



1970's:

- From Ambassador to Prime Minister
- Israeli Society in the Wake of the Yom Kippur War

Overview

The Yom Kippur War produced deep rift in the Israeli consciousness and led to a change of government. In 1974, Yitzhak Rabin had just recently completed a successful term as Israel's Ambassador to the United States and was elected to lead the country as the first "sabrah" (Israeli-born) Prime Minister following the resignation of Golda Meir. Rabin's most notable accomplishments in his first term as Prime Minister were rehabilitation of the economy, narrowing of the social gaps and the agreement on separation of forces arrangements with Egypt and Syria, which constituted an important step toward a peace treaty. It is also during this period that Yitzhak Rabin made the decision to send commandos into Entebbe.

From Ambassador to Prime Minister

First Diplomatic Experience: Rabin's Term as Ambassador

In February 1968, less than a year after leading the Israel Defense Forces in the Six-Day War victory, Rabin was appointed Ambassador to the United States. It was his first real experience in a diplomatic post. Having spent his career until that time in the military, devoted to Israel's security, his new position required not only a different lifestyle, but new ways of thinking and acting.

Rabin's tenure as Ambassador to the United States marked the growth of the strategic links between Israel and the superpower. Until the Six-Day War, France was Israel's primary arms supplier, and the military and economic aid provided by the United States was limited. However from 1968 on the American attitude toward Israel steadily changed. The improved relationship was partially a result of Rabin's success in promoting Israeli interests and forging close relationships with American leaders (particularly Henry Kissinger), as well as international relations, namely the escalation of the Cold War-era struggle between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. In these years, the doors of the White House and the State and Defense departments were opened wide to Israel's leaders and emissaries, and the warm relationship that still exists between the two countries was formed.

Yitzhak Rabin During the Yom Kippur War

In 1973, Yitzhak Rabin returned from his tour as Ambassador to the U.S. At the time, the election campaign for the eighth Knesset was underway. The campaign was cut short by the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War on October 6, 1973. Like other Israeli leaders and citizens, Yitzhak Rabin was taken by surprise. During the war, he raised funds for war needs. Once the ceasefire took effect, the country was able to take up the election campaign where it had left

off. Labor won the election, and Golda Meir, who had been prime minister from 1969 to 1973, formed the new government in which Yitzhak Rabin had a cabinet post.

In contrast to the sense of pride and euphoria that swept through Israel after the glorious victory in the Six-Day War, the trauma of the Yom Kippur War sapped the nation's self-confidence. The government appointed a state commission headed by the President of the Supreme Court, Shimon Agranat, to investigate the circumstances of the outbreak of the war and the reasons for the IDF's failure to prepare itself. In its conclusion, the commission assigned most of the blame to the senior military ranks, primarily the IDF Chief of Staff Lieutenant General David "Dado" Elazar.

Yet Yitzhak Rabin felt that placing the blame exclusively on the military without taking into account the responsibility borne by the government was inappropriate and asserted that responsibility for the Yom Kippur War calamity should be shared.

Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin

In response to the harsh public criticism of her role in the Yom Kippur War, approximately one month after the election, Golda Meir resigned as Prime Minister. Meir left behind a party torn by divisiveness. Despite his lack of experience in partisan politics, Yitzhak Rabin decided to compete for the premiership against Shimon Peres, who became his greatest political rival. In the runoff between the two men, Rabin triumphed, and in June 1974, Yitzhak Rabin formed a government.

During his first term, one of Rabin's priorities was to reach an interim agreement with Israel's main enemy, Egypt. His active agenda also included attempts to reach cease-fire agreements with Israel's neighbors; rebuilding the strength of the IDF after the Yom Kippur War; extricating Israel from its postwar economic crisis; addressing the country's social and economic problems - high taxes, poverty, unemployment, lack of housing and inadequate education in the development towns; and conducting a determined, resolute war on terrorism.

Operation Entebbe

In the 1970's, Palestinian terror groups carried out numerous international terror attacks that were meant to attract the world's attention to their demands. A climax of these strikes was the hijacking of an Air France flight on its way from Tel Aviv to Paris on June 27, 1976. The plane landed in the Ugandan city of Entebbe, where the hijackers were given assistance by the local army. The hijackers proceeded to separate Israeli passengers from the other passengers, and demanded that dozens of terrorists be released in exchange for the Israeli hostages.

Yitzhak Rabin's government faced the difficult dilemma of whether or not to try to free the hostages by military action or to negotiate. The decision makers had serious doubts as to the chances of success of a military action, due to the time pressures and the great physical distance of Entebbe from Israel. On the other hand, negotiating with terrorists would be seen as submitting to terror.

Shortly before the expiration of the ultimatum set by the terrorists, Defense Minister Shimon Peres and Chief of Staff Motta Gur recommended military action. The cabinet approved the plan, which called for airlifting commando forces to the airport in Entebbe, gaining control of

the terminal, and releasing the hostages. The brazen and well-planned action was successful: most of the hostages were released unharmed. Three hostages were killed and six were injured. In addition, the commander of the raid, Lieutenant Colonel Yonatan Netanyahu (for whom the operation was posthumously named) was killed, and another soldier was seriously injured.

Negotiations with Egypt

Negotiations between Israel and its neighbors after the Yom Kippur War were focused primarily on Egypt as Yitzhak Rabin considered Egypt's influence critical to Israel's relations with the neighboring Arab states. In his book "A Service Notebook" Yitzhak Rabin wrote, "Ever since the establishment of the state, it has been evident that the key to war and peace in the Middle East is held by Egypt, the leading country in the Arab world. There has not been a single war between Israel and the Arab states in which Egypt was not involved. There was no end of any war in which Egypt did not play a part in it ending. The next stage on the road to peace has to be negotiations between Egypt and Israel."

In the wake of what came to be called the 'shuttle diplomacy' of U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, Israel and Egypt signed an interim agreement in September 1975, which determined the borders and the areas to be controlled by Israeli and Egyptian forces in the Sinai Peninsula and along the Suez Canal, as well as areas under United Nations supervision. The two countries also agreed to avoid the use of force, and to maintain a joint commission to address any problems that might arise. The interim agreement was the basis of a process that resulted in the Camp David Accords during Menachem Begin's term as prime minister (1978). The Peace Agreement was signed in 1979.

End of the Term in Office

Two events led to Yitzhak Rabin's decision to resign as Prime Minister. The first was the F-15 fighters' affair. Four new aircraft that were ferried from the United States to Israel landed in Israel late on a Friday afternoon. Their relatively late arrival caused the ceremony at which the planes were received to extend into the Sabbath. The Poalei Agudat Israel faction charged that the act was a desecration of the Sabbath, and introduced a no confidence motion against the government. In the voting, the faction voted against the government, while cabinet ministers from the National Religious Party abstained. Rabin declared that he could not lead a government whose members did not show loyalty to that government. He submitted his resignation to the President leaving the decision to a public election.

The Labor party selected Rabin as its prime ministerial candidate, but Yitzhak Rabin was forced to take a leave from political life in the wake of revelations that his wife Lea maintained a dollar account in the United States after her husband's term as ambassador there ended. At the time, it was unlawful for Israeli citizens to have foreign currency accounts in foreign banks. Yitzhak Rabin assumed full responsibility for his wife's actions, and resigned as Labor's candidate for prime minister.

Israeli society in the wake of the Yom Kippur War

The Shock of the War

Israel's failure to be adequately prepared, the shock of being surprised, and the heavy human cost of the war – 2,569 dead, 7,500 wounded and 301 POWs – left a deep fissure in Israeli

society, despite the fact that by the end of the war the IDF had beaten the Arab armies. Arrogance and overconfidence that Egypt and Syria would not launch a surprise attack against Israel caused the intelligence community, senior army commanders and the political leadership to misinterpret the signs that these countries were gearing up for war. The differences of opinion between the military and political establishments, as well as within the military itself, regarding the issue of responsibility for the debacle sifted down to the Israeli public and fanned feelings of distrust of the Labor leadership, doubts about the capability of the IDF, and a general decline of national morale.

As opposed to the euphoria that reigned among the Israeli public after the magnificent accomplishments of the Six-Day War, the Yom Kippur War was conceived as a bleak national trauma which would be expressed for years to come.

Political Extremism and Polarization

The negative mood exacerbated the dispute in Israeli society over the desired course of action with its Arab neighbors. The political extremism and polarization were partially reflected in the emergence of protest movements that demonstrated their disappointment with the leadership. One was Gush Emunim, a national-religious movement that called for renewal of settlement throughout the biblical Land of Israel, considering the post-'67 era the beginning of the era of redemption. Gush Emunim was also engaged in social activities, such as education and immigrant absorption. On the other end of the Israeli political spectrum was Peace Now, established in 1978. The movement, which was founded at the time of the start of the peace process with Egypt, called for expansion of the peace process between Israel and the Arab states, including a peace agreement with the Palestinians that would include territorial compromise on the Land of Israel. Peace Now opposed the settlements founded by the Gush Emunim movement.

Reconciliation with Egypt

Initial diplomatic overtures between Israel and Egypt began right after the Yom Kippur War, but the historic breakthrough in relations between Israel and the largest Arab country was in November 1977, when Egyptian President Anwar Sadat expressed his willingness to go to the end of the world – and even Jerusalem – to prevent another war. A week later, Sadat landed in Israel and was received with great emotion.

During his visit to Israel, Sadat took steps to break down walls of suspicion by initiating confidence-building measures aimed at both Israeli leadership and the public. Israeli citizens had the thrill of seeing an Egyptian leader addressing their parliament.

After roughly a year of negotiations, U.S. President Jimmy Carter brought Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat together at the Camp David Summit. The agreement signed by the leaders at the end of the summit included the framework for the full peace agreement between the two countries as well as the framework for a comprehensive peace agreement in the Middle East and the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It took another six months of negotiation until the full peace treaty between Israel and Egypt could be signed, on March 26, 1979.