



Photo by Gidon Levim

Benjamin Netanyahu

primed to be minister

by Aliza Davidovitz

With surgical precision and military genius, an elite Israeli commando force rescued 100 hostages at Entebbe airport on July 3, 1976. With great national pride and relief, Jews around the world exulted. A whole nation rejoiced, a whole nation cried, but only one family mourned—the family of Lieutenant Colonel Yonatan Netanyahu, the sole military casualty. One young handsome Israeli leader and hero had died, and in the midst of grief, the seeds of a future prime minister were born, Benjamin Netanyahu.

Netanyahu was profoundly anguished by his older brother's death and by his parents' suffering. He was so devastated that he could not swallow food for weeks, some reports said. Once they were three brothers, Benjamin in the middle, and a younger brother, Iddo. All three were accepted to and served in the prestigious and selective Sayeret Matcal, an elite anti-terrorist force. Shimon Peres had once described the heroic brothers as "Lions." But now the lion's head was cut off, and Benjamin was to shoulder the mantle. Netanyahu immediately gave up his consulting job in the United States and moved back to Israel where his road to the Knesset's most prestigious seat would begin. His B.A. in Architecture and Master's in Business Administration would later be used to build and manage a nation.

"I think about my brother more than one can imagine," says Benjamin Netanyahu in an in-depth interview with *Lifestyles*. But Netanyahu made it clear that his political ideology has never been influenced or inflamed either by his brother's death or by his historian father's Jabotinsky-like views. Netanyahu says that his actions have always been guided by one motivation only: to ensure the survival of the Jewish State, thus the Jewish people!

Netanyahu says that he has always maintained that the future of the Jewish people depends on the strength and security of the State of Israel. Many, however, have regarded Netanyahu's hyperbolic concerns as both passé and alarmist. But then October 2000 came, and accompanying the eruption of violence in Israel was a wave of antisemitic violence, unseen since WWII, plaguing communities around the world. Suddenly, accusations of Netanyahu's exaggerations resurfaced as praise for his wisdom and foresight.

The issue of Israel's security has always been a political conundrum, but ever more so since the emergence of the peace process. Though it sought to pacify Arab-Israeli relations, it has served to ignite Jewish divisiveness on the question of what Israel really needs to be secure. It ultimately decided the political life of Prime Minister Rabin, and will decide that of his successors, Netanyahu, Barak and perhaps Ariel Sharon.

When Netanyahu first appeared on the electoral scene in 1996, his campaign message was repetitive, but loud and clear: He wanted peace with security and reciprocity. He indeed wanted peace with Israel's Arab neighbors, but he also wanted to ensure the safety and security of Jewish lives. Reciprocity was not merely his campaign slogan, but the foundation upon which a new future in the Middle East could flourish. Netanyahu defined reciprocity as give and take, not just give and give. But three years into Netanyahu's term, many began to regard his mantra as a eulogy for the peace process and the



Phot by Peter Halmagyi

With former Vice President Al Gore.

breath of life into Barak's political ascent.

Barak, too, brought with his victory his own oft repeated slogan that would address the entire machinations of the peace process: "It takes two to tango." Just over a year and half later, many feel that Barak "tangoed" solo to Arafat's music, stepping all over his own two feet.

Netanyahu tells how difficult it was for his own premiership to get off on the right foot. Put in the spotlight of Yitzchak Rabin's peace agreement which was supposed to end all terrorist attacks, buses and cafes were still blowing up in the heart of Israel. Netanyahu felt that as prime minister, he was punished because the dreams of an easy peace and of a "Disneyland" in the Middle East were not materializing. With the bearer of that dream assassinated, Netanyahu served as the scapegoat.

Netanyahu will never forget that horrifying night at home when he first found out that Rabin had been murdered. Chills ran up and down his spine. "The only words that came from my mouth were 'Oh my God,'" Netanyahu recalls. "Regardless of a difference of opinions, this was a murder that happened to a person I had known and respected for years. The combination of national and personal grief was extremely powerful."

Following that national tragedy, many believed, including Leah Rabin, that Netanyahu's differences of opinion with

Rabin were woven into a rhetoric that had instigated the violence which took Rabin's life. With his popularity at an all-time low, it was just a matter of course for his government to fall. Yet Netanyahu's responses to the thousands of letters he has received throughout the years (he personally answers every letter) do not bespeak failure. To the many letters he received after the last election that expressed grief and grave concern over Barak's victory and his surrendering of Jewish land, Netanyahu responds: "Thank you for your letter following the elections. Peace is a passion all Israelis share. If we differ, it is over means, not ends. I am confident that the people of Israel will continue to seek a secure future for our children."

Netanyahu is more worried now than ever before about Israel's future. He feels that today, under Barak's government, the Palestinians are not merely demanding a state next to Israel, but a state instead of Israel. He had long ago cautioned that it is very easy to make peace agreements. "A new agreement could be made every five minutes," Netanyahu claims. "Unfortunately, they don't last longer than the photo-op."

Once again, his words proved frighteningly prescient. Not too long after the Camp David summit—where Barak made such huge concessions that Leah Rabin said her husband would turn in his grave—the TV images of the trilateral summit between

Clinton, Barak and Arafat were supplanted by much more telling pictures: clashes erupted in Gaza and the West Bank; gunfire lit up the sky in Gilo; and two Israeli soldiers were lynched and murdered and then thrown from a window only to be further mutilated by a frothing pack below.

Netanyahu explains that peace agreements made between Israel and its Arab neighbors are very different than if Israel's neighbors were democracies.

"At no time did I delude myself to think when I was P.M. that if I smiled at Arafat or he smiled more kindly on me that all our problems were over," Netanyahu explains. "Every peace agreement that you make must be built on a solid foundation of defense—otherwise it is not worth the paper it is written on."

And although many were quick to accuse Netanyahu of not keeping his own agreements, interestingly enough he not only kept his own campaign promise that Israel's security would be at the forefront of any agreement, but he also kept the promise of the Rabin-Peres government and continued on the Oslo track—with cautious discretion. Netanyahu does say that he would have chosen a peace track other than Oslo. He would have preferred to work things out directly with the local population and the people that are there in the territories. "When you bring in the Palestinian leadership from abroad with their misguided dream of shrinking Israel to the '67 borders and of bringing back a million Palestinian refugees to the doorstep of Israel," Netanyahu maintains, "I think it will be a ticking time bomb against peace."

He does admit, however, to being hurt by the accusations that he did not want peace. "I have two small children, what else do I want for them but peace?" he asks.

Netanyahu, who still bears the scars in his heart from what an absence of peace has brought his family, could not, as is Jewish custom, name either of his sons after his brother Yonatan. Netanyahu remembers feeling, when he first met Winston Churchill's grandson, that the namesake carried a tremendous responsibility. "It is way too big of a burden for a child to bear.

I could never do that to my children."

There are also other burdens that Netanyahu wants to spare his children. When asked whether his daughter, Noa, was interested in pursuing a career in politics, he answers, "I really hope not."

But Netanyahu himself had borne the burdens of a nation for 3 years. And for those who thought he moved too slow on peace, there were also those to his political right who thought that with Hebron and Wye he moved too fast and gave too much. "It is very difficult to give away part of your patrimony," Netanyahu says. "But I had also inherited an agreement." One rabbi, who had known Netanyahu's grandfather, approached the Prime Minister and asked him, "What would your grandfather say, that you are giving back land?" Netanyahu confides that he did not have a response and went to seek an answer from his father, which he very seldom does. "Your grandfather was a very smart man," Netanyahu's father said. "He would tell them it is better to give up 10 percent than a hundred percent."

"If I broke the agreement, Israel would be under international siege," Netanyahu claims. "Israel's peace agreements with other countries would be jeopardized, including Jordan and Egypt."

However, one of the accomplishments that Netanyahu prides himself for during his tenure as prime minister was to present realistic percentages and expectations to the Palestinian Authority. "Oslo was rushing ahead to the pre-'67 borders. Israel would have remained pinhead thin and neither Israel nor peace would have survived." Netanyahu goes on to say that most people don't realize just how small Israel really is. He explains that when people watch the news and see a picture of a weather map of the United States and then see a map of Israel which fills the same space on the TV screen, they assume that Israel is just as big the U.S. The United States, however, is the 4th largest country in the world; the State of California alone is approximately 15 times larger than the entire State of Israel. Prior to 1967 Israel was 9 miles wide at its narrowest point. Netanyahu walks more miles

than that on the treadmill in 2 days.

But somehow, no matter where Netanyahu walked, somebody's toes were always being stepped on. And as he continuously fought for the survival of the Jewish State, he never stopped fighting for his own survival as well, from no-confidence votes, to assaults on his character, to malicious accusations. When he opened the Hasmonian tunnel, 1,000 Palestinian police started shooting at Israeli soldiers; when he started construction in Har Homa, Washington sent a few verbal shots his way too. When Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin was assassinated, Netanyahu was all but accused of shooting Rabin himself. Whether he took a step to the "left" or the "right," Netanyahu walked into a shooting range.

"There are some leaders who do everything right because they hold their finger to the wind to test the polls," Netanyahu explains. "Someone like that may win a hundred elections." But for Netanyahu being in a position of leadership is not the same thing as leading. "A leader is someone who is guided by his own values and does what he thinks is right, and is ready to take flak for it, to take hits for it, and to lose for it."

So, in 1999, Netanyahu lost. And the prime minister who was once called by *People* magazine "the man women most wanted to share a bomb shelter with," could find no shelter even there from the incessant bombardment by the press.

Netanyahu, discussing his tenure as prime minister, says that the press was hostile to him from day one. He also says the press hardly reported all the good things he was doing for the country, such as liberalizing the economy, privatizing business and making every effort to transform Israel into a free market economy. The press also evaded reporting, according to Netanyahu, his efforts to turn Israel into a super high-tech country, the "other" Silicon Valley. "If I had to spend all my time denying and correcting the press reports, I would have precious little time for little else," Netanyahu had once told Cable News Network's Larry King in an interview.



Photo by Gidon Levin

Netanyahu admitted to *Lifestyles* that he himself has become resilient to the press attacks in order to survive personally and emotionally, but that his children have suffered greatly from the vilification. “My children could literally feel the slings and arrows,” Netanyahu says. “You can never inure yourself to the wounds your children endure.”

But Netanyahu himself has not only endured, he has prevailed. Only a year and half after stepping into private life, Netanyahu’s absence made hearts grow fonder. With a 20 percent lead over Barak in the polls, Netanyahu would win election to prime minister if he would run. Many feel that Netanyahu would usher in a greater feeling of security not only on the ground, but on the air waves where Israel is flagging in its public relations battle. Israel’s PR battle reached a low in a CNN interview when Christina Amanpour said to Barak, “Arafat considers today’s actions [by Israel] tantamount to a declaration of war.” Barak “eloquently” replied: “Bullshit!” This left many asking, “Where in the hell is Netanyahu?”

Netanyahu, who says he is smarter now than he was four and half years ago, is well aware of his mistakes. “I see where I could have hurt people or offended them,” he says. And for those who may have hurt or offended Netanyahu he iterates, “I have a wise heart, and a wise heart is forgiving of others.”

Another mistake Netanyahu admits to is the little time he spent on socializing and camaraderie, which he feels is important for ministers and cabinet members and the press. “Most politicians spend 95 percent of their time on personal advancement and public relations and little on substance,” Netanyahu declares. “I spent 90 percent of my time on substance and doing what was important for the country.”

But Netanyahu is not crying over his mistakes, nor over losing the last election, which he knew from the polls two months prior that he would lose. It was actually Netanyahu’s wife, Sarah, who was watery-eyed when her husband gave his resignation speech. The prime minister himself had saved his tears for more tragic occasions. “There is nothing harder to bear as a prime minister than picking up the prime minister’s direct phone line at 3 a.m. and hearing that Israeli soldiers or citizens have been killed, except

for having to tell their parents and families,” Netanyahu admits. “At the end of the day you’re with yourself and you have to make decisions yourself. No amount of friends or coterie can help.”

For over five decades, however, American presidents have “helped” Israel’s prime ministers make those difficult decisions: In ’56 Eisenhower threatened to cut off all political and economic support to Israel until Israeli troops withdrew from the Sinai; in ’75 Ford threatened a major shift in U.S. policy toward Israel until Israeli troops withdrew from the Suez Canal; in ’82 Reagan warned the country that it would suspend U.S. aid if it continued its operations in Beirut; in ’91 the Bush administration threatened to cut off loans to Israel if it expanded settlements in the West Bank, and in 1998 Clinton promised Netanyahu that if he advanced peace by signing the Wye Agreement, Jonathan Pollard would be released. Netanyahu signed, Clinton reneged!

In his first speech after the ’96 election Netanyahu had said: “The relationship between Israel and the United States is rock solid, and I’m certain that it will remain that way in the next four years.” But over the next three years, the “rock solid” views of the two handsome, eloquent and savvy, young leaders—Netanyahu and Clinton—served to undermine the relationship. It descended to personal snubs from Clinton refusing to meet with Netanyahu or to host him at Blair House—where other Israeli prime ministers and heads of state, including Barak, have been welcome—to Netanyahu coming to Washington to meet with the Republican opposition.

Clinton’s refusal to move the American Embassy to Jerusalem, his interference in Israel’s elections, his strong support for Palestinian demands, among his other actions today raises the question whether Bill Clinton really was the best friend Israel ever had? In his haste to build a “presidential legacy” and to divert attention from the Monica Lewinsky scandal, Clinton was pushing peace at any cost. For Netanyahu, peace at any price was and is untenable. Netanyahu is not certain whether the Clinton administration really understood how costly “any cost” may be.

“Israel’s security needs look very different from the banks of the Potomac than from the banks of the Jordan,” Netanyahu exclaims. “If you make a peace in which you’re asked to seriously impair your defenses or asked to pay any price to have peace, you’ll pay that price—and you still won’t have peace.”

Indeed after the 1994 Rabin-Arafat peace-signing ceremony and their historic handshake on the White House lawn, Israel was shaken for three years by a slew of terrorist attacks that killed 270 Israeli citizens. By 1996, Israel’s security fears won Netanyahu an election.

“I had warned Arafat that if he colluded with terrorism I would take things away from him, including money which I indeed withheld from him for 2 months when I found out he was supporting Hamas,” Netanyahu reveals. Following the opening of the Hasmonian tunnel, Netanyahu called Arafat and warned him that he had 30 minutes to call off the violence or Israel would roll in the tanks. “A cold peace is better than a hot war,” Netanyahu says. In a recent interview with Wolf Blitzer on CNN, Netanyahu criticized Barak for rewarding Arafat and his people for the vio-

lence they have launched against Israel.

During Netanyahu's tenure, terrorism was reduced by 87 percent. One hour after Netanyahu lost the May '99 elections to Ehud Barak, Hezbollah fired katyusha rockets into Northern Israel. And though Netanyahu gracefully bowed out of office upon his defeat, he went out with a bang! For the first time ever, Israel retaliated by attacking the infrastructure of Lebanon, destroying bridges, transformers, power stations and effectively stopping the shelling. "I always thought the right thing to do was not to act against civilians in the south, or seek out Hezbollah like pins in a hay stack, but to put pressure on Beirut and Damascus by pounding the infrastructure of Lebanon," Netanyahu explains, "to make them realize it is very costly to fire rockets into Israel."

Amazingly, this articulate, outspoken, former prime minister says that he is not an especially gregarious person and admits that being in a position of leadership is very lonely. But Netanyahu was never really alone. Even he was amazed by the overwhelming support he received after the May '99 election. "I had, and still have, delegations of grown men coming to me and crying, saying please don't go!" he says. Netanyahu was, after all, the first prime minister of Israel to be voted in directly by the people themselves. Even in the last election, Barak won only 51 percent of Jewish votes—hardly a landslide.

Although many had begged him to stay, there were those who feared his return. "There are those in the political rank who want their turn," he offers. "You lose elections and the next guys on the ladder want you to get out of the way."

Even Bill Clinton called Netanyahu soon after he lost the election to say, 'Everyone is saying you'll be coming back very soon.' And that comeback is on the horizon. It took only three months after settling some legal problems and six hours after Barak resigned for Netanyahu to declare, "I'm running for Prime Minister." Subsequently, he has decided not to run due to the instability of the current Knesset which he maintains would prevent him from forming a strong government.

"Being prime minister and acting as a prime minister are two different things," Netanyahu explains. "I could be prime minister, but I couldn't act." What will Netanyahu do next? The answer can probably be divined from his own words in an interview he gave Larry King in 1996: "In Israel there is no such thing as a former prime minister. They always try and come back!"

lifestyles

Op-Ed editorial by Benjamin Netanyahu

In recent days Ehud Barak has once again offered Yasser Arafat generous territorial concessions, hoping that a deal will bolster his chances in the upcoming prime ministerial election. But at best that election will return him to the same predicament he faced when he resigned—mired in an endless struggle for political survival with a parliament that does not support his policies. Knowing full well that the Israeli people would elect a right-of-center Knesset and hoping that a law permitting only sitting members of Knesset to run in special elections for prime minister would block my return, Prime Minister Barak cynically resigned his office and then used all his power to thwart any attempt to disband Israel's parliament. If I learned anything from my three years in office, it is that the prime minister cannot act alone. Achieving his objectives requires the support of a strong and stable government, backed by a parliament that reflects the will of the Israeli people. That's why, though the Knesset did pass an amendment that would allow me to run for the premiership, I withdrew my candidacy. I will not stand as a candidate in elections that won't give Israel a new Knesset—that offer the winner the title of prime minister, but deny him the tools to effectively lead the country. Sadly, these pointless elections come at a time when the people of Israel do want real change. Yesterday's bus bombing in Tel Aviv was just the latest example that our current policies are not working. Indeed, since the recent Palestinian violence began nearly three months ago, my country has undergone a profound transformation. For 30 years, many Israelis convinced themselves that the obstacle to peace came not from without, but from within—that what stymied peace was not our enemies' intent to destroy us, but our own reluctance to compromise.

Today, many of those who hoped that we could end the conflict by giving up the lands liberated in the Six Day War now realize that what our neighbors want is far more than our return to the pre-1967 borders—something Mr. Barak is essentially offering again, and that Mr. Arafat already rejected at Camp David last summer. The Palestinian grievance is not with the borders of the Israel but with its very existence. The events of the last few months have revealed this truth to all who are not totally blinded by ideology. The Barak government was prepared to sacrifice the Jordan Valley, which gives Israel the strategic depth it needs to defend its eastern frontier. It was prepared to open the Pandora's box of a Palestinian "right of return" that could flood Israel with millions of refugees. And it was prepared to divide a Jerusalem that is the very heart and soul of the Jewish people. The response was an intifada of rocks, bullets, bombs and lynchings. While many view this sequence of events as a great paradox that defies logic, it is all too logical. When Israel negotiates from a position of strength, our Arab neighbors are willing to compromise. When we negotiate from weakness, they harden their positions. When we tolerate terror, we are terrorized. When we fight terror, we are more secure. Imagine what would have happened if Mr. Arafat agreed to the concessions Mr. Barak was and is still prepared to make. Those who believe that we would have ended the conflict have never watched Palestinian television, listened to Palestinian radio or read Palestinian newspapers—all controlled by Mr. Arafat and mobilized by him to incite hatred against the Jews and their state. When I became prime minister four years ago, I took over a peace process that was marked by similar one-sided concessions and Palestinian terror. But by insisting on the principle of reciprocity, my government drastically reduced Palestinian terrorism and restored a sense of security to the people of Israel. While I made mistakes as prime minister, on the questions that are most important to the future of our country, I believe that my policies were the right ones. Today, according to polls, a clear majority of Israelis agree. They realize that there is no utopian solution to the problems we face; that a peace process based on wishful thinking and blind faith will only lead to more violence, more terrorism and even war; that we must concentrate our efforts in the next few years on achieving a "cold peace," with measured agreements anchored in security. Based firmly on the principles of reciprocity and deterrence, such a peace can bring a large measure of quiet to this nation until our enemies realize that the Jewish state will not buckle under their pressure.

The people of Israel also realize that in their quest to live in true peace with their neighbors, they stand on the right side of history. The forces of globalization and liberalization that are spreading across the globe have made Israel stronger and more prosperous with each passing year. And just as they have swept away dictatorships across the world, these same forces will sweep away the brutal dictators that are tyrannizing our region. When that day comes, when more nations in the Middle East are governed by ballots and not bullets, then hope for a warmer and more permanent peace will spring anew. Unfortunately, the coming election does not offer the Israeli public a real choice. But I have no doubt that such a choice will soon be given to them. When that day comes, I will again consider a return to public life. Not simply to be called "Mr. Prime Minister," but to act like one—to restore Israel's security and lead our nation toward a peace that reflects the realities of today and the possibilities of tomorrow. □