

CHAPTER 5

From Helsinki to Oslo

A CURSORY GLANCE at the map of Europe shows the capitals of Finland and Norway only a few hundred miles apart. Yet despite their proximity, the accords reached at Helsinki and Oslo represent decidedly different approaches to international relations. In both of these Scandinavian cities, parties ostensibly seeking an end to a decades-old conflict entered into negotiations that culminated in an historic agreement. But unfortunately for the prospects of genuine Arab-Israeli reconciliation, the similarities end there. The process started at Helsinki helped end the Cold War and liberate hundreds of millions of people. The process started at Oslo unleashed an unprecedented campaign of terror and left millions of Palestinians living under a tyrant.

CHAPTER 5

From Helsinki to Oslo

A CURSORY GLANCE at the map of Europe shows the capitals of Finland and Norway only a few hundred miles apart. Yet despite their proximity, the accords reached at Helsinki and Oslo represent decidedly different approaches to international relations. In both of these Scandinavian cities, parties ostensibly seeking an end to a decades-old conflict entered into negotiations that culminated in an historic agreement. But unfortunately for the prospects of genuine Arab-Israeli reconciliation, the similarities end there. The process started at Helsinki helped end the Cold War and liberate hundreds of millions of people. The process started at Oslo unleashed an unprecedented campaign of terror and left millions of Palestinians living under a tyrant.

The differences between the two approaches should have been obvious from the start. Whereas the Helsinki agreements forged a direct link between human rights and East-West relations, the Oslo accords failed to establish any connection between human rights and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Worse, as would later become clear in word and deed, Oslo's architects actually believed that such a link would be detrimental to the interests of both parties. Considering the Arab regimes' abysmal record of respecting the rights of their own people, it was no surprise that representatives of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) wanted to avoid any mention of human rights. But that Israeli negotiators would delude themselves into believing that such an omission actually served Israel's interests is a sad testament to how little we learn from history.

For most Middle East policymakers, the end of the Cold War became noteworthy primarily for the collapse of the Arab countries' Soviet sponsor and for the possibility of rapid geopolitical change, both of which intoxicated the minds of those seeking a miraculous end to the Arab-Israeli conflict and the creation of a "New Middle East" overnight. Conveniently forgotten was the real lesson of the Cold War: Namely, that the environment that precipitated this historic collapse was cultivated by both the courage of dissidents like Sakharov and Orlov, who challenged the Soviet authorities to free their own people, and the bold policies of Western leaders such as Jackson and Reagan, who turned the process of liberalization and reform inside the Soviet Union into an important element of superpower relations.

To be sure, no Arab figure of Sakharov's stature has yet emerged in the Middle East to give voice to the struggle for human rights. But Israel and other democratic governments have also not carried their share of the burden. When the peace process began, the free world had a remarkable opportunity to use its influence to help the emerging Palestinian society evolve into a democratic state that could serve as the linchpin of a wider Arab-Israeli peace. Instead it did precisely the opposite, spending the better part of a decade building and supporting a corrupt dictatorship.

Sadly, the one democratic country in a region rife with belligerent, authoritarian states refused to believe—and still refuses to believe—in the universal power of its own ideals. Skeptical of their country's ability to promote change in the Arab states and tired of diplomatic deadlock, Israeli policymakers initiated a peace process at Oslo but left the real key to Middle East peace—establishing a direct link between the liberalization of Arab regimes and the peace process—gathering dust in Helsinki.

THE MARCH OF FOLLY

In 1993, the world, the people of Israel, its parliament, and virtually its entire government, were shocked to discover that secret talks in Oslo between representatives of Israel and the Tunis-based PLO had led to the formulation of a Declaration of Principles between the two sides. Israel had spent three decades fighting the PLO within its own borders and trying to expel the organization from its bases in neigh-

boring states. Now it was treating the PLO to a triumphant return to Gaza and the West Bank.

The PLO was formed in 1964. This was *three years before* the Six Day War, during which Israel captured the West Bank from Jordan and the Gaza Strip from Egypt. Obviously, then, the reason for the establishment of the PLO was not to “liberate” these territories from Israeli rule. Rather, it was to destroy the state of Israel and, as its leader frequently boasted, “push all the Jews into the sea.” The PLO’s founding charter openly called for “the liquidation of the Zionist presence” and asserted that “armed struggle is the only way to liberate Palestine.”

To advance its goals, the PLO perpetrated countless acts of terrorism and hoped to trigger a wider Arab war against Israel that would annihilate the Jewish state. When a surprise attack launched by Egypt and Syria on Yom Kippur day in 1973 was successfully repelled by Israel, it became clear to the PLO that the Arab states did not possess sufficient military power to destroy Israel. Deciding that its goal could only be advanced piecemeal, the organization changed tactics. In 1974, its governing council approved its so-called “phased plan,” according to which the PLO would take hold of any territory relinquished by Israel—as a result of diplomatic pressure, terrorism, or a combination of both—and use it as a launching pad for the next round of fighting. One senior PLO member explained the strategy:

According to the Phased Plan, we will establish a Palestinian state on any part of Palestine that the enemy will

retreat from. The Palestinian state will be a stage in our prolonged struggle for the liberation of Palestine on all of its territory. We cannot achieve the strategic goal of a Palestinian state in all of Palestine without first establishing a Palestinian state [on part of it].¹

While the PLO claimed to be the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, the State of Israel refused to recognize it as such or negotiate with it. After a number of Israelis started meeting openly with the PLO in the 1970s and 1980s, the Israeli Parliament passed a law in 1986 prohibiting such meetings unless explicitly authorized by the government. In the early 1990s, the governments of both Yitzhak Shamir and Yitzhak Rabin rejected negotiations with the PLO in favor of talks with the local Palestinian leadership.

Thus, the announcement in September 1993 that Rabin's Labor government had reached an agreement with the PLO came as a complete surprise. The Clinton administration, also unaware of the clandestine talks in Oslo, was thrilled: Both Democratic and Republican administrations had long supported efforts by Israelis and Palestinians to reach a compromise. President Clinton, correctly seeing the breakthrough as a golden diplomatic opportunity that was happening on his watch, quickly arranged a signing ceremony in Washington. PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat and Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin shook hands on the White House lawn before a stunned and jubilant world.

The Oslo agreement was fairly straightforward: Israel

committed itself to transferring territory to the PLO, which would take responsibility for governing the Palestinian population in the areas under its control. In the first stage, the PLO would be placed in charge of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank city of Jericho. The PLO was allowed to establish a 9,000-man police force, whose weapons would be supplied by Israel. All issues related to the settlements, Jerusalem, refugees, and borders were to be deferred to final status talks.

The PLO's two core commitments were that it would permanently abandon the goal of destroying Israel and that it would fight terrorism. The former would require changing those clauses in the PLO charter that called for the annihilation of the Jewish state, ending all incitement against Israel, and educating the Palestinian public for peace. The latter would entail using the newly equipped police force to crack down on fundamentalist terror groups, disarming, arresting and in some cases extraditing terrorists, as well as cooperating with the Israeli security services to prevent terror attacks.

Israel immediately split into pro-Oslo and anti-Oslo camps. As a nonpolitical observer in 1993, it seemed to me that most Israelis had made up their minds about the accords not after a careful review of their contents, but based on a priori assumptions. On the Left were many who would seemingly support any agreement so long as the "peace process" appeared to be moving forward. On the Right were many who opposed any territorial compromise with the PLO, regardless of the where, when, and how.

But at the beginning of the peace process, the pro-Oslo forces clearly had the upper hand. As is always true in Israel, the moment peace seems within reach, the public quickly becomes euphoric. A hopeful atmosphere could be felt everywhere, in the streets, in markets, in schools, in songs, in art, and of course, in the media.

Unfortunately, in this new atmosphere, expressing reservations about Oslo was seen as tantamount to rejecting peace itself. For me, this proved particularly confining. Believing that our Jewish, democratic state should try to guarantee its security without controlling the lives of another people, I counted myself among those who were prepared for territorial compromise with the Palestinians. At the same time, I was gravely concerned that a number of flawed assumptions underlying the Oslo process would preclude any possibility of an historic reconciliation.

First, the premise of Oslo, as Shimon Peres had declared on numerous occasions, was that the abyss we faced with the Palestinians would have to be traversed in one giant leap of faith. According to this view, the mutual recognition called for in the accord would trigger an irreversible political and economic chain reaction that would rapidly transform our relationship with the Palestinians and quickly usher in a "New Middle East." While any agreement with the Palestinians would have necessitated crossing a psychological Rubicon, it seemed to me that the way to overcome our mutual distrust was by seeing concrete changes in the present, not by simply forgetting the past.

Second, the Rabin-Peres administration blatantly ignored

the issue of Palestinian compliance. In a sense, this logically flowed from the first assumption. If a leap of faith were all that was needed to bridge the gap between Israelis and Palestinians, then compliance with the minutiae of detailed agreements would naturally become irrelevant. Rather than hold the Palestinians accountable and establish a *quid pro quo* that could build mutual trust, Palestinian violations of the accords were swept under the rug in the name of keeping the peace process “on track.”

Third, the architects of Oslo made no effort to reach a broad national consensus within Israel. No matter how large or vocal the opposition, its concerns were disdainfully ignored by Rabin and Peres, a mistake that Ehud Barak would later repeat. As terrorism reached unprecedented levels, these governments decided to continue the peace process, blindly pressing forward while the nation was splitting at the seams. In fact, one early stage of the Oslo agreements was passed in the Knesset by only two votes after two members of the opposition abandoned their party and traded their support for positions in the government.

But the assumption underlying the Oslo process that troubled me the most was the belief held by the Israeli government that the undemocratic nature of Arafat’s regime would serve the interests of peace and security. That Israel’s government had enlisted a man in the fight against Palestinian terrorism who had spent much of his life ordering the killing of innocents was bad enough. But that it believed that the fewer constraints placed on Arafat’s rule, the better off Israel would be, was to me the height of madness. Not

only would Arafat do our job for us, the reasoning went, but he would do it better.

OUR DICTATOR

Only a few days after the Oslo process had officially begun, Prime Minister Rabin coined the phrase that chillingly summed up the government's entire approach. Arafat would deal with terrorists, Rabin assured his countrymen, "without a Supreme Court, without B'tselem [a human rights organization] and without all kinds of bleeding heart liberals."² The undemocratic nature of Arafat's regime, far from being an obstacle to peace, was considered a crucial asset in the fight against terror.

When I read Rabin's remarks I was deeply troubled. Rabin was essentially arguing that a fear society among the Palestinians would serve peace and security and that the regime governing that society would be a reliable ally. Of course this was not the first time a democratic leader had made that argument. The tendency to see nondemocratic regimes as anchors of stability and security has colored Western strategic thinking for decades. Instead of pressuring Arab tyrants to free their own peoples and recognizing that their oppressive rule breeds fundamentalism, violence, and terrorism, the West has long believed that nondemocratic rule in the Middle East has prevented the region from descending into chaos. Yet while America and the West have sponsored tyrants from a comfortable distance, Israel was creating one in its own backyard.

I decided to write an article expressing my concerns about where the Oslo peace process was heading:

The [Palestinian] society that will emerge from fighting without a Supreme Court, B'tselem and bleeding heart liberals will inevitably be based on fear, and on unlimited totalitarian authority. . . . [T]otalitarian regimes cannot maintain stability without an enemy. Once they finish off their internal rivals, they inevitably look for outside enemies.³

My criticism of Oslo was not an assault on the idea of peace with the Palestinians. On the contrary, I was convinced that the same formula that had successfully worked to end the Cold War and transform the Soviet Union—linking Western policy to the expansion of human rights and democracy—could work to build a genuine and lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

[I]f we really want to give the rosy picture of peace a chance, we must try to ensure the building of real democratic institutions in the fledgling Palestinian society, no matter how tempting a “solution” without them may be. . . . Palestinian autonomy can become a unique test case for the determined introduction of democracy in the Arab world. Indeed, those who are responsible for the agreement and believe most in the potential of a peace here have the most at stake in exporting democracy to the emerging Palestinian society. In the coming

transitional period, Palestinians will be totally dependent on the West and Israel, politically and economically. Making political concessions and generous financial donations without “interfering in domestic affairs” almost dooms the process. On the other hand, rigidly linking the concessions and assistance to human rights policy nurtures the chance for real peace.⁴

But the same arguments that I had heard a generation before about the incompatibility of Russians with democracy, and that had been said two generations earlier about the Germans and Japanese, were now being said about the Palestinians. On both the Left and the Right, the response to my argument about the need to build Palestinian democracy was the same: “Come on, Natan, this is the Middle East we’re talking about.”

Buttressing this view was an assumption that Israel had no role to play in promoting democracy among the Palestinians in any case. As Benjamin Ben-Eliezer, a senior Labor Minister, put it soon after the Oslo accords were signed: “Promoting democracy in the Middle East involves the sensitivities of time-honored cultural traditions and a multitude of different populations. As a result, those of us in democratic societies must adopt the roles of passive spectators and must patiently wait on the sidelines.”⁵ Shimon Peres, Israel’s foreign minister, felt much the same: “I do not believe that democracy can be imposed artificially on another society.”⁶ When nothing would have enhanced Israel’s security more than promoting a Palestinian society

founded on democratic principles and institutions, Israel's leaders instead decided to usher in a peace process predicated on Palestinian tyranny. Worst of all, they were proud of it.

The Rabin-Peres government rolled out the red carpet for Arafat and his cronies. It placed the newly formed Palestinian Authority (PA) in charge of Gaza and Jericho and later transferred to its control four other West Bank cities. The 9,000-man strong PA security force would eventually swell to over 40,000 men, making it the largest per capita "police force" in the world. Israel's government implored foreign countries to shower the PA with aid and assisted Arafat in establishing a chain of monopolies over staple goods provided to and by the Palestinians. Without having faced an election, Arafat was given legitimacy, territory, money, and, most important, control over the lives of two million Palestinians.

What was obvious from the beginning was that all the power given to Arafat was not being used to improve the lives of the Palestinians but rather to strengthen his own rule. To me, this was the only possible outcome that could come from building a dictatorship. The problem was not Arafat's personality, problematic though it may be, but that the fate of the "leader" of the Palestinians was not linked to the fate of the Palestinians themselves. None of the benefits given to Arafat and the PA were made conditional on *how* they ruled. A Palestinian regime almost entirely dependent on the support of the free world was not being asked, much less forced, to build an open, democratic Palestinian society

or to use its power to tangibly improve the lives of the Palestinians.

Instead, strengthening Arafat became one of the primary objectives of the peace process. The rationale was that, unlike the Hamas and Islamic Jihad terror organizations that openly called for the destruction of Israel, Arafat and his PA were forces of “moderation,” interlocutors with whom an historic compromise could be reached. And in contrast to the local Palestinian leadership, the Arafat-led PLO would have enough power to crack down on Islamic terrorism.

While the world had vilified Israel for its violations of Palestinian rights, Arafat was free to treat his Palestinian subjects as he pleased. When he shut down an independent Palestinian newspaper, and threatened the lives of Palestinian human rights activists, there was barely a hint of protest. When he rigged an electoral system to ensure that his loyalists would dominate the vote, no government withheld recognition, and Shimon Peres, Israel’s prime minister at the time, praised the Palestinian elections as “more democratic than those in Egypt or Syria.”⁷ When Arafat set up special security courts that made a mockery of due process, democratic leaders applauded him, believing the courts would help fight terror. Naïve intellectuals like Feuchtwanger had been duped about Stalin’s justice system in the 1930s, but these leaders were fully aware that they were praising an exercise in tyranny.

In fact, fighting terrorism was the only demand that was ever publicly made of Arafat. But when terror attacks did

not stop, however, Israel's government, determined not to stop the peace process, turned the other cheek. Democratic leaders around the world, for their part, condemned the terror attacks, but were just as likely to blame Israel for provoking the aggression against it as to cast aspersions on Arafat's commitment to the peace process. Between the signing of the Oslo accords in 1993 and the defeat of the Labor government in the elections of 1996, over 200 Israelis were killed in terror attacks, many more than had been killed in terror attacks during any similar period in the history of the state. Despite Rabin's promises to abort the peace process if the guns Israel supplied to the Palestinians were ever turned against the Jewish state, as well as mounting evidence that the PA was complicit in the terror attacks, the Oslo process continued. Rabin repeatedly declared that he would "continue the peace process as if there were no terrorism and fight terrorism as if there were no peace process."

Israel's government had trapped itself into believing that there was no alternative to Arafat's authoritarian rule. Arafat, the thinking went, was the only one who could fight terrorism and confront the "enemies of peace." It made no difference how Arafat ruled as long as he was providing Israel with security. And when he failed to do that, the only conclusion drawn was that he was too weak and would therefore have to be strengthened even further with more concessions, more legitimacy, and more money. Only then, Israelis were told by their government, would he be strong enough to stand up to the terrorists and make peace.

When American Jewish leaders expressed their concerns

about Palestinian noncompliance with the Oslo accords, Yossi Beilin, one of the prime architects of the peace process, told them it was “none of their business.”⁸ Uri Savir, another of Oslo’s leading lights, told a pro-Israel lobby that anyone who opposed American aid to the PLO could not be called a friend of Israel.

Official attitudes toward the organization Peace Watch also revealed the mindset of those leading the peace process. Like the Helsinki Group established two decades earlier to monitor compliance with the Helsinki Agreements, Peace Watch, an organization of which I was also a founding member, was established to monitor compliance with the Oslo accords. Comprised of Israelis of all ideological stripes, from Left-wing kibbutz leaders to Right-wing settlers, Peace Watch was launched precisely because there was wide concern that as a result of the euphoric atmosphere in Israel, the Palestinians would not have to abide by their commitments. Peace Watch published papers on whether the Palestinian Authority was fighting terrorism, stopping incitement, educating for coexistence, or fulfilling the other commitments it had made. The government of Israel, determined to strengthen Arafat at all costs, not only ignored the work of Peace Watch, but it also instructed its embassies to do the same. When some questioned why Israel was not using information that could be very helpful in exerting diplomatic pressure on the Palestinian Authority to comply with its agreements, Israeli officials scoffed that it was the government’s role to determine whether the Palestinians were fulfilling their commitments.

Throughout the peace process, a constant refrain of the proponents of Oslo was that “there was no alternative to Arafat.” The idea that a free society could be a viable alternative was dismissed out of hand. Here is how Beilin, expressing a sentiment that was often heard in the “peace camp,” put it:

I don't believe that we are going to have a democratic Middle East and you know what? I'm not sure whether all of us would applaud a democratic Middle East because we know what would happen. We know what happened in Algeria. All of us applauded the democratization and all of us also applauded the army which put an end to it and rightly so. We are all afraid of the situation. The situation where democracy is being exploited by the most reactionary and cynical forces.⁹

But what Beilin and others did not recognize were the immense dangers that a fear society would inevitably pose to Israel. Playing the double game that the Soviet regime had once perfected, Arafat's PA hid its true face by talking peace in Western capitals while at the same time inciting Palestinians back in the territories. As Arafat was signing agreements and accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, his PA-controlled media was inculcating a generation of Palestinians to hate the Jewish state, and his PA-run schools were educating Palestinian children from textbooks that had literally wiped Israel off the map.

The architects of Oslo believed that if Arafat were brought

from Tunis to the territories and given enough power to govern the Palestinians, he would have an interest in building a country, improving the conditions of his people, and fighting a terrorism that could undermine both the peace process and his leadership. But this naïve view completely ignored the crucial difference between democracies and dictatorship. Arafat had no incentive to build a country for the Palestinians or improve their lives because he was not made dependent on them. Moreover, even if he was no longer committed to the phased plan—which was a highly dubious assumption—he had no incentive to fight terrorism because he needed the Jewish state as an external enemy.

I knew enough about fear societies to realize that such a regime would inevitably threaten Israel. I thought that we should link the legitimacy, money, and concessions we and the rest of the world were giving Arafat to his regime's willingness to build a free society in the areas that had been put under its control. In my view, the PA had to be given the same choice that had once faced the Soviets: Build a free society for your people and be embraced by the world, or build a fear society and be rejected by it.

Nothing of the sort had happened. On the contrary, the PA was encouraged to build a fear society. While Arafat was turning the screws on his own people, he became the most frequent foreign visitor to the White House and the recipient of billions of dollars of foreign aid. Almost no effort was made to strengthen an independent Palestinian civil society or to invest directly in the Palestinian people. The most egregious example of strengthening Arafat instead of his

people was the 1995 Paris Agreement in which Israel agreed to transfer 20 percent of Palestinian value added tax (VAT) receipts directly into Arafat's private account in a Tel Aviv bank. Arafat could do entirely as he pleased with the hundreds of millions of dollars that poured into this slush fund. For the peace process to work, I believed that the idea of strengthening Arafat had to be replaced with the idea of making him dependent on his own people. But nothing, it seemed, would shatter the illusion that only "a strong leader can make a strong peace." Nothing, that is, until the spring of 1996, when a wave of suicide bombings and the celebrations on the Palestinian streets that followed them swept Oslo's champions from power.

NETANYAHU COMES TO POWER

In May 1996, Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu, promising to restore reciprocity to the peace process, was elected prime minister. "Bibi" Netanyahu, as he is usually called, had pledged in the campaign to continue with Oslo, but only if both sides fulfilled their commitments.

The name Netanyahu had a special meaning for me ever since the raid on Entebbe in 1976. In that raid, Israel rescued hostages on an Air France plane that had been hijacked by terrorists and flown to Uganda. The only Israeli soldier who was killed during the daring raid thousands of miles from Israel was the commander of the operation, Yoni Netanyahu, Bibi's older brother. When I was arrested, a picture of Yoni, cut out from the newspaper, was hanging on

my wall. Each time I heard an airplane flying in the skies over my prison camp, it reminded me of Entebbe and lifted my spirits: I knew I was not alone. One day a plane would come to my rescue and bring me to Israel.

As ambassador to the United Nations, Benjamin Netanyahu had given my wife good political advice when she was campaigning for my release. After I left prison, when I was continuing the struggle to free Soviet Jewry, he also gave me sound advice. The fact that I was being helped by Yoni's brother was a very satisfying feeling. I will never forget our first meeting in 1986 when the bright and charismatic Netanyahu, with whom I would develop a good relationship, told me that in ten years he would be prime minister. Ten years later, he was.

My party, Yisrael Ba'aliyah, competed for the first time in the 1996 elections that brought Netanyahu to power. After the fall of the Iron Curtain, hundreds of thousands of Jewish immigrants from the Soviet Union moved to Israel. By 1995, disappointed with the political establishment's neglect of absorption issues, I and some other immigrant leaders formed a political party that would help immigrants from within the Knesset. We won seven of the 120 seats in parliament, and we eventually became a coalition partner in Netanyahu's government.

Our party was primarily founded to address absorption-related issues and would devote most of its energies to these topics, but we could not avoid taking a stand on the issue that topped the public agenda. Our platform explicitly stated

our support for reciprocity, noting that “full compliance with all previous agreements must be a necessary condition for advancement in the peace process with our neighbors.”¹⁰ In the two years that had passed since the Oslo accords were signed, Israel had fulfilled its commitments and the Palestinians had not. We had transferred territory and sovereignty to the PA. The PA had not changed the PLO charter, confiscated illegal weapons, or locked up terrorists. Worse, instead of preparing the Palestinians to live in peace with Israel, the PA did precisely the opposite. I believed that Israel had to stand firm in the face of Palestinian noncompliance and not continue the peace process if violations continued.

Though other party platforms included similar statements on the need for reciprocity, ours was unique in linking Israeli concessions with the degree of democratization in the society of our negotiating partner.

The character of the relations with our neighbors and the willingness for a territorial compromise will depend on the degree of progressive democratization of the sides represented by our negotiating partners, particularly in the area of human rights.¹¹

During the negotiations over our entry into Netanyahu’s government, we asked that the connection between democracy and peace be included in the government’s guidelines. The team negotiating on behalf of Netanyahu and his Likud party almost laughed us out of the room. “You deal with

the absorption of immigrants,” they said. “Let us deal with the peace process.”

The first test of the new government came in Hebron, which was the last of the six West Bank cities that was to have been transferred to the PA. It was also the only one in which Jews lived. After a wave of suicide bombings in early 1996, Shimon Peres realized that Hebron could not be transferred to the PA as scheduled and decided to postpone the handover until after the Israeli elections. Peres lost those elections to Netanyahu by fewer than 30,000 votes. With Bibi now in charge, the question was whether the new government would go through with the postponed withdrawal. New governments are obviously bound by the agreements signed by previous governments, but Netanyahu had also run on a platform of reciprocity. Given the Palestinian violations of the agreements, it was not clear what he would do.

The government came under enormous pressure both inside and outside of Israel. Because the idea that a “moderate” Arafat should be given as much power as possible had become so firmly entrenched, the government’s policy of reciprocity was easier to explain in theory than to implement in practice. Even though Netanyahu had won a democratic election by insisting on Palestinian compliance, the expectation in most diplomatic quarters was that if Israel wanted Arafat to start fulfilling his commitments, its “hard-line” government would have to show that it too was committed to the peace process.

In the wake of the terror attacks, months were spent try-

ing to guarantee the security of Hebron's residents. Hebron is the site of the Tomb of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs of the Jewish people, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sara, Rebekah, and Leah.¹² Adding to the immense significance of Hebron to the Jewish people is the fact that it was also the first capital city of ancient Israel, before King David moved the capital to Jerusalem. Until 1929, Jews had lived in Hebron for three millennia. In that year, part of the Jewish community in Hebron was massacred in an Arab pogrom, and the rest fled in the wake of the slaughter. After Israel captured the West Bank city in 1967, a small number of Jews was determined to resettle there. Today 400 people live next to the Tomb of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs, and approximately 7,000 live in the nearby community of Kiryat Arba.

The vote to leave Hebron finally came in December. I decided to visit Hebron the morning before the government meeting. I intended to vote in favor of the withdrawal, but an overwhelming feeling of responsibility was pressing down on me. I wanted to see for myself what would happen to the Jewish residents of Hebron if the army redeployed and handed control over most of the city to the PA. Jews from the community explained to me the risks they would face should the handover be approved. Potentially hostile Palestinians would be only a few meters from their windows. The pleading look in their eyes sent a clear message: "Please don't betray us."

Prior to making a decision on Hebron, Netanyahu obtained written assurances that were aimed at redefining

the rules of the game for the peace process. A letter from U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher, as well as a "Note for the Record," made clear that America backed our government's position that Israel alone would determine the extent of each further "redeployment" before a final status accord would be reached. The Palestinians claimed that the interim Oslo stages entitled them to nearly all the territories,¹³ and Netanyahu wanted this issue clarified before he made any concessions. No less important, the "Note for the Record" made the principle of reciprocity explicit, stipulating that the PA would have to dismantle the terrorist infrastructure, confiscate illegal weapons, end incitement, and perform the various other commitments it had agreed to at Oslo in order for the peace process to continue.

My vote in favor of the Hebron redeployment is the only vote I have cast as a minister in the Israeli government that I regret. In retrospect, our government should have been less concerned with showing that we were ready to continue the peace process, less confident of American guarantees, and more insistent that the Palestinians take steps to comply with signed agreements before we moved forward. As it turned out, our government was given little diplomatic credit for the redeployment, promises of Palestinian reciprocity never materialized, and the idea of "strengthening Arafat" gained even wider currency. The risks that Israel took did not increase our security, improve our diplomatic position, or enhance the prospects for peace. Above all, the redeployment hindered our army's ability to defend the Jewish community in Hebron, leading to lethal results four

years later when the community became a prime target of Palestinian terrorists.

A LOOK AT WYE

The negotiations over Hebron convinced me that Arafat's greatest asset was the ubiquitous conception shared by many Israelis and nearly all the international community that he had to be as strong as possible for the peace process to succeed. Even interim agreements that could have served to move the peace process in the right direction were sabotaged by the constant fear of "weakening" the Palestinian leader. I witnessed this firsthand during the negotiations over the Wye agreement, in which I took part along with Prime Minister Netanyahu, then Foreign Minister Ariel Sharon, and Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai. Those negotiations were an attempt to reach an agreement over the second phase of Israel's redeployment in the territories. Netanyahu's government was willing to transfer additional territory in the West Bank to Palestinian control, but it was determined to both formally and practically restore reciprocity to the peace process. From now on, we said, both sides would have to keep their commitments.

I didn't realize it at the time, but Netanyahu's decision to include me in the Israeli delegation to Wye was quite extraordinary. Although I was part of his inner cabinet, there was no obvious reason for Bibi to invite me to participate in the talks. I was neither a senior minister nor a member of his Likud party. In fact, Netanyahu's decision was

criticized by other coalition parties, who also wanted representatives at the talks.

But Bibi knew I had been a consistent champion of the principle of reciprocity and that I would defend it in the negotiations. As for my ideas of the importance of building a free society among the Palestinians, Netanyahu, who spent many years in the United States, was sympathetic in principle,¹⁴ even if somewhat skeptical in practice.

With its beautiful grounds, placid river, gorgeous sunsets, the Wye Plantation in Maryland was an ideal place for peace negotiations. The atmosphere was meticulously designed to break the tensions between the sides. The media were kept at a safe distance and participants could only be accompanied by a single aide. The relatively small delegations preserved a more informal and laid-back environment. The main transportation was motorized carts, which I shared a number of times with Palestinians, some of whom spoke fluent Russian from their days “studying” in the former Soviet Union.

But in spite of the attempts to create a tranquil setting, the meetings and talks were full of tension. Every discussion seemed to turn into a game of brinkmanship. There were different teams working on all sorts of topics: the extent of the redeployment, the size of the Palestinian police force, the confiscation of weapons, the punishment and extradition of Palestinian terrorists, the fate of Palestinians in our own prisons, the establishment of a seaport and airport in Gaza, and many other matters. Regardless of the issue at stake, we would soon discover that the biggest problem in trying to

restore reciprocity was that Arafat had convinced the Americans that he was too weak to fulfill any of our demands.

The negotiations at Wye were the first time I met Arafat. The Israeli delegation had many meetings with the PA leader that week, but our first encounter with him was for me the most revealing. In that initial meeting, we began by discussing what was thought to be one of the simplest issues. Thousands of cars were then being stolen from Israelis and smuggled into the Palestinian Authority, where they would be stripped and sold for parts. Car theft had become a national epidemic. Insurance rates were skyrocketing, and the Israeli police seemed powerless to address the issue since within minutes the cars were already driven to Palestinian controlled areas into which they could not enter. For its part, the PA was doing nothing to stop the thefts. In a few cases, however, when high profile Israelis who had their cars stolen had called their "friends" in the PA for help, the cars were suddenly "found."

During the meeting at Wye, we asked the Palestinians why they were not using their massive police force to stop the thefts. Predictably, they said that to address the issue they needed to be stronger, which would require more concessions from Israel.

Arafat sat silently, his eyes darting back and forth and his lower lip trembling. He was not involved in the conversation at all. "Is this the man that is running the Palestinian Authority?" I thought to myself. He seemed hardly capable of running anything.

Suddenly, Arafat jerked to attention and blurted out,

“It’s the settlers. It’s the settlers who are stealing the cars, not our people.” Arafat’s remark was so absurd and childish that it was difficult for me not to burst out laughing. But the Palestinians were not amused. Suddenly, Arafat’s ridiculous outburst changed the dynamic of the discussion. The Palestinian delegation immediately went from being on the defensive to hurling charges at Israel. The Americans, obviously embarrassed by Arafat’s outrageous assertion, chose not to confront Arafat at such an early stage of negotiations and over such a secondary issue.

After Arafat’s remark, it became clear to me that though he may have looked as if he were detached from reality, he was in fact totally in charge. Like a virtuoso conductor, with one word, one gesture, or even one look, his whole orchestra would change its tune.

On the third day, the Americans presented a take-it-or-leave-it proposition. When Netanyahu and the rest of our team looked it over, we were shocked at how one-sided it was. All of Arafat’s previous commitments, which he had reneged on and which we now wanted fulfilled, were turned into yet another round of lip service. We all agreed that if we planned on restoring reciprocity, the American proposal was totally unacceptable. Bibi asked me to inform the Americans of our position and members of the delegation started packing their bags. I called Dennis Ross. “We understand that this is a take-it-or-leave-it proposal. Well, we cannot take it, so we’re leaving.” A new set of efforts began to restore the talks. Eventually, the suitcases were unpacked and the negotiations resumed.

The Americans wanted to keep a feeling that a break-

through could happen at any moment in the hopes that this would enable the sides to reach an agreement. The following morning, the person in charge of logistics came to tell us that we all had to dress formally and wear ties, since a signing ceremony might be held later that day. I had not worn a tie for a decade and considered it part of my newly found freedom. I asked the logistics person if Arafat would also be asked to wear a tie. "I don't think so," he answered. "So we'll offset each other," I told him. "Here at least we will have real reciprocity."

For me, the highlight at Wye came on the Saturday before official talks began. Neither Sharon nor Mordechai had yet arrived for the negotiations when Clinton paid a courtesy visit on Netanyahu and me. Netanyahu graciously gave me the opportunity to share my views with the president, a rare privilege because Bill Clinton is one of the best listeners I have ever met. He was entirely engaged in our conversation, sympathetic, understanding, and extremely sharp. During our hour-long conversation, I had enough time to describe my entire conception of what had gone wrong with the peace process and what would set it right.

I outlined my whole theory on the differences between democracies and dictatorships and explained why I believed that the essential flaw in Oslo was the erroneous assumption that a dictator would be interested in delivering peace and prosperity to his people. Israel, I said, had made a historic transformation. In the wake of the Oslo agreements, the mainstream Israeli body politic had abandoned an old and cherished ideology: the belief in a Greater Land of Israel. The reality of Oslo and the acceptance of Palestinian

national rights that it called for were incompatible with the vision of settling the entire land from the Jordan to the Mediterranean.

Rather than impede this transformation, Netanyahu effectively completed it. With only half of the public feeling itself part of the peace process, a fundamental shift in Israeli attitudes would have remained in doubt. The critical moment came when Netanyahu, the so-called "Right-wing" prime minister, led an overwhelming majority of Knesset members to agree to transfer parts of Hebron to PA control, a move which marked a sea change in Israeli attitudes only one year after the country had experienced one of the most traumatic and tragic events of its short history, the political assassination of Yitzhak Rabin.

The Palestinians, I said to President Clinton, had not undergone a similar transformation. All the power that was given to Arafat was not being used to build bridges between our two societies but to strengthen the Palestinians' animosity toward Israel. This, I said, had to change. Given a territorial base, international recognition, and a presidential pulpit, Arafat should use his power to convince opinion-makers, journalists, teachers, and other influential Palestinians to end the decades-long struggle against the existence of Israel.

I asked the president to ignore what Arafat was telling him or telling English-speaking journalists and look instead at what he was saying in Arabic to his own people, what he was broadcasting on television, and what he was teaching in

his schools. Arafat speeches in Arabic were laced with calls for a holy war to liberate Palestine and Jerusalem. The media and schools under his control were preaching hatred toward Israel and Jews. How could it be, I asked the president, that five years after a new era was to have begun, and after we had made many concessions to Arafat, Palestinian hatred toward Israel was greater than when the peace process began? The answer, I argued, was that Arafat was acting just like any dictator by maintaining his power using external enemies. Because of the nature of the Palestinian regime and its dependence on Israel, Arafat needed Israel as both a partner and an enemy. Just as the Communist leaders in the USSR once saw the United States, Arafat saw Israel as a partner who could provide external resources and an enemy who could provide internal stability.

I repeated the case for linking concessions to the Palestinian leadership to their creating a more democratic, open, and transparent society. For example, I said, Arafat could begin by changing the PLO Charter, not in a petty, semantic fashion that had no meaning, but in a way that sent a clear message to every Palestinian that the PA had stopped seeking the destruction of Israel and wanted to live in peace with it. In doing so, he would be following in the footsteps of Anwar Sadat, who boldly and unequivocally told Egyptians that there would be “no more wars” with Israel.

Changing the charter would not immediately transform the Palestinians into a democracy living in peace with Israel. But because the architects of Oslo had conspicuously

avoided imposing liberalizing commitments on the Palestinian side, the charter was one of the few tools Israel had at its disposal to induce change within Palestinian society. That change should be followed, I said, by a concerted and systematic effort by the PA to promote peace among Palestinians.

That conversation with the president was the first time since the peace process began that I felt that the importance of change *within* Palestinian society was finally understood, and by no less than the leader of the free world, the man who was devoting so much time and energy to helping Israelis and Palestinians achieve peace.

The next day, the Israeli delegation had lunch with Clinton, Vice President Al Gore, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, National Security Adviser Sandy Berger, Ambassador to Israel Martin Indyk, and America's special envoy to the Middle East, Dennis Ross. Clinton said he had spoken with Arafat and told him that he agreed with me that the most important thing was the message Arafat was conveying to his own people. He told him that publicly changing the charter offered the opportunity to send a clear message to his people. Predictably, Arafat and his advisers warned the president that "changing the charter would weaken them and bring Hamas to power."

At our lunch, Clinton came up with a proposal to break the impasse. What do you think, Clinton asked the Israeli delegation, about the idea of my going to Gaza to publicly support Arafat and make it easier for him to change the

charter? The reaction of the Israeli delegation was mixed. It was clear that such a visit would give Arafat enormous legitimacy. On the other hand, if the visit would represent a turning point for Arafat, an end to his speaking out of both sides of his mouth, and the beginning of him conveying a clear and unequivocal message of peace, we thought it might be worth the price.

After much prodding, Arafat and his entourage finally consented to change the charter if Clinton came to Gaza. No sooner had everyone agreed than a senior American administration official chased me down a corridor, frantically insisting that Israel had “put a gun to Arafat’s head.” There was no way, he said, that Arafat could fulfill this promise without endangering his own life. Amazingly, the official then told me he was going to try to convince Arafat not to go through with it.

I realized then that if this official believed that “strengthening” Arafat precluded the Palestinian leader from making even this minimal effort to promote peace and reconciliation, we could not hope to convince America to press Arafat to keep any of his commitments in the future. My fears that the desire to strengthen Arafat was endangering Israel’s future were compounded by my concerns about the effect this thinking was having on our most important ally. Not only did it preclude any hope of America supporting efforts to link the peace process to the opening of Palestinian society, but it was also placing us in a diplomatic quagmire in which pressure would be

borne only by Israel, the side that could “afford” to compromise.

Given such a mindset, it was only natural that the United States bent over backwards to accommodate Arafat when it finally came time for him to change the charter. Not only did the president reward Arafat with a trip to Gaza—the first visit by any head of state to PA-controlled territory—but the administration also spared no effort to appease the Palestinians. It was a fiasco: American officials made statements that drew a dangerous moral equivalency between the families of those who perpetrated terror and those who were its victims.¹⁵ Arafat’s speech declaring the change of the charter was as vague as possible, and the “vote” was an orchestrated raising of hands that collapsed into applause for the “Great Leader and Teacher.” The whole thing was a charade.

A day in which Arafat should have sent a historic message to Palestinians to accept the legitimacy of the Jewish state and to start down the road of reconciliation was used instead to strengthen the despot’s moral authority and the Palestinians sense of victimization. He was allowed to continue his game of sending a double message, one in Arabic to his own people and the other in English to the rest of the world. For all of President Clinton’s understanding and sympathy, he did not make a serious effort to change the rules of the Oslo game. The key to peace still meant keeping Arafat strong and keeping the peace process moving “forward” no matter what.

AMERICA'S SILENCE

Before the farce in Gaza, the peace process was rocked by another crisis that also had its seeds at Wye. There, Arafat had demanded that Israel release 750 Palestinians whom the PA deemed "political prisoners." They had been convicted of "nationalistic" crimes against the State of Israel as opposed to car theft, burglary, rape, and other offenses. The problem was that filling such a high quota of prisoners would have required Israel to release prisoners with "blood on their hands," a phrase Israel used to describe those convicted of crimes that resulted in fatalities. Israel had only 200 prisoners without blood on their hands who fit the Palestinian definition of "political prisoners." Moreover, those of us at Wye had no intention of agreeing to the release of murderers.

When the Americans realized that Netanyahu would not budge on this issue, they asked the Israeli side for a favor to break the impasse. Since the Palestinians did not want it publicly known that they had agreed to compromise on the prisoner issue, the official agreement would say that 750 prisoners would be released. In practice, however, we would not have to release prisoners with blood on their hands. Netanyahu agreed to the proposal only after America committed itself to vouch for the oral understanding.

Immediately after we returned to Israel, the Palestinians reneged on the deal and publicly claimed that Israel had agreed to release 750 prisoners, *including* those with blood on their hands. The pressure for Israel to immediately fulfill

its “obligations” began to grow. We expected America to keep its word and reject the false claims that were being made by the PA. But America stayed silent. Netanyahu called Dennis Ross to voice Israel’s disappointment and had me speak to him as well. I told Dennis that after years of noncompliance with agreements, Arafat did not believe he had to abide by any of his commitments. “If after the great efforts that were made at Wye to restore reciprocity America will now allow Arafat to renege on his promises, then there will be no hope that the peace process can succeed,” I said. “We must freeze everything, until the matter is resolved.”

Dennis listened patiently and said he agreed with many of my points but that I also had to understand Arafat’s problematic situation and how much pressure he was under, particularly from the families of the prisoners. The important thing, Dennis said, was to make sure that the peace process could move forward.

It was a message I had heard many times from my friend Dennis Ross. Dennis is a first-rate diplomat, with a terrific memory for detail, an easy manner, and a knack for building and rebuilding bridges between negotiating partners. His commitment to peace is also matched by a strong Jewish identity. On a number of Friday evenings, when he couldn’t meet with Israeli government officials who do not conduct official business on the Jewish Sabbath, and before he could meet with Arafat, who preferred meetings very late at night, he was a dinner guest in my home. It was a chance to have nonofficial discussions about many things, including

the peace process. I would usually tell Dennis why I felt Palestinian compliance was so important to the building of trust on both sides. He was genuinely sympathetic with my point of view, even about the importance of Palestinian democracy and the PA's respect for human rights, but he would also argue how important it was to "strengthen" Arafat's hand.¹⁶

Israel's government had gone to great lengths at Wye to accommodate Arafat in an effort to forge an agreement that would restore reciprocity to the peace process. But even though Arafat was blatantly breaking his word in front of the Americans, the Clinton administration was reluctant to hold him accountable. While this reluctance was present from the beginning of Oslo, America's attitude toward Arafat was especially disturbing since only a few days earlier the Wye agreement had been signed on the basis of America's explicit promise to back Israel on the prisoner issue.

Though America kept silent, Netanyahu went ahead with a vote on the first stage of Wye. I warned about the dangers of fulfilling our commitments when America's silence was helping Arafat avoid compliance. If we wanted to restore reciprocity, I argued, we would have to stand our ground. That is why, to the dismay of Netanyahu, who must have felt that I was being ungrateful after having taken me to Wye, I abstained. The first batch of 250 prisoners were released. When it became clear that many of those released were common criminals—contrary to the Palestinian public's expectations but in accordance with the Wye agree-

ment—strikes were called in Israel’s prisons, riots broke out in the territories and almost all the international community said that Israel had reneged on its commitments. Netanyahu, burned by the Americans, decided to freeze the process. By the time the Americans finally did side with Israel by confirming publicly that we were telling the truth about the prisoner issue, the damage was already done.

When Clinton came to Israel for his Gaza trip a few days later and met with the four ministers who participated at Wye, I told him that I was extremely disappointed. “There was an agreement,” I said, “which America had promised to guarantee.” I continued, “If America had stood by Israel two weeks ago and not worried about weakening Arafat, then the violence that took place would have been avoided.”

The prisoner episode illustrated the problems that plagued Netanyahu’s government from the beginning. During Bibi’s tenure, a clear effort was made to replace Oslo’s blind leap of faith with a more sober approach that stressed reciprocity and compliance with agreements. But only a firm Israeli stance coupled with unequivocal American backing could have made the policy a success. In the end, the combination of a bitterly polarized Israeli public and an international community, including the United States, determined not to weaken Arafat ultimately undermined the policy.

As for the issue that concerned me the most, almost nothing was done to promote change within Palestinian society. I had proposed that a committee be formed to address the problem of Palestinian incitement, but once it was established, it almost never met. The government,

focused on terrorism, weapons, and prisoners, simply didn't make incitement a real priority. Money continued to be transferred to Arafat's private slush fund despite repeated protests in the cabinet that it be stopped. As minister of trade and industry, I could not overcome Arafat's determination to maintain the fear society he had created. Arafat rejected countless projects Israel proposed that would have bettered the lot of his own people because they would have served to decrease tensions between Israelis and Palestinians and release his hold on Palestinian economic life. For a long time, he successfully blocked efforts to help the Palestinian Authority establish an industrial park in Gaza that would have encouraged investment in Palestinian areas, created tens of thousands of jobs, and alleviated poverty.

Similarly, Arafat rejected my proposal to create joint ventures in the West Bank in existing industrial zones that would have fostered cooperation between Jews and Arabs and generously redistributed municipal tax revenues to depressed Palestinian areas. He was not interested in creating jobs for his people or improving the conditions in which they lived. Hiding behind the rhetoric of resisting occupation, Arafat simply opposed the development of a Palestinian society that would not be fully under his control and that would move toward genuine reconciliation with Israel. But his rhetoric worked. No one was willing to support efforts to force Arafat to improve the lives of his own people because the peace process continued to operate under the dangerous assumption that strengthening Arafat was the key to peace.

BARAK JUMPS INTO THE ABYSS

In May 1999, Ehud Barak won a landslide victory over Netanyahu. Barak was the former chief of staff of the Israeli Defense Forces and had once served as the commander of Sayeret Matkal, the country's most famous elite military unit (Bibi had been a member of the same unit). Barak seemed to bring a general's penchant for quick and decisive operations to the political arena. He saw the arduous efforts of the Netanyahu government to restore reciprocity as needless haggling over insignificant issues that only bogged down the peace process and prevented the sides from resolving the conflict. That is why he refused even to put the word "reciprocity" into his government's guidelines. To Barak, reciprocity had become "a symbol of our looking for excuses not to move forward." Instead the new guidelines specified that the commitments of Israelis and Palestinians would be fulfilled "in parallel," a vague diplomatic formulation that effectively threw the quid pro quo approach of the previous administration out the window.

Barak, however, was no champion of Oslo. He clearly did not trust Arafat and had courageously bucked his own Labor party by abstaining on a key peace-process vote as a minister in Yitzhak Rabin's government. His criticism of Oslo was that it was forcing Israel to relinquish all its assets without receiving a final peace agreement in return.

My party planned to join Barak's government and advance the absorption-related issues on our agenda. On

questions of security, Barak had put most people at ease that the days of terror would not return. Most new immigrants saw Barak as he had portrayed himself during an intensive campaign in Israel's Russian-speaking media, as the country's most decorated soldier, a warrior who would never compromise their security.

During coalition negotiations, our party again brought up the question of Palestinian democracy and human rights. Barak's representatives were even more dumbfounded than Bibi's representatives had been three years earlier. After serving as a member of Netanyahu's government, most Israelis had pigeonholed me as a "Right-wing" minister, a label which suggested to many on the Left that I was not overly concerned about Palestinian rights.

Barak, the "Left-wing" prime minister, refused to put the democracy issue into the new government's guidelines. In truth, nothing could be further from the mind of Barak or his Labor party colleagues than Palestinian democracy. Yossi Beilin, appointed minister of justice in the new government, expressed what seemed to be the dominant view of nearly all the self-described "peace camp" in Israel when he said that "if we wait until [the Palestinians] become democratic, then peace will wait for our great-grandchildren, not ourselves. . . . My first priority is to make peace with the Palestinians. I do not believe that it is up to me to educate them." ¹⁷

With potential negotiations with Syria on the horizon, my party did insist that a letter be attached to the coalition

agreement stipulating that Yisrael Ba'aliyah's Knesset members believed that the extent of Israel's concessions to Syria should be equal to the degree of openness, transparency, and democracy within Syria. To my knowledge, this is the only coalition agreement in Israel's history that linked democracy among our neighbors with peace.

In my meetings with Barak, he told me that he was determined to jump to final status talks immediately and to resolve all outstanding issues in one fell swoop. He intended, he said, to use previous Israeli commitments to entice the Palestinians to enter into final status negotiations. To Barak, the prolonged stages of Oslo that were supposed to develop mutual trust had proven to be a failure and were likely to trigger confrontation in the future. The Palestinians, Barak argued, believed that Oslo entitled them to nearly all the territory before final status talks were completed, something Israel could not accept. Barak was confident that he would greatly improve Israel's negotiating positions: "We will explain to the world that even 50 percent of the West Bank is an enormous concession, and we will start negotiations from there."

The prime minister was particularly keen on reaching an agreement before President Clinton left office. According to Barak's calculations, a deal would have to be signed by August 2000, when a new presidential candidate was scheduled to be chosen at the Democratic National Convention, and the "window of opportunity" would close. I told Barak that by restricting himself to finishing the negotiations at a predetermined time, he was giving the Palestinians a huge

advantage. But Barak was determined to achieve peace as quickly as possible.

In order not to interfere with his plans to wrap everything up by the following summer, Prime Minister Barak preferred to ignore all the Palestinian commitments that had been made since Oslo began. He continued fulfilling Israel's responsibilities under the Wye agreement, and even made additional gestures such as releasing prisoners with "blood on their hands" without demanding anything in return. I repeatedly asked that the government prepare a report on Palestinian compliance with previous agreements, but it was never put on the agenda. I voted in the government against all of Barak's concessions, protesting each time that the Palestinians were being allowed once again to avoid complying with their commitments. When Barak decided to transfer areas on the outskirts of Jerusalem's Old City to the Palestinians as a down payment that would encourage them to enter final-status negotiations, I stressed this point in an op-ed in the *New York Times*:

[I]f the Palestinian Authority can get a toehold into the eastern part of Jerusalem without extraditing a terrorist or changing a textbook, why should it ever agree to the painful compromises that are the only way to bring real reconciliation?¹⁸

I also began voicing my concerns that Barak's hurried attempts to reach an agreement and keep to his self-imposed timetable were giving Arafat the ability to extract more and

more concessions before serious negotiations had even started. A paradoxical situation had emerged. When Barak initially formed his government, my fear was that he would be too generous during final-status negotiations. Now I was afraid that Barak would be too generous *prior* to negotiations taking place, since he was making concessions just to start the talks. According to reports that began to circulate, the same man who had told me he would convince the world of the generosity of an offer of 50 percent of the territories was already proposing Israel give up 70 percent, 80 percent, even 90 percent of the territories. Since no official talks had begun, these were becoming Israel's opening positions in final-status negotiations.

My fears deepened in May 2000 when I found out that back-channel negotiations with the Palestinians were being conducted in Stockholm. According to the information I received, Barak had made outlandish concessions to the Palestinians, including giving up over 90 percent of the territories and half of Jerusalem. Not only had the prime minister vitiated the principle of reciprocity and agreed to concessions that were not supported by Israel's government or people, but he had also continued to erode Israel's negotiating positions without receiving anything in return.

Troubled by what I had heard, I went to speak to Barak, who denied everything. After receiving the same information a few days later from a different source, I wrote an open letter to the prime minister expressing my concerns:

In the last few days, disturbing news has reached me regarding agreements that you made or that were made in your name within the framework of negotiations with representatives of the Palestinian Authority. It pains me that you do not tend to share the developments in the negotiations with the members of the government or at least the members of the security cabinet and the heads of the parties that are coalition partners. So I am forced to learn about these developments from personal friends. . . . From the agreement being developed a dangerous reality is being created according to which Israel relinquishes, in advance, all of its assets without insisting on the settling of the final status of Jerusalem, the refugees and the borders.¹⁹

At the next cabinet meeting, I told Barak how I regretted never having developed the skills of a spy despite serving in prison for nine years on false charges of espionage on behalf of the United States. "I never thought that I would one day need those skills as a minister in my own government to build an international network to find out what my own prime minister is proposing to the Palestinians."

On the eve of Barak's visit to Camp David to conclude a peace deal with the Palestinians, I brought my letter of resignation to the prime minister. He argued that there was no reason for me to leave the government and even proposed that I join him at Camp David. "Look, Natan," he said, "it is true that I am prepared to make large concessions in

return for a final peace agreement. But one of two things will happen. If Arafat agrees, then you and I will have a problem, but Israel will have peace. And if he says no, all of Israel will be united and the world will be with us.” I told Barak that there was no chance he would bring peace and that his willingness to make such concessions after years of noncompliance would only further convince the Palestinians of our weakness.

At the time, I was fiercely criticized by many on the Left, both inside and outside Israel, who argued that by leaving Barak’s government on the eve of an historic agreement, I was “betraying peace” and the struggle for human rights. The *New York Times* correspondent in Israel noted that “doves in Israel long ago stopped expressing their disappointment that Sharansky, a former human-rights champion, ended up taking a hard line on peace and joining the nationalist camp.” But as I argued in a column explaining my decision to resign, peace and human rights were certainly on my mind.

The same human rights principles that once guided me in the Soviet Union remain the cornerstone of my approach to the peace process. I am willing to transfer territory not because I think the Jewish people have less of a claim to Judea and Samaria than do the Palestinians, but because the principle of individual autonomy remains sacred to me—I do not want to rule another people. At the same time, I refuse to ignore the Palestinian Authority’s violations of human rights because I

remain convinced that a neighbor who tramples on the rights of its own people will eventually threaten the security of my people. . . . A genuinely “new” Middle East need not be a fantasy. But it will not be brought about by merely ceding lands to Arab dictators and by subsidizing regimes that undermine the rights of their own people. The only way to create real Arab-Israeli reconciliation is to press the Arab world to respect human rights. Israel must link its concessions to the degree of openness, transparency, and liberalization of its neighbors. For their part, Western leaders must not think the Arabs any less deserving of the freedom and rights that their own citizens enjoy—both for their sake and for ours.²⁰

Barak called me at home from Camp David. “Natan,” he said, “I was sitting alone in my room reflecting on the historic decisions I will have to make and I thought of you sitting in solitary confinement in prison. I thought you of all people could understand the weight I feel on my shoulders, the enormous sense of responsibility I bear.” By then, I knew that anything I would say about Palestinian compliance, much less Palestinian democratization, would be completely ignored. But I figured since Barak seemed so interested in making history, I might remind him of the history of his own people.

“I just heard,” I told the prime minister, “that Arafat said that since Jerusalem belongs to all Muslims, he will not agree to make any compromises on Jerusalem without first

consulting the leaders of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan. Yet you have decided to divide Jerusalem without the support of your own government, let alone the Jewish world.” “Ehud,” I continued, “I do not know if you are aware of it, but according to the Jewish calendar, we are now in the middle of the three-week period in which we mourn the destruction of our ancient Temple. During these three weeks, religious Jews do not even sign a contract to buy or sell an apartment. But you, the prime minister of the State of Israel, are prepared to sign an agreement to divide Jerusalem. If you go ahead with your plan, you will be remembered in history as the first Jewish leader who voluntarily agreed to give up Jerusalem.”

Ehud Barak did not give up Jerusalem. Yasser Arafat wouldn't let him. The head of the PA turned Barak's offer down and started a war instead. The tremendous international support that Barak had assumed his far-reaching offer would bring Israel never materialized. The desire to strengthen Arafat was so powerful, the belief that he was the key to peace so pervasive, that diplomats the world over both excused the actions of a tyrant who had unleashed an unprecedented wave of terrorism and blamed Israel for provoking the terror launched against it.

One thing that can be said of Barak is that he did not waver from his all-or-nothing strategy. In sticking to this approach, he exposed the true face of Arafat to Israelis before we made any more concessions to him. Had Barak responded to the intifada by forming a national unity government and forcefully responding to Palestinian aggression,

he would have united the country and perhaps would still be prime minister today. But instead, Barak poured fuel on the fire by responding to Palestinian terror by offering even more concessions. Supported by less than one-quarter of his parliament, Barak recklessly continued negotiating an agreement that would not only determine the permanent borders of Israel, but also affect the identity of the Jewish people for many generations to come. Moreover, despite what he may have believed, and probably still believes, Barak's concessions, which he was never authorized to make in the first place, have still not been taken off the table. In the minds of much of the world, they have become the starting point for negotiations in the future.

Supporters of the peace process, both inside and outside of Israel, expressed their shock at the violence that greeted Barak's unprecedented generosity. They simply could not understand how Palestinian hatred toward Israel could have turned so virulent. The animalistic mutilation of Israeli soldiers, the feverish incitement in the Palestinian media, the calls to martyrdom that rang from Palestinian schools and mosques, and the chants of "Death to the Jews" that echoed throughout the Arab world raised the eyebrows of even the most ardent supporters of compromise.

But those dreaming of a quick solution to the conflict should not have been surprised. For seven years, Arafat was doing what all dictators do, using his power not to promote peace and better the lot of the Palestinians but rather to turn the Palestinians into a battering ram against the Jewish state. Money allocated to improve the Palestinian living

standards was diverted to support a vast network of terror. Hundreds of millions of dollars earmarked for social and economic development were instead used to buy weapons to attack Israel. Broadcasting stations meant to promote democracy and freedom were used to foment incitement and justify terror. Schools meant to educate the next generation of Palestinians for peace with Israel have only inculcated hatred for Jews and their state. By allowing, and often encouraging, Arafat to create a fear society, a peace process that should have been steadily reducing a century-old animus had instead exacerbated it.