

Cato and Caesar

Ariel Sharon's stroke in early January shocked and dismayed an Israeli public that saw its prime minister as the embodiment of strength and resilience—even invincibility. At a high point of popularity and commanding an almost unprecedented political mandate, a victory for Sharon and his new Kadima party in the upcoming national elections was all but certain. His sudden departure left a huge leadership vacuum and a public apprehensive about Israel's future.

The support and admiration which Sharon enjoyed during the past few years has been the subject of much speculation and analysis. That someone who was vilified, both at home and abroad, by so many people for so long could turn into a media and voter favorite is still a mystery to many pundits. After the prime minister's collapse, many commentators noted that the only thing Sharon ever changed about his trademark steamroller tactics was their targets; by strong-arming the Gaza disengagement, he won the praise of the political Left and Center. Even the more cynical of Israeli columnists were enchanted by his new public image. Yaron London wrote in *Yediot Aharonot* that "Losing him is like losing a father... Expected, but always frightening and depressing. In this case, it was made tenfold more frightening by the fact that only weeks before his departure, he began a bold process that he did not have a chance to finish. The sheep he so loved to surround himself with when being photographed on his ranch... are us." Yoel Marcus, in his *Haaretz* column, compared Sharon to Charles de Gaulle and noted that by the end of his journey, "the prime minister had achieved the status of 'father

of the nation.” Journalist and historian Tom Segev’s tone was a bit more circumspect as he attempted to define Sharon’s legacy: “No prime minister since Ben-Gurion—including Golda Meir, Menachem Begin, and Yitzhak Rabin—enjoyed Sharon’s popularity.... Sharon managed to prevent himself from being identified with politics; like Ben-Gurion, he was identified with the state itself. Sharon was and remains a military man, and even as prime minister tended to run the country as a general, not as a citizen among equals.”

One need not endorse everything Sharon did during his career to recognize the enormity of his contribution to the State of Israel over the course of six decades. And yet, there is something disquieting about the public sentiment that elevated him to the status of “father of the nation,” as Marcus put it—a status he achieved because of, and not despite, his being seen as an authoritative leader who could be aggressive and relentless.

Sharon may have ended his career on a tragic note. But the hopes which the public placed in him will continue to shape the political discourse in Israel for years to come. It is a good time, therefore, to take stock of these trends, and to sound a warning about the dangers they pose for Israeli democracy.

A few days prior to Sharon’s hospitalization, Israeli TV began broadcasting the acclaimed BBC/HBO co-production *Rome*, a Julius Caesar biopic. The series follows the general and statesman from his 49 B.C.E. military triumph in Gaul, through the civil war that left him as the supreme ruler of the Roman Republic, and ends with his death in 44 B.C.E. at the hands of conspirators. Some critics chose to see in *Rome* an implicit critique of American “imperialist” tendencies in our own time. We should watch out for facile comparisons between ancient history and current events, and the comparison here is a bit forced, all things considered. Yet in one respect, at least, there is something all Israelis—and democratic citizens more broadly—can learn from the story of the Republic’s demise.

Caesar was, by all accounts, a colossal figure: One of history's finest generals, emerging victorious time and again, even when pitted against far greater armies. He was a gifted historian and writer, and a diligent, visionary statesman. His vision, however, was seriously at odds with the traditional ideals of the Republic. Ruling as a dictator after the Roman civil war, Caesar systematically weakened the Republic's institutions, most notably the Senate, for which he showed unrestrained contempt. He offended political elites by courting public adoration through a series of populist initiatives, such as the free distribution of grain, gift giving, debt amnesty, and gladiator contests. Though he was never crowned as a king, he wielded absolute authority, and enjoyed the honorary title *pater patriae*—"father of the nation."

Though Caesar had many enemies, his most consistent and determined adversary was Marcus Porcius Cato—also known as Cato the Younger, to distinguish him from his great-grandfather, Cato the Elder. During his career Cato occupied a number of leadership positions in Rome and was renowned for his humility, unimpeachable honesty, intolerance of corruption, and unyielding devotion to republican virtues. As Plutarch wrote of him, it was "not in the hope of gaining honor or riches, nor out of mere impulse, or by chance that he engaged himself in politics, but he undertook the service of the state as the proper business of an honest man, and therefore he thought himself obliged to be as constant to his public duty as the bee to the honeycomb."

Caesar and Cato were destined to collide. At a very early stage, Cato sensed Caesar's far-reaching ambition, and he undertook to thwart him at every turn. He was thoroughly dedicated to the sacred republican ideal: That true freedom does not mean having a just ruler, but having no single ruler at all. Cato's absolute commitment to principle alienated him from many of his peers and cost him in terms of popularity—but he was determined to save Rome from Caesar. His efforts were in vain. After a long political crusade, which ultimately played out on the battlefield, Cato, realizing defeat, took his own life at Utica in 46 B.C.E. to avoid capture. As Plutarch reports,

when Caesar learned of Cato's suicide, he said, "Cato, I grudge you your death, as you have grudged me the preservation of your life."

Cato's campaign to stop Caesar was therefore much more than a conflict between two political opponents. It was a clash between two models of political leadership and the political values they represent. Cato's emphasis on political liberty, the distribution of power, and the rule of law were irreconcilable with Caesar's cult of charisma, populism, and authoritarianism. In the end, Caesar's megalomaniacal flamboyance and autocratic leadership fanned so much hostility among his rivals that a group of Senators stabbed him to death. And yet, his assassination did not restore the Republic as the conspirators had hoped. Rome was on the threshold of a new era, the Age of the Caesars, a period that gave us corrupt despots like Tiberius, Caligula, and Nero, and saw the decline of the very virtues that had been the glory of the classical world.

Democracies sometimes find themselves faced with a tenuous political situation, in which they must choose between the paths of Cato and Caesar. The temptation of Caesarism, particularly during times of crisis, is enormous: The masses grow weary of endless deliberations and look to a strong, determined leader to carry them through the storm to safety. And indeed, in extreme cases, this may be the right choice. But it comes at a heavy price. A strong leader, whose forceful methods may be indispensable for dealing with imminent danger, can threaten democracy if he continues to employ them once the crisis has ended. And yet, a more profound threat to freedom may come from the citizens themselves, when a perception of national or personal insecurity leads them to long for a charismatic "shepherd," and to this end they are willing to play the sheep.

Of course, Ariel Sharon is no Julius Caesar, much the same way that Israel is no Roman Republic. Sharon never acted on imperialist fantasies and did not seize authority as a self-styled dictator. He operated as a politician and a leader—some would say a great leader—within the democratic

framework. Still, it is hard to avoid the feeling that the unprecedented public support he received during the past year reflected more than just the endorsement of his policies. His popularity suggests that Caesarism is alive and well in the Jewish state. This is hardly news—Israel’s political tradition has known its Caesars before, most notably the country’s first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion. Public figures in the mold of Cato, however, distinguished by a deep moral commitment and an impeccable personal record, are disappointingly hard to find in Israeli politics today.

For a nation accustomed to a more or less permanent sense of crisis, Sharon’s departure raises profound questions. True, the continuous threats to national security and the need for wise, strong men and women at the helm are not to be underestimated. At the same, the Israeli predilection for authoritarian-style leaders is a sign of civic immaturity and a lack of trust in the ability of the people to govern their own affairs wisely. If Israeli democracy is to flourish, it must encourage a different kind of politics and a different kind of politician—less charismatic, perhaps, but stable, trustworthy, mature, and steeped in civic virtue. A nation fighting for its life needs a Caesar now and again, but every republic waving the flag of freedom must always keep its eyes on Cato.

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