

Yoav Gelber

Sharon's Inheritance

Delivered at the ISA Annual Conference
Banff, May 2006

Ariel Sharon has been a key figure in Israel's military and political history for more than fifty years — longer than any other active politician apart from the eternal Shimon Peres. An appreciation of Sharon's historical impact requires more than the time I have here, and probably a broader perspective than we all have now. So, please treat the following attempt as experimental only, far less committing than I would have liked it to be.

Sharon was a typical representative of the *Yishuv's* interim generation. The contemporaries of his parents built the Zionist enterprise. They laid foundations in settlement, agriculture, education, defence and many other fields. They created the political system and the institutions. They shaped the new Jewish life in the Land of Israel — not in terms of ideology (this had been done by the earlier generations), but in terms of implementing ideology and translating it into daily life, in terms of *mentalité*, or mentality, to use the *Annales'* phrase.

The main role that the founders left to the next generation was the defence of their parents' enterprise. The world of Sharon's childhood and youth revolved around this theme. He and his generation grew up and matured under circumstances of successive existential threats to the Zionist enterprise. These threats began with the Arab Revolt in 1936-1939, continued with the threat of an Axis armies' invasion in the years 1940-1942, with the threat of a pro-Arab solution of the Palestine problem that Britain might impose, with the War of Independence and

Arab invasion in 1947-1949, and with life inside indefensible borders and enemy's artillery range between 1949 and 1967.

In contrast to their parents, "defence" was not perceived by Sharon's generation in tactical terms. Tactically and methodically they were highly aggressive since they had emerged out of the "fence" in 1937-1938, and according to Anita Shapira they abandoned their parents' "defensive ethos" and shaped their own "offensive" one. Yet, the use of the word "Defence" was not mere word-washing. It symbolized their broader perception of the Zionist enterprise as constantly threatened by its Arab surroundings and, sometimes, also by other powers. "Defence" implied that the Jews of the Land of Israel were the responding side and not the initiators of the threats; even if and when tactically they unleashed the first blow or shot the first bullet.

Until the Six Day War in 1967, the consensus in Israeli society on this perception of "Defence" and its imperatives was wide. There were dissenters, but they were insignificant. The external threats menaced all components of society, regardless of the differences between Ashkenzi and oriental, religious and secular, poor and rich, right and left. Hence, the defensive nature of Jewish existence was recognized and agreed by most Jews that felt themselves living under these threats in Israel and supported by most Jews living abroad.

This was the background against which Sharon's worldview developed since his childhood. Although his personal ambition and audacity, as well as his ability to proceed on the edge of truth, loyalty and discipline were outstanding, and perhaps because of these traits, Sharon was a typical, almost symbolic product of the pre- and early statehood's consensus, for good and bad. Indeed, what has made Sharon unique was more his powerful and ruthless personality than his ideas, wisdom or originality.

Sharon's military career was meteoric. He began as a platoon commander in the Alexandroni HISH brigade and was severely wounded in Latrun. In the end of the War of Independence, having recovered from his injuries, he was appointed commanding officer of Alexandroni's reconnaissance unit. After the demobilization of the war's army, the unit was transferred to the Golani regular brigade and became its *Sayeret*. For several months in 1950, Sharon and his men acted along the Syrian border and cleaned the margins of the Hula swamps from Arab refugees who had infiltrated from Syria and attempted to resettle in the marshes.

In 1951, after *Sayeret* Golani, Sharon was appointed intelligence officer of the Central Command. In this post he was exposed for the first time to diplomacy and met with UN observers and Jordanian representatives to the MAC. From that position he moved to the same post in the Northern Command, where he worked for the first time under Moshe Dayan, who was the GOC. In this office Sharon was personally involved in the kidnapping of Jordanian policemen to facilitate the release of two IDF soldiers in Jordanian captivity, an action performed with great cunning, also a typical trait of Sharon.

In the summer of 1952 Sharon took a vacation from the army and went to study law in the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Simultaneously, he commanded (at the age of 25) a reserve infantry battalion of the Jerusalem brigade with which he was involved in several border incidents while the battalion held the line of the northern corridor. In July 1953, he was called again from his studies to lead a reprisal raid on Nabi Tzamuil, and soon afterwards his vacation ended and he was assigned by Dayan with building unit 101, the designated contractor of reprisal and retribution raids across the borders of Israel.

During its short life-span that lasted only four and half months, unit 101 became a legend. The legend, however, exceeded by far its basis in

reality. Out of this period, the first month was devoted to training the mixed crowd that Sharon and his deputy, Shlomo Baum, assembled in the camp of Sataf, near Jerusalem. In the end of this first month, a patrol of the unit that infiltrated into the Gaza Strip as an exercise, encountered Arabs in al-Burej refugee camp, opened fire to rescue itself and left behind about 30 killed Arabs and dozens of wounded. The next month, September 1953, was spent mostly in chasing Azazma bedouins — infiltrators who settled in the Central Negev. Early in October Unit 101 returned to Central Command and performed patrols along and across the border in preparation for future actions. It also executed one retaliatory raid — an ambush of an Arab bus near Latrun. A few days later, the raid on Qibia took place followed by a temporary cessation of retaliations because of the shock that the outcomes of that raid generated in Israel and abroad. In December 1953, two teams made the unit's deepest penetrations into enemy's territory, but these were also its last independent actions before the merger with the paratrooper battalion 890 in the beginning of 1954.

Sharon became the commander of 890 and the IDF's sub-contractor of retaliations in the years 1954-1956. In the summer of 1956 the IDF's paratrooper unit was expanded into a brigade and Sharon was appointed its commanding officer. Throughout those years, Sharon's habit of interpreting and expanding the scope of the authorities' approval of retaliations, culminating in the battle of the Mitla in the Sinai War, made him a highly controversial figure. He acquired zealous admirers and at the same time made fierce enemies. Sharon's relations with the truth became ever more ambivalent, as Ben-Gurion noticed in those very days and others, me included, could add more examples from their own experience in later years.

When his mentor since their common days in Northern Command, Dayan, terminated his term as Chief of staff, Sharon's so far meteoric career was frozen for several years. He held two second rate posts and spent a year in the British Army's Staff College at Kemberley. In abeyance, he tried to attract Ben-Gurion's attention, bypassing the Chief of Staff Laskov. He did it through Shimon Peres, then Director General of the Ministry of Defence, with whom he corresponded from England on his next appointment. This was the beginning of a wonderful friendship that despite subsequent deep political differences between the two, persisted until the foundation of *Kadimah*. However, when Laskov learned of this correspondence he demanded from Ben-Gurion to discharge Peres, and when Ben-Gurion refused he resigned and retired from the army.

The freezing of Sharon's military career ended after the appointment of Izhak Rabin as CoS. Rabin nominated Sharon chief of Northern Command's staff, and in 1965 he was promoted to Aluph and appointed director of training, a post that he held for four years until he became GOC Southern Command in the summer of 1969. In the Six Day War Sharon commanded a division that waged the break through battle in the central sector, a battle well known for its brilliant planning and execution.

After four years in Southern Command, and what he and many others regarded as winning the War of Attrition, Sharon expected promotion and prepared himself for the post of CoS. However, he was not offered this or any other post and in June 1973 he retired from the army and moved directly to politics. Bitterly he said: They push me out of the army arguing that I am too old, and on the same day they appoint an Aluf Pikud who was a corporal in the Ghaffirs when I was a child (Yona Efrat and the Kahan commission).

Sharon's direct shift from the army to politics was not a precedent — Ezer Weizmann and Chaim Bar-Lev had done it before. Unlike his two predecessors, however, Sharon did not jump to a ministerial post but to a "black" or "dirty" political work, trying to unite several parties and create an alternative to the forty years rule of Mapai.

Ironically, Sharon, who built the Likud almost single-handedly, was also its liquidator. In building the Likud Sharon displayed certain personal traits that made him prominent also among Israeli politicians: boldness, ruthlessness, sticking to his guns and determination that were reminiscent of Ben-Gurion. However, he was not a new Ben-Gurion — far from it. He lacked BG's discretion, restraint, modesty, patience and wisdom to say nothing about his vision.

Sharon barely achieved the union of the right wing parties in the framework of the Likud when he was called back to the army, to command a division in the Yom Kippur War. An interesting speculation is what would have happened in the Sinai front if Sharon was still GOC Southern Command. Since it could hardly be worse than it was, the self-evident conclusion is that it must have been better and the question remains how much better.

During the Yom Kippur War, Sharon emerged once more as a highly controversial figure and this image stick to him until his premiership, when his partisans and opponents switched sides. In the fall of 1973, his new political career made him a target for accusations of all sorts, including disloyalty, lack of discipline, illegally hiding documents in his ranch and improper conduct. However, there is little and insignificant evidence to substantiate these accusations, and a lot more to contradict them. Sharon, on his part, claimed that he was given illogical orders by his superiors (Gonen and Barlev) who did not feel or grasp the battlefield's reality.

Sharon's complaint was true mainly in regard to Gonen, while the case with Barlev was more complicated. It was a matter of emphasizing different principles of war following the crossing of the Suez Canal. While the daring Sharon wanted to exploit the success of the crossing and transfer most of his troops to the western bank to harass the Egyptian rear, the cautious Barlev saw primarily the failure of Sharon's division to open a safe route to the canal and extend the bridgehead on its eastern bank. He insisted that this was a pre-condition for the transfer of more troops to the west bank. The argument turned into a personal and political one, between Sharon and Barlev, alias Likud and Labour, about the distribution of unwarranted laurels.

After the war, Sharon returned to political activity, but the translation of the shock, or "earthquake" of the Yom Kippur war into political terms had to wait four more years. The elections of December 1973 were held too close to the war and could not reflect its impact. The army was still mobilized and many recruits did not know what happen in the war, how and why. The lists of candidates were left unchanged, thus reflecting the now anachronistic pre-war situation.

Disappointed of the Likud achievements in the elections, Sharon quarreled with Begin and left the Likud for the first time. Rabin, the new PM, appointed him his advisor for combating terrorism. However, Sharon had already become "a political animal", and towards the elections of 1977 he returned to politics and established his own party, *Shlomzion*, that hardly achieved two seats in the *Knesset*, while his political creation, the Likud, won the elections without him. Sharon learned his lesson and soon re-joined the Likud and was appointed Minister of Agriculture.

During the second half of the 1970s Sharon — in and out of office — emerged as the mentor of the settlers of *Gush Emunim* and their "spokesman" in the government. It is not easy to explain this alliance. It

was not ideological as the settlers might have believed, but also it was not just a cynical political alliance. Sharon, an off-spring of the Labour movement, was pragmatic, not messianic, though he made pilgrimages to several rabbis, mainly for political benefits. Besides his personal ambition, defense considerations were the primary — and perhaps the only — force that motivated him. He believed that sticking to the West Bank and the Gaza Strip was a security imperative, and regarded both territories as essential for Israel's existence. In his eyes, the settlers were tools for maintaining these territories and obstructing any prospect of a re-partition of the country.

This political alliance broke up twice — at first, when Sharon executed the evacuation of the settlements from Yamit district in Sinai in 1982, and the second time in the recent disengagement. Between these two crises, Sharon — in all the offices that he held and out of office — was the most significant, effective and influential ally of the settlers in the Israeli political system. He encouraged, cultivated and promoted them and their enterprise. However, he did not do it for their sake, but thought he was using them for his sake.

In Sharon's eyes, the settlers were primarily "soldiers" fulfilling a mission. This is probably the explanation to his ability to abandon them in one fell swoop and turn his back on them when the "mission" changed, in both the evacuation of Yamit in 1982 and in 2005. Ignoring — or, at least, underestimating — their religious mysticism and belief, as well as their ideology and sociology, he thought that as "soldiers" performing a mission they should obey orders even if they don't like them or identify with them — including the order of evacuation.

In 1982, Sharon dreamt on solving the Palestinian problem by destroying the emerging Palestinian entity in Lebanon, and he needed the peace with Egypt and the securing of Israel southern border for

accomplishing this goal. Tactically, he proved right and Egypt did not intervene in the war and the IDF had no need to spare troops for the Egyptian border. Strategically, Sharon was wrong. The war in Lebanon did not solve the Palestinian problem and probably aggravated it, adding a few other quandaries to the list on Israel's agenda. Sharon, however, did not remain to bear the consequences and ended his term in the defense ministry with the stigma of the Kahan State Commission of Inquiry after the Sabra and Shatila massacre.

While Sharon was preoccupied with clearing his name in label suits against the *Time* in the United States and *Haaretz* in Israel, Misha Arens and, subsequently, Itzhak Rabin had to clear the mess that he had left in Lebanon. However, this mess has proved its survivability and continues to bother Israel until these very days.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Sharon and his generation had little knowledge of Lebanon and of the history of the *Yishuv* and Israel's relations with the various groups in this country. In June 1947, Ben-Gurion arrived at an agreement with the Maronite religious leadership in Lebanon that cost a few thousand pounds and kept Lebanon's army out of the War of Independence and the military Arab coalition. He could and did dream about establishing a Christian state in Lebanon. However, when it came to real politics he knew to restrain himself and his subordinates and several times — in 1948, 1951 and 1958 — he overruled an Israeli invasion or intervention in Lebanon's politics or at least restricted it. His intuition warned him that Lebanon was a Pandora Box and he refused to commit Israel even if the circumstances appeared favorable and the rewards were tempting. The maximum he was ready to approve was clandestine support of potential allies, be them the Maronite Falanx or the Junbalat Druze. Sharon, as well as Rabin and Peres before

him, did not share Ben-Gurion's caution. With different reasoning, all three and their advisors sank Israel deep in the Lebanese swamp.

The war in Lebanon displayed the gap between Sharon the genius tactician and Sharon the poor strategist, or between Israel's military power and its capacity of exploiting politically this superiority. Having failed in Lebanon, in the following years Sharon turned his attention and energies to the Palestinian problem inside the country and renewed his alliance with the settlers that broke down in April 1982.

A major question is what brought Sharon to change his demeanor with the settlers, and to change his perception of the Arab-Israeli conflict — from the declaration about Netzarim's importance to the decision to evacuate it two years later together with the rest of the Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip. Any answer will necessarily be speculative as we have no access to the source material.

The common answer, given by Sharon himself, has been that when he became Prime Minister he could see things that he had not seen and probably could not see before. The only thing that an Israeli PM sees that he had not and could not see before he became PM is the White House, namely the president of the United States. Ultimately, it is the PM that faces the President, and since Izhak Rabin's second term all Israeli premiers maintained good relations with the American presidents but did it at the expense of Israel's independence and some Israeli interests. All of them regarded and presented the American President's support as outweighing demonstrations of independence and more significant than the sacrificed interests.

Office holders below the PM may imagine that they are independent to make decisions and shape policies as long as the PM is their buffer. They can clash or cooperate with the Pentagon or the State Department; they can cover on unauthorized outposts and similar

"independent" actions, or make deals with the Chinese behind the Americans' back, but in the end of the day, if it is unacceptable to the American president the PM would force them to call it off. Sharon was no exception to this rule, and his successor, Ehud Olmert, is already continuing the tradition.

When Sharon was elected PM in 2001, he felt for the first time the pressure of standing alone (or with Dubi Weisglass, which is the same thing) to face an American president. He began to maneuver in this new field, and as usual did it with tactical skill and no strategy. In this process he conformed to President Bush's vision of a Palestinian state and accepted his Road Map, ignoring the principles of this scheme that might be to the detriment of Israel. He could do it because he was confident that the Palestinians would not fulfill their part. However, he was soon confronted with the question what Israel could do without the Palestinians.

The deadlock in the relations with the Palestinians appeared to Sharon threatening. On the one hand, he had realized long ago that an agreed solution with the Palestinians was impossible. They did not seek compromise and co-existence but justice, and their justice — mainly the Right of Return — was incompatible with the continuing existence of Israel as the Jewish nation state. On the other hand, Sharon became aware of the deteriorating legitimacy of Israel, of the radicalization of parts of the Israeli left, the growing significance of Europe and the apparent fatigue of the once leading elements of Israeli society. Above all, he was not Izhak Shamir, and he just could not sit idle and watch developments from the side line. He had to do something, to reshape Israel if not the entire Middle East as he tried 25 years earlier in Lebanon, and he came out with the disengagement plan.

It is too early to estimate the consequences of Sharon's disengagement from the Gaza Strip, and we don't know yet whether it was a historical turning point leading to additional "disengagements", "convergings", "re-allingments" or other "clean" catch-phrases for withdrawal from or in the West Bank, or it was a one-time episode. There are two basic ways of looking at it. The first approach would argue that maybe for the first time in his life, Sharon adopted a strategy, and his line was strategically justified: there was no room for a few thousand Jews in the midst of the Gaza strip. Eventually, they would have to abandon their settlements, and if temporary or tactical benefits could be drawn from their evacuation — let's do it. The arguments against this approach concern tactical issues: the organization of the evacuation or the lack of it, the continuing barraging of the Qassam "missiles" etc.

The second approach represents the disengagement as a successful tactical move (typical of Sharon) that indeed relieved Israel from diplomatic pressures, and probably saved a few companies on current security duties. Furthermore, contrary to the warnings and expectations it ended without a major domestic breach. However, it achieved all these accomplishments for a heavy price for Israel strategic position in the future. The partisans of this view would claim that in the long run the disengagement solved nothing and its accomplishments are precarious and temporary. The problems of the Gaza strip could not be solved by removing 7000 Jews from the settlements, but by resettling 700,000 Arabs elsewhere in the Arab and western world. The evacuation of the settlements from the northern tip of the strip — that had only a legal reasoning, not demographical or security — did not achieve its aim and Israel is still held responsible for the Gaza strip. Meanwhile the evacuated settlements turned into military depots, training camps and areas of launching missiles to the western Negev.

Since the disengagement, the Egyptian border has turned into an active and hot border. The involvement of Egypt in the affairs of the Gaza strip is still limited to security matters. The efficiency of the Egyptians leaves a lot of room for improvements, but this is not the main problem. The menace of Egyptian presence in the Gaza strip is strategic, not tactical: it may intensify under a different regime, and a minor clash between Israel and the Palestinians may then escalate into a dispute between Israel and Egypt and endanger the most significant Israeli diplomatic achievement so far — the peace with Egypt. Again, Sharon's tactical approach overcame strategic considerations

The political consequences of the disengagement are arguable. For the time being, Israel's international position has improved, but not drastically. However, the Palestinians voted for the *Hamas*. The common exoneration that they did so because of the corruption in the PA is far from convincing. Corruption is not deplorable in Palestinian society, except, perhaps, in the eyes of the minority of westernized Palestinians. The probability that the elections reflected gratitude to *Hamas* for his stand against Israel, and even identification with its political program, is much higher. The question is how long Europe and the USA will stick to their policy of ignoring or boycotting the Palestinian government, and the first cracks in this wall are already visible.

During his life time, Sharon was involved in various attempts to settle the Palestinian problem, from using the most violent means in the borders war of the 1950s and in Lebanon to the picture with Bush and Abu Mazin in Sharm al-Sheikh. His powerful and dominant personality played a major part in both kinds of attempts. Yet, his ideas proved futile: from Qibya to the recent Intifada, Israel failed in pacifying the Palestinians by force, and also to satisfy them by moderation.

Sharon was not outstanding in this respect. Their differences notwithstanding, almost none of his generation has appreciated the might of the Palestinians' opposition to the Zionist enterprise, their endurance, patience and tenacity. Most of them, in the army and in politics, believed that either the Palestinians would succumb under military, economic and political pressures, or would be tempted by Israeli concessions. They hoped that either the use of more force would reduce the Palestinians to comply with Zionism, with a Jewish nation state and with a strong Israel, or a common ground could be found based on compromise. Some of them moved from one approach to its opposite — to mention Mati Peled, Ezer Weizmann, Shlomo Lahat, Dani Rotschild and Ami Ayalon as few examples. Each approach has produced lots of arguments to support its line of reasoning and against the alternative. Both approaches have so far failed to achieve their goals. The Palestinians may find formulas that will conceal their goals or hidden wishes, and raise expectations among Israelis, but they will not abandon them. The Israelis may withdraw to the 1967 lines, only to face in due course new/old demands such as the UN partition borders, the Right of Return etc.

The insolubility of the Palestinian-Jewish conflict could be evident since the Palestinian rebellion in 1936-1939. In those years, there was no so-called occupation. There were even no refugees claiming their right of return. Jerusalem was still out of the conflict. Nevertheless, the gap between the Jews' search for admission, coexistence and compromise, and the Palestinians' demand for justice, have proved too wide to be bridged. Sharon and his generation have bequeathed to us an insoluble problem with no partner to negotiate its solution. Amnon Sela argued yesterday that in political science there is nothing like a state of affairs with no partner. Yet, in politics there is such a state of affairs, and we

shall have to learn how to live with it rather than hope for its unattainable solution.