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"GO TO THE TEMPLE MOUNT"

Ariel Sharon had no intention of setting foot on the Temple Mount. In the fall of 2000, the Israeli coalition government was teetering, and Sharon, the opposition leader, sensed an opportunity to speed up its collapse and position himself to be the next prime minister. It was the post he had long coveted, but it seemed beyond his reach, due to the many controversies that had swirled around him for decades. As Sharon plotted, he considered some modest gestures, such as a news conference near the Temple Mount, the most important and sensitive holy site in the region. It is revered by Jews, as well as by Muslims, who call it the Noble Sanctuary. Sharon's brief stroll to the shrine would be one of the most significant events in a decade of dramas that further entrenched one of the world's most enduring conflicts. Yet the spark for that walk came about in a casual, almost accidental way, the product of one brief transatlantic phone call with his best friend. That friend, Israeli journalist Uri Dan, happened to be one of the first people we had met when we arrived in Jerusalem a year earlier, in the fall of 1999.

In our early days in Jerusalem, Uri invested considerable time in trying to persuade us that everything we thought we knew about the Middle East was wrong. At that point, a full-fledged peace agreement between the Israelis and the Palestinians seemed within reach. Uri disputed this. There had been virtually no fighting for the previous three years, and violence between the two sides appeared to be fading into the past. Uri said it was not. And Sharon, Israel's most prominent hawk, looked to be in the twilight of his long and checkered career. On this last point, Uri was most adamant of all. Sharon, he insisted, was a man with a future.

A charming, dapper chain-smoker with an elfish grin and a perpetual tan, Uri built his long career on an allegiance to Sharon that bordered on religious faith. The bond between the two men was built on one unshakable belief. The Jews and the Arabs had been fighting for generations, and in the minds of these two men, no resolution was on the horizon. The year 2000 was perhaps the most hopeful time ever in the Israeli-Palestinian feud, but Uri Dan and Ariel Sharon saw no reason to be optimistic. As they viewed it, the Arabs had never genuinely accepted the presence of Israel, and it would be a grave and foolish risk to let Yasser Arafat lead an independent state of Palestine on Israel's borders. The Israeli men believed it was always dangerous to let your guard down when dealing with the Palestinians or the Arab world, and no document masquerading as a peace treaty was going to put to rest this long history of animosity. They accepted the conflict as a permanent feature of life in the Middle East, part of the world they were born into, and part of the world they would leave behind. Their goal was to steadily improve Israel's position in this endless struggle. Perhaps a solution would gradually emerge at some distant date, but they saw no point in entertaining that notion in their lifetime. In their minds—and in the minds of a fair number of Israelis and Palestinians—if you did not accept the enduring nature of the conflict, then you did not understand the conflict at all.

This idea, and their friendship, had a long history. Uri first encountered Sharon in 1954 when Uri was a nineteen-year-old correspondent for a military newspaper, and the future Israeli leader was a young lieutenant colonel commanding the secret paratrooper Unit 101, which carried out commando raids in the West Bank. Uri, a natural reporter even in his teens, tracked down the unit

and showed up unannounced. Sharon was greatly annoyed that a journalist had pierced the secrecy surrounding the unit, and he grilled Uri about who had tipped him off, to no avail.

"Many years later Sharon told me that his friendship for me began that night, when I refused to reveal my sources. He liked that," Uri said.[1] Uri, in turn, was so enamored with Sharon's gift for leadership that he devoted his professional life to chronicling Sharon's every military and political battle for a half-century. Uri wrote three books about Sharon, defended him at times when he was a political pariah, and ceaselessly championed Sharon's hard-line views in columns that appeared in Israeli newspapers and the *New York Post*.

Because the *New York Post* and the Fox News Channel both belonged to Rupert Murdoch's media galaxy, Uri saw it as only natural that he should offer Jennifer his take on the mysteries of the Middle East. His analysis was always colored by his unwavering loyalty to Sharon. Yet his war stories were good ones, even if they were largely dramas from the past and came from a man so old-fashioned that he still composed his articles with a pen and a notepad.

Uri did not hesitate to remind us of his most famous remarks about Sharon, made initially in 1972, when Sharon was an army general who had been passed over for the position of army chief of staff. "Whoever doesn't want Sharon as chief of staff will get him as defense minister," Uri wrote in the Israeli newspaper *Maariv*. Sure enough, Sharon became defense minister nearly a decade later, although he was ultimately forced to resign for his role in orchestrating Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon, which targeted Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organization. A Lebanese Christian militia allied with Israel massacred hundreds of Palestinians in two refugee camps, Sabra and Shatila, near Beirut. This generated an international outcry and massive antiwar protests in Israel. Ultimately, an Israeli government inquiry found that Sharon bore indirect responsibility for not preventing the killings. Sharon's career was in ashes, and his many critics said he was finished as a politician. Yet Uri still saw a bright future and offered a second prophecy to complement the earlier one: "Whoever doesn't want Sharon as defense minister will get him as prime minister."

These remarks sounded dated, if not ridiculous, by the time Uri recounted them to us. Sharon was then seventy years old, a widower

twice over, and was not exactly the picture of health as his waistline expanded with age. One reporter watched Sharon work his way through an entire tube of Pringles potato chips as they conducted an interview.[2] As one wag put it, Sharon managed to soldier on in the rough-and-tumble of Israeli politics because he was "psychosomatically healthy." He was still a war hero to some Israelis, but he had many more critics, and the prevailing Palestinian view was that he was the devil.

Uri was not shy in boasting about their friendship. Once, with Sharon sitting next to him, Uri told us how Sharon would often wrap up his sixteen-hour working days with an after-midnight phone call so they could rehash the crisis of the day. "Sometimes I fall asleep while he's still talking," Sharon chimed in. And when Sharon traveled, Uri was almost always part of the entourage, assuming the contradictory roles of journalist and confidant. Whenever Sharon met with foreign leaders, Uri was usually nearby and would pull out his pocket-size camera and snap a couple of quick photos. Then Uri would ask the host leader to sign the menu of the meal that he had shared with Sharon. This tradition carried on even after Sharon became prime minister. On trips to Washington, Sharon occasionally escorted Uri into the Oval Office and presented "my best friend" to President George W. Bush.

We had not been in Israel long when Uri arranged for Jennifer to interview Sharon. At the time, it was more a courtesy call than a news event. Sharon was not in great demand. Jennifer viewed it as an opportunity to stockpile material for a future piece on Sharon that might run when he retired, or perhaps even for his obituary. Sharon volunteered to come to the Fox office on Jaffa Street in Jerusalem. He patiently recounted familiar stories while sitting on a small, rickety metal chair that had never been intended for someone with his frame.

Sharon had rehabilitated himself politically since the Lebanon debacle nearly two decades earlier. His comeback included several cabinet posts, and by 1998, he was Israel's foreign minister. With great reluctance, he was forced to negotiate with his archrival Arafat in talks hosted by the United States at Wye River Plantation on Maryland's Eastern Shore. With considerable pressure from the Clinton administration, the bitter enemies reached a very limited interim deal, known as the Wye River Memorandum. Israel was to hand over security control to the Palestinians in several areas, and

the Palestinians were to fight terrorism. As part of the process, there was talk of getting the sides together for a group handshake. In the carefully choreographed world of diplomacy, a handshake between Ariel Sharon and Yasser Arafat is about as sexy as it gets. Uri was nearby, having dinner at Legal Sea Foods in Washington, when he spoke by phone to Sharon. Uri asked Sharon whether he would actually allow himself to be photographed clasping hands with Arafat. "Shake the hand of that dog?" Sharon huffed. "Never."

The Wye River Memorandum happened. The handshake didn't.

Diplomacy marched on, and in the summer of 2000, Clinton invited Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak and Arafat for negotiations at Camp David, Maryland, in search of a comprehensive deal. These talks came nearly seven years after the sides had signed their first interim agreement, known as the Oslo Accords, which was sealed with a handshake between Arafat and Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin on the lawn of the White House in September 1993. The agenda at Camp David included core issues that had divided the two sides for more than a half-century: the borders of the two states, the fate of Palestinian refugees, the prospect of dividing Jerusalem, as well as the question of sovereignty over Jerusalem's most contested religious site, the Temple Mount–Noble Sanctuary.

In a photo session at the beginning of the talks, Barak and Arafat played to the cameras as they prepared to enter the guest house in the wooded compound. Both men were overtly polite as they simultaneously reached the front door, extending their arms and trying to guide the other inside with body language that said, "No, I insist, you go first." Clinton cajoled and twisted arms as the delegations remained secluded at Camp David, where, two decades earlier, President Jimmy Carter had negotiated the historic peace agreement between Israel and Egypt. For the Israelis and the Palestinians, it was standard practice to leak the details of their negotiations every time one of the participants took a bathroom break. Yet this time, the parties were tight-lipped as they conducted the most detailed talks ever.

Sharon remained in Israel as the talks took place. As the opposition leader in parliament, he was generally ignored by the media. Still, he told anyone willing to listen that a peace agreement with the Palestinians was rash and unrealistic and would leave Israel far less secure.

When the Israelis and the Palestinians emerged from Camp David after two weeks of talks, they were closer to a deal than they had ever been, but each side said that the other had stopped a few steps short. Almost immediately, the recriminations began. Barak and the Israelis described their offer as "extremely generous" and believed it was rejected because that was the instinctive Palestinian response to all Israeli offers. For many Israelis, the Palestinians had once again fulfilled Israeli statesman Abba Eban's aphorism: "The Arabs never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity."

Barak did not hesitate to lambaste Arafat. "At Camp David, Mr. Arafat well understood that the moment of truth had come and that painful decisions needed to be made by both sides. He failed this challenge," Barak wrote. "At the deepest level Arafat does not accept the . . . right of the State of Israel to exist as a Jewish state."

Arafat and the rest of the Palestinian leadership said that Israel failed to address essential Palestinian needs and that the proposal would not have given the Palestinians a viable state. He argued that the Palestinian territory in the West Bank would not have been contiguous, that the Palestinians would not have full sovereignty in East Jerusalem, and that the proposal did not sufficiently address the status of millions of Palestinian refugees. Arafat said that if he had accepted the terms, he would have suffered the same fate as Yitzhak Rabin, who was assassinated by a Jewish ultranationalist in 1995, just two years after he signed the interim peace deal with Arafat. "If I will betray [my people], no doubt [some]one will come to kill me," Arafat said.[3]

Barak's peace offer at Camp David was not in writing, and the two sides had different interpretations afterward. Yet participants said it was clear that the Israeli leader was offering a compromise on the Temple Mount–Noble Sanctuary. For religious Jews, relinquishing control of Judaism's holiest site was sacrilege, and for ardent nationalists such as Sharon, it was tantamount to treason.

Sharon and his supporters held press conferences and issued statements arguing that such a deal would be a disaster for Israel. Yet Sharon was largely ignored. Uri suggested that Sharon might be able to attract more attention if he held a weekly news conference in the cobblestone plaza facing the Western Wall. The retaining wall had been part of the Second Temple in King Herod's Jerusalem. Ever since the temple's destruction by the Romans in 70 CE, this one surviving wall, on the western side of the compound, has been

the holiest place for Jewish prayer. Sharon took note of his friend's idea but did not immediately act on it.

Despite the failure at Camp David, Israeli and Palestinian negotiators continued to meet, holding secret sessions during August and September. The talks were held even though Barak's coalition government was increasingly shaky. Sharon was already anticipating its demise, and in September he traveled to New York to express his deep misgivings about the Camp David negotiations to Jewish leaders in the United States. Such trips to the United States are part of a regular pilgrimage for Israeli politicians of all parties.

While in New York, Sharon was already charting his next moves. Sharon called Uri for one of their daily chats and reached Uri as he was traveling in a car with a fellow Israeli journalist on their way to dinner in Jerusalem. They took Sharon's call on the car's speaker phone. Sharon had finally warmed to Uri's idea from a few weeks earlier. "When I get back, I plan to hold a press conference at the Wall," Sharon said, referring to the Western Wall.

This should have pleased Uri, but he and his colleague had moved on and upped the ante. "No, no, no, Arik," Uri said, referring to Sharon as he was universally known in Israel. "That's not enough. You must go all the way to the Temple Mount." Uri and his colleague then proceeded to make their case for Sharon to take the far more dramatic step of going to the Temple Mount.

Sharon was not a religious man, and Israeli politicians had long steered clear of the shrine because it is such an explosive site. The sensitivity is both political and religious. In political terms, any visit by an Israeli politician is sure to inflame Muslims. In religious terms, most rabbis say that it is forbidden for Jews to ascend the Temple Mount, due to the possibility they will inadvertently tread atop the "holy of holies." This was the inner sanctuary in each of the ancient Jewish temples that was reserved for special visits by the high priest. Yet if Sharon visited, he would surely attract extensive media coverage and could convey several messages simultaneously. He could show the depth of his opposition to Barak's Camp David proposal, burnish his reputation as Israel's leading security hawk, and restate Israel's claim that Jerusalem—all of Jerusalem—belonged to the Jewish people.

An Ariel Sharon press conference at the Western Wall plaza, where thousands of Jews pray daily, might have drawn a bit of media attention. Most likely, it would have been a one-day story that would have appeared on the evening television news and merited a modest mention buried inside newspapers the next day.

Uri's provocative suggestion had the potential, however, to thrust Sharon back into the center of the debate. It would be a major drama for Sharon to take a few extra steps and lumber up the wooden walkway from the Western Wall plaza to the Temple Mount–Noble Sanctuary above. The thirty-five-acre religious shrine, with its paved stones and soaring cypress trees, rises above Jerusalem. It hosts two seventh-century shrines: the iconic Dome of the Rock, with its golden top, and the much larger, if less spectacular, Al Aksa Mosque. Muslims believe this was the place where the Prophet Muhammad ascended to heaven on a winged steed. These two shrines are also built on top of the ruins of the Jewish temples. This is the most bitterly contested piece of real estate in the entire Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Israel has claimed sovereignty over the site since capturing it in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. Israelis stunned themselves by taking it, and Muslims were equally shocked that they had lost it. Israelis had been denied access to the site since the 1948 Arab-Israeli war that divided Jerusalem, and its return to Israeli hands was seen as a modern miracle. Yet even in that euphoric moment in 1967, Israel's leaders understood that Jewish control of the holy site would be a major source of conflict. The Second Temple had been destroyed nearly two thousand years earlier, and the Islamic holy sites had been in place for thirteen hundred years. Israel could declare the site its own and allow worshippers to pray at the Western Wall. Yet any action on the Temple Mount–Noble Sanctuary itself would be seen by Muslims as a desecration. The Israelis grasped this and kept a Muslim religious trust, the Wakf, in charge of the site on a day-to-day basis. The vast majority of daily visitors have always been Palestinian Muslims. Israel still claims sovereignty, however, and it will be incredibly difficult for any Israeli leader to relinquish this claim over Judaism's holiest site. Israeli police have always been on duty at the entrances and the exits and are often present on the grounds as well. Foreign tourists and Israeli Jews are allowed to visit but are strictly instructed not to interfere with the Muslim

worshippers. Any Jews who begin to pray are quickly escorted away by Israeli police.

Several days before Sharon's planned visit, Barak invited Arafat to his private home in the small Israeli community of Kochav Yair, northeast of Tel Aviv. Given the hostility of the last decade, it may be difficult to comprehend how dramatically different the atmosphere was in 2000. Arafat was driven to Barak's home for an extended talk on the most sensitive issues, and it barely raised an eyebrow. The venue was unusual. Direct talks between Barak and Arafat were relatively rare, and the meeting was not announced in advance. Still, Israeli and Palestinian negotiators met so often that it was no big deal when word of the meeting came out afterward. Along with their aides, Barak and Arafat talked late into the night in an attempt to work through issues that had stymied them at Camp David.

It was not a formal negotiating session, and Barak, the decorated Israeli general, and Arafat, the lifelong revolutionary, never had a warm relationship. Yet those present said it was by far the most relaxed meeting the two men ever had. Two months earlier at Camp David, they had barely conversed. During the dinner, the Israeli leader placed a call to President Clinton to say how well the discussion was going. With Arafat close enough to hear Barak's side of the call, the Israeli leader told Clinton that "I'm going to be the partner of this man even more so than Rabin."[4]

For the Palestinians, the one sour note of the evening was Sharon's impending trip to the religious shrine. Arafat went with Barak onto his balcony and urged the Israeli leader to prevent Sharon's visit on the grounds that it would inflame the Palestinians. "I told Bill Clinton, I told the European Union, I told the Vatican, I told the Arabs, I told Barak himself in his house, we were in his house, 'please don't let Sharon go there,'" Arafat said later.[5]

Barak did not envision Sharon's visit causing an uproar and declined to intervene. Barak saw it as an internal Israeli political matter. From his perspective, Sharon's goal was to solidify his hold on the Likud Party in the face of a potential challenge by Benjamin Netanyahu, who was returning to Israel after spending a year in the United States.

The disagreement did not spoil the night. When Arafat left, he kissed Barak on both cheeks, something he had not done before, according to participants. Reflecting the upbeat mood, the two

sides agreed to send negotiators to Washington for further talks with the Clinton administration, which was revising proposals made at Camp David.

The Palestinians made several additional pleas to block the visit. Saeb Erekat, the chief Palestinian negotiator, said that he warned Shlomo Ben-Ami, Israel's acting foreign minister, about the potential consequences. Jibril Rajoub, the senior Palestinian security chief in the West Bank, told the *Jerusalem Post* that "the visit is a provocation which will trigger bloodshed and confrontation. . . . Sharon is putting oil on fire."

On Thursday, September 28, 2000, Sharon, dressed in a dark suit and wearing wraparound sunglasses, trudged up the wooden walkway to the Temple Mount, surrounded by hundreds of members of the Israeli security forces with the same wraparound shades. Jennifer and her TV crew were nearby.

I was several months pregnant with our first child and was feeling woozy. Journalists were not allowed to follow Sharon up to the shrine, and while I waited, I felt increasingly unsteady in the heat and noise that surrounded Sharon's tense walkabout. In between filming stand-ups with my crew, I had to sit down repeatedly to catch my breath.

On top of the Temple Mount–Noble Sanctuary, Sharon strolled around the expansive grounds. He did not enter either of the two Muslim religious shrines and was largely lost in a sea of security guards. On the fringes, angry Palestinians and the Israeli police exchanged shoves. Soon the Palestinians began hurling stones from the top of the platform down toward Jewish worshippers below. Sharon did not linger. He made his point and exited on the same wooden walkway he entered. I, meanwhile, found myself spending most of my time doubled over—partly from morning sickness, partly as cover from the hail of Palestinian stones.

The next day at the traditional Friday prayers, Palestinian preachers worked the already agitated worshippers into a frenzy. The young men stormed out of the mosque and immediately started to throw rocks, chairs, and any other objects that were not nailed down. Israeli riot police, standing shoulder to shoulder behind their clear fiberglass shields, confronted the Palestinians just outside the shrines and fired back with tear gas,

rubber bullets, and, eventually, live fire. As the Palestinian mob spread across the grounds of the shrine in several directions, young men rained down rocks on the Jewish worshippers at the Western Wall. I was wearing a flak jacket over my expanding belly and was again nearby in the Old City with my crew. We navigated our way through the narrow streets, taking cover in side alleys and door wells. The threats included Israeli tear gas and rubber bullets, Palestinian stones, and piles of trash that had been set aflame by the rioters.

The Palestinians and the Israeli police battled for hours, and the fighting on the Temple Mount–Noble Sanctuary and surrounding areas left seven Palestinians dead and about two hundred injured. The fighting instantly spread to the West Bank and Gaza. Israeli and Palestinian policemen, who had been carrying out joint patrols for years, suddenly began shooting at one another. Multiple battles erupted daily. The stone throwing and the gun battles soon escalated into Palestinian car bombings and Israeli helicopter strikes. The Palestinian uprising was launched.

Uri Dan's final book, *Ariel Sharon: An Intimate Portrait*, was published shortly after Sharon fell into a coma in January 2006. Uri wrote of Sharon's excursion to the Temple Mount but made only a brief, veiled reference to his part in encouraging it. Uri wrote that a day after the visit, Sharon's son, Omri, "shot angry looks at me. I suppose he thought that I was the instigator of the visit to the Temple Mount. The fact is that Ariel Sharon made his decision alone."

Yet later that year, Uri proudly recounted his role in Sharon's visit to us shortly before he died of lung cancer in December 2006, at age seventy-one. The Israeli journalist who was in the car and who participated in the conversation with Uri and Sharon also confirmed the episode, although he asked not to be named. In Uri's mind, he had helped persuade Sharon that dramatic action was needed at a crucial moment. And to Uri's way of thinking, the Palestinian response to Sharon's visit unmasked their true intentions and showed that the Palestinians could not be trusted to make peace.

If Sharon had not walked up the ramp to the Temple Mount, would the last decade have been fundamentally different? Perhaps the peace talks would have continued in an environment that was not so overheated, and a breakthrough could have been reached.

Maybe Sharon never would have become prime minister, a less confrontational atmosphere would have prevailed, and the Palestinian uprising could have been avoided or at least contained.

Yet there is an equally strong case suggesting that the Israelis and the Palestinians would not have reached an agreement, no matter how tranquil the atmosphere. Seven years of negotiations had already taken place. The Palestinians had not received the statehood they expected. Their frustration was at the boiling point before Sharon took his walk, and if that episode had not led to the uprising, something else easily could have.

The Israelis and the Palestinians always have competing narratives, and Sharon's visit was a classic example of how these very different interpretations of events fuel the conflict. For Palestinians, Sharon had been a reviled figure for nearly a half-century, and he was directly challenging the Muslim claim of sovereignty over the third holiest site in Islam. Given this bitter history, combined with the place and the timing of his visit, Sharon skillfully pressed the Palestinian hot buttons, producing a highly charged response that could not be easily contained. Sharon's visit was an extreme provocation and generated an outpouring of anger. To this day, many Palestinians believe the uprising could have been avoided if Sharon had stayed away from the holy site and if the Israelis had made additional concessions at the peace talks.

Yet many Israelis believe that the Palestinian uprising was not only inevitable but was planned by Arafat and the Palestinian leadership as a way to pressure the Israelis in the negotiations. Even Israelis who disagreed with Sharon's visit defended his right to make it. For decades, foreign tourists and Israelis had visited the Noble Sanctuary on a daily basis without incident. How come, they asked, the Palestinians could not tolerate one brief visit by Sharon?

"I was reading intelligence reports from early 2000 that said Arafat was going to use violence if he didn't get what he wanted," said Chuck Freilich, a senior member of Israel's National Security Council from 2000 to 2005 and later a lecturer at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government. "I think it goes back to the fact that Arafat wanted a peace process, not a peace agreement. When he had to make hard choices, he turned to violence."

Ami Ayalon, who had completed a five-year term as head of the Shin Bet security service, Israel's equivalent of the FBI, shortly before the uprising, had a very different take. "Yasser Arafat neither

prepared nor triggered the intifada. The explosion was spontaneous against Israel, as all hope for the end of occupation disappeared, and against the Palestinian Authority, its corruption, its impotence. Arafat could not repress it," he said.

The first Palestinian intifada, from 1987 to 1993, was universally viewed by Palestinians as a success. Those street protests, marked primarily by stone-throwing clashes, gave the Palestinians a renewed sense of pride, brought the Israelis to the negotiating table, and led to the Oslo Accords. Given that history, Arafat and the movement he led for decades, Fatah, were proud to embrace the second intifada and claim after-the-fact sponsorship. "The Fatah movement is proud of launching the intifada and leading it," said Marwan Barghouti, the Fatah leader in the West Bank who was the most prominent figure at street protests during the early days of the uprising. "The intifada expresses the will of the masses. It did not begin with an order and will not end with an order."[6]

Sharon's visit and the ensuing violence did not immediately torpedo the negotiations. The Israelis and the Palestinians continued to talk for another four months, even as the fighting intensified and Barak's coalition government disintegrated. From the perspective of Arafat and the Palestinians, rejecting the Camp David proposal and embracing the uprising seemed to make sense, at least initially. Barak responded by sweetening the offer he had made at Camp David. Arafat and many of his fellow Palestinians believed that time and the tide of history were on their side, and the intifada was a way to speed up the process.

Yet Arafat's approach was not sustainable. It was a mistake that both sides have often made over the years, opting for short-term tactics that seem to provide temporary advantage, at the expense of a long-term strategy dedicated to resolving the conflict. The improved Israeli offer had more to do with the desperation of Barak and Clinton, both of whom badly wanted an agreement as their days in power dwindled. Once they were gone, Arafat would have to deal with their replacements, who had no interest in negotiating with him.

Sharon, meanwhile, was suddenly unstoppable. He had been considered unelectable ever since 1982, when he led Israel into the quagmire of Lebanon, pursuing Arafat all the way to Beirut. Sharon's obsession with Arafat had been his downfall. Now, in a supreme irony, Arafat's backing of the Palestinian uprising elevated

Sharon to new heights in the eyes of Israelis. Sharon won a landslide election victory over Barak on February 6, 2001, barely four months after the Temple Mount visit undertaken at the prodding of Uri Dan. Just as Uri had predicted, Israelis turned to Sharon when they felt threatened.

"The Jews were awakened by the bombs, and they looked around and said, 'Who will save us?'" Uri said. "Let's have a man like [Sharon] leading the war against Arafat and his terrorism. Yasser Arafat made Sharon the prime minister of Israel."

For decades, Sharon demonstrated an extraordinary ability to influence the Israeli-Arab conflict. He often managed through the sheer force of will. Time and again, his actions and their impact greatly exceeded his authority. In the 1973 Mideast War, his command of Israeli forces in the Sinai Peninsula helped turn the tide of that war after Israel was caught off-guard by the Egyptian and Syrian invasion. In the 1982 Lebanon war, he unleashed a massive military operation as defense minister before others in the Israeli government realized the full extent of his plans. And for years, he was the engine for settlement building in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, often proceeding without government approval. Sharon's Temple Mount excursion followed in the same tradition, setting off a remarkable chain of events that continue to shape the conflict.

In the months and years that followed, both Israelis and Palestinians would opt for hard-line leaders over moderates, making a resolution of the conflict ever more difficult. As the fighting intensified and positions hardened, the battles would take on a perverse logic of their own. Palestinian suicide bombings terrorized Israel but ultimately undermined the Palestinian cause. The Israelis conducted massive military operations that subdued Palestinian militants but also inflicted widespread civilian casualties and harmed Israel's international standing. Both sides would greatly overestimate what they could achieve. The Palestinians believed the uprising would take them on the path to statehood, only to find that it set them back. The Israelis would repeatedly bump up against the limits of their military power, crushing the Palestinian uprising only to find themselves dragged down by the same unresolved political problems.

Perhaps the most important legacy of Sharon's Temple Mount excursion was in demonstrating how swiftly Israeli-Palestinian

peace efforts could be undermined and how difficult it is to restart them. It took the Israelis and the Palestinians fifty years to hold full-fledged negotiations on the conflict's core issues. With just a little nudge from his good friend Uri Dan, Sharon took a short walk to the most combustible place in the Middle East, lighting a fire that would burn for years.