The Big Freeze
By Ari Shavit
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In a certain sense, a superficial one, Ariel Sharon and Dov Weisglass are an odd couple. Sharon is a rancher from the western Negev, Weisglass a lawyer from Lilienblum Street in Tel Aviv. Sharon is the son of a Russian agronomist, Weisglass the son of a Polish fur merchant. Sharon is flesh of the flesh of the fighting rooted land-settlement movement, Weisglass is the embodiment of the speculative immigrant bourgeoisie. Sharon is brutal frontier Zionism, Weisglass is urban real estate Zionism.

However, in another, deeper sense, the source of the soulmates’ alliance between the farmer and the lawyer is perfectly clear. Between the fighter and the fixer. Between the crass authenticity of Sharon and the wheeling and dealing of Weisglass, because when Sharon was a leper, after Sabra and Chatila, Weisglass stood by his side. When Sharon found himself in new battlefields in which he was at a complete loss (commission of inquiry, courts, hostile press), Weisglass fought his battle. When Sharon understood that the world had changed and was ruled by new mega-authorities (Aharon Barak, Time magazine, Yedioth Ahronoth), he also understood that Weisglass was the person who would know how to represent him before those new super-authorities. He understood that Weisglass supplemented him.

So that over the years the rural commander developed a growing dependence on his Tel Aviv lawyer who became a personal advocate, a family advocate, a policy advocate. The advocate who for the past 30 months has represented Ariel Sharon vis-a-vis the American mega-authority, the advocate who in the past 30 months, in his official capacity as a senior adviser to the Prime Minister, has almost single-handedly conducted the delicate relationship between the White House and Sycamore Ranch. Which is to say, between the United States of America and the State of Israel.

Is it Dov Weisglass who brought about Sharon’s reversal of policy? Is he the eminence grise who imposed on the emperor of the settlements the decision to evacuate settlements? The settlers themselves are convinced that he is. They are certain that Weisglass is a devious Rasputin who found some dark way to make the czar do things that the czar himself, by himself, would never do.

However, Weisglass himself shrugs off these contentions. He doesn’t deny that he supported the disengagement from the start. He doesn’t hide the fact that he placed the facts on Sharon’s desk. The political problem, the economic problem, the problem of refusenik soldiers. And he made it clear to the boss that the international community will never let up. That the Americans will not be able to support us for all time. But in the end I wasn’t the one who made the decision, Weisglass says. The prime minister made the decision. While he, the bureaucratic chief, was simply there at his side. He, the faithful advocate, simply sat with his client in the room throughout the entire process.

Weisglass was born in October 1946, in Tel Aviv. He grew up and was educated in 1950s Ramat Gan, in a family that moved quickly from poverty to affluence. At age 19, draft age, he was already studying law. At age 24, he was working in the Moritz-Margolis law firm. Thirteen years later he (along with his partner, Ami Almagor) bought the practice from its founders and made it one of the country’s leading law firms. In 1980 he represented Yitzhak Rabin against the French magazine L’Express. In 1983 he represented Sharon against the Kahan Commission of Inquiry, which investigated the Sabra-Chatila massacre. In 1985-86 he represented Sharon in his suit against Time magazine (Sharon sued the magazine over a report implicating him in the massacre). At first he specialized in representing security personnel who testified before commissions of inquiry (Yossi Ginossar, Shaul Mofaz, Hezi Callo, Alik Ron). He then also specialized in representing ministerial directors-general accused of corruption (Shimon Sheves, Moshe Leon, Avigdor Lieberman). Also among his clients: Ehud Yatom, Rafi Eitan and Avigdor Kahalani. And the Shin Bet security service and the Mossad espionage agency. Not to mention the kibbutz movement.

Weisglass’s critics claim he is not a distinguished lawyer, that he’s messy, superficial, shoots from the hip, lacks an aura of dignity, is without a moral center of gravity. Others, though, note his common sense, his humane understanding. And no one doubts his ability to charm people he considers important. Or his ability to conclude a deal, tie up loose ends, make the right call to the right person. Because the lawyer with a thousand hats is not only a very cordial fellow, he is also very well-connected, across the length and breadth of the Israeli establishment.

We begin our conversation at a Tel Aviv cafe and then go on to his run-down office on Lilienblum Street. Dressed in gray trousers and a white shirt topped by a shiny bald pate, he looks older than his age. Quickly, though, he floods me with his historical knowledge and musical education. He is in total control, and one can accept that or not, but it can’t be ignored, because it is now shaping the reality we are living.

Daily call to Rice

Tell me about Condoleezza Rice. What sort of woman is she?

“She is an amazing woman. Intelligent, smart, very fair. Both educated and extraordinarily pleasant. But beneath that deep courtesy and culture, she can also be very firm. She can be decisive.”

Does she ever raise her voice at you, yell at you?

“What do you mean, raise her voice? I’m older than she is, you know. The Americans don’t talk like we do here.”

Tell me about the dynamics of the relationship between you, and whether it’s an unusual relationship.

“I am in ongoing and continuous contact with Rice. In complex times it could be every day, by phone. In less complex times it’s a phone call a week. On average, I meet with her once a month. Since May 2002 I have met with her more than 20 times. And every meeting is a meeting. The shortest one was an hour and a half.”

What does she call you?

“Dub.”

What do you call her?

“Condy.”

And how does it work between you?

“The channel between Rice and me has two main purposes. One is to advance processes that are initiated, to examine our ideas and their ideas. The road map, for example, or the disengagement plan. But there is an equally important function, which is troubleshooting. If something happens - an unusual military operation, a hitch, a targeted assassination that succeeded or one that didn’t succeed - before it becomes an imbroglio, she calls me and says, ‘We saw so-and-so on CNN. What’s going on?’ And I say, ‘Condy, the usual 10 minutes?’ She laughs and we hang up. Ten minutes later, after I find out what happened, I get back to her and tell her the whole truth. The whole truth. I tell her and she takes it down: this is what we intended, this is how it came out. She doesn’t
get worked up. She believes us. The continuation is damage control.”

Rice looks like a tough cookie. Can you really talk to her freely? Can you tell her the jokes that you like to tell so much? “We are always joking. Always. Whenever I come to Washington, I tell her stories about what’s going on in Israel. I speak freely. Almost the way I’m talking to you. There is no awe, no honor. Each of us cuts into the other. I wouldn’t say we are pals, but our working relationship is very friendly.”

Would you say that the Weisglass-Rice channel is a strategic asset? Has it made Dov Weisglass indispensable? “As you know, the cemeteries are full of indispensable people. I don’t want to boast. But the importance of this relationship is that it enables the president to speak with the prime minister and the prime minister to speak with the president without their speaking to one another. You have to understand that presidents and prime ministers don’t prattle every day. For the president to phone the prime minister is an event. It is an act of state significance. So those conversations are very heavy. In large measure they are constrained. Whereas in this channel everything is more direct. Immediate.

“For the Americans, it’s convenient. They know they have someone who is ensconced not in the jaws of the lion but in the very gullet of the lion. It’s also convenient for us. It makes it possible for us to talk to them in real time, informally. When my conversation with Rice ends, she knows that I walk six steps to Sharon’s desk and I know that she walks twelve steps to Bush’s desk. That creates an intimate relationship between the two bureaus and prevents a thousand entanglements.”

Have you become one of the family at the White House? “Look, the first time you enter the White House your heart skips a beat. Anyone who tells you different is not being truthful. After all, that’s where the world’s chief executive sits. But today, after 20 visits, I walk about pretty freely there. They know me well, from the Marine who stands at the entrance to the secretaries and the girls. And that makes my job at lot easier. When you are in awe, like a lawyer making his first appearance before a court, you stammer and you forget the remarks you prepared. After a time, when you feel free and relaxed, that is a tremendous advantage. We speak totally freely. I tell her that something is right or that it’s not so. Completely freely.”

Have you ever had occasion to see President Bush? “I have, but I won’t talk about that. Unplanned meetings with the president are not something one talks about. For them, the concept of dropping in is the holy of holies.”


Does he like your jokes? When he sees you, does he expect a good joke? “He has told some of my jokes to others. We heard about them afterward at second and third-hand.”

He’s said to be Limited. “Why limited? Because he didn’t remember the name of the president of the Czech Republic? That’s very primitive criticism. President Bush is a person of character, with his own inner truth. He is sure of himself, cool, smiling. He is aware of his power. There is a lot of similarity between the way he and Arik [Sharon] manage things. They are both people with a certain inner maturity.”

What about the great gap in age and experience? “True, and I can’t tell you how the president handles the question of health insurance in America. But on the issues having to do with us he has a very clear worldview. Like Arik, he has a loathing for violence; a loathing of everything having to do with terrorism and the use of force. And he has a loathing for untruthfulness and for failure to carry out commitments. He doesn’t accept the Middle Eastern political style in which you come and say something and then forget what you said. From that point of view he is very American. He doesn’t tolerate nonsense. He can’t stand the Middle Eastern jabbering with nothing underlying it.”

Are you saying that at a certain point in the past two years the Palestinians simply lost him, that they were erased from his map? “I will not tell you anything that has not been published. But according to what has been published, two things happened. The first was the ‘Karine A’ weapons ship. The second was a certain piece of intelligence that I sent them that shows clearly Arafat’s full awareness of financial aspects of the perpetration of terrorist acts. When those things became clear about a person who swore 16,000 times to the Americans that he would make every effort to fight terrorism, he was erased. From that moment he was as good as dead.”

If so, you were the one who prompted the Americans to adopt a political policy that is very close to yours: without Arafat, without terrorism, without the present Palestinian government. “The Americans were here for four months in 2003. Through [assistant secretary of state] John Wolf they were involved in the process in the most intimate way. Wolf reported directly to Rice. Those four months had tremendous pedagogical value. The Americans saw for themselves what the Palestinians’ most solemn promises really meant. They saw the Palestinians’ detailed working plans and their splendid diagrams and they saw how nothing came of it. Nothing. Zero. When you add to that the trauma of September 11 and their understanding that Islamic terrorism is indivisible, you understand that they reached their conclusions by themselves. They didn’t need us to understand what it’s all about. So, when we came to them and told them that there is no one to talk to, we didn’t have any problems. They already knew that as of now, there is no one to talk to.”

The formaldehyde formula
Is that what you really think - and Sharon, too - that there is no one to talk to? “We reached that conclusion after years of thinking otherwise. After years of attempts at dialogue. But when Arafat undermined Abu Mazen at the end of the summer of 2003, we reached the sad conclusion that there is no one to talk to, no one to negotiate with. Hence the disengagement plan. Because when you’re playing solitaire, when there is no one sitting across from you at the table, you have no choice but to deal the cards yourself.”

In 2001 we were still of a different opinion - you tried to reach an agreement with the Palestinian leadership. “Because of his trenchant realism, Arik never believed in permanent settlements: he didn’t believe in the one-fell-swoop approach. Sharon doesn’t think that after a conflict of 104 years, it’s possible to come up with a piece of paper that will end the matter. He thinks the other side had to undergo a deep and extended sociopolitical change. But when we entered the Prime Minister’s Office, he still believed that he would be able to achieve a very long-term interim agreement. An agreement of 25, 20, 15, 10, 5 years. There were some Palestinians who preferred that approach to the approach of [former prime minister Ehud] Barak. They were the ones we talked to. But very quickly we discovered that we were up against a stone wall, that when you get to the decision-making center, nothing happens.”

Still, in 2002 you accepted the initiative of President Bush, the road map, and the principle of a Palestinian state, didn’t you? “For a great many years the accepted view in the world was that people turned to terrorism because their situation was bad. So that if you make things better for them, they will abandon terrorism. The Palestinian assumption was that when the Palestinian majority gets national satisfaction, they will lay down their arms and the occupiers and the occupied will emerge from the trenches
and embrace and kiss. “Arik thought differently. He understood that in the Palestinian case the majority has no control over the minority. He understood that the ability of a central Palestinian administration to enforce its will on the entire Palestinian society is all but nonexistent. He understood that Palestinian terrorism is in part not national at all, but religious. Therefore, granting national satisfaction will not solve the problem of this terrorism. This is the basis of his approach that first of all the terrorism must be eradicated and only then can we advance in the national direction. Not to give a political slice in return for a slice of stopping terrorism, but to insist that the swamp of terrorism be drained before a political process begins.

“President Bush’s speech of June 24, 2002, expressed exactly that approach. We didn’t write it, but it articulated in the best way what we believed. That is why Sharon accepted the implicit principle of the speech immediately. He saw it as a historical turnabout. He saw it as a paramount policy achievement. For the first time the principle was accepted that before we enter the negotiating room, the pistols have to be left outside.”

But didn’t the road map translate that principle into a very crowded timetable?

“Arik would have preferred that the first stage of the road map go on for three years, the second stage five years and the third stage six years. But because the road map stipulated that it was based on performance and not on sacrosanct dates, he was able to accept it. He understood that the important thing was the principle. What’s important is the formula that asserts that the eradication of terrorism precedes the start of the political process.”

If you have American backing and you have the principle of the road map, why go to disengagement?

“Because in the fall of 2003 we understood that everything is stuck. And even though according to the Americans’ reading of the situation, the blame fell on the Palestinians and not on us, Arik grasped that this state of affairs would not last. That they wouldn’t leave us alone, wouldn’t get off our case. Time was not on our side. There was international erosion, internal erosion. Domestically, in the meantime, everything was collapsing. The economy was stagnant, and the Geneva Initiative garnered broad support. And then we were hit with letters of officers and letters of pilots and letters of commandos [letters of refusal to serve in the territories]. These were not weird kids with green ponytails and a ring in their nose who give off a strong odor of grass. These were people like Spector’s group [Yiftah Spector, a renowned Air Force pilot who signed the pilot’s letter]. Really our finest young people.”

What was your main concern in those months, what was the main factor that pushed you to the disengagement idea?

“The concern was the fact that President Bush’s formula was stuck and this would lead to its ruin. That the international community would say: You wanted the president’s formula and you got it; you wanted to try Abu Mazen and you tried. It didn’t work. And when a formula doesn’t work in reality, you don’t change reality, you change the formula. Therefore, Arik’s realistic viewpoint said that it was possible that the principle that was our historic policy achievement would be annulled - the principle that eradication of terrorism precedes a political process. And with the annulment of that principle, Israel would find itself negotiating with terrorism. And because once such negotiations start it’s very difficult to stop them, the result would be a Palestinian state with terrorism. And all this within quite a short time. Not decades or even years, but a few months.”

I still don’t see how the disengagement plan helps here. What was the major importance of the plan from your point of view?

“The disengagement plan is the preservative of the sequence principle. It is the bottle of formaldehyde within which you place the president’s formula so that it will be preserved for a very lengthy period. The disengagement is actually formaldehyde. It supplies the amount of formaldehyde that’s necessary so that there will not be a political process with the Palestinians.”

Is what you are saying, then, is that you exchanged the strategy of a long-term interim agreement for a strategy of long-term interim situation?

“The American term is to park conveniently. The disengagement plan makes it possible for Israel to park conveniently in an interim situation that distances us as far as possible from political pressure. It legitimizes our contention that there is no negotiating with the Palestinians. There is a decision here to do the minimum possible in order to maintain our political situation. The decision is proving itself. It is making it possible for the Americans to go to the seething and simmering international community and say to them, ‘What do you want.’ It also transfers the initiative to our hands. It compels the world to deal with our idea, with the scenario we wrote. It places the Palestinians under tremendous pressure. It forces them into a corner that they hate to be in. It thrusts them into a situation in which they have to prove their seriousness. There are no more excuses. There are no more Israeli soldiers spoiling their day. And for the first time they have a slice of land with total continuity on which they can race from one end to the other in their Ferrari. And the whole world is watching them - them, not us. The whole world is asking what they intend to do with this slice of land.”

Maneuver of the century

I want to remind you that there will also be a withdrawal in the West Bank.

“The withdrawal in Samaria is a token one. We agreed to only so it wouldn’t be said that we concluded our obligation in Gaza.”

You gave up the Gaza Strip in order to save the West Bank? Is the Gaza disengagement meant to allow Israel to continue controlling the majority of the West Bank?

“Arik doesn’t see Gaza today as an area of national interest. He does see Judea and Samaria as an area of national interest. He thinks rightly that we are still very very far from the time when we will be able to reach final-status settlements in Judea and Samaria.”

Does the evacuation of the settlements in Gaza strengthen the settlements in the West Bank or weaken them?

“It doesn’t hurt the isolated, remote settlements; it’s not relevant for them. Their future will be determined in many years. When we reach a final settlement. It’s not certain that each and every one of them will be able to go on existing.

“On the other hand, in regard to the large settlement blocs, thanks to the disengagement plan, we have in our hands a first-ever American statement that they will be part of Israel. In years to come, perhaps decades, when negotiations will be held between Israel and the Palestinians, the master of the world will pound on the table and say: We stated already ten years ago that the large blocs are part of Israel.”

If so, Sharon can tell the leaders of the settlers that he is evacuating 10,000 settlers and in the future he will be compelled to evacuate another 10,000, but he is strengthening the other 200,000, strengthening their hold in the soil.

“Arik can say honestly that this is a serious move because of which, out of 240,000 settlers, 190,000 will not be moved from their place. Will not be moved.”

Is he sacrificing a few of his children in order to ensure that the others remain permanently where they are?

“At the moment he is not sacrificing anyone in Judea and Samaria. Until the land is quiet and until negotiations begin, nothing is happening. And the intention is to fight for every single place. That struggle can be conducted from a far more convenient point of departure. Because in regard to the isolated settlements there is an American commitment stating that we are not dealing with them at the moment, while for the large blocs
there is genuine political insurance. There is an American commitment such as never existed before, with regard to 190,000 settlers.”

If what you are saying is correct, the settlers themselves should organize demonstrations of support for Sharon, because he did a tremendous service to the settlement enterprise.

“They should have danced around and around the Prime Minister’s Office.”

And Sharon himself actually didn’t undergo a de Gaulle-type reversal. He didn’t make a u-turn. He remained loyal to the approach of the national camp.

“Arik is the first person who succeeded in taking the ideas of the national camp and turning them into a political reality that is accepted by the whole world. After all, when he declared six or seven years ago that we would never negotiate under fire, he only generated gales of laughter. Whereas today that same approach guides the president of the United States. It was passed in the House of Representatives by a vote of 405-7, and in the Senate by 95-5.”

From your point of view, then, your major achievement is to have frozen the political process legitimately?

“That is exactly what happened. You know, the term ‘political process’ is a bundle of concepts and commitments. The political process is the establishment of a Palestinian state with all the security risks that entails. The political process is the evacuation of settlements, it’s the return of refugees, it’s the partition of Jerusalem. And all that has now been frozen.”

So you have carried out the maneuver of the century? And all of it with authority and permission?

“When you say ‘maneuver,’ it doesn’t sound nice. It sounds like you said one thing and something else came out. But that’s the whole point. After all, what have I been shouting for the past year? That I found a device, in cooperation with the management of the world, to ensure that there will be no stopwatch here. That there will be no timetable to implement the settlers’ nightmare. I have postponed that nightmare indefinitely. Because what I effectively agreed to with the Americans was that part of the settlements would not be dealt with at all, and the rest will not be dealt with until the Palestinians turn into Finns. That is the significance of what we did. The significance is the freezing of the political process. And when you freeze that process you prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state and you prevent a discussion about the refugees, the borders and Jerusalem. Effectively, this whole package that is called the Palestinian state, with all that it entails, has been removed from our agenda indefinitely. And all this with authority and permission. All with a presidential blessing and the ratification of both houses of Congress. What more could have been anticipated? What more could have been given to the settlers?”

I return to my previous question: In return for ceding Gaza, you obtained status quo in Judea and Samaria?

“You keep insisting on the wrong definition. The right definition is that we created a status quo vis-a-vis the Palestinians. There was a very difficult package of commitments that Israel was expected to accept. That package is called a political process. It included elements we will never agree to accept and elements we cannot accept at this time. But we succeeded in taking that package and sending it beyond the hills of time. With the proper management we succeeded in removing the issue of the political process from the agenda. And we educated the world to understand that there is no one to talk to. And we received a no-one-to-talk-to certificate. That certificate says: (1) There is no one to talk to. (2) As long as there is no one to talk to, the geographic status quo remains intact. (3) The certificate will be revoked only when this-and-this happens - when Palestine becomes Finland. (4) See you then, and shalom.”

Dramatic consequences

Dubi Weisglass, will the disengagement plan be implemented?

“I can give you a definitive answer regarding Sharon’s intention. His intention is entirely sincere. He has determination and he has complete resolve. But contrary to what some say, he is not a dictator. Everything depends on the Likud Central Committee and the party convention. I don’t know what is liable to happen in those bodies. I see a political alignment that is not supplying the credit a leader needs, that doesn’t trust him to know where he’s going or what’s best for the country.”

Does Sharon know where he’s going? Can we rely on him?

“He has a very coherent worldview. And he has done everything, seen everything, had experience in all situations. So with him everything is under control. Everything is conducted quietly, in proper language, with no raising of voices. And that quiet projects a tremendous sense of confidence. A sense that there is someone there to rely on. Someone who knows what he is going to do.”

Is there anything hesitant in him?

“No, he is not hesitant. He is very sure of himself. But with him the processes are organic. They are not oranges. There is a matter of ripening. And here he had, after all, the sentiment for the people, the land, the landscape. But there was no struggle between mind and heart. With him the heart is always dominant. And when the mind reached the conclusion that this is what had to be done, it was clear that he would do it. At bottom he’s a bit’ honist [one who sees things through the prism of security]. He has a deep relation to the homeland and to history and to places, but his overriding principle is rational. The axiom is to safeguard the lives of the Jewish people. All the rest is subordinate to that. All the rest is in descending order.”

Aren’t you worried, nevertheless, that all of this won’t happen? That political opposition or a violent revolt will thwart the disengagement plan?

“That could happen. When I hear the voices and the threats, I am fearful. It’s far from clear what will happen. Similarly, when you see the prime minister being forced to cope with all kinds of [Likud] faction members who got to the Knesset on his coattails, it’s frustrating. And when you hear this one shouting and that one screaming and another who is affronted. When you see that such an essential move is liable to be blocked because of personal and emotional considerations that are simply not to the point. Because people don’t understand how dramatic the decision we face is. And because no mechanism has been found that will manifest politically the desire of the great majority that supports the plan.”

Is it really all that dramatic?

“If Sharon’s disengagement plan is torpedoed, politically it will be cause for everlasting regret. Our achievements will be lost. The international community will lose patience with us. It will take the same attitude toward us as it does toward Arafat. We will very quickly find ourselves up against a Palestinian state that uses terror against us and up against a world that is becoming increasingly hostile. We will find ourselves in a tragedy.”