



Jerusalem 7:04; Toronto 8:46

Quote of the Week...

"The United States will not support the establishment of an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza. The final status of these lands must, of course, be reached through the give and take of negotiations. But it is the firm view of the United States that self-government by the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza in association with Jordan offers the best chance for a durable, just, and lasting peace." - Late President Ronald Reagan, speaking on Sept. 17, 1982.

Commentary...

A Strategic Partner By Jonathan Tobin

Reagan's place in Jewish history rests on more than record number of votes

Whenever the question comes up of how a Republican presidential contender may do among Jewish voters, the name "Ronald Reagan" is bound to be mentioned. In a record that may stand for a long time, Reagan won approximately 39 percent of the Jewish vote (as estimated by pollsters) in 1980. He remains imprinted on modern Jewish history as the answer to a favorite trivia question for pundits.

But as America mourns the passing of its 40th president, we need not focus on that event. Reagan's place in Jewish history will not depend on how long his 1980 record lasts.

Though death tends to soften even the most bitter partisans, Reagan's significance can be lost amid all the praise from his admirers and some of the brickbats that his political opponents are still hurling at him.

Though most liberals will go to their graves still wrongly believing him to be an ignorant fool, the truth is that their bitterness is fueled by a grudging acknowledgement that his masterly political skills doomed the welfare state as we knew it, and changed the terms of political discourse in this country. Under Reagan's leadership, conservatives left the margins and became the majority.

Liberal revisionists will also continue to claim rather foolishly that Reagan's policies did not hasten the end of the Soviet Union. They assert that nobody won the Cold War, and that all he left was a sunny personality and the debris of the ill-considered Iran Contra scandal.

In the last couple of years, the notion of American hubris has become something of an article of faith for critics of the Iraq war and George W. Bush's foreign policy, but those who are quick to dismiss the idea that America can transform the world in its image should remember that Reagan's challenge to the Soviet Union did just that. And without Reagan's infusion of self-confidence into the American psyche, it might not have been possible to put an end to the dark night of Soviet hegemony.

As much as liberals might deny it now, Reagan's 1983 description of the Soviet Union and its satellites as an "evil empire" drove many of them crazy. It was a direct challenge to the way the U.S. political establishment - mainstream Democrats and Republicans alike - viewed its global rival.

Rather than merely accommodating that evil and implicitly acknowledging that it was on the same moral plane as our own flawed society, Reagan drew a bright line of distinction. That undermined the twisted logic of appeasement of the Soviets via détente.

And it was exactly the sort of language that the movement to free Soviet Jewry had needed to mobilize Americans.

ISRAEL NEWS

*A collection of the week's news from Israel
A service of the Bet El Twinning Committee of
Beth Avraham Yoseph of Toronto Congregation*

Natan Sharansky ת"ן

recalled in a tribute to Reagan how he first learned of the "evil empire" speech in a Siberian prison cell, where he had been sent for trying to gain the right to move to Israel, as well as for speaking up for the human rights of the Russian people. Sharansky and others who suffered under communism understood what Reagan's sophisticated American critics could not: Casting our struggle with the

Soviets as one of good against evil was a vital step on the road to freedom for Soviet Jews and for the people of Eastern Europe.

In that sense, Ronald Reagan was the Jews' greatest ally in the battle to open the gates of the Soviet Union. It's no coincidence that it was during his presidency that the Soviet Jewry movement changed from being an afterthought for the makers of American foreign policy into a fundamental component of strategy.

It was also during his presidency that the relationship between Israel and the United States changed from one of pure dependency into one where the contributions of Israel to American security finally merited it the status of strategic partner.

Historians will rightly note that U.S.-Israel relations were not a bed of roses during Reagan's eight years in the White House. Battles over American weapon sales to Israel's Arab enemies, the Lebanon war, the hostility of some members of his administration toward Israel (notably Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger) and the incredible stupidity of Israel in using Jonathan Pollard, an American Jewish employee of the Navy Department, as a spy all made for controversy. Reagan's foray to Bitburg, Germany, in 1985, where he spoke at a military cemetery where members of the Nazi S.S. were buried, also broke the hearts of many of his Jewish fans.

But none of this changes the essential philosophy that lay behind his political career and his presidency: the rejection of a philosophy of moral equivalence.

Reagan believed that there was no equating a Communist system which turned an entire nation into a prison, with the free world. He believed that victims of terror and terrorists themselves should not be viewed in the same light. And he attempted, though not always successfully, to make American foreign policy reflect these truths. Reagan's ideas are still the prism through which we can understand the controversies of today.

He truly believed in American exceptionalism - America as the proverbial "city on a hill" that reflected not merely democracy, but the last best hope of humankind.

Unlike those who are embarrassed by such rhetoric, he embraced it wholeheartedly and followed the logic of this faith to its inevitable conclusion: The forces of freedom can never accept the legitimacy of the forces of tyranny. The war between them may not always be hot, but it is never over.

For this, the left judged him a simpleton. But history will judge who were the idiots and who the moral giant of his time.

Reagan won that record number of Jewish votes in 1980 precisely because he rejected Jimmy Carter's attitude that placed both Israel and Soviet Jews on the same moral plane as Arab terrorists and dictators and the masters of the gulag archipelago. And though his presidency did not always live up to the promise of that rhetoric, without his achievement of rolling back the "evil empire," there would be no hope for doing the same in a Middle East where Islamists are just as bent on freedom's destruction.

That is why his greatness transcends the still-smoldering embers of the political firestorms of his time. Let us pray that his successors will continue to find inspiration in these simple, yet inescapable, truths. (Jewish World Review June 9)

The writer is executive editor of the Philadelphia Jewish Exponent.

This issue is dedicated in memory of
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The Prisoners' Conscience By Natan Sharansky

In 1983, I was confined to an eight-by-ten-foot prison cell on the border of Siberia. My Soviet jailers gave me the privilege of reading the latest copy of Pravda. Splashed across the front page was a condemnation of President Ronald Reagan for having the temerity to call the Soviet Union an "evil empire." Tapping on walls and talking through toilets, word of Reagan's "provocation" quickly spread throughout the prison. We dissidents were ecstatic. Finally, the leader of the free world had spoken the truth - a truth that burned inside the heart of each and every one of us.

At the time, I never imagined that three years later, I would be in the White House telling this story to the president. When he summoned some of his staff to hear what I had said, I understood that there had been much criticism of Reagan's decision to cast the struggle between the superpowers as a battle between good and evil.

Well, Reagan was right and his critics were wrong.

Those same critics used to love calling Reagan a simpleton who saw the world through a primitive ideological prism and who would convey his ideas through jokes and anecdotes. In our first meeting, he told me that Soviet premier Brezhnev and Kosygin, his second-in-command, were discussing whether they should allow freedom of emigration. "Look, America's really pressuring us," Brezhnev said, "maybe we should just open up the gates. The problem is, we might be the only two people who wouldn't leave." To which Kosygin replied, "Speak for yourself."

What his critics didn't seem to understand was that the jokes and anecdotes that so endeared Reagan to people were merely his way of expressing fundamental truths in a way that everyone could understand.

Reagan's tendency to confuse names and dates, something I, too, experienced first-hand, also made him the target of ridicule. In September 1987, a few months before a summit meeting with Gorbachev in Washington, I met with Reagan to ask him what he thought about the idea of holding a massive rally of hundreds of thousands of people on behalf of Soviet Jewry during the summit. Some Jewish leaders, concerned that if the rally were held Jews would be accused of undermining a renewed hope for peace between the superpowers, had expressed reservations about such a frontal challenge to the Soviet premier.

Seeing me together for the first time with my wife Avital, who had fought for many years for my release, Reagan greeted us like a proud grandparent, knowing he had played an important role in securing my freedom. He told us about his commitment to Soviet Jewry. "My dear Mr. and Mrs. Shevardnadze," he said, "I just spoke with Soviet Foreign Minister Sharansky, and I said you better let those Jews go."

Not wanting to embarrass the president over his mistake, I quickly asked him about the rally, outlining the concerns raised by some of my colleagues. His response was immediate: "Do you think I am interested in a friendship with the Soviets if they continue to keep their people in prison? You do what you believe is right."

Reagan may have confused names and dates, but his moral compass was always good. Today's leaders, in contrast, may know their facts and figures, but are often woefully confused about what should be the simplest distinctions between freedom and tyranny, democrats and terrorists.

The legacy of president Reagan will surely endure. Armed with moral clarity, a deep faith in freedom, and the courage to follow his convictions, he was instrumental in helping the West win the Cold War and hundreds of millions of people behind the Iron Curtain win their freedom.

As one of those people, I can only express my deepest gratitude to this great leader. Believe me, I will take moral clarity and Shevardnadze any day. (Jewish World Review June 8)

The writer, a prisoner of Zion for nine years, is currently minister-without-portfolio in charge of Jerusalem and Diaspora Affairs.

Now He Belongs to the Ages By Lewis A. Fein

Americans of a certain age all have their memories of or opinions concerning Ronald Reagan, glorified as a hero or begrudgingly accepted as a political giant. But my fondest recollection of President Reagan is the piece of White House stationery that defines a personal album of growth, trust, acceptance and manhood: the letter with its cursive elegance - regardless of whether the signature bears the work of its namesake of the duplicative precision of a machine - expresses a sentiment, a profound sense of hope and joy - the president's best wishes for my bar mitzvah and its significance as a religious ritual and overall act of freedom.

The president's letter is both ordinary and profound because, though the words are themselves a customary act of thanks (both parties dispatch millions of letters, expressing joy, pain or admiration), Reagan's note, like the man himself, is something more, something better: A kindred wish that he, too, would like to recite the prayers and consume the wine - to bask upon the rabbi's

words and the congregation's praise - and assume his rightful place in a processional of strength. For, if my coreligionists remember nothing else about this great man, they have a duty to recall Reagan's unshakable support for the Jewish people and the state of Israel.

Indeed, history confirms that no Republican presidential candidate has yet equaled Reagan's share of the Jewish vote, garnering ballots from a people too easily lured by the false promises of liberalism in general and the Democratic Party in particular. This man - the same man who compelled his own children to watch the archival footage of Nazism's murderous campaign against the Jews, to remind his own family that anti-Semitism is the oldest and most foul hatred to have befallen mankind - neither sought nor needed the votes of such a small community of people. He educated his sons and daughters about the plight of the Jewish people, and the eternal righteousness of Israel's existence, for a simple reason: justice. He would not abide the private insults - the disgusting remarks about a sinister people, all of whom somehow manipulate the highest realms of politics, media and finance - that inevitably produce isolation, imprisonment and extermination. To this great disease of hatred and defeat, Reagan's words (like his warning to the Soviet Union) are firm and just, "No more!"

As Americans, we have a duty to remember these words and their historical significance. For Reagan's generation of free men and women are the very people who came before the gates of tyranny with the keys of freedom. It is the American soldier, forever memorialized by his actions in Europe (and justly celebrated yesterday by President Bush), who, like millions of other volunteer soldiers across this greatest of nations, bore witness to the crimes of fascist evil: gas chambers, gallows, barbed wire, electrified fences, attack dogs, crematoria, shallow graves, the wholesale murder of one million children and the virtual erasure of an entire people. Reagan's generation liberated the camps; Reagan himself tried to liberate the world. We forget these essential deeds at our own peril.

Historians will debate Reagan's position among the most important leaders of this country; partisans will fight about the wisdom of his strongest actions. But, for me, the words for this great man echo from the pulpit that marked my entry into adulthood.

Shalom, chaver. Goodbye, Mr. President. Now you belong to the ages. (Jewish World Review June 7)

The writer is an Internet entrepreneur in Los Angeles.

The Goldberg Manipulations By Andrea Levin

The New Yorker's Jeffrey Goldberg is not known for dishonesty; he's recently won awards for daring stories on Hizbullah and Iraq. But a May 31 piece entitled "Among the Settlers: Will They Destroy Israel?" is so distorted and sloppy with facts as to raise questions about his other writing.

The title signals the thrust of the piece, and indicates there will be little interest in balanced or thorough consideration of the genesis, purpose and legality of the settlement enterprise. Instead, readers find a 24-page spread, rich in stereotypes and heavily devoted to lurid portraiture of Jewish residents of the West Bank and Gaza. A number appear emotionally unstable, and many are physically repellent - one has "fingernails [that] were chewed and dirty," others are "sallow" and "sour-faced." The opening "Zealots" section has one after another spewing vile language and fierce anti-Arab sentiment.

Moshe Levinger, with "bulbous eyes" and "outsized teeth," is said to be the "face" of the settler movement, a man who calls for expelling any Arab "who hurts Jews." Yet Goldberg contradicts himself, writing, or example, that "three-quarters of the Jews in the West Bank and Gaza could be considered economic settlers" - that is, not motivated by religious fervor - and the remaining 25% of the "national religious camp can be divided into two main groups." One part will "respect the authority of the elected government in Jerusalem" as compared to what he terms the "more unremitting settlers" of Hebron. So Levinger the Hebron firebrand is part of a minority of a small minority.

Another indicator of his tangential role can be seen in a Nexis search of major world publications for the past three years. Goldberg's "face" of the settler movement was mentioned in fewer than a score of media stories, and these mainly in passing references to his activity in the late sixties in Hebron. In contrast, Ron Nachman, mayor of Ariel, turns up in four times as many news citations. But perhaps the writer preferred readers not to see this "face," or to know that at the College of Judea and Samaria in Ariel, hundreds of Arab men and women earn degrees along with Jews.

Goldberg sticks to his dominant message - that religious fanatics disconnected from Israel's daunting, real-life political challenges embody and define the entire settlement question. Thus too he skates over or ignores

completely essential information about the history of settlements. In the entire piece, there is not one mention of the Labor party's embrace of the Allon Plan, first enunciated in July 1967. That peace proposal defined Israel's defensive territorial needs in the wake of the Six Day War, consistent with UN Security Council resolution 242, whose framers believed it would not be in the interests of peace for Israel to return to its pre-1967 armistice lines. The Allon Plan projected ambitious settlement construction to secure strategically critical areas such as the Jordan Valley, areas in general sparsely populated by Palestinians. In the next decade, under Labor prime ministers, 76 settlements were built.

Goldberg alludes to Labor's founding role only in a brief, misleading observation that "such men as Shimon Peres and Yitzhak Rabin"... "discerned a strategic value to settlement; these kipa-wearing pioneers would keep watch over the newly-conquered Arabs..."

In fact, Israelis who established the 21 Jordan Valley settlements, for example, were primarily not yarmulke-wearing religious settlers, but secular men and women who founded kibbutzim and moshavim for security reasons.

No residents of the Jordan Valley or Gush Etzion or other, similar Allon Plan communities were interviewed for the piece.

Goldberg is equally deceptive in his single, dismissive reference to the legal status of settlements. He declares simply: "Most international legal authorities believe that all settlements, including those built with the permission of the Israeli government, are illegal." That's it. Case closed.

None of the "international legal authorities" are named, and none of the contentious issues involved are described.

The writer fails to mention that the United States does not characterize the settlements as "illegal." And many experts on international law have disputed their illegality on multiple grounds. Prof. Julius Stone, a leading scholar on the subject, has maintained that the effort to designate Israeli settlements as illegal is a "subversion... of basic international law principles."

Also suggestive of both the casually incendiary tone of the piece and Goldberg's shoddy approach to accuracy is his repeated charge that Israel is practicing "apartheid" in areas "across the Green Line." He explains the system is "apartheid, because two different ethnic groups living in the same territory are judged by two separate sets of laws."

One wonders whatever happened to the touted fact-checkers at The New Yorker. In the West Bank, there are different laws not on the basis of ethnicity but of nationality. The Palestinian Autonomous areas have their own legal system - mainly inherited Jordanian law and new law introduced by the Palestinians themselves. Moreover, if Israel moved to extend its own legal system to the territories, that would constitute annexation, which both Palestinians and Israelis oppose, and which would be universally condemned.

The areas under emergency Israeli military control are, as Goldberg notes, "temporary." To bring the charge of "apartheid" in circumstances involving the Israeli military's recent counter-attack against a terrorist onslaught unprecedented in the nation's history is, yet again, highly distorted.

But Goldberg is offhand about terrorism inflicted on Israelis elsewhere as well, erroneously stating that "overall, 150 settlers have been killed." Presumably he refers to the number of people killed in the territories since September 2000. That figure is over 200, according to the human rights group B'tselem. The Israeli Foreign Ministry list of fatalities designates the place of residence of those killed, and shows that close to 200 (at least 188) of the dead lived in the settlements. Goldberg's statement that "over all, 150 settlers have been killed" is not accurate.

"Among the Settlers" is one of those accounts that says more about its author than about its subject. It is a gaudy display of twisted Jewish assault on caricatured "other" Jews, and intellectually dishonest generalizations about the representative significance of those "others." In occasional moments of professional integrity, Goldberg introduces facts - such as the very small percentage of settlers represented by his featured "representatives" - and those facts demonstrate less the strength of a zealot threat to Israel than the weakness of Goldberg's zealot journalism. (Jerusalem Post June 9)

The writer is executive director of CAMERA, Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America.

What Europe Wants By Caroline Glick

Standing before the EU parliament in Brussels last week, French EU parliamentarian Paul Marie Couteaux made a stunning statement. After condemning Israel's actions to defend itself against Palestinian terrorism as the "theocratic excesses of this religious state," Couteaux declared that Europe should supply the Arab world with nuclear weapons. In his words, "I have no hesitation in saying that we must consider giving the Arab side a large enough force, including a large enough nuclear force, to persuade Israel that it cannot simply do whatever it wants. That is the policy my country [France] pursued in the 1970s when it gave Iraq a nuclear force." Couteaux's statement, though

over the top, follows a flow of seemingly obtuse and illogical statements and actions by the EU and its member states in recent weeks, months and years. For instance, in the midst of the IDF's counter-terror operations in Rafah last week, Ireland's Foreign Minister Brian Cowan, speaking for the EU whose presidency his country currently holds, condemned Israel's actions in the most hysterical and factually inaccurate terms.

After meeting a delegation from the Organization of the Islamic Conference (the same people who gave a standing ovation to Malaysia's then prime minister Mahathir Mohamad last fall when he claimed that Jews were the source of all the troubles in the world), Cowan all but accused Israel of carrying out war crimes when he stated that "Israeli forces showed a reckless disregard for human life." Placing the IDF's military operations directed against Palestinian terrorists on par with the murder of Tali Hatuel and her four young daughters in a deliberate attack by Palestinian terrorists, Cowan said, "I would once again remind Israel, the occupying power, that the Fourth Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War is fully applicable to the Gaza Strip." Like almost all of the EU's statements, Cowan's remarks ignore basic facts.

As a database comprised by the International Policy Institute for Counter Terrorism shows quite clearly, Israel targets terrorists in its operations while Palestinians attack Israelis indiscriminately. The institute's figures show conclusively that since the start of the Palestinian terror war, non-combatants have made up 80 percent of Israeli casualties, whereas on the Palestinian side, 56% of casualties have been verified combatants. Since Palestinian terrorists generally do not wear uniforms, Dan Radlauer - who oversees the database - explains that it is quite possible that the percentage of Palestinian casualties who are combatants may actually be significantly higher than that figure. This information is readily available to Cowan and his EU colleagues. They could easily have put together a similar study.

But that would not advance their interests.

In a revealing incident, earlier this month, the Palestinian Human Rights Monitoring Group (PHRMG) released a report outlining the systemic abuse of power by Palestinian security forces against Palestinian civilians.

According to an account in The Scotsman, the report has not won PHRMG accolades for its brave and honest reporting in an atmosphere of terror and repression cultivated by Arafat and his henchmen.

Rather, in response to the organization's decision to document human rights abuses by the PA and by Israel, the group has seen its financial support from the EU slashed.

If one believes the EU's rhetoric of support for the peaceful resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the EU's actions make no sense. After all, if the EU is interested in an end to the terror war, it should be empowering anti-terror groups in the PA to uncover abuses and fight them. Yet rather than do so, the EU has shelved every report that has proven that EU funds to the PA are actually diverted to finance terrorism and incitement. If the EU wishes to play an active role in the search for peace and security in the region, it should not be condemning lawful Israeli actions against terrorists and ignoring the fact that, by its indiscriminate nature, Palestinian terrorism is an affront to the very notion of international law.

Yet, this is precisely the point. There is a yawning gap between the EU's rhetoric and its actual policies. Its rhetoric purports to work toward a workable peace between Israel and its neighbors. Its actual policy is to support the Arabs against Israel. Indeed, Europe has a three-tiered approach to the Arab world, each policy layer of which is inherently inimical to the notion of fairness and balance in relation to Israel.

Since the 1970s, Europe has embraced appeasement of the Arabs as a central plank of its foreign policy. This became entrenched in the wake of the 1973 OPEC oil embargo. As well, following the trail blazed by Charles de Gaulle, sympathy to the Arabs and hostility towards Israel has served Europe's interest in differentiating itself from the US. Because the US is committed to European security through the NATO alliance, Europe can curry favor with the Arabs from whom the US will protect it. At the same time, it can deflect Arab wrath onto the US, which is unwilling - for strategic and moral reasons - to sever its alliance with Israel.

Finally, Europe has a domestic interest in currying the favor of the Arabs over Israel. Europe has a growing Muslim population that has been inculcated with a fanatical form of anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism is also rife on both the left and right sides of the European political spectrum. Given this, it is good politics domestically to condemn Israel, while turning a blind eye to Arab terrorism and human rights abuses.

So what we have in Europe, then, is not an otherwise friendly continent that condemns Israel out of sheer ignorance. Rather, we have a hostile continent that condemns Israel to advance its perceived political and strategic interests.

While hostility towards Israel is comprehensible when it comes from a

militarily weak and self-interested Europe, such refusal to acknowledge the reality of the nature of the Palestinian war against Israel makes less sense in the American context. The US cannot depend on a security guarantee from any foreign power. It must defend itself and its global interests. From this distinction, it necessarily transpires that US national security interests cannot be long advanced by appeasement of terror-supporting regimes in the Arab and Muslim world which declare the US to be the primary source of evil in the world.

Yet since last spring, we have seen concerted American moves toward embracing Europe's hostile positions towards Israel. The latest example was the American refusal to cast a veto on last week's UN Security Council's condemnation of the IDF operations in Rafah. This move must be seen in the context of an overall US policy of giving the EU and the UN a larger role in the formulation of America's policy towards Israel. This trend was instigated by Washington's decision last year to work with the UN, the EU and Russia in formulating and launching the road-map plan for peace.

The US has moved in this direction because it believes that its national interest is served by placating the EU and UN on Israel in the hopes that doing so will make them more supportive of US initiatives in Iraq and elsewhere. Yet, what we have seen in Iraq is that regardless of the role that Washington charitably gives to the EU and the UN regarding Israel, these bureaucracies do not respond by supporting the US in Iraq and elsewhere. Again, since the EU has an institutional interest in not working in concert with the US, an American turn towards Europe simply causes Europeans to take even more extreme positions regarding both Israel and Iraq.

It isn't that all Europeans are inherently hostile towards Israel. In an amazing display of pride and wisdom two weeks ago, French Jews boycotted a rally against anti-Semitism. The boycott came not because the Jews of France do not view anti-Semitism as a salient threat. On the contrary, they boycotted the rally because its organizers refused to link anti-Semitic attacks in the country to anti-Zionism.

Given the direct link between anti-Semitism and hostility towards the Jewish state in Europe, it is important to question what Israel has been doing to diminish Europe's perceived interest in appeasing the Arab world. Looking at the government's policy towards Europe over the past few years, the answer is that it has done nothing effective to change European perceptions. Last summer, for instance, Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom expressed an interest in applying for membership in the EU.

When the EU condemns Israel, as it did last week, Israel may express revulsion. Yet, it continues to call for Europe to play an active role in the search for peace. In so doing, Israel maintains a fiction of European friendship and fair-mindedness in the pursuit of its Middle East agenda that simply do not exist.

Were Israel to treat Europe as the hostile force it is, it could craft a workable policy. This should be aimed at strengthening the voices in Europe calling for an abandonment of anti-Semitism and a reckoning with the actual threat that the increasingly radicalized Islamic world manifests to its own security.

As it stands, the current policy of sweeping European hostility under the rug of diplo-speak cocktail parties and press conferences is detracting from Israel's national security interests. The government's policy of denial is legitimizing hateful voices and blocking voices of reason to be heard above the din of anti-Zionist propaganda. At the same time, Israeli tolerance for European hostility strengthens the forces of appeasement in the US and weakens those allies who understand the strategic necessity of supporting Israel. (Jerusalem Post June 9)

A New Low for Democracy By Evelyn Gordon

With the cabinet's approval of his disengagement plan on Sunday, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon brought Israel's democracy to a new low.

It was troubling enough when he first proposed a unilateral withdrawal from Gaza, a mere year after having won the premiership by running against this idea. As Labor MK Yuli Tamir correctly observed (Haaretz, May 16), the Likud would almost certainly not have chosen him as its prime ministerial candidate had it known that this was his intention, and had the Likud not run him, he would not be prime minister today. Nor is it likely that Sharon would have won the general election on such a platform: Labor's Amram Mitzna did run on a pledge to evacuate Gaza unilaterally, and suffered the worst defeat in Israeli electoral history.

Thus the proper thing to do would have been to go to the public with his new policy and ask for a new mandate – either through elections or through a national referendum. That, for instance, is what Charles de Gaulle did when he decided to abandon Algeria after having been elected on the slogan "Algerie francaise."

Nevertheless, Sharon can hardly be accused of plumbing new depths by his

failure to do so: In this, he merely followed in the shameful footsteps of Yitzhak Rabin ("I will not negotiate with the PLO") and Ehud Barak ("I will not divide Jerusalem").

Where Sharon did break new ground was in his behavior since the Likud referendum on May 2. Democratically speaking, Sharon was right to hold this referendum: Since it was the Likud's 200,000 members who originally chose him as their candidate, it was proper to ask them for a new mandate when he sought to reverse the platform on which they elected him. And for this reason, as Tamir perceptively noted, the oft-heard argument that this minority has no right to "dictate" to the majority is ridiculous: It was precisely this minority that made Sharon prime minister to begin with.

Nevertheless, Sharon had no legal obligation to call a referendum, nor was he legally obliged to pledge, as he did at the Likud Central Committee meeting in March, that "the members' referendum will be binding on all representatives of the Likud, me above all. We are all representatives of the public. Acceptance of the democratic decision of the widest possible forum is the best way to safeguard the Likud's unity."

YET ONCE he chose to do so – not out of any democratic principle, but in a successful bid to frighten wavering Likud ministers into supporting him – Sharon had no moral right to ignore the referendum's outcome. His only legitimate recourse at that point was to ask the public as a whole for a new mandate – which, incidentally, public opinion polls most certainly do not provide.

Before the last election, polls also showed a majority of the public favoring unilateral withdrawal, yet the candidate who proposed that course of action was trounced by the candidate who opposed it. Similarly, when Sharon announced his plan, polls showed a large majority of Likud members supporting it – yet it was decisively defeated in the referendum.

Instead, however, Sharon continued pushing his plan in the cabinet, declaring that insignificant cosmetic changes – such as altering the plan's title – were sufficient to comply with the referendum results. In so doing, he made a mockery of the referendum, his public pledge and, most importantly, the democratic process.

True, democracy was equally ill-served by the weathervane behavior of its three most vocal self-declared supporters – Binyamin Netanyahu, Limor Livnat and Silvan Shalom, who voted for the plan after Sharon threw them the bone of a few additional insignificant changes. Yet Netanyahu's critique of Sharon's behavior is no less accurate for his failure to practice what he preaches: "The prime minister initiated the Likud referendum and obligated himself to accept the results. He didn't say that he would accept the results only if he won, and would throw them into the garbage if it turned out that he lost. What kind of message does this send to the public, when the government ignores the decision of its voters because the result is not to its liking?"

Adding insult to injury was the invective that Sharon hurled at anyone who dared to argue that he ought to honor the referendum results: Accusing them of being motivated by narrow political interests – as if, since he himself lacks any vestige of democratic sensibility, no one else could possibly feel morally obligated by a democratic decision – and, even more outrageously, calling them "rebels," as if it were they, not he, who were flouting the party's will. As Likud MK Ayoub Kara trenchantly observed: "If we're rebels, then the Likud as a whole is rebel."

Sharon has repeatedly argued that he has the right to ignore the referendum because "the public elected me to decide." Yet in fact, voters generally choose a prime minister because they approve of the policies he promises to pursue – not because they intend to install a dictator who will do whatever he pleases, even if it is the opposite of what he promised.

If Sharon truly wants to implement his disengagement plan, he should ask the people for a mandate – either through elections or a national referendum. Otherwise, the Knesset must muster the courage to reject his contemptuous disregard for the democratic process.

If neither of these things happen, it will deal a deadly blow to the public's already shaky faith in the political system and the value of democracy. After all, democracy is supposed to provide the public with a mechanism through which it can influence government policy. If it does not, what is the point of spending billions of shekels on elections every few years? (Jerusalem Post June 8)
