

A Humane Patriot

Avi Primor

Avi Primor is the incoming president of the Israel Council of Foreign Relations.

When I first met Dave in 1961, he was introduced to me as “Mr. Sharon.” For quite a while I did not know that his real name was Kimche. We first met in Abidjan, the capital of the Ivory Coast in West Africa. It was my first position as a novice in the diplomatic service. I served as second man in the embassy under Ambassador Shlomo Hillel—second man because there were only two at the embassy. And then Dave arrived as the Mossad representative for West Africa. Why Sharon? Because Dave came from Holland, where his cover as a Mossad man had been mistakenly blown by a fellow diplomat. He had had to change posts as well as his name.

For us, young diplomats of the Foreign Ministry, the Mossad people were curious creatures with whom we normally had as little contact as possible. We always had the impression that they snubbed us and considered themselves a higher species due to the aura of secrecy that surrounded them. They would always avoid us.

Dave turned out to be completely different than what I had imagined a member of the Mossad to be. From the start, his cooperation with the embassy was total and most pleasant. He developed a personal friendship with Ambassador Hillel and even with me, the young “greenhorn.” He did not snub me one bit; on the contrary, we developed a close friendship based on our common love of Africa and of... water-skiing. In actual fact, Dave was never very strong in sports and was not really good at water-skiing but he was very keen and very stubborn. The more he toppled off his skis into the water, the more he tried. It turned out that this was a very typical characteristic of his. As kind, friendly, and patient as he always was with everybody, he was just as stubborn and determined in everything he did. In American English I would say that “he would never take no for an answer.” In French, a language he spoke, he would probably think of what Napoleon declared: *“Impossible n’est pas français”* [There is no impossible in French].

What were Dave’s goals and objectives? Dave was, first and foremost, an Israeli patriot. His patriotism was predicated on his profound love of Jewish culture and tradition, which brought him to Zionism early on in his life. Everything he did in his life was aimed at serving the State of Israel. He was even worried about not wasting his time on duty, as it belonged to the state, or wasting the state’s money.

Indeed, Dave was always keen and punctilious about such details. For example, as director-general, he would always travel abroad alone, never accompanied by staff or assistants, as did his predecessors, and as do his followers. He would always choose the quickest flight routes, preferring night flights in order not to waste a minute. Dave conducted his work as quickly as possible and returned home immediately, never “wasting” time resting or sightseeing. When abroad, he avoided using taxis—something he was certainly entitled to do, and something his subordinates, including me, would not hesitate to do. He preferred to use public transportation in order not to waste even a penny of the state’s money. He also viewed the very colorful and daring activities of the Mossad simply as the indispensable means for the defense of Israel. In Africa he lectured to me on what one had to know about the then-awakening Black Continent. He also lectured on the idealism of helping the Africans, citing Theodor Herzl’s *Altneuland*. Above all, he explained to me the essential interest of the State of Israel in developing its relations with Africa.

In the early 1960s, Israel was still a country struggling not only for its very survival, but also for international recognition, which was just as essential to its survival as its military defense. This international recognition was, however, rather scarce. Only some European countries recognized Israel and maintained diplomatic relations with it. The situation was somewhat better on the American continent, but hardly anyone in the emerging Third World wanted to have any contact with the Jewish state, viewed as an outcast in the Muslim world. Dave was convinced that even for the First World, our position would not be solid if we did not achieve a breakthrough in the Third World. The First World was not enthusiastic about maintaining relations with lepers like South Africa or Taiwan. The only possibility for Israel to become respected worldwide was through penetration into the Third World and, at that time, this was only possible in Africa. Only there did we have a chance—if we dared.

Many years later, in the late 1970s, Dave, then the number two man at the Mossad, called me to join him in one of the big Mossad projects that he had inspired and led. Again, there was the Dave I knew in Africa, the idealist, wanting to cooperate with oppressed minorities, but first and foremost looking for allies for Israel— allies that could serve as a breakthrough in the boycott imposed upon it by all of its neighbors. This brought him to develop our relations with the Christian minorities in Lebanon. His hope was to eventually conclude peace with a Christian-dominated Lebanon as a first step toward breaking down the Near East ostracism of Israel. He might have even achieved that goal were it not for the assassination of Lebanese President Bashir Gemayel almost immediately after being elected to power. Dave did not need me for military, security, or Mossad activities. He recruited me to create a diplomatic dialogue with our new partners to the north of

Israel. In the fascinating six months I spent with him in the Mossad, I always heard him say that what we were doing was in the essential interest of the State of Israel and nothing else.

Dave never surrounded himself with the aura of the Mossad. He was always very modest, down-to earth, practical, and pragmatic. Once, during the course of our collaboration, he asked me, "Now that you see it from the inside, how do you find the Mossad?" He answered the question immediately himself: "The emperor is naked, isn't he?" He was right, or course, because the Mossad, just like every other institution, is composed of normal people, some very devoted, some less so, some very efficient, some less so.

In 1980, shortly before Dave became the director-general of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, I was appointed to a position that was, at that stage in my career, the dream job of my life—director of the Department of Western Europe. Then I was very happy to learn that my friend Dave would be my boss. But soon I was to be bitterly disappointed. Dave called me into his office and asked if I would be willing to give up my new assignment and take on the Africa Department instead. At that time, the Africa Department was almost a wasteland. A few years earlier, practically all African countries had severed their diplomatic relations with Israel; we had nearly no embassies in Africa anymore and there were no African embassies in Israel. At the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Africa Department was only staffed by one part-time secretary. Stunned, I asked Dave, "What have I done to be punished and exiled this way?" His answer was, "If you are still the Avi Primor I knew in Africa and in the Mossad, then you will not consider this appointment an exile but an extraordinary challenge and opportunity. Of course," he said, "if you have grown old and are in need of a comfortable, routine job, only wishing to rest calmly in your slippers, then you can keep your European Department. But if you are the fellow I knew, then I promise you that you will be grateful to me for this appointment." What Dave expected of me was no less than to convince the African continent to reestablish diplomatic relations with Israel. I could not believe my ears. But as I said, Dave would never take no for an answer and I again found myself deeply involved in African affairs.

Dave was without a doubt the most efficient, the most influential, and the most powerful director-general we ever had. In our daily work at the ministry, we all knew that the buck stopped at his desk. There was seamless coordination between Dave and the foreign minister, Yitzhak Shamir, and as a result, none of us ever needed direct contact with the minister. Dave was the boss. It was from him that we received our instructions and all of the answers that we required.

Dave kept his word to me. I do not think that there was ever a case of a department director at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who enjoyed as much autonomy or had as much maneuverability as I did as Director of the Africa Department. I could roam Africa from north to south and from east to west, often under assumed identities. I could also travel the world in search of prominent Africans—with whom I would meet mostly in secrecy—in order to try and reestablish the old ties between Israel and the Black Continent. Dave's backing was absolute. Despite his multiple responsibilities and activities, he was a constant source of encouragement, reminding me that what I was doing was perhaps a bit dangerous and often uncomfortable but a great patriotic deed for Israel.

Safeguarding Israel's interests remained uppermost in Dave's mind even after he left public service. In creating and leading the Israel Council on Foreign Relations and the Copenhagen conferences, and in helping to negotiate the Geneva Accords, Dave was always convinced that he was doing what was indispensable for his beloved country. He was profoundly convinced that after having overcome military struggles for its survival, and after having succeeded in becoming established as an honorable member of the international community, Israel's most important goal was to achieve peace with its neighbors in order to guarantee its survival and long-term viability. What was true in the late 1970s and in the early 1980s in Lebanon was a thousand times more important in relation to the Palestinians and the rest of our Muslim neighbors. Even those who disagreed with Dave about his political choices could not but admit that Dave's only motivation was the good of Israel.

For almost fifty years Dave inspired me. What I learned from him was not only patriotism and perseverance, but also humaneness and humanism. I will always miss him, but what he imparted to me over all those decades will guide me for the rest of my days.