

Ariel Sharon: A Walk to Remember

In the fall of 2000, then leader of the opposition, Ariel Sharon took an extraordinary walk that changed his destiny. Sharon, even as a powerful politician, was considered a has-been. In fact, if Benjamin Netanyahu had not taken a brief respite from politics, he would not have been in that position.

The King of Israel

In the late 1960s and 1970s, he was nicknamed *The King of Israel* and *The Lion of God* for his extraordinary leadership in the Six-Day War (1967) and the Yom Kippur War (1973). At the time, he was considered the greatest field commander in Israel's history.

However, over time his reputation would take a hit. He failed to prevent massacres by Lebanese militias against Palestinians in Lebanon in 1982. He also led a harsh retaliatory raid against the Jordanian village of Qibiya in the 1950s after an Israeli woman and her two children were murdered by Arab infiltrators.

Known also as *The Bulldozer*, he was fearless and at times ruthless when it came to stamping out terror. "Sharon had a reputation for pushing the license and limits of his orders to the maximum." (TimesofIsrael) Once making a decision, he never second-guessed himself—something his soldiers deeply admired.

He was a champion of the settlers, those who believe in building Jewish communities in Judea and Samaria (the West Bank). "Sharon doubled the number of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip during his tenure." (Wikipedia)

In 2000, at 72 and grossly overweight, few Israelis expected

Sharon to reinvent himself and become the 'grandfather' of Israel. Against all odds, he became the Prime Minister for the next five years, and was set to win four more years when he suffered a stroke that would take his life. Even in death he was defiant—fighting for eight years before finally giving in this past Shabbat.

The Temple Mount

What was the moment that changed his legacy? It was a walk that Sharon took on the mount of the ancient Jewish Temple. In July that year, U.S. President Bill Clinton was desperate to see an agreement reached between the Israelis and the Palestinians. He put tremendous pressure on Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak to make concessions no Israeli Prime Minister had ever made. He offered East Jerusalem as a Palestinian capital and custodianship over the Temple Mount—the most significant Jewish holy site.

Arafat rejected this generous offer and returned home to a hero's welcome, ready to start the second *intifada* (uprising) against Israel. I have long maintained that Arafat had no intentions of peace. Leading a popular rebel army is far easier than governing a nation.

Barak, on the other hand, returned home battered and bruised for making so many concessions—most notably, regarding Jerusalem. Sharon, leader of the opposition, said in a TV interview:

"One man, the Prime Minister, without discussing the issue with the inner cabinet, without bringing it to the government, without bringing it to the Knesset, without asking anyone of the Jewish leaders around the world, decided to hand over the holiest place of the Jewish people. That is something that no one can understand."

To demonstrate that Israel would never relinquish control over the Old City of Jerusalem, Sharon said he would take a walk on

the Temple Mount. To be sure, the Temple Mount is the most disputed little piece of real estate in the world! This infuriated Arafat. Despite the fact that Sharon had walked there many times before and Israelis have been able to stroll on the Temple Mount for decades—this time was different—it was defiant. It was a message to Arafat that Jerusalem would never be divided.

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon

The *Bulldozer* made his point and Arafat started a war. Suicide bombers were dispatched. Israel defended herself vigorously. The world blamed Sharon for provoking the uprising, but there is ample proof that Arafat was planning war all along—he was just looking for the right moment. Israelis did not blame Sharon. Barak was disgraced and Sharon was elected prime minister in early 2001.

Between 2000 and 2005, in response to “hundreds of Palestinian suicide bombings and terrorist attacks against Israeli civilians, [which] killed nearly 1,000 innocent people and wounded thousands of others” (), Sharon built Israel’s Security Fence. The Security Fence stopped the second Intifada in its tracks. The number of suicide bombers decreased by more than 90 percent!

Over the next several years, Israelis from the right and the left, to their great surprise, came to love Sharon. They discovered a gentler, more caring Ariel than the *Bulldozer*’s nickname would have led one to imagine. They felt protected by him.

Gaza Disengagement

In 2005, Sharon was all set to win another four years as Israel’s premier—this time as leader of the new centrist party, *Kadima*. He had left the historic Likud party over a major rift. He wanted to get out of Gaza. Most Israelis, including me, felt that the resources used to protect less

than 10,000 Israelis amongst well over 1,000,000 Arabs were not worth it. We were tired of seeing Israeli soldiers killed in this no-man's-land.

Sharon, against everything he stood for before, embraced the *hitnatkut*—the *disengagement*. During that time, there was not one Israeli who did not hear the word—*hitnatkut*—daily. Orange ribbons everywhere symbolized resistance. But the *Bulldozer* would not give in.

We were all duped. After forcibly removing 8,000 Jews from Gaza, it became clear that it was a mistake. Within a short time, the terrorist group Hamas was voted into power in Gaza. The Palestinian leadership and Hamas interpreted Israel's act of peace as weakness. Gaza is far worse off now, than before. Over 10,000 rockets and mortars have been fired from Gaza since Israel offered them an olive branch.

We emboldened the terrorists. Many believe that in his next term, Sharon was determined to evacuate large portions of the West Bank as well. But, we will never know if that would come true. Before the elections took place, he suffered a powerful stroke that left him in coma—until Saturday.

Most westerners, as evidenced by comments I saw on Facebook, know only one thing about Ariel Sharon—that he was the Prime Minister who evacuated Gaza. They know nothing about the General who took the Sinai desert in mere days, about the strategist who protected Israel from destruction in the 1973 Yom Kippur war, and they barely remember the man who took a bold, controversial *walk to remember* in late September 2000—a walk that thrust him into the prime minister's office.

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