

Roy Meachum



## Rebirth of hope

A summer cold coughed me awake the night hope returned to Israeli politics. Only the dogs were half-awake at 3 a.m. to share my celebration, triggered by newspaper headlines and confirmed by CNN.

Allowing the cacophony of the electronic media into my life during those early hours was, as friends will recognize, the surest sign of the importance the story holds on my personal index.

For the better part of 15 years I held my breath, fearful that, first, Menahem Begin and then successor Yitzhak Shamir, bullied by Ariel Sharon, would drag humanity into a general war, triggered by the thermonuclear bombing of world capitals.

Short of those horrors, all but unimaginable to most readers — who frankly, my dear, don't give a damn about the whole Middle East — there was the daily reality of witnessing my nation and its government held hostage by ideological manipulation.

As long as the Likud Bloc sat squarely on Israel's ancient throne, its mumbo-jumbo dictated the standards that individual Jews, journalists and others defied at singular peril.

Being called anti-Semitic, as the Bush White House discovered, was the automatic "reward" of anyone who questioned the Shamir-Sharon mixture of colonial imperialism, religious fundamentalism and a fascist disregard for the nation's Christian and Muslim minorities.

Neither Talmud nor Torah can justify the repression of human rights that has characterized Israeli official conduct in recent years. It can only be explained in political terms. Likud employed systemic prejudice to elevate and stroke its own "untouchables," namely the Orientals, Israelis whose families spent centuries living under Islamic rule.

Until the massive outpouring from the Soviet Union, which accompanied communism's collapse, the most volatile segment of the nation's society was made up of Jews who spoke Arabic as their mother tongue and thrived on the region's traditional appetite for vindictiveness.

All by themselves, the ex-Soviets can scarcely be blamed for what was generally regarded as an electoral upset. But tossing massive numbers



of Europeans into Israel's strained and fractured economic and demographic mess amounted to the same thing as the last straw on the camel's pack.

Losing a \$10 billion loan guarantee from Washington, designed to settle the newcomers, virtually assured Mr. Shamir's departure from power. With its own election hands full, the White House will now be hard pressed to come up with some short-term financial aid to smooth the way back for Yitzhak Rabin.

Last Tuesday's voting came as sweet justice for the once and almost certain future prime minister. Mr. Rabin's enforced resignation in 1977 led directly to the first defeat for his Labour Party in Israel's history.

His "crime" was a U.S. bank account established while ambassador to Washington, before returning to take over the post established by the nation's founding father, David ben-Gurion. Pretty small potatoes as corruption goes, but a clear violation of country's foreign currency control laws.

At any rate, Labour's original loss at the hands of Mr. Begin came complete with all those ironies to be expected in that part of the world.

For openers, it placed in Mr. Ben-Gurion's former job two men he once considered outlaws. Mr. Begin was branded a traitor for ordering his supporters to fire on regular Israeli troops, in a dispute over arms during the 1948 war. Mr. Shamir spent Israel's first years in exile, because of crimes committed by the so-called Stern Gang, which he ran.

Moreover, his indiscretion left Mr. Rabin powerless to decide the fate of the territory he had conquered while military chief of staff. His World War II comrade-in-arms Moshe Dayan received more publicity, but Gen. Rabin was directly responsible for 1967's June Six Day War, the proudest event in Israel's hour on the world stage.

The return of the Labour Party to power in Jerusalem must be counted as a triumph of pragmatism; it does not mean everything will now be hunky-dory in the Middle East. Israeli and Arab lambs and lions are still a long way off from sitting down together to tackle the area's horrendous problems.

Cold war conflicts covered up deep-seated crises arising from a critical and growing water shortage and the continuing tragedy of refugees, corralled in simmering revolt in camps from the Mediterranean's Gaza Strip to Iraq's Kurdish mountains.

In a very real sense, Mr. Rabin has the opportunity to compensate richly for his past mistakes. He can achieve genuine peace for the region, particularly in light of noises from Saudi Arabia and other Arab nations looking to do business.

Especially after their support for Saddam Hussein last year, the Palestinians no longer can count on the Saudis to back their demands for a separate state. On his part, Mr. Rabin has openly proposed complete autonomy for most of the West Bank. It may be the best offer Yasser Arafat and his kinsmen can expect in their lifetime.

Certainly the most important difference that came with last week's Israeli elections was the creation of options where there had been none, thanks to intransigence on the part of Mr. Shamir and Mr. Sharon.

The Middle East remains the Middle East, which is to say nothing can be counted on until it's done and past.

But the rebirth of hope in the land made holy to three religions, that was enough for me in those early morning hours, when only the half-asleep dogs watched my dance around the room.