got no further. On the way he also succeeded in getting rich.

That was the example that Olmert had before his eyes when he started his political career. His path looks like a river that snakes its way left and right, and sometimes back, but does not rest for a moment in its quest to reach the sea - supreme power. It may have taken decades, but now he has arrived.

Tamir, a former member of the Irgun, started his political career in the Herut party, left it, joined it again, tried to unseat Menachem Begin, failed, and was compelled to

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leave. So he set up a small party called the “Free Center”. Olmert, a Revisionist from birth, believed that Tamir, who was much younger than Begin, was more promising, and joined his unsuccessful rebellion. He found himself a junior functionary in a small party.

Tamir promoted the youngster. Too late did he understand that his pupil was more talented than he had bargained for: he did unto Tamir what Tamir had done unto Begin. He caused a split between Tamir and his partner, the veteran right-wing politician Eliezer Shostak, left the party and founded another one with Shostak. Then he overthrew Shostak and took over the leadership of the splinter group himself. The affair caused some smiles when Olmert (literally) ran away with the party’s rubber stamp in order to take it over.

In 1973, Ariel Sharon united the right-wing in a new bloc called Likud (“Unification”). Apart from the Herut and Liberal parties, which were already united in a joint faction, he added two tiny groups: Tamir’s Free Center and the State List, a remnant of Ben-Gurion’s devotees. (When I asked him, at the time, what was the use of these two, which had no votes to speak of, he told me: “It’s important to create the impression that the entire Right is uniting. So I could not leave anyone out.”)

In the elections that took place on the last day of 1973, the Likud, led by Menachem Begin, appeared as a united bloc. Sharon was No. 6 on the list, Olmert No. 36. Since then he worked tirelessly, with innumerable ploys, to edge closer to the leadership. He rose to No. 26 (1981), No. 24 (1984), No. 22 (1988), No. 13 (1991) and No. 10 (1995). Then he decided on a shortcut: he became the Likud candidate for mayor of Jerusalem and defeated the old Teddy Kollek.

As mayor, he worked on two fronts: oppressing the Arab population and pampering the Orthodox. The annexed Arab quarters were systematically neglected. He pushed Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu into opening a tunnel near the Muslim shrines, causing riots that resulted in dozens killed. He encouraged American Jewish right-wing millionaires to build Jewish settlements in the middle of Arab neighborhoods, and campaigned for turning the beautiful Abu-Ghneim hill into the fortified Jewish settlement Har-Homa. In the end, he pushed for the building of the Separation Wall that cuts up the Arab neighborhoods.

With the Orthodox, on the other side, he maintained an alliance that kept him in power, and in the end handed them the keys of the city. The secular Jewish population escaped from the city in droves.

All this did not help him. When he decided to enter the Knesset again, the 3000 members of the willful Likud Central Committee bounced him back almost to square one: No. 32 on the election list. But Sharon, now leader of the party, decided that is was

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worthwhile to acquire the loyalty of this frustrated, ambitious politician. When he set up his government, he tried to hand him the powerful Finance Ministry. This proved impossible, because Netanyahu, No. 2 on the list, could not be pushed away.

The solution was to give Olmert a second-rank ministry, Industry and Trade, coupled with a consolation prize: the prestigious but empty title of “Deputy Prime Minister”. The sole prerogative of the holder of this title was to preside over cabinet meetings when the Prime Minister was abroad. Sharon did not travel much.

And then two things happened: Sharon, spurred on by Olmert, split the Likud, and then sank into a coma. The “Deputy” became quite naturally his temporary heir, and the temporary heir became his permanent successor. After forty years of snaking around, the river had reached the sea.

How will Olmert develop as Prime Minister? Will the fox turn into a lion, the mere-politician into a statesman?

The first steps do not bode well. Though Olmert made no serious mistakes, the election results were dismal: instead of the 45 seats promised Sharon by the polls, he won only 29 at the ballot. Since then he has been playing the arrogant leader, especially vis-à-vis the Labor Party, his indispensable coalition partner. He is trying to include in his cabinet the racist party of Avigdor Lieberman, treats Mahmoud Abbas with open contempt, boycotts the elected Palestinian leadership (“the “ Hamas Government”) and allows Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz free rein to shell and starve the Palestinians.

In order to demonstrate his independence, he has given a new name (“Convergence”) to Sharon’s old separation plan. He speaks about it in vague terms, without maps and time-tables. It might serve the annexation of large areas (“without Arabs”), or turn out to be a hallucinatory plan that will never be implemented. Clearly, his wish for a wide and comfortable coalition is more important to him than the realization of a plan that demands a narrow, resolute and tightly focused cabinet.

It is too early to foresee where he will go. History has known small politicians who stepped out of the shadow of great leaders and surprised the world. Such a one was Harry Truman, who succeeded Franklin Delano Roosevelt and made his own mark as president. Another was Anwar Sadat, the successor of the charismatic Gamal Abd-al-Nasser. But it is also true that counter-examples are legion.

It has been said that a politician thinks about the next elections, a statesman about the next generation.