

7 September 1983

Reflections on a resignation

THE DIVERSE speculations about specific, immediate reasons for Prime Minister Begin's resignation were not particularly intelligent. It was evident for months, from the private reports of public figures in Begin's entourage, that Begin had withdrawn into a silence that even his closest confidants could seldom penetrate except on the essentials of his own office. His mien and his behaviour reflected simply a state of spiritual exhaustion. When finally he appealed to his "friends" to give up on their importuning him not to resign, he said simply, "I cannot go on."

It was surely the sense of exhaustion, growing daily stronger, that dictated the inconvenient timing of his announcement. The troops in the Shouf mountains in Lebanon were on the eve of withdrawal – but were still there. The cabinet debate on budget cuts was not over but would certainly be concluded within a week or two. It would manifestly be appropriate for a prime minister to preside over both these processes until their successful conclusion. Indeed, a constructive end to the economic debate may have been undermined by Begin's departure. Nor would he have forced a last-minute cancellation of the visit of the German chancellor if the feeling of utter tiredness were not overwhelming.

The suddenness of Begin's announcement deepened Israel's political disarray, and now we have the inevitable tensions and tumult surrounding the uncertainties of the succession. But there is another element beclouding the personal tragedy. This is not the way Menachem Begin's public career should come to an end.

NO DOUBT, his mood was darkened by the events in Lebanon. Always sharply sensitive to the danger of the loss of life, he was certainly depressed by the unexpectedly high number of casualties, and naturally, as prime minister, he had to see himself as responsible for the operations which had brought them about. The unbridled attacks made on him by the Opposition in Israel and by unscrupulous media abroad were, however, largely without foundation and, in the case of the Opposition in Israel, hypocritical to boot.

Every war is, in some measure, a disaster – unless it is concluded without dead or maimed. In every war mistakes are made, causing loss of life – though often, in the past, they have been concealed from public knowledge until long after the event. Prominent for committing such mistakes in the state of Israel is the Labour Party, which presided over four major wars and one "minor" one. Does one need to recount the mistakes made in the War of Independence? Or, more pertinently, in the Yom Kippur War? In that war, compounding the blunders of commission and omission in the defence establishment and the army before the war, the political leadership knowingly jeopardized the lives of hundreds of front-line soldiers. They declined to call up the reserves even when they knew that the Egyptians and the Syrians were poised for the attack, and refused to accede to Chief-of-Staff David Elazar's appeal for a pre-emptive air-strike.

They took these decisions in order to demonstrate to the "world," beyond any possible shadow of doubt, that it was the Arabs, with swords visibly unsheathed, and not an obviously unprepared Israel, who were the aggressors; and thus to win sympathy and support. The sacrifice they made met with a uniform European response: complete indifference. In Israel's darkest hour during that war, Europe's governments, with the

exception of Portugal, refused to allow U.S. planes carrying supplies to the IDF to land in their territory, even for refueling. (Not to mention Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's statement after the war, justifying the Arab aggression.)

If Begin and Ariel Sharon can be accused of blundering in their reliance on the promises of the Christian militias that they would enter the battle in Beirut, how much more grievous was the blunder of the Golda Meir government in paying a horrendous advance price to please a European morality which had long ceased to exist.

Moreover, the brilliant victory in the field then accomplished by the IDF was nullified under American pressure and converted into defeat. In the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War, Israel remained poorer in territory and economically (by giving up the oil of Abu Rodeis) than before the war – in which Israel lost 3,000 men.

IN LEBANON, Israel achieved two great objectives. Normal life was restored to Galilee; and the invasion revealed the tremendous stores of arms and ammunition accumulated by the PLO in patent preparation for a renewed and unprecedentedly massive attack on Galilee – and perhaps not only on Galilee.

Secondly, there was the breaking of the PLO, of its military strength and potential, and the undermining of its political prestige and standing throughout the world. This would have been impossible without the entry into Beirut. From there the PLO conducted its war on Israel, and its terror activities throughout the world. From there, it directed the campaign of murder and rapine against the civilian population of Lebanon.

Indeed, perhaps the greatest mistake made by the Israeli government in Lebanon was to refrain from driving directly into Beirut. It is fair to say that the dithering over going into Beirut (and this, once again, under the pressure of Washington, which had for years consistently protected the PLO), enabled Yasser Arafat to prepare for a siege and forced upon the IDF a painful weeks-long prolongation of the battle – to the equally prolonged accompaniment of obloquy from the “world” outside.

The failure to bring about a stable regime in Lebanon was the result of a grievous under-estimate of the diversity and depth of inter-communal hatreds in that country, and of the degree of Syrian influence. It is wrong, however, to describe Begin's (and Sharon's) striving for such a regime as serving a purely Lebanese interest. A strong and stable Beirut government, friendly to Israel, is an Israeli interest of a high order.

The balance of consequences of the war in Lebanon is distinctly, even heavily, in favour of Israel; and heavy and painful as the casualty list has been Begin has no reason to reproach himself for the invasion of Lebanon.

AS FOR the other grave, immediate problem besetting the nation, Begin must accept full blame. The economic crisis was avoidable. Economic policy is not a personal fiefdom of the finance minister. In Israel, the interdependence of foreign policy and internal economic governance is blatant. Most specifically, an incorrect economic policy increases and deepens Israel's dependence – and, more significantly, the people's *sense* of dependence – on the U.S. The Likud was originally elected on a platform that intended to reduce, indeed to eliminate, that dependence. Except for one brief period, the Likud government's policy has promoted and enhanced it.

It was the prime minister's duty to ensure that his finance minister direct his policy so as to restrain the economy and to make necessary cutbacks in government

spending and so influence the behaviour of the public. Yet never once did Begin even interfere significantly to stop the downhill slide of the economy.

He did not lift a finger to ensure the introduction of the policy he had promised in the 1977 election, nor to prevent or halt the careless rapture of the late Simcha Ehrlich and, later, of Yoram Aridor, in openly encouraging waste and free spending. He gave no sign that he grasped either the social implications and even the far-reaching, dangerous political implications of Israel's living beyond its means.

When, moreover, Ehrlich's successor, Yigal Hurvitz, initiated a drastic change of direction, courageously launching a policy of restraint and belt-tightening, the prime minister did not prevent, as he could have prevented, Hurvitz being squeezed out of office.

THE CONSEQUENCES of this fateful failure of government on Begin's part have been disastrous, and their end is not in sight. The next prime minister should observe the elementary law: that his responsibility spreads over every area of government and, in Israel today, his first concern must be to work for a drastic revision of economic policy.

Reader's letter, 10 October 1983

IMMORAL OPERATION

To the Editor of The Jerusalem Post

Sir, – I WAS DISTURBED BY Mr. Shmuel Katz's recent assertion that "Begin has no reason to reproach himself for the invasion of Lebanon." It is true, as Mr. Katz notes, that every war is a disaster. However, not every war is as unnecessary as was the Peace for Galilee operation.

In the eight months prior to this operation, the Galilee was more peaceful and free of terrorist attack than it had been for many years. This improvement was the result of a tacit cease-fire between Israel and the PLO – a cease-fire that the PLO observed more faithfully than Israel. Whatever reasons in fact motivated Messrs. Begin and Sharon to launch the Lebanon invasion, assuring the peace of the Galilee was evidently not prominent among them.

Pointing to the PLO arms caches captured by the IDF, Mr. Katz claims that the Lebanon invasion was justified as an attempt to destroy the PLO's military capability. This line of reasoning is not entirely rational. Syria poses a greater threat to Israel than the PLO ever did. Nevertheless, it would not be wise for Israel to invade and occupy Syria, incurring thousands of casualties. Syria's full military capability may never be used against Israel. Should its use be threatened, Israel will doubtless be able to defend itself in ways less costly than a drive toward Damascus. Similarly, the cost of Israel's drive to Beirut was far out of proportion to the threat posed by the PLO.

Mr. Katz's reasoning is not only irrational, it is immoral. One is not justified in attacking and destroying an enemy merely because the enemy is armed. Israel was heavily armed before the Lebanon invasion. As subsequent events demonstrated, Israel was capable of invading and occupying much of Lebanon and of inflicting heavy damage through aerial bombing of cities and villages. However, I am sure Mr. Katz would agree that Israel's military capability prior to the Lebanon invasion would not have justified a pre-emptive strike by the PLO, Syria or Lebanon.

In any case, the Lebanon invasion did not destroy the PLO's military capability. As I write this letter, the media are reporting that Yasser Arafat has returned to Lebanon and that PLO military units have joined the Druse in the Shouf mountains.

The Lebanon operation was unnecessary and immoral. Even one of the more than 500 Israelis who died in that operation has died unnecessarily. Thus, it is not surprising that Prime Minister Begin was moved to resign. What is surprising is that the rest of his cabinet, particularly Mr. Sharon, were not similarly moved.

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